Why Liberals Struggle to Cope With Epochal Change

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As I witnessed the despair and incomprehension of liberals worldwide after Donald Trump's victory in November's U.S. presidential election, I had a sinking feeling that I had been through this before. The moment took me back to 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, signaling the beginning of the end of Soviet Communism and the lifting of the Iron Curtain that had divided Europe since the end of World War II. The difference was that the world that collapsed in 1989 was theirs, the Communists'. Now it is ours, the liberals'.

In 1989, I was living within a Warsaw Pact nation, in my final year of studying philosophy at Bulgaria's Sofia University, when the world turned upside down. The whole experience felt like an extended course in French existentialism. To see the sudden end of something that we had been told would last forever was bewildering—liberating and alarming in equal measure. My fellow students and I were overwhelmed by the new sense of freedom, but we were also acutely conscious of the fragility of all things political. That radical rupture turned out to be a defining experience for my generation.

But the rupture was even broader—on a greater global scale—than many of us realized at the time. The year 1989 was indeed an annus mirabilis, but one very different from the way Western liberals have framed it for the past three decades. The resilience that the Chinese Communist Party demonstrated in suppressing the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square turned out to be more consequential than the fall of the Berlin Wall. For Russians, the most important aspect of 1989 was not the end of Communism, but the end of the Soviet empire, with the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. It was thus the year that Osama bin Laden proclaimed the jihadists' victory over the godless U.S.S.R. And 1989 was also when nationalism began to reclaim its political primacy in the former Yugoslavia.

The return of Trump to power in the United States may prove another such instance in a period of enormous political rupture. If liberals are to respond effectively to the challenge of a new Trump administration, they will need to reflect critically on what happened in 1989, and discard the story they've always told themselves about it. The means of overcoming despair is to be found in better comprehension.

Tom Nichols: Stalin's revenge

From a liberal point of view, comparing the anti-Soviet revolutions of 1989 with the illiberal revolutions today might seem scandalous. In Francis Fukuyama's famous phrase, 1989 was "the end of history," whereas Trump's victory, many liberals assert, may portend the end of democracy. The year the Berlin Wall fell was viewed as the triumph of the West; now the decline of the West dominates the conversation. The collapse of Communism was marked by a vision for a democratic, capitalist future; that future is now riddled with uncertainty. The mood in 1989 was internationalist and optimistic; today, it has soured into nationalism, at times even nihilism.

But to insist on those differences between then and now is to miss the point about their similarities. Living through such moments in history teaches one many things, but the most important is the sheer *speed* of change: People can totally alter their views and political identity overnight; what only yesterday was considered unthinkable seems self-evident today. The shift is so profound that people soon find their old assumptions and choices unfathomable.

Translated to this moment: How, just six months ago, could any sane person have believed that an aging and unpopular Joe Biden could be reelected?

Trump captured the public imagination not because he had a better plan for how to win the war in Ukraine

or manage globalization, but because he understood that the world of yesterday could be no more. The United States' postwar political identity has vanished into the abyss of the ballot box. This Trump administration may succeed or fail on its own terms, but the old world will not return. Even most liberals do not want it back. Few Americans today are comfortable with the notion of American exceptionalism.

In the aftermath of Trump's victory, some political commentators grimly looked back to the 1930s, when fascism stalked the world. The problem is that the 1930s are beyond living memory, whereas the 1990s are still vivid to many of us. What I learned from that decade is that a radical political rupture gives the winners a blank check. Understanding *why* people voted for Trump will be little help in apprehending *what* he will do in office.

Political ruptures are achieved by previously unimaginable coalitions, united more by their intensity than a common program. Politicians who belong to these coalitions typically have a chameleonlike ability to suit themselves to the moment—none more so, in our time, than Trump. American liberals who are gobsmacked that people can treat a billionaire playboy as the leader of an anti-establishment movement might recall that Boris Yeltsin, the hero of Russia's 1990s anti-Communist revolution, had been one of the leaders of the Communist Party just a few short years earlier.

Read: How China made the Tiananmen Square massacre irrelevant

Like the end of the Soviet era, Trump's reelection victory will have global dimensions. It marks the passing of the United States as a liberal empire. America remains the world's preeminent power, yes, and will remain an empire of sorts, but it won't be a liberal one. As Biden's spotty record of mobilizing support to defend the "liberal international order" in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated, the very idea of such an order was for many critics always a Western fiction. It existed as long as the U.S. had the power and political will to impose it.

This is not what Trump will do. In foreign policy, Trump is neither a realist nor an isolationist; he is a revisionist. Trump is convinced that the U.S. is the biggest loser in the world it has made. Over the past three decades, in his view, America has become a hostage, rather than a hegemon, of the liberal international order. In the postwar world, the U.S. successfully integrated its defeated adversaries Germany and Japan into democratic governance, international trade, and economic prosperity. This did not apply to China: In Trump's view, Beijing has been the real winner of the post-1989 changes.

Trump's second coming will clearly be different from the first. In 2016, Trump's encounter with American power was like a blind date. He didn't know exactly what he wanted, and American power didn't know exactly who he was. Not this time. America may remain a democracy, but it will become a more feral one. Under new management, its institutions will likely depart from the safety of consensual politics and go wild. In times of rapid change, political leaders seek not to administer the state, but to defeat it. They see the state and the "deep state" as synonymous. Illiberal leaders select their cabinet members in the same way that emperors used to choose the governors of rebellious provinces: What matters most is the appointee's loyalty and capacity to resist being suborned or co-opted by others.

In Trump's first administration, chaos reigned; his second administration will reign by wielding chaos as a weapon. This White House will overwhelm its opponents by "flooding the zone" with executive orders and proclamations. He will leave many adversaries guessing about why he is making the decisions he does, and disorient others with their rapidity and quantity.

George Packer: The end of Democratic delusions

In 2020, Biden defeated Trump by promising normalcy. Normalcy will no longer help the Democrats. In the most recent example of an antipopulist victory, Donald Tusk triumphed in Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections and returned to be prime minister, not because he promised business as usual but because his party, Civic Platform, was able to forge a compelling new political identity. Tusk's party adopted more progressive positions on such controversial issues as abortion rights and workers' protections, but it also wrapped itself in the flag and embraced patriotism. Tusk offered Poles a new grand

narrative, not simply a different electoral strategy. Civic Platform's success still depended on forming a coalition with other parties, a potentially fragile basis for governing, but it offers a template, at least, for how the liberal center can reinvent itself and check the advance of illiberal populism.

The risk for the United States is high: The next few years could easily see American politics descend into cruel, petty vengefulness, or worse. But for liberals to respond to this moment by acting as defenders of a disappearing status quo would be unwise. To do so would entail merely reacting to whatever Trump does. The mindset of resistance may be the best way to understand tyranny, but it is not the best way to handle a moment of radical political rupture, in which tyranny is possible but not inevitable.

Back in 1989, the political scientist Ken Jowitt, the author of a great study of Communist upheaval in that period, *New World Disorder*, observed that a rupture of this type forces political leaders to devise a new vocabulary. At such moments, formerly magic words do not work anymore. The slogan "Democracy is under threat" did not benefit the Democrats during the election, because many voters simply did not see Trump himself as that threat.

As the writer George Orwell observed, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." The challenge of apprehending the new, even when the fact of its arrival is undeniable, means that it may come as a shock to liberal sensibilities how few tears will be shed for the passing of the old order. Contrary to what seemed the correct response in 2016, the task of Trump opponents today is not to *resist* the political change that he has unleashed but to *embrace* it—and use this moment to fashion a new coalition for a better society.