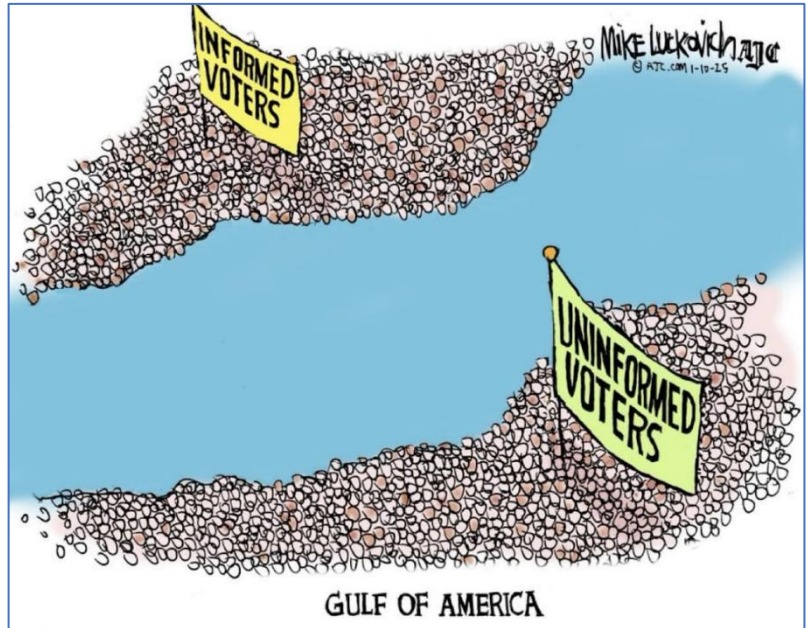


# Friends of Democracy #6 – January 20, 2025

**Michael Edward Luckovich** is an editorial cartoonist who has worked for The Atlanta Journal Constitution since 1989 and won the 2005 Reuben, the National Cartoonists Society's top annual award. He is also the recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes. ([Wikipedia](#))

Dear Friends...

Tuesday the 20<sup>th</sup> we inaugurated our 47<sup>th</sup> president. Normally a day to be taking an interest in politics. Perhaps even celebrate. Yet I ignored it consequentially to preserve one last illusion of normalcy. Wednesday as I woke, indeed the world looked about the same as before. Yet my feeling was much more foreboding as I glanced at the news. On the horizon, there seemed to be a storm of epic proportions gathering.



Among our president's first executive actions was a proposal to rename the Gulf of Mexico. On a scale of 1 to 10 in global importance, perhaps a minus 20! Yet symbolically, appropriately representative of the vengeful pettiness and hegemonic view of the world our president seems intent on doing battle with – Canada, Greenland, Denmark and Mexico at the top of the list. It also seems emblematic of the great divide in our nation between MAGA libertarianism and WOKE progressivism.



No folks, this is not an episode of Beavis and Butt-Head to snicker and laugh about when the director of DOGE does a Hitler salute. This goes right to the heart and purse and leadership of our entire government, military and judicial branch.

With just 1,6% lead in the popular vote, it seems that the “[silent majority](#)” Ronald Reagan spoke to in 1969 has again seen its cause championed by a disrupter who spews vague promises of Making America Great Again<sup>1</sup>. Just as “[the great communicator](#)” did in 1980 with his revisionist agenda of libertarianism and trickle-down economics, Trump and his well-established power-base of billionaires, legislators, political strategists and judiciary enablers are about to restructure the framework of American civil liberties.

My intellect wants to believe that half the nation couldn't have been completely wrong. My optimism wants to wish that this new administration gets some of it right. Yet a wide swath of our population is about to become marginalized, even criminalized, while seditious are being pardoned. For me personally, cause for worry and indignation. I grieve for all the people of non-binary gender, women seeking health care for reproductive complications, recipients of social security who may lose essential benefits, benefactors of the Affordable Care Act, all those who pay too much for necessary medications, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants with their respective children born on American soil, minorities facing barriers to higher education, and most significantly, an ecological time-bomb that is dangerously being ignored. These greater plights all give cause to dismay over my person's potential for influencing a change. I struggle with a newly perceived sense of helplessness.

<sup>1</sup> "Let's Make America Great Again" used by Ronald Reagan as a campaign slogan in his 1980 presidential campaign. ([Wikipedia](#))

## Does democracy matter when “the wrong people win”?

By a slim electoral margin, an epochal shift in American politics and social order has been enabled. Culture wars instead of inclusiveness seem to be the new norm. Preemptive obedience to an authoritarian disrupter precludes civil courage of exactly those people with wealth and influence who should know better and actually could make a difference. Disregard for the norms of public discourse and civic responsibility has unleashed an aggressiveness that has not been seen since FDR’s New Deal ushered in a national commitment to relief for the needy and reform of the financial structures that fostered wealth and social disparity.

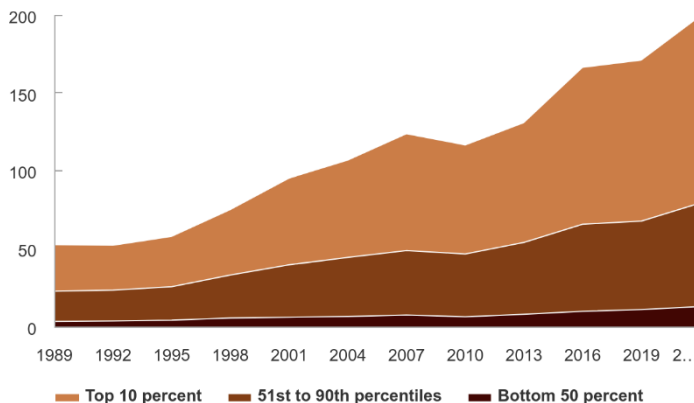


The gulf of America is the divide between those who believe freedom is a privilege for elite rich white supremacists to lie, cheat, steal and abuse the weight of their power for their own benefit, and those who believe the rest of America, comprised of a wide diversity of ethnic, social, cultural and economic backgrounds should not be disenfranchised from education, public safety, and upward mobility.

Never has the concentration of wealth in a president’s advisory cabinet (the center of political decision making) been in such stark contrast to the general wealth of the Nation. As of mid-December The Guardian estimated Trump’s cabinet’s combined wealth at \$340 Billion was 2.881 times richer than Joe Biden’s cabinet – just as a side note to who the elite are in Washington. Here is how the wealth of our nation has grown in comparison between rich and poor since the beginning of Ronald Reagan’s so-called “trickle down economics”.

Total Family Wealth, by Wealth Group

Trillions of 2022 dollars



Literally half the country has seen nearly no growth in 45 years. The wealthiest 40% have doubled their wealth in that period and the richest 10% quadrupled theirs.

A September 2017 study by the Federal Reserve reported that the top 1% owned 38.5% of the country's wealth in 2016.

Net value of the bottom 50% of American households was \$51 thousand. The top 10% made up 67% of total household wealth with an average worth of \$6,9 million. 135x richer.

**Yes, democracy matters!** Not because it’s only about dominance. It’s also about maintaining resilience. At critical points, systems tip towards new dynamics of dominance. In the US that dominance is wealth which translates directly into power. With a compromised judicial system, a jilted electoral system and a legislature which is disproportionately representative of the population and . but that does not necessarily eliminate a species that has lost its dominance. It just means that species is challenged to adapt. This is the reality of free-market capitalism and is also a mirror of the biological dynamics of nature, where each sub-group fights for domain, sustenance, sustainability. If you are born into a deprived environment, you will not thrive like a seedling with a better start. Viewing this as a moral battle only fuels the emotional heat of the fire which threatens our viability. Pragmatically, it is useless for the grassy plain to bicker about the encroachment of a forest who’s trees will steal its light.



### **Don't give up!**

In 1971 David Brower founded Friends of the Earth with a slogan "**Think globally, act locally**" urging people to consider the interconnectedness of the entire planet while taking action in one's own community and immediate circles of influence. This means for me using the tools at my disposal i.e. (Books, Internet, Films, Discussions, Public Forums) to keep pace with current events, but placing my focus on that which I can positively influence in my personal daily encounters.

I see the greater issues

Sorry for the long pause in this series of letters. With the nomination of Kamala Harris for the Dem ticket, I was so energized by the dynamic of her campaign, that I literally felt there was nothing I could add to equation. From July to November, I mostly read about immigration in the US, followed the blogs of Heather Richardson and watched a series of lectures on economics by Robert Reich.

I was dead certain the Biden-Harris legacy would prevail and socially responsible progressivism would claim the election. I was dead wrong.

Essentially nothing has changed in my immediate life. And for many of us who are privileged enough to be beyond the encroachments of a new political and economic paradigm that has defined American politics In

From Letter #5

...a **masterful strategy** for remaking of the GOP into an extremist right-wing, anti-democratic, libertarian, populist, authoritarian movement. It goes like this **1)** Break the rules! Be so audacious that no known norms can define or defy you; **2)** Do that with a speed and insistence that forces the opponents to sound hysterical when they call you out; **3)** Add a healthy portion of time-proven cynicism, hypocrisy, bigotry, projection, corruption and the almighty power of hate; **4)** Keep your financiers happy and the crowd whipped up into an ecstatic frenzy that is too testosterone invigorated to be able to stop and think; **5)** Disguise your ideology in a promise that is fantastically diametrically opposed to what you are actually aiming for, because that would be diametrically opposed to the actual needs and social status of the constituency you are courting and catering to (undereducated, poorly paid, working class, rural white misogynist with a grudge). **6)** Give them purpose and direction by leading them down a path of impassioned rebellion against – you guessed it: (cynicism, hypocrisy, bigotry, projection, corruption and the almighty power of hate).

**The hidden ideology is simple:** no more government oversight, no consumer protection, no taxes for the extremely wealthy, no separation of powers, no leniency for dissents or freedom of the press, no tolerance for diversity or the sticky business of (voting rights, civil rights, women’s rights, gender diversity), amnesty for political buddies, punishment for political opponents. At the top of the pyramid is big-money and big industry (the likes of the Koch Family, Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, to name a few). Their interests are protected above all else by a centralized nucleus of power, censorship of critical thinking, ending public education and all forms of equal opportunity, curtailing public health care, re-establishing capital punishment and ignoring aberrations of society that are uncomfortable to look at – like drug addiction, immigration, gun violence, suicide, domestic terrorism.

The leaders of this rebellion against our state, and frankly democracy itself, are well-educated, highly successful, as ruthless and morally depraved as they are intelligent and sinfully rich. They have been financing and conspiring since the early 70’s and even as I write this, I know I am sounding like a conspiracy theorist and incredibly woke. Guilty. But in my defense, I am sorry that I need to say, these are the bread crumbs that trace their march. They’re openly visible to be objectively reviewed, if anyone cares. I do.

The principal characters in this story are (excuse my radical simplification here, but a few key words are enough to set every curious reader into action for days):

- 1) **Libertarianism:** A child of murky waters which ebb between philosophy and political jargon, it started out as a term for liberal personal freedom, anarchy and socialism. Then it got usurped by conservative activists, and bent to the service of corporate freedom from government regulation. As a toxic ingredient of the “culture wars”, it now claims the right of conservatives to deny others their right of disagreeing with them. Good luck trying to sort out this genesis. In effect it is a prime example of the ability through social influencing, to morph a word into a new meaning that better suits one’s motive. The word Woke, for example, originally came from Afro-American vernacular and meant being awake to racial prejudice and discrimination. Later its meaning expanded to encompass social inequities, sexism and denial of LGBT rights. The MAGA movement has demonized the word, equating it with treason, immorality, elitism, and uses it as a justification for banning books, restricting access to voting by undesired social and ethnic groups, even striking any reference to climate change from federal and state documents. What should have been a positive natural consequence of awareness out of the civil rights and women’s movement became a four-letter word.

- 2) **The Federalist Society** was founded in 1982 by students at Yale Law School who were inspired by a visiting professor/lecturer, the Honorable Antonin Scalia. His novel concept of “originalism” saw the constitution as a base set of rules to be administered by the legislative state and a strong executive without undue interference by the judiciary – whose only task is judging, not making the rules. In the four decades since then, the concept of originalism has mutated from Scalia’s original intention of deferring to governmental administration, to using the courts as a political instrument of revisionist conservatism. The capstone of this transition was the reversal of the Chevron deference doctrine of 1984. Today conservatives are taking the ‘originalist’ argument to support an idea that the constitution (written in 1787) is an ironclad mandate set in stone, and not a concept to be adopted with a changing and developing society. Justice Antonin Scalia was appointed to the Supreme Court by Ronald Reagan in 1986 on the recommendation of the Federalist Society. Since then, all six of the conservative judges currently on the supreme court have been protégés of the massively influential Federalist Society and its current co-chairman and former executive vice president, Leonard Leo .
- 3) **Originalism and Professor Scalia.** According to Harvard Law Professor, Adrian Vermeule, during a lecture at the Harvard Law School in Oct 2022, Scalia’s “originalist” reasoning SUPPORTED the Chevron deference in the interest of the public over private adventurism, for which he cautioned the Judiciary not to interfere too strongly with the Executive branch. By 2013 during the Obama administration, Vermeule argues, Scalia had begun to change his stance on ‘originalism’ and saw the executive more critically. It is not this change of heart however, that has inspired the current court. But rather Scalia’s original idea of a strong executive, leading them not only to reverse Chevron, but also grant sweeping immunity for any actions carried out in the course of presidential duty. This is a prime example of the malleable principles of justice coalescing to become servants of specific political interests. GOP, strong executive, deconstruction of the administrative state, protection of deep pocketed special interests, government appointed Judges who overturn bedrock principles of the last 100 years.
- 4) **The Heritage Foundation** is a conservative “[think tank](#)” dedicated to countering liberal views on taxation and regulation, which they consider to be anti-business. Project 2025 is the Heritage’s 10<sup>th</sup> “Mandate for Leadership” – a blueprint for the intended second Trump presidency. Its first was in 1981 for the Reagan administration. Although originally anti-Trump, as he gained the presidency in 2016 the Heritage quickly adjusted and made sweeping recommendations for key positions in his administration. Beginning in 2022, the Heritage Foundation began to incrementally embrace “national conservatism as its guiding ideology.” In May 2022, the Heritage completely reversed its position to support military aid to Ukraine and claimed “Ukraine Aid Package Puts America Last”. This is not a fly by night organization making random swings of faith. It has an agenda, and if one were looking for a silent behemoth in the shadows of power being influential in forming policy and directing the course of history, this would be a strong candidate. The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973 by **Paul Weyrich** (“[an American religious conservative political activist and commentator associated with the New Right](#)”), **Edwin J. Feulner** co-founder and former president, and **Joseph Coors** of the Coors beer empire. “[While the organization was at first only minimally influential, it grew into one of the world's largest public policy research institutes and has been hugely influential in advancing conservative policies.](#)” For a look at the history of funding, influence, and ideology, go here ([SourceWatch Center for Media and Democracy](#))

If one delves into the copious literature on the topic of Authoritarianism, written by social scientists, political analysts and investigative reporters, one sees a consistent scenario for dismantling democracies. (**Reading List:** [Causes and Consequences of Authoritarianism](#) / [Reading List from FOREIGN AFFAIRS online magazine](#) / [PEW Research on America's view on foreign policy 2019](#) / [Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy](#) / [Popular Books on Authoritarianism](#))

**In conclusion I would like to recommend you to read these two pieces.**

**The first** is an in-depth portrait of the libertarian Federalist Society and the silent but enormously effective rise of Leonard Leo ([Link](#)) as a major influencer in the conservative restructuring of our courts. It appeared in the online investigative journalistic magazine ProPublica in October of 2023.

**The second** is a portrait of turncoat politician J.D. Vance and his ([Faustian](#)) pact with power. This excellent essay, which recently appeared in the NYTimes, was written by Ed Simon, author of *“Devil’s Contract: The History of the Faustian Bargain”* and the editor in chief of Belt Magazine, which covers the Rust Belt and Appalachia. Here is a link to the (Gift Version of [full article](#) – Max 10x retrievable).

Thank you for your attention...

Let me know if you are already privy to the things I post. If not, then I am glad I could share them.

If yes, then share them further and let me know what else you find important or would like to read about.

In the words of Joyce Vance, “We are in this together.”

And the worse it gets, the more we’ll need each other.

Sincerely,

Paul Kustermann

## Archive of previous Links and Newsletters:

Can be found at my website: <http://www.paulkustermann.de/files/Share/Democracy>

Thank you for your attention.

If you don’t want to receive these letters  
simply respond with a simple “No, thanks.”

If it is helpful – please forward  
to others who want to be informed.

With best wishes from Berlin  
Paul Kustermann