



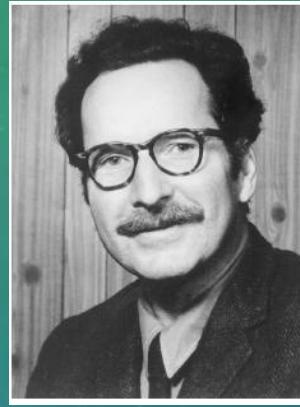
*Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death...*

--James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

# FATAL ATTRACTION: THE POLITICS OF MORTAL TERROR

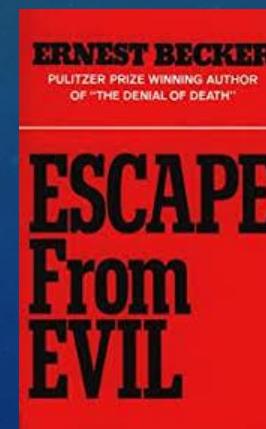
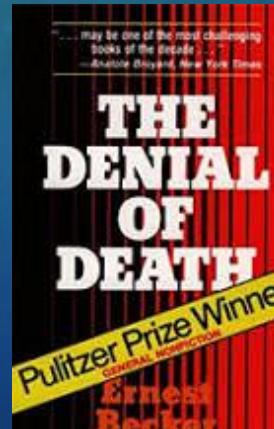
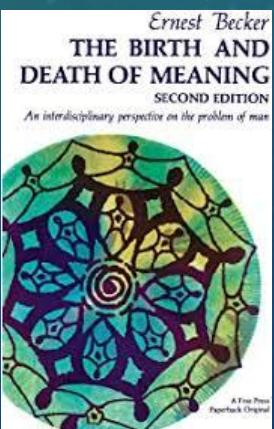
**It is our knowledge that we have to die that makes us human..." Alexander Smith, 1863**

# ERNEST BECKER

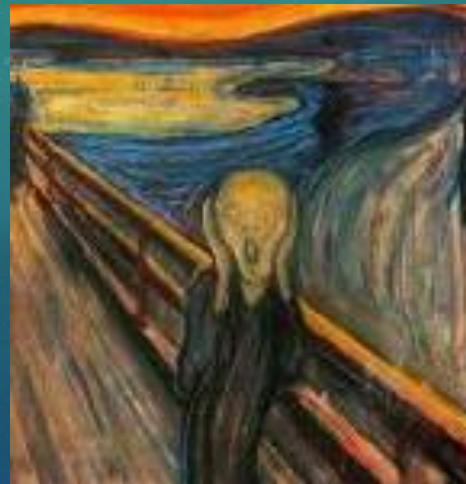


*...the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.*

*The Denial of Death, 1973*



The uniquely human awareness of death creates the potential for paralyzing terror. One of the most important functions of cultural worldviews is to manage the terror associated with this awareness of death. This is accomplished primarily through the cultural mechanism of self esteem, which consists of the belief that one is a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe.



People are motivated to maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and satisfy the standards of value associated with their worldviews.

# IS IT TRUE? AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERLUDE

*Science is refusal to believe on the basis of hope.*

C.P. Snow

# MORTALITY SALIENCE

- If cultural worldviews serve to provide beliefs about the nature of reality that assuage our anxiety associated with the awareness of death, then asking people to ponder their own mortality (**mortality salience**) should increase the need for the protection provided by such beliefs.
- This should result in vigorous agreement with and affection for those who share our beliefs (or are similar to us) and equally vigorous hostility and disdain for those who do not share our beliefs (i.e., are different from us).
- Typical mortality salience induction:
- **PLEASE DESCRIBE THE EMOTIONS THAT THE THOUGHT OF YOUR OWN DEATH AROUSES IN YOU.**
- **WRITE DOWN AS SPECIFICALLY AS YOU CAN, WHAT YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN TO YOU PHYSICALLY AS YOU DIE AND ONCE YOU ARE DEAD.**
- Aversive control induction: intense pain, failure, ostracism, embarrassment.
- Other mortality salience inductions: death anxiety scales, exposure to gory videos, being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, subliminal exposure to the word "dead" or "death".
  - Judge study
  - Reward for heroic behavior

# DEATH THOUGHT ACCESSIBILITY (DTA):

If cultural worldviews and self-esteem mitigate existential terror, then threats to cherished cultural beliefs and/or self-esteem should increase the accessibility of implicit death thoughts.

DTA is typically assessed by a word-stem completion task:

Participants are asked to make words from fragments such as:

- C O F F \_ \_
- S K \_ \_ L
- G R \_ \_ \_

- COFF \_\_ COFFEE VS. COFFIN
- SK \_\_ L SKILL VS. SKULL
- GR \_\_\_ GRILL VS. GRAVE

- Christian fundamentalists who read an essay describing logical inconsistencies in the Bible (or evidence in support of the theory of evolution) had increased DTA.
- Canadians who read an essay belittling Canadian culture had increased DTA.
- Atheists who read an essay suggesting that Jesus may have actually existed had increased DTA.
- Americans asked to reflect on their “undesired self” had increased DTA.

# SO WHAT?

*The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death does not appear under its own name; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.*

Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 1992

# FATAL ATTRACTION

Max Weber: in times of historical upheaval people often embrace leaders with “charisma”, “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”



“It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction – what calm, what relief.”

Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, 1971

- Fatal Attraction: mortality salience increases support for charismatic leaders.
- After a reminder of death or an upcoming exam, participants read campaign statements purportedly written by three political candidates in a hypothetical upcoming gubernatorial election.
- The candidates varied in leadership style: charismatic, task-oriented, or relationship-oriented:
  - Charismatic leader: “....You are not just an ordinary citizen, you are part of a special state and a special nation...”
  - Task-oriented leader: “...I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done so that there is no ambiguity.”
  - Relationship-oriented leader: “...I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state. I know that each individual can make a difference...”

After reading each candidate's statements, participants reported who they would vote for in an election:



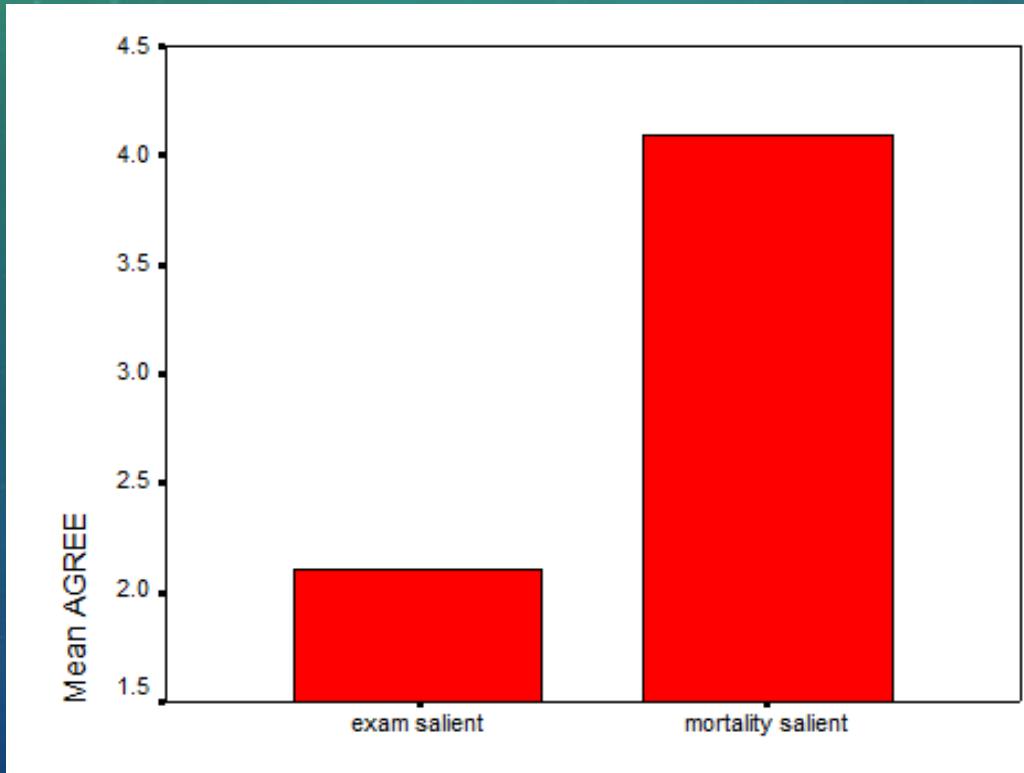
# IN THE WAKE OF 9/11



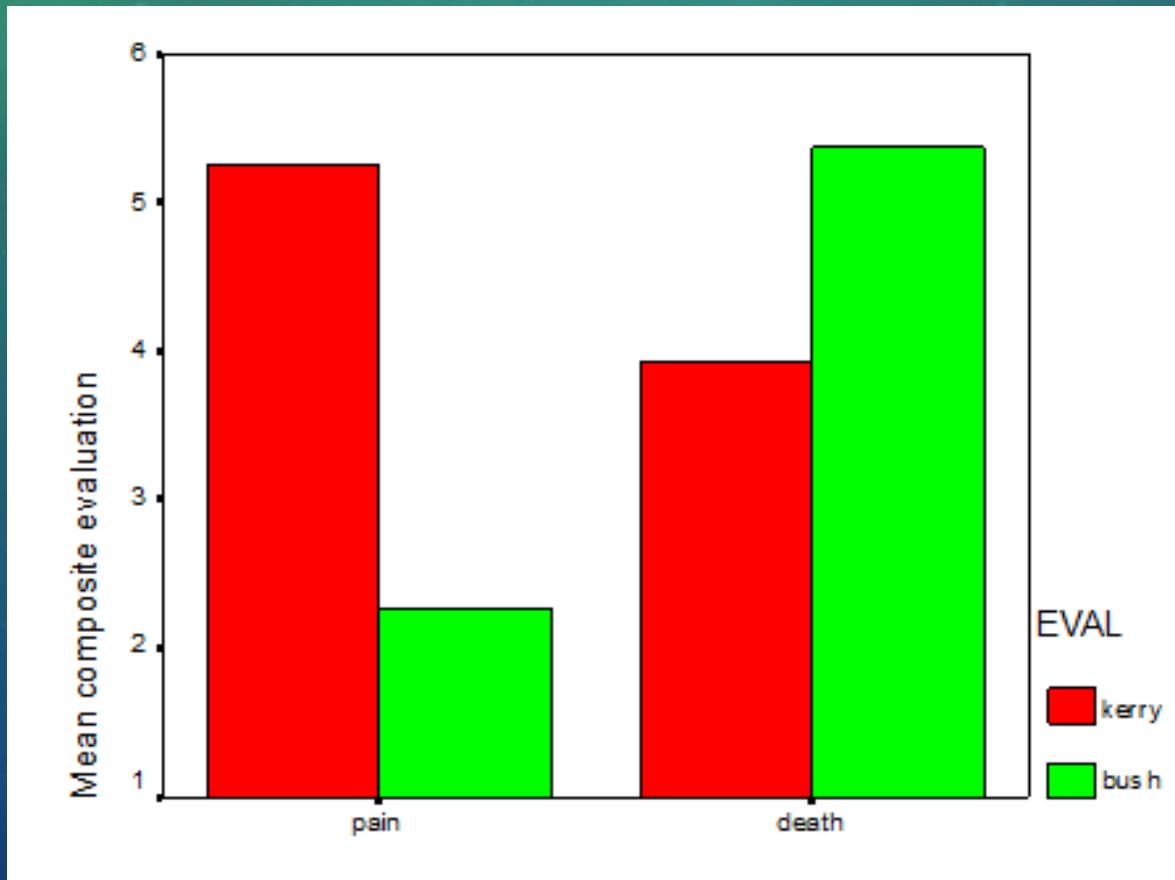
President George W. Bush became a charismatic leader as a result of the events of September 11, 2001...

# DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Participants increased their support for President Bush and his policies pertaining to Iraq in response to mortality salience (MS):



- In spring 2004, John Kerry was more highly regarded than George Bush in an aversive control condition.
- However, after a reminder of death, George Bush was more highly regarded than John Kerry:



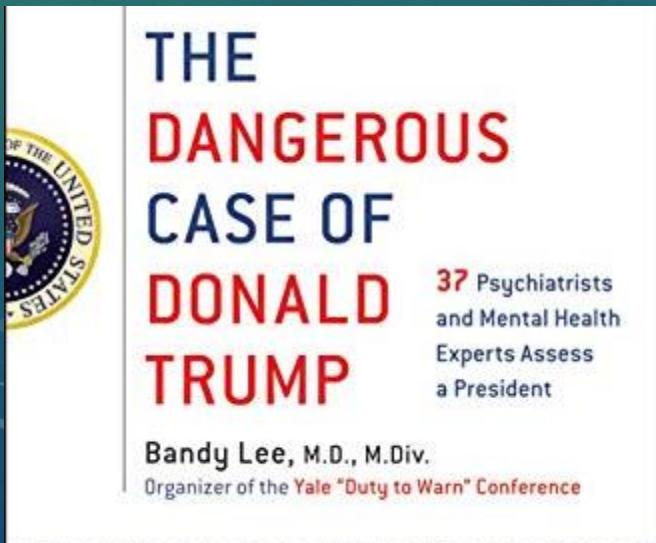
In late September 2004, registered voters at Rutgers University reported who they intended to vote for in the upcoming election after thinking about death or something unpleasant:

	Bush	Kerry
Control	8	35
Death	32	14

# DONALD J. TRUMP: MONSTROUS CLOWN OR HEROIC CHANGE AGENT?

" As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people...On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron."

H.L. Mencken, 1920



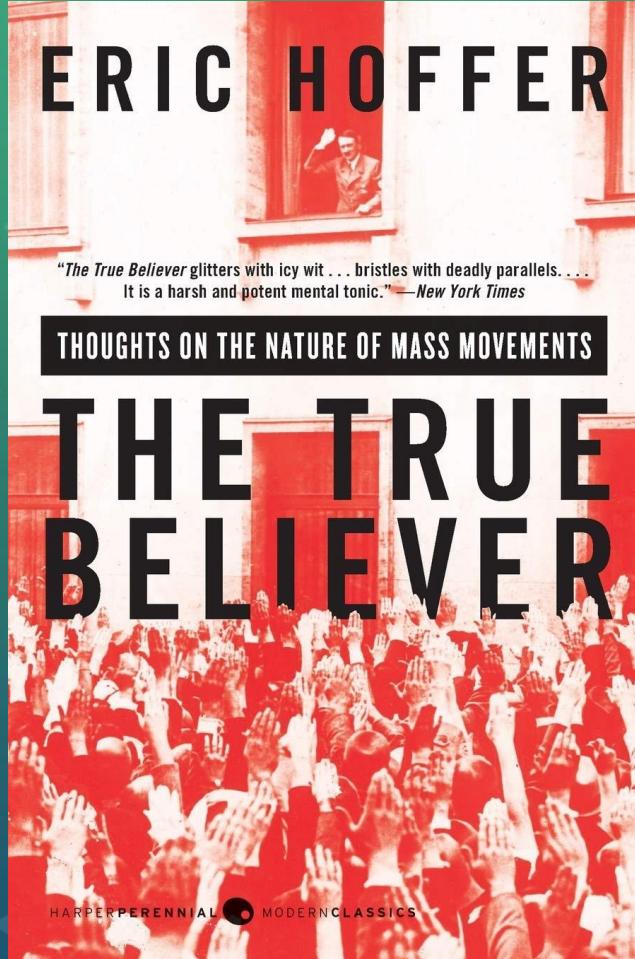
"Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom."

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985

"We got elected on Drain the Swamp, Lock Her Up, Build a Wall. This was pure anger. Anger and fear is what gets people to the polls." Steve Bannon (Trump campaign advisor, 2017)



<https://www.facebook.com/historiansondonaldtrump/>



## THE TRUE BELIEVER: THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF MASS MOVEMENTS ERIC HOFFER (1951)

- The primary impetus for all populist movements is a critical mass of frustrated and disaffected citizens subject to grave economic and/or psychological insecurity "in desperate need of something...to live for."
- Such citizens are thus prone to unwavering dedication and loyalty to a leader who confidently espouses a cause that infuses their lives with a sense of "worth and meaning" AND...

- ...faith in the future via "identification; the process by which the individual ceases to be himself and becomes part of something eternal." = SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY
- Charismatic leaders, need not be exceptionally intelligent, noble, or original.
- The primary qualifications "seem to be: audacity and a joy in defiance; an iron will; a fanatical conviction that he is in possession of the one and only truth; faith in his destiny and luck; a capacity for passionate hatred; contempt for the present; a cunning estimate of human nature; a delight in symbols (spectacles and ceremonials)...the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinion of others, the singlehanded defiance of the world...[and] some deliberate misrepresentation of facts".





Mass movements also require an external enemy to enable the charismatic leader to direct/deflect the rage and righteous indignation of their frustrated and disaffected followers toward a tangible scapegoat, an individual or group of individuals designated as an all-encompassing-repository of evil who must be subdued or eradicated.

Finally: “All active mass movements strive...to interpose a fact-proof screen between the faithful and the realities of the world. They do this by claiming that the ultimate and absolute truth is already embodied in their doctrine and that there is no truth nor certitude outside of it...It is the true believer’s ability to “shut his eyes and stop his ears” to facts...which is the source of his unequaled fortitude and constancy. He cannot be frightened by danger nor disheartened by obstacles nor baffled by contradictions because he denies their existence”

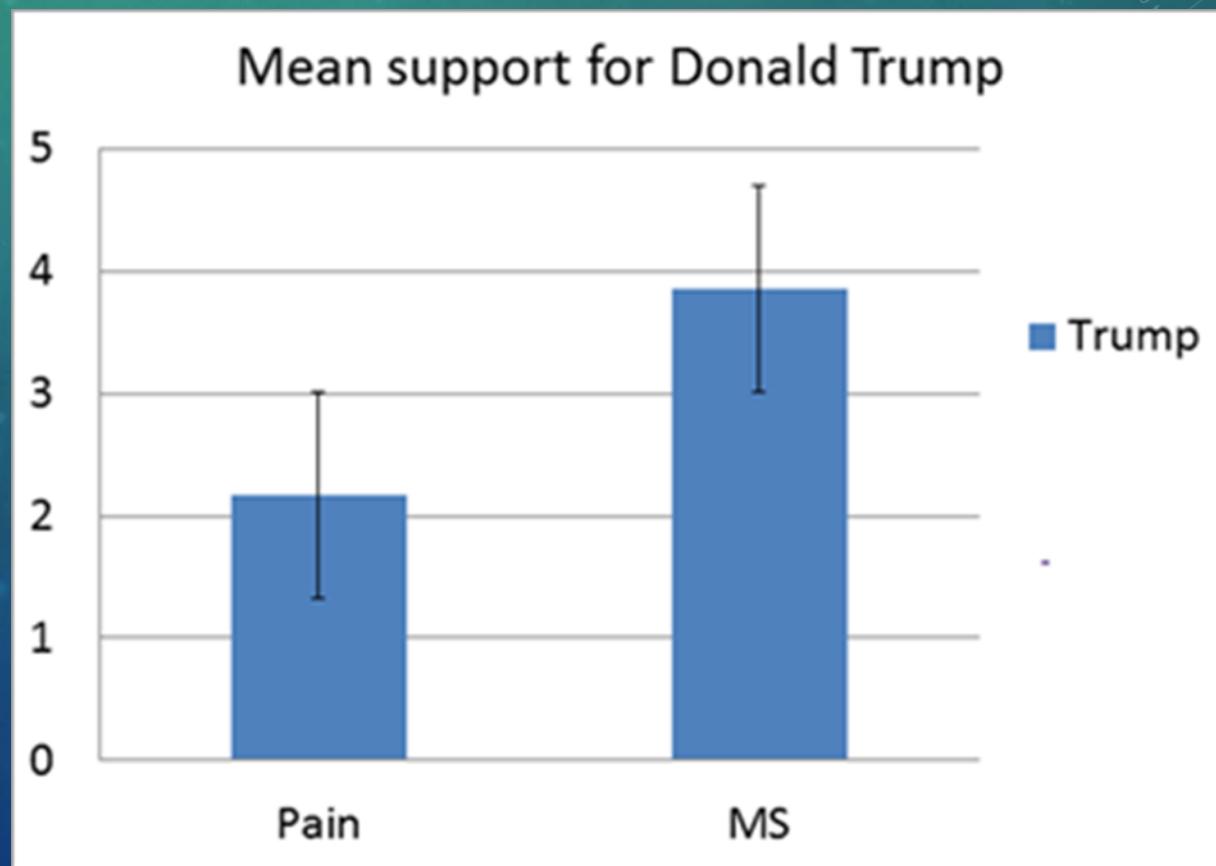
*Donald Trump, July 2018: "Stick with us. Don't believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news. ... **What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening.**"*

*“The Fraudulent Presidential Election of 2020 will be, from this day forth, known as THE BIG LIE!” – Donald Trump May 2021*

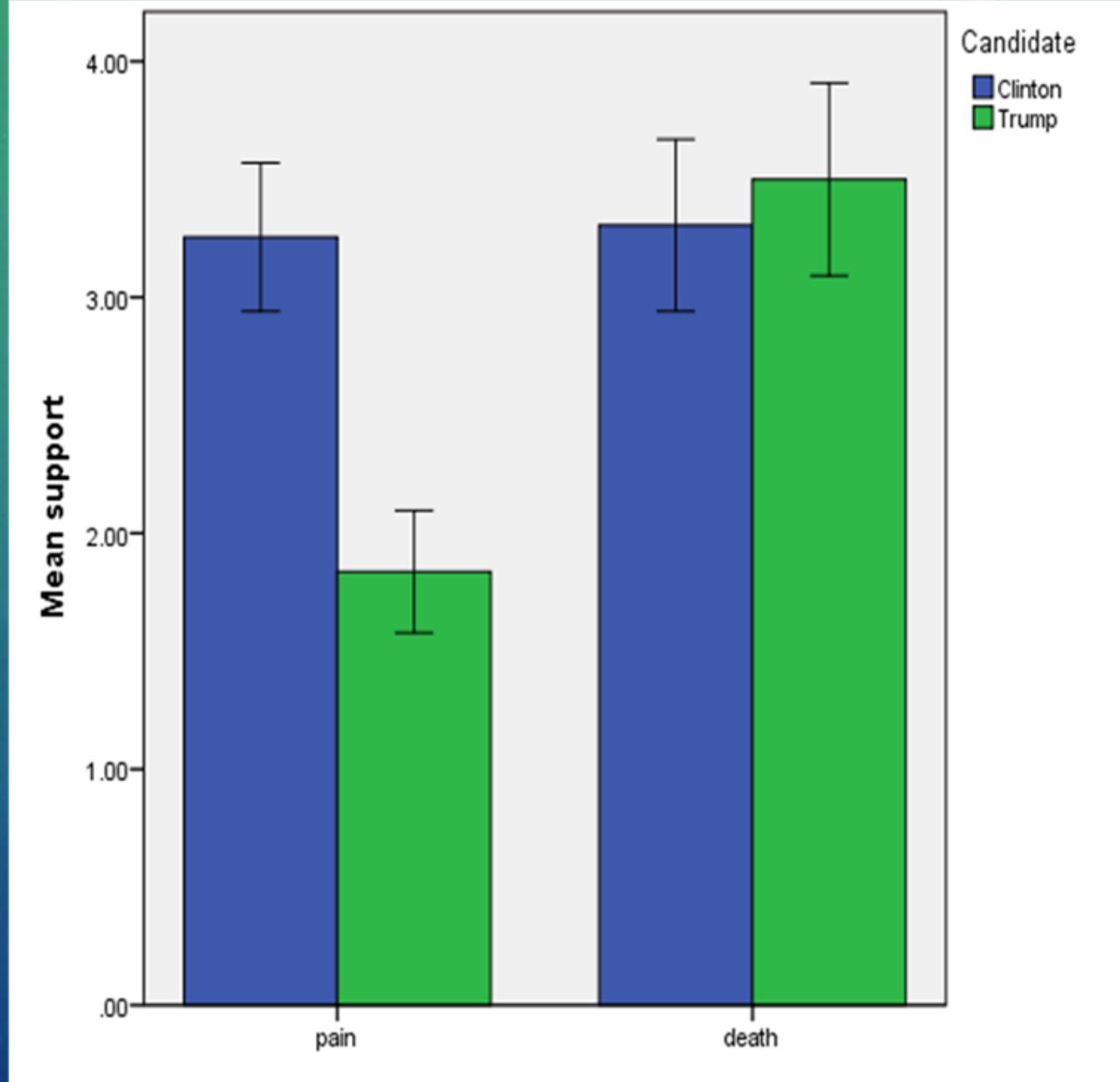


# YOU'RE HIRED! THE EFFECT OF MORTALITY SALIENCE ON SUPPORT FOR DONALD TRUMP

In fall 2015,  
Americans reminded  
of their mortality  
were more supportive  
of Donald Trump and  
more willing to vote  
for him:



- In August 2016, Americans had more favorable impressions of Hillary Clinton and reported being more likely to vote for her in a control condition.
- However, after being reminded of their mortality, participants were (again) more supportive of Donald Trump and more willing to vote for him.



# TRUMP ON THE STUMP

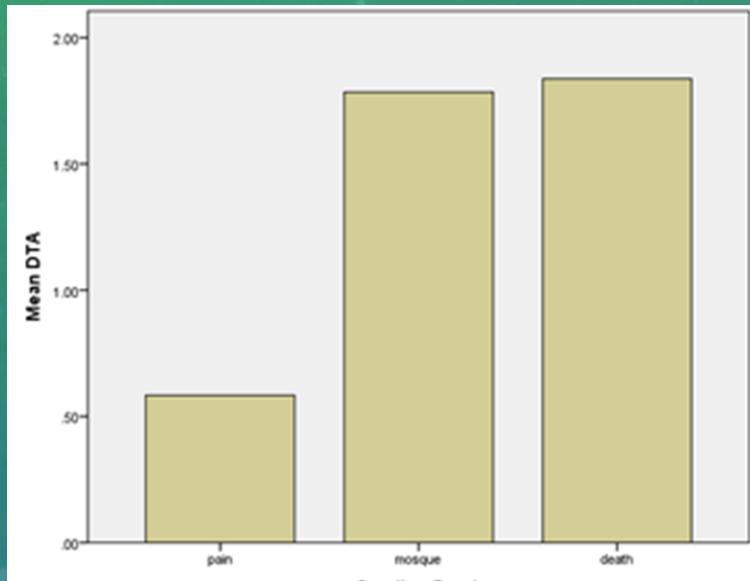
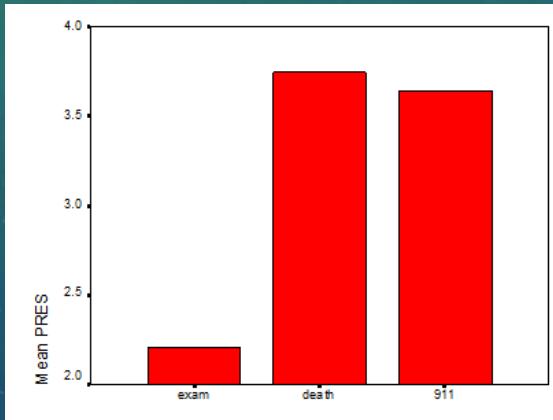
## THE EVIL TRIAD: TERRORISM, ISLAM, AND IMMIGRANTS



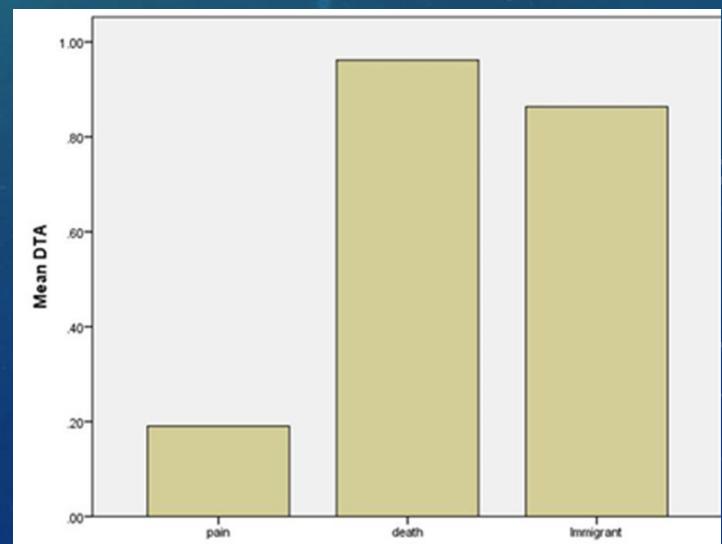
"It is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a parliament or a communist dictatorship ... Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

Hermann Goering (Hitler's "campaign manager")

Americans asked to think about the events of 9/11 (or terrorism in general) had increased death thought accessibility.



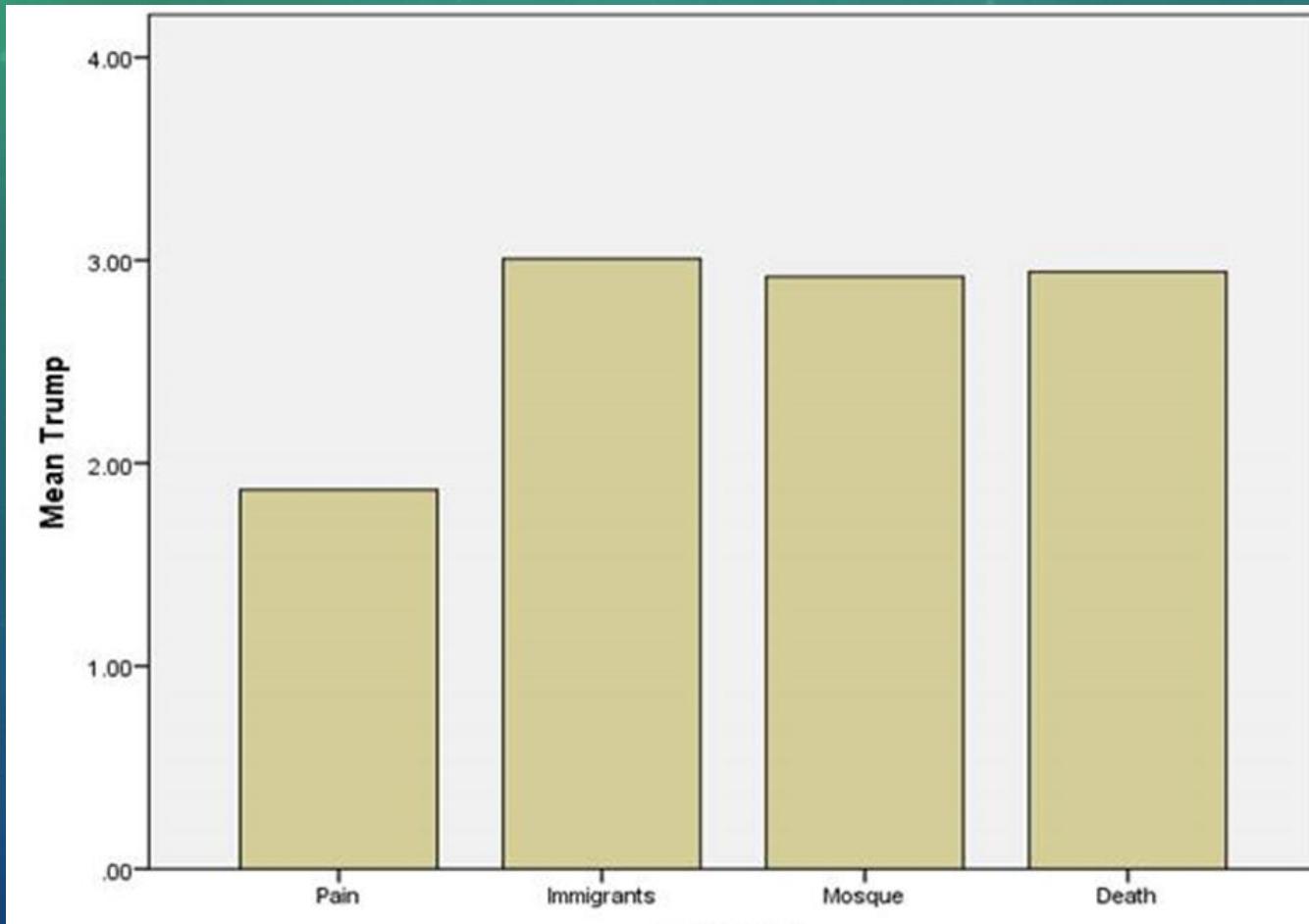
Americans asked to think about a mosque being built in their neighborhood had increased death thought accessibility.



Americans asked to think about immigrants moving into their neighborhood had increased death thought accessibility.



Americans asked to think about death, or immigrants moving into their neighborhood, or a mosque being built in their neighborhood reported more favorable impressions of Donald Trump and a higher likelihood of voting for him:



# SO WHAT? DEATH: THE TRUMP CARD

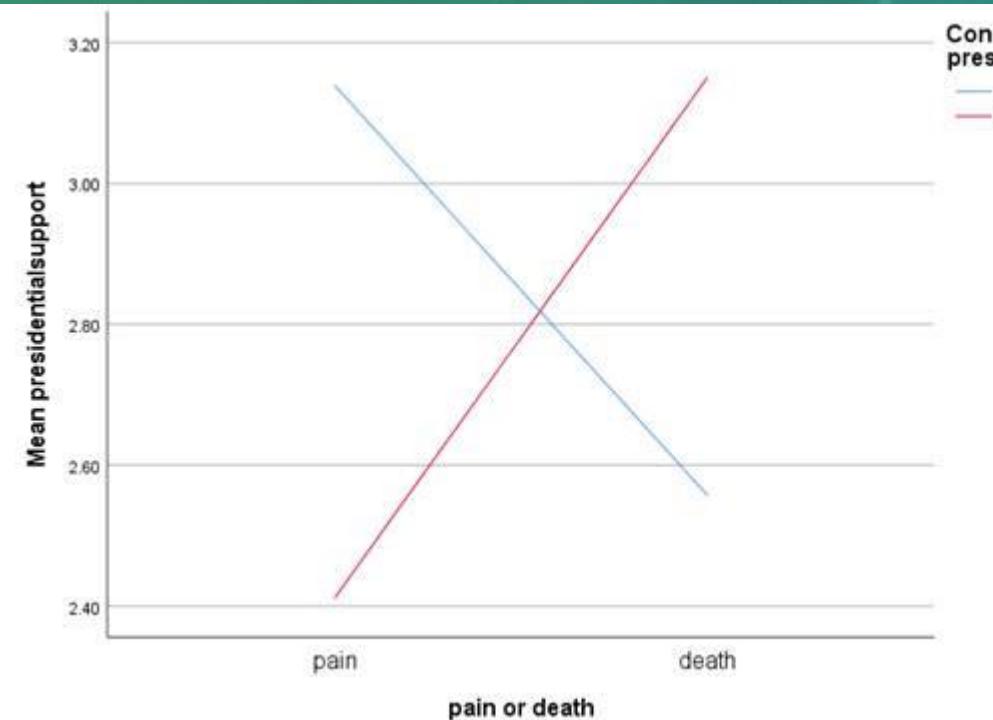
Making terrorism, Islam, and/or immigrants salient increases death thought accessibility, which is psychologically equivalent to being reminded of death.

This in turn increases support for charismatic leaders in general and Donald Trump in particular.

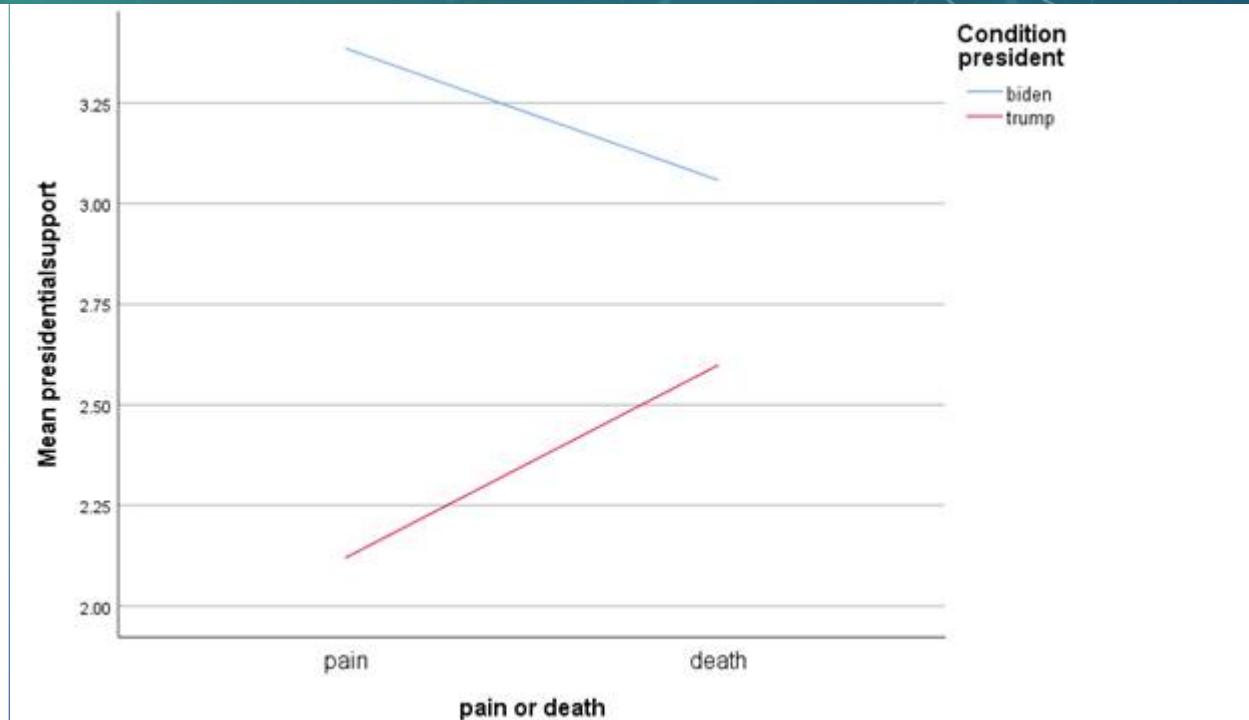
2020 Axis of Evil: Democrats (socialists, Antifa – will take away your guns and God), people of color (“low income housing will destroy the suburbs”), & China (covid-19 = “kung flu”, “the China virus”)

# 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

White participants



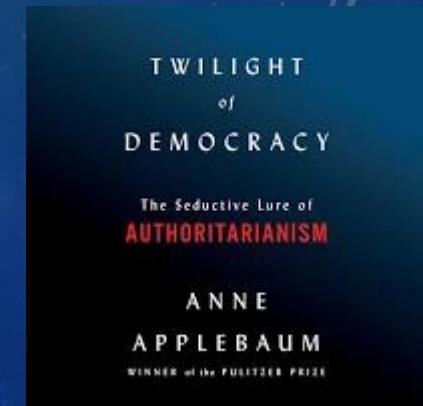
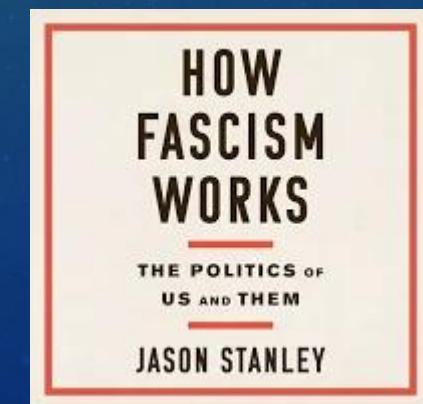
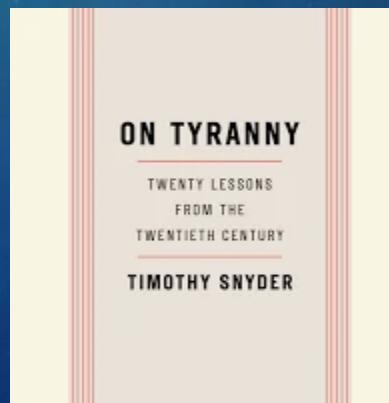
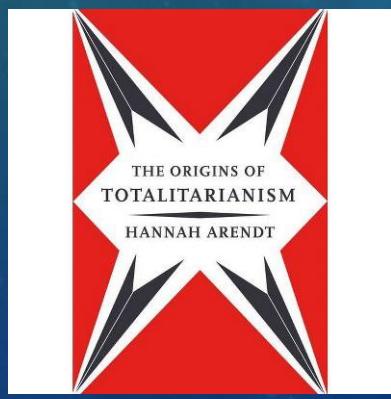
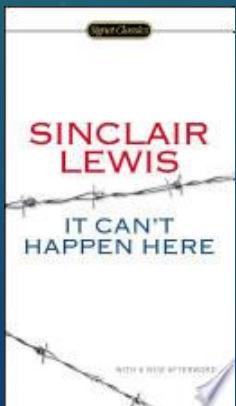
Non-white participants



# CONCLUSIONS

Some support for Donald Trump is the result of non-conscious defensive reactions to existential terror, rather than rational consideration of, and agreement with, Mr. Trump's specific policies or proposals.

This has ominous implications for democracy, regardless of one's political predilections.



“...there is no greater mistake and no graver danger than not to see that in our own society we are faced with the same phenomenon that is fertile soil for the rise of Fascism anywhere: the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual.”

Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 1941

- What is fascism?
  - “fascist politics...aims to separate a population into an “us” and a “them”
  - “Fascist politicians transform the population’s shared understanding of reality by twisting the language of ideals through propaganda and promoting anti-intellectualism, attacking universities and educational systems that might challenge their ideas. Eventually...fascist politics creates a state of unreality, in which conspiracy theories and fake news replace reasoned debate.”
  - *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, Jason Stanley, 2018

# FASCISM ANYONE? LAURENCE W. BRITT, 2003

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Powerful and continuing expressions of nationalism.</li><li>2. Disdain for the importance of human rights.</li><li>3. Identification of enemies/scapegoats as a unifying cause.</li><li>4. The supremacy of the military/avid militarism.</li><li>5. Rampant sexism.</li><li>6. A controlled mass media.</li><li>7. Obsession with national security.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>8. Religion and ruling elite tied together.</li><li>9. Power of corporations protected.</li><li>10. Power of labor suppressed or eliminated.</li><li>11. Disdain and suppression of intellectuals and the arts.</li><li>12. Obsession with crime and punishment.</li><li>13. Rampant cronyism and corruption.</li><li>14. Fraudulent elections.</li></ul> |
|--|---|

# HITLER: ASCENT 1889-1939 (BY VOLKER ULLRICH)—FROM 9/28/16 REVIEW IN THE NY TIMES BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Hitler was often described as an egomaniac who “only loved himself” — a narcissist with a taste for self-dramatization and a “characteristic fondness for superlatives.”

Hitler was known, among colleagues, for a “bottomless mendacity” that would later be magnified by a slick propaganda machine that used the latest technology (radio, gramophone records, film) to spread his message.

A former finance minister wrote that Hitler “was so thoroughly untruthful that he could no longer recognize the difference between lies and truth” and editors of one edition of “Mein Kampf” described it as a “swamp of lies, distortions, innuendoes, half-truths and real facts.”

## HITLER ON LIES IN MEIN KAMPF

“...in the big lie there is always the force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large scale-falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously....For the grossly imprudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying. These people know only too well how to use falsehood for the basest purposes.”

Hitler was an effective orator and actor adept at assuming various masks and feeding off the energy of his audiences...he specialized in big, theatrical rallies staged with spectacular elements borrowed from the circus. “Hitler adapted the content of his speeches to suit the tastes of his lower-middle-class, nationalist-conservative, ethnic-chauvinist and anti-Semitic listeners”. He peppered his speeches with coarse phrases and put-downs of hecklers. Even as he fomented chaos by playing to crowds’ fears and resentments, he offered himself as the visionary leader who could restore law and order.

Hitler increasingly presented himself in messianic terms, promising “to lead Germany to a new era of national greatness,” though he was typically vague about his actual plans. He often harked back to a golden age for the country, “to paint the present day in hues that were all the darker. Everywhere you looked now, there was only decline and decay.”

Hitler virtually wrote the modern playbook on demagoguery, arguing in “Mein Kampf” that propaganda must appeal to the emotions — not the reasoning powers — of the crowd. Its “purely intellectual level,” Hitler said, “will have to be that of the lowest mental common denominator among the public it is desired to reach.” Because the understanding of the masses “is feeble,” he went on, effective propaganda needed to be boiled down to a few slogans that should be “persistently repeated until the very last individual has come to grasp the idea that has been put forward.”

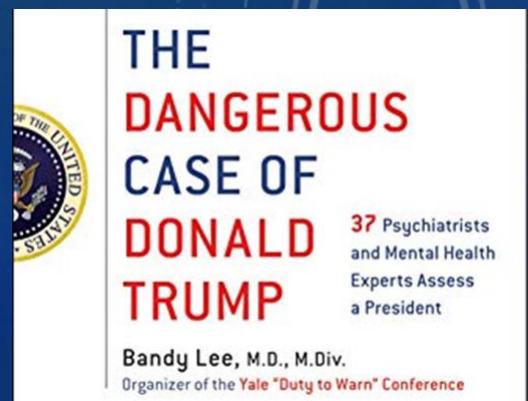
## THE BIG LIE: “For Republicans, fealty to Trump’s election falsehood becomes defining loyalty test” (Washington Post, May 2, 2021)

- “Debra Ell, a Republican organizer in Michigan and fervent supporter of former president Donald Trump, said she has good reason to believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen. “I think I speak for many people in that Trump has never actually been wrong, and so we’ve learned to trust when he says something, that he’s not just going to spew something out there that’s wrong and not verified,” she said, referring to Trump’s baseless claims that widespread electoral fraud caused his loss to President Biden in November.”
- POINT: RECENT RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT SUPPORT FOR THE 1/6/21 CAPITAL INSURRECTION AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IS MEDIATED BY SUBSCRIPTION TO THE BIG LIE.
- DEMOCRACY IS IMPERILLED UNTIL THE BIG LIE IS DISMANTLED

# DISMANTLE THE BIG LIE:

- What matters is this. “ Do you recognize, acknowledge and assert without qualifications that Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump decisively in a free, fair and legitimate election?
- Of course, this is the question the leader of the House Autocrats is running from but there is no escape from it. It is the essential marker in American political life. It marks the boundary waters between reality and fantasy and the truth and the lie. It marks the front lines in the battle ahead between American democracy and the autocratic cancer that blossomed from the poisonous Trump Presidency.
- The use of language matters and understanding the code words is more important than ever. There is no higher strategic priority for Trump, McCarthy and McConnell than making the murderous insurrection disappear into the fog of a culture without memory.
- If that is allowed to happen, we will lose the country. The coverup of what happened on the 6th by Trump and his cabal of elected Autocrats guarantees more political violence, death, extremism and instability in the years ahead.
- **Steve Schmidt – May 19, 2021**

THE “ORANGE” BLACK SWAN: A **black swan** is an unpredictable event that is beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences. **Black swan** events are characterized by their extreme rarity, severe impact, and the widespread insistence they were obvious in hindsight.



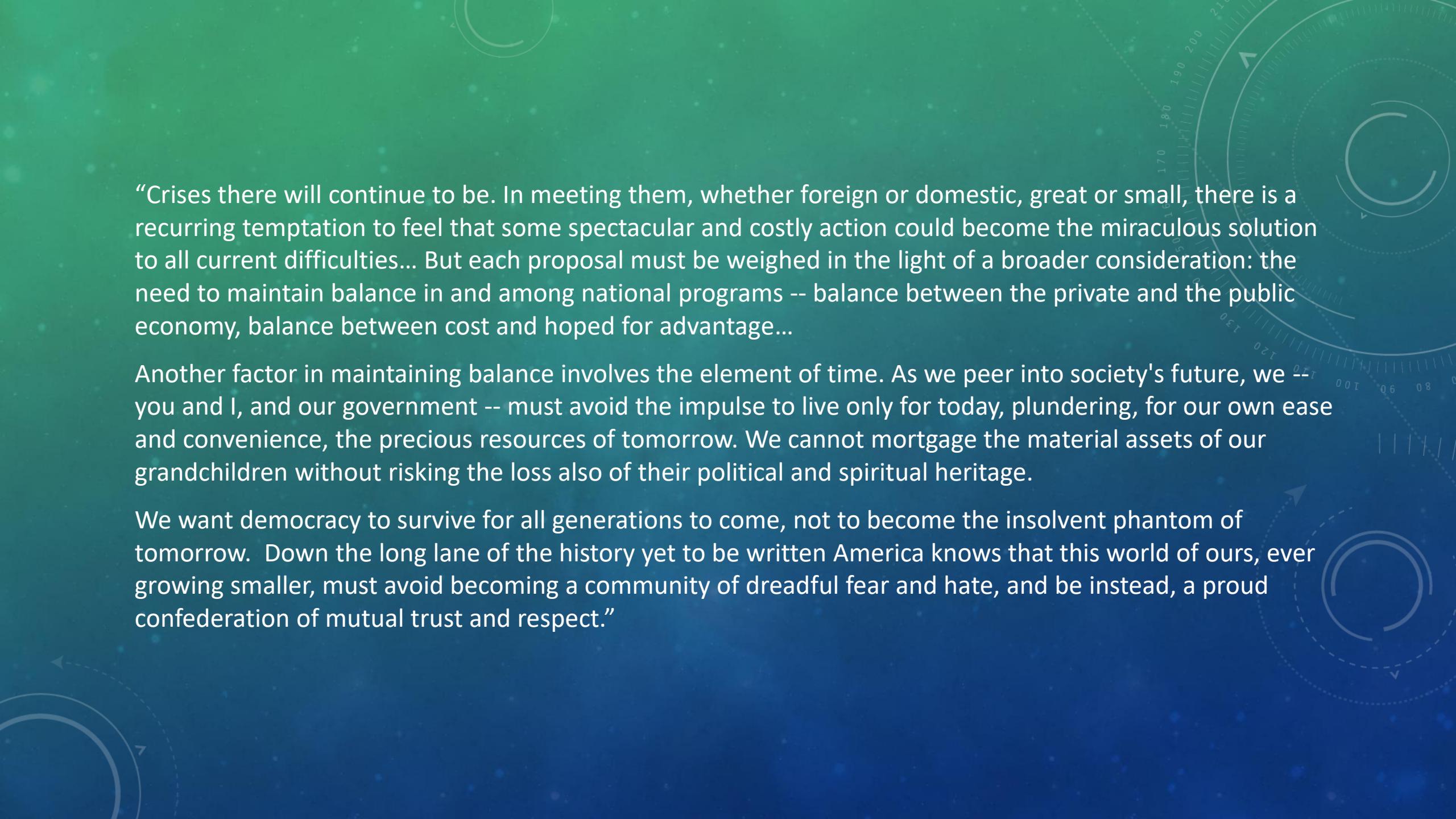
# NOW WHAT? U.S. AND HUMANITY AT THE CROSSROADS?



# COMMON HUMANITY

- “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life.”
  - Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851
- “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Abraham Lincoln (first Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861)



“Crises there will continue to be. In meeting them, whether foreign or domestic, great or small, there is a recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties... But each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs -- balance between the private and the public economy, balance between cost and hoped for advantage...

Another factor in maintaining balance involves the element of time. As we peer into society's future, we -- you and I, and our government -- must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage.

We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow. Down the long lane of the history yet to be written America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.”

# President and General and Republican Dwight Eisenhower





Thank you!

[ssolomon@skidmore.edu](mailto:ssolomon@skidmore.edu)

Life is great!