

The End of the Argument *ad Orbánum*

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A reasonable rule is that once you begin making an argument *ad Hitlerum*—comparing some malevolent politician to Hitler or some malignant movement to the Nazis, or declaring a brutal (but non-eliminationist) war a genocide comparable to the Holocaust—you have lost the plot. The facile but extreme analogy is the first resort of the unimaginative alarmist.

To this we should now add the argument *ad Orbánum*, namely, the view that the Trump administration is just like that of the creeping, well-nigh unstoppable, and irreversible corrupt authoritarian ruler Viktor Orbán. In this view, the Hungarian prime minister's version of illiberal democracy was coming for America, and would probably win—indeed, might have already won. In the wake of Orbán's smashing electoral defeat on April 12, in a country whose experience of electoral democracy is recent and whose authoritarian past is dark indeed, the argument *ad Orbánum* looks pretty flimsy.

Effective dictators do not usually lose elections, and when they do, they deny it and hold on to power anyway. Genuine fascists—not those merely cosplaying the role—send squads of jackbooted thugs to beat up trade unionists, exile loudmouthed professors, make uncooperative journalists drink castor oil, and if necessary arrange lethal accidents for their opponents, when they don't simply order them to be shot in the street. Orbán, undeniably awful and illiberal though he was, failed all of those tests. He was merely a cynical, greedy, corrupt, and unprincipled populist Russian shill. Good riddance to bad rubbish, one might say.

[Adam Serwer: The scapegoat scam](#)

But there is a larger point worth reflecting on, particularly for those who saw in Orbán's Hungary America's future or even America's present. My sample is entirely unscientific, but I have long noted that friends of mine who are Americanists, steeped in our history and institutions, have been consistently more optimistic (or at least, considerably less pessimistic) about America's future than those who are primarily Europeanists.

For sake of convenience, let us call the latter group the Comparativists. They invoke storm troopers, Mussolini, and the erosion and collapse of democratic government; their mood is that of Cicero at the end of the Roman Republic. The Americanists are more likely to say, as a good friend—a distinguished soldier, a historian, and a white southerner—recently put it to me, *It's terrible, of course, but look, until the Civil Rights Acts took hold, we were not a full democracy—and that's barely 80 years ago.*

Or more pointedly, as a Black colleague reported her father saying, “Honey, I've seen a lot worse. I lived through Jim Crow.” The Americanists do not love their country less for being fully familiar with the grim side of American history, including slavery (of course), the Trail of Tears, the betrayals of Reconstruction, the mass lynchings of the early 20th century, the bloodshed in the Homestead and Pullman strikes, violence in the coal fields, anti-Chinese legislation, the Palmer raids, the forcible placement of Japanese Americans in illegal concentration camps at the beginning of World War II, and various Red Scares.

The Americanists are also fully familiar with the illiberal and dangerous characters of American history: traitors such as Aaron Burr and John B. Floyd, not to mention every U.S. Army officer—West Pointers, the lot of them—who signed up to fight for rebellion and slavery. Let us also not forget the “malefactors of great wealth,” as Theodore Roosevelt called them, including Henry Ford, the raving anti-Semite who puts Elon Musk in the shade, or demagogues such as Huey Long, whom Franklin D. Roosevelt thought the most dangerous man in America.

The point is not that the Americanists think this is an awful country and always has been. Rather, they know the dark side of its politics more intuitively and more deeply than the utter pessimists do. But the Americanists also, I believe, understand this country's strengths considerably better.

They are not surprised by the way in which a cunningly devised and evolved constitutional system—at whose 18th-century origins they do not sniff in disapproval, and whose authors they do not despise, even the slaveholders among them—has blocked the worst impulses of the Trump administration. They deplore the inhumanity of a rampaging immigration police but are not surprised by the way in which its excesses have been thwarted, by courts, or state legislatures blocking anti-immigrant laws under pressure from business and church groups, or the people of

Minneapolis rising up and forcing the administration to back down.

Knowing a bit about J. Edgar Hoover's dirty work for Democratic presidents, the Americanists are, if anything, relieved that Kash Patel is [considerably less effective](#) than the founder of the FBI—deeply insecure, episodically inebriated, and out of touch with the organization he is supposed to lead. (Patel has denied all of this, and has filed a lawsuit against *The Atlantic* for its reporting on his tenure.) The Americanists hate the vindictive prosecution of President Trump's political opponents, but note with satisfaction that these cases get routinely thrown out of court by disdainful judges, many of whom were appointed by Republicans, including Trump himself. They are not surprised that the Supreme Court, some of whose members sport judicial philosophies they reject, has overruled Trump on tariffs, and probably will do so on birthright citizenship.

They note, too, the charms of federalism and the persistent independence of the press. The state police, even in red states, do not shut down newspapers or radio stations. Jeff Bezos has not turned *The Washington Post* into the house organ of the administration. *The New York Times's* journalists, including the really cutting ones, are not followed by scarred men in leather overcoats wielding truncheons. The editors of *The Atlantic*, I am told, do not dread a 2 a.m. knock at the front door.

There is no Trump Youth movement with uniforms, a “Horst Wessel Song,” and midnight torchlit parades. Trump has no Leni Riefenstahl, just idiotic artificial intelligence-generated memes that make him look ludicrous. And unlike Ernst Röhm, Marjorie Taylor Greene and other disaffected Trumpists have not been pistoled to death during a Night of the Long Knives. Indeed, some of the wackiest members of the Trump movement, such as Candace Owens and Tucker Carlson, have become even more vituperative in denouncing the ever more erratic president than many of his progressive critics are.

Trump has a narrow though deep political genius, including a feral instinct for detecting and preying on weakness and vulnerability. But it's not enough genius to pick capable subordinates, or to avoid idiotic fights he cannot possibly win, such as declaring the pope soft on crime (or, in Vice President Vance's version, theologically unsound). Nor does the president have the organization and skill to manipulate the midterm elections, despite his own wishes and the darkest foreboding of so many pessimists.

[Gal Beckerman: The quiet way authoritarianism begins to crumble](#)

The overblown, in some cases hysterical, fears of so many opponents of Trump has made them less effective. Conjuring up Trump as the American Mussolini absolves his opponents of the responsibility of figuring out who opened the door to the rise of this bad and dangerous man—how the Democratic Party lost interest in, and the confidence of, traditional constituencies; why elite institutions, particularly universities, became objects of ridicule and scorn; and why mendacious claims that the system is “rigged” against large swathes of the working and middle classes seemed plausible to tens of millions of Americans.

Trump has caused, and will cause, damage to the body politic, to our norms of public behavior, and to the integrity of officials and institutions, as well as misery and financial loss to many who deserve neither. There will be an enormous load of repair work to be done. But he is not going to bring down the Great Republic.

The Americanists have one other thing going for them that the despondent Comparativists do not: belief in America's resilience and, unpopular though the word may be, uniqueness. They know what it means to have a nation built by immigrants from all over, conceived in liberty, as Abraham Lincoln put it, and dedicated to the proposition that all of us are created equal. They know that America has never fully achieved its aspirations—indeed, often has fallen far short of them—but that the aspirations remain, and rest on inspiring truths. They know that despite the follies and crimes that have blotted the country's past, there is more than enough to celebrate as the 250th anniversary of our independence rolls around. And they know, deep in their bones, that the wonderful parts of the American story are not over yet—not by a long shot.