



## *Commentary on the Presidency and National Security Panel*

Valerie Bunce (Cornell University)

### **MEMO PREPARED FOR CONFERENCE: A REPUBLIC, IF WE CAN KEEP IT**

On April 12-13th, 2018, researchers, scholars, journalists, and policymakers came together at New America in Washington D.C. to address questions about the health and resiliency of American democracy. This conference considered questions such as: Can a liberal democracy and representative government persist in the United States? Are we experiencing a breakdown of democracy? Are checks and balances that are built into the political system and the mediating institutions that link citizens and government strong enough to sustain liberal democracy?

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1. I agree with virtually all of the arguments made by our panelists. Insofar as foreign policy is concerned, Donald Trump is unusually free to do what he wants. Neither institutions, because he inherited an imperial presidency (as Larry Jacobs argued), nor principles, because he has broken with the commitments that have guided U.S. foreign policy for the past 70 years (as Elliot Cohen argued), get in his way.
2. But how does Trump's approach to and conduct of foreign policy relate to the question before us at this conference; that is, the future of U.S. democracy?
3. In the comments that follow, I offer three observations about the relationship between national security and the decline of democracy. These observations are based in part on studies in the fields of comparative politics and international relations that address this question and in part on the experiences of democratic decline in interwar Europe; Serbia during the 1990s; and, more recently, Russia, Hungary, and Poland.
4. Observation 1: threats to national security, whether real or fabricated, are strongly associated with the election of political leaders that have authoritarian aspirations. One good example is the first election of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Presidency in March, 2000. Russians only began to rally around the relatively unknown Putin once he promised (in rather crude fashion) to win the war in Chechnya and hunt down the terrorists that were responsible for a bombing in Moscow. Putin's foundational claim to rule, and a claim to which he keeps returning in order to refresh his political support (a pattern that is typical of many leaders, including Donald Trump, Slobodan Milosevic and Viktor Orban), is that he—and only he—is able to keep Russians safe. Economic promises, such as making Russians rich, came later. The Putin story, in fact, is a common one. As we know from Aleksandar Matovski's work, over the past thirty years the best explanation of why democracies erode and collapse has been security crises, both national and personal in form—in particular, external

threats to the state, domestic and international terrorism, high crime rates and/or growing public disorder.

5. Observation 2: there is an ongoing discussion of the growing influence of right-wing populist politics and politicians in Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere. What strikes me even more—though one can argue that this is part of the right-wing populist package, rather than a stand-alone factor-- is the return of right-wing nationalism as a powerful political force. This is what I see as the common thread connecting Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, Slobodan Milosevic during his reign in Serbia in the 1990s and the PiS leadership in Poland. For example, right-wing nationalism serves as the core theme in their electoral appeals (make the U.S., Russia, Hungary, Serbia and Poland “great again” and do much more to protect the “real” people from “others” and the economic, cultural and demographic threats they pose); it defines who their enemies are (anyone who threatens the nation); it accounts for the leader’s close alliance, no matter how improbable, with cultural conservatives; and it explains their popularity in smaller towns and rural areas as opposed to large cities. It is telling, for instance, that Slobodan Milosevic never won an election in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and that Donald Trump also failed to win his home city, New York (and his home state).
6. Right-wing nationalism has dangerous consequences—for foreign policy and, because of that and its impact on domestic politics, for democracy. First, far more than populism, nationalism is directly linked to national security--a term that means, after all, the security of the nation in the face of domestic, as well as international threats. Second, the seductive power, but also the danger of nationalism is that it is simultaneously an inclusionary project—Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community of strangers—and an exclusionary project—because defining the nation means demarcating members from non-members. Right-wing nationalists are particularly fussy about who gets to be part of the nation. They can be very quick to expel (or worse) even long-standing citizens of the state. Finally, right-wing nationalist leaders embrace two types of security policies, and both of them undermine the

quality and survival of democracy. One is the familiar Weimar scenario; that is, mounting an aggressive foreign policy that claims to protect the nation from internal and external threats. This is also the model that led Milosevic to carry out a war against the other republics that made up Yugoslavia, and that Putin used two decades later to annex Crimea and de-stabilize eastern Ukraine. What we are seeing in contemporary Poland, Hungary and the U.S., however, is a second model—protecting the nation and its culture not so much by projecting military power outward as by going it alone in foreign policy, downplaying the value of alliances, disputing the benefits of membership in multilateral organizations, and protecting borders by defending the nation and its culture from immigrants and immigration. Nationalism always attempts to harden boundaries not just between people, but also between the international and domestic arenas. It is not surprising that such a mission is particularly attractive to ordinary people and ambitious political leaders in a time of globalization.

7. Observation 3: when their popular support declines, democratic (and authoritarian) political leaders tend to use international crises to divert attention away from their domestic failings and boost their poll numbers. They take this approach, no doubt, because they have fewer constraints in foreign than in domestic policy. At the same time, it is far easier for leaders to manipulate public opinion regarding foreign as opposed to domestic policy, because the former issue area combines low information with high salience. The use of international crises to prime the leader's support becomes a problem for democracy when leaders: 1) invent international crises (and make a habit of doing so—as we have seen over the years in both Russia and Hungary); 2) use external crises as a pretext for reducing civil liberties and political rights, and; 3) label critics of their security policies enemies of the nation. As a result, international crises do not just rally support around the leader; they also divide and demobilize the opposition. These are precisely the dynamics that we saw in Serbia in the 1990s; Russia since 2004; and Hungary since 2010. The question then becomes: will the U.S. be the next example of a political leader using threats to the nation to dismantle democracy?