

The War of the Words: Trump and the Left

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAR 3 2017

Narrative has in some ways become the most prescient battle point, up-to-the-minute, in the United States today. Who has the hegemonic power over the meta-narrative of what we are, where we are going, and what this presidential administration is about? If you read some venues on the Left, it is the new politicized press that will not be able to stand by and present neutral news; the press does not have to “get along” with Trump. There is an open debate in the mainstream press today about whether it should act as an “opposition” to Trump. Should it lose the (for some, unattainable) goal of objectivity and neutrality in favor of a politically-engaged and politically-“responsible” press? If you listen to Andrew Klavan or Dana Loesch, it is the new Right led by Trump’s moderate Realism who leads the narrative, pitted, as they are, against a pansy-Leftist fringe that has chosen hooliganism and outright mob violence at college universities such as UC-Berkeley in place of intellectual and ideological freedom. For Loesch, the Left is being led by women and men still grappling with shame over women’s periods and engaging in political performance art of “free bleeding” (e.g., not wearing women’s hygiene items during menstruation).

The academic world has some responsibility for the nihilism seen in some parts of the press in its abject rejection of attempts to report in a neutral manner all sides of a story by reporting, simply, the story as told by the various sides. The throw-your-hands-in-the-air-if-it’s-not-numbers approach that some of we academics take to the methodological challenges of doing good qualitative research does not help to teach our students – some of whom become important journalists – how to approach these real-world issues in their own subsequent professional work. Journalism is, after all, a qualitative art. If we teach journalism students in our political science classes that there is no truth and that qualitative work cannot be rigorous, it is no wonder that they do not have the tools to respond to the current situation of ideological division within the U.S.

For the Left, Trump is an authoritarian thug and a racist because of his immigration policies. The Left has many additional complaints about Trump, but most of those fall within the realm of legitimate political difference (e.g., differences on environmental protection, trade policy, or public schools). It is the accusation of racism that has the most rhetorical staying power, although that accusation appears to be conflated with rhetoric on immigration that reflects, again, legitimate policy difference and does not, in fact, call for racism. For the Right, the Left has proven itself: (1) unwilling to accept election results, and (2) willing to engage in violent rioting to try to have its way over this basic political rite of democracy. For the Right, too, the Left of the press has been willing to mount nothing short of a war-campaign against the new President the likes of which the official Soviet press agency, Tass, would have been proud. I had the opportunity to spend a week in the Soviet Union as a young teenager in the early 1980s and to read Tass’s English-language newspaper in location. The fictional worlds that can be created and made real by reporting that does not at least strive for neutrality has always remained with me.

The battle over narrative has become a battle over meta-narratives of symbolic violence (I should note here my indebtedness to Pierre Bourdieu on this point); literally, in this case, who is doing symbolic violence to the American people? Each side accuses the other. Is it, as the narratives of the Left suggest, Trump with his election-campaign rhetoric of walls and limits to immigration; or, as Trump’s administration seems to suggest, a new phenomenon of “fake news” by a politically-*irresponsible* press-become-ideologues?

I can only imagine what the Fox news video of metal barriers and fire starters being thrown at university buildings at UC-Berkeley and the police choosing to stand down rather than engage the mob looks like to my friends and

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colleagues abroad. Certainly, it does not look much like democracy, certainly not an orderly one, with Left-leaning media outlets calling the incidents “protests” and Right-leaning media outlets calling them — more accurately — “riots.” The accusations against a new standing President are non-stop, out-of-the-ordinary, and suggest a real unwillingness to accept the outcome of a democratic election. It also suggests a significant *internal* challenge to our basic institutional frameworks based upon the dislike that some opponents have to the content of Trump’s policies. The basic civic structure of our political institutions, such as balance of power between the executive and judicial branches, are coming under fire for issues of ideological and political content—precisely the opposite of what has kept our institutions intact for this long. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, who was speaking of democracy in general, the American democratic constitutional system is absolutely the worst political system there is — except for the other options available. Mob rule, political violence, refusal to accept a free and fair election, and temper tantrums on the streets and in the media show very effectively the salience of this apocryphal phrase.

To wit, regarding balance of powers and separation of powers issues currently simmering: Immigration is an issue of national security over which the President has high degrees of discretion and authority, some of which is shared with Congress. Notably for the current brouhaha regarding immigration, as Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. armed forces, the President of the United States has almost unlimited final authority over Homeland Security. President Obama expanded the use of executive powers in practice significantly by comparison with prior administrations, leaving Trump with a strong precedent in practice for doing the same. We don’t have to like any of it. But structurally, institutionally, constitutionally, and statutorily, it is the case. If one doesn’t like it, one must go through the political process to change the institutions, the statutes, and in some cases, the U.S. Constitution. And that means going through the legislative branch; despite efforts to the contrary, the judiciary remains a judicial branch, *not* an administrative agency. The legislative branch is the people’s branch; it is meant to vet major changes in law, constitution, and some policy areas because it is the branch most responsible to the people. And, while I am decidedly against pure majoritarianism (e.g., it must be checked by judicial power and constitutional principle), I am also against judiciaries-as-administrative-agencies and pure executive/administrative rule, the synonym for both of which is, in comparative politics terms, *authoritarianism*.

Our political institutions in the U.S. are as close to perfect as we can hope to achieve. Noodling with them is a bad idea. The type of ideological rhetoric being used today in the press allows us to lose sight of how important this is.

My grandmother taught me that the institutions of our country are what matters; arguments over the details of policy matter less, for we change our minds on which policy is best over the course of a lifetime, or sometimes even from one decade to the next. And we can be wrong on the details of policy. Maintaining the integrity of our institutions keeps the country intact and in balance over the long term. My grandmother, who went to the University of Wisconsin, Madison for her undergraduate degree in the 1920s, was very wise. Sometimes old wisdom keeps us out of trouble.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).