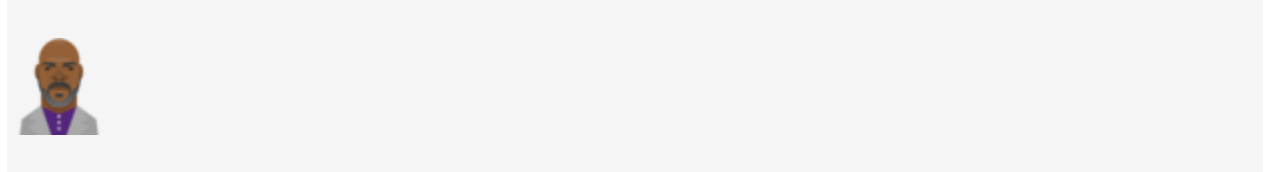


State of the Resistance

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Trump's opposition understand themselves not simply as defenders of particular policy positions but as stalwarts of democracy.



By [Jelani Cobb](#)

Under normal circumstances, referring to the address that the President delivers each January as the “State of the Union” is a familiar bit of hyperbole. It is more aptly thought of as a summary of the year that was—not unlike the countless news and pop-culture roundups that appear at New Year’s—and as a projection of the Administration’s priorities for the upcoming year. The President gives a pro-forma statement that “the state of our union is strong,” because what else would it be? But these are not normal circumstances.

Trump’s statement regarding the strength of the Union in last week’s address carried about the same credibility as his denial that he cheated on his postpartum wife with a porn star, or his claim that Mexico would pay for his quixotic border wall.

Americans, by a nearly two-to-one margin, believe that Trump has further divided the country. Superficially, his speech conformed to the conventional structure of a State of the Union address. But, at the very moment that the President was attesting to the Union’s durability, his Administration and its Republican abettors were actively engaged in a feud with the F.B.I., attempting to discredit the special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation and to release a secret memo about that investigation, despite objections from

senior officials in the Department of Justice. In a new book, “How Democracies Die,” Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that democracy does not typically succumb during a catastrophic event, such as a seizure of power by a military junta. It fails more commonly through the gradual weakening of crucial institutions, such as the judiciary and the press. In short, the Union is precisely as strong as its institutions, and those institutions are being assailed in ways that we’ve seldom seen.

It is for this reason that, since the inception of Trump’s Presidency, the members of his opposition have tended to understand themselves not simply as defenders of particular policy positions but also as stalwarts of democracy itself—a resistance. As such, the Trump Resistance has differed from, for instance, the Tea Party in key ways. The latter was intent upon “taking the country back”; the former hopes to insure that the country remains standing. Yet it has been in particulars of policy that Trump’s impact on women, immigrants, and minorities—the groups most antagonized by him during the 2016 campaign—can be seen.

The President who has been accused of sexual harassment or assault by at least nineteen women has also overseen a revision of the Department of Education’s guidelines on sexual assault on college campuses that raises the standard of proof for accusers. He has made it easier for employers to refuse to include birth control in their health-care plans and reinstated the “global gag rule” on abortion counselling. He created an “election integrity” commission that was a thinly veiled attempt to nationalize voter-suppression techniques. He has rescinded deportation protections granted to two hundred thousand Salvadoreans and almost sixty thousand Haitians, and tried to remove transgender people from the military and to ban people in certain majority-Muslim countries from travelling here. His Justice Department has issued new guidance that could lead to more prosecutions for marijuana-

related crimes, which will disproportionately affect African-Americans, who are far more likely to be arrested on such charges.

Lest this litany seem too sunny, in January the Doomsday Clock, which measures the likelihood of human annihilation, moved closer to midnight than it has been since the nineteen-fifties. The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which sets the clock, called out Donald Trump specifically for his inflammatory rhetoric on North Korea, the Iran deal, climate change, and nuclear weapons.

Given this record, the pronouncements of the Commander-in-Chief were hardly an accurate depiction of our Union. Last year, the *Washington Post* noted, Trump's actions prompted some eight thousand seven hundred protests across the country. The A.C.L.U., which greeted the incoming Administration by saying, "We'll See You in Court," has sued the Administration over *DACA*, the rescission of Obama-era guidelines concerning the use of drones, the travel ban, the case of an undocumented teen who was refused access to an abortion, and that of a ten-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, who was detained at the border rather than being allowed to return to her family. (The A.C.L.U. of Virginia also sued for the right of alt-right protesters to gather in a Charlottesville park—a decision that had disastrous consequences when, predictably, they resorted to violence against counter-demonstrators.) The N.A.A.C.P. has challenged Trump's ruling on Haitians; sued the Department of Homeland Security, arguing that Trump's "shithole" comment reflected intentional discrimination in immigration policy; and fought the election-integrity commission, which, stymied by its lack of progress, was disbanded last month.

There is also a direct line connecting Trump's election with the many women's marches that have taken place across the country and with the #MeToo movement that emerged last fall. The cultural tide that saw the resignations of elected officials that included Senator Al Franken and Representatives John Conyers

and Trent Franks was, on many levels, a backlash against the conditions that allowed Trump to win the Presidency despite his accusers' credible allegations of harassment and assault. The energy of that moment has resulted in record numbers of female candidates running for office. While the main narrative of the wave of victories in the Virginia House of Delegates last November was its potential as a predictor of the 2018 midterms, ElectionNight also brought eleven women—the first trans woman and the first Asian-American and Latina women among them—into that state's legislative body.

The amorphous shock and outrage of a year ago have given way to the broad contours of a movement. Trump's authoritarian tendencies have been met by a majority in both houses of Congress, led by a stunningly pliable Republican Party. (At the State of the Union, Democrats registered dissent by boycotting, dressing in black, and wearing kente cloth and purple ribbons.) That conjunction has made it far easier for the President to achieve his agenda than for concerned citizens to place barriers in his path. These are perilous times. But it's possible, when looking from just the right angle and at exactly the right moment, to discern something that looks strikingly similar to inspiration. ♦