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Tablet

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IF ANYONE IN THE FUTURE CARES ENOUGH TO WRITE AN AUTHENTIC HISTORY OF the 2024 presidential campaign, they might begin by noting that American politics exists downstream of American culture, which is a deep and broad river. Like any

I river, American culture follows a particular path, which has been reconfigured at key moments by new technologies. In turn, these technologies, which redefine both space and time—canals and lakes, the postal system, the telegraph, railroads, radio and later television, the internet, and most recently the networking of billions of people in real time on social media platforms—set the rules by which stories are communicated, audiences are configured, and individuals define themselves.

Something big changed sometime after the year 2000 in the way we communicated with each other, and the means by which we absorbed new information and formed a working picture of the world around us. What changed can be understood as the effect of the ongoing transition from the world of 20th-century media to our current digital landscape. This once-every-five-centuries revolution would have large effects, ones we have only just begun to assimilate, and which have largely rendered the assumptions and accompanying social forms of the past century obsolete, even as tens of millions of people, including many who imagine themselves to reside near the top of the country's social and intellectual pyramids, continue to imagine themselves to be living in one version or another of the long 20th century that began with the advent of a different set of mass communications technologies, which included the telegraph, radio, and film.

The time was ripe, in other words, for a cultural revolution—which would, according to the established patterns of American history, in turn generate a political one.

I first became interested in the role of digital technology in reshaping American politics a decade ago, when I reported on the selling of Barack Obama's Iran deal for *The New York Times Magazine*. By the time I became interested in the subject, the outcome of Obama's campaign to sell the deal, which had become the policy cornerstone of his second term in office, was a *fait accompli*. The Deal seemed odd to me, not only because American Jews were historically a key player in the Democratic Party—providing outsized numbers of voters, party organizers and publicists, in addition to huge tranches of funding for its campaigns—but because the Deal seemed to actively undermine the core assumptions of U.S. security

architecture in the Middle East, whose goals were to ensure the steady flow of Middle Eastern oil to global markets while keeping U.S. troops out of the region. A Middle East in which the U.S. actively “balanced” a revisionist anti-American power like Iran against traditional U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel seemed guaranteed to become a more volatile region that would require exactly the kinds of active U.S. military intervention that Obama claimed to want to avoid. Nor did turning over major shipping lanes to Iran and its network of regional terror armies seem like a recipe for the steady flow of oil to global markets that in turn helped ensure the ability of U.S. trading partners in Europe and Asia to continue to buy U.S.-made goods. Seen through the lens of conventional American geopolitics, the Iran deal made little sense.

In the course of my reporting, though, I began to see Obama’s plans for the Middle East not simply as a geopolitical maneuver, but as a device to remake the Democratic Party—which it would do in part by rewiring the machinery that produced what a brilliant young political theorist named Walter Lippmann once identified, in his 1921 book, as “public opinion.”

Lippmann was a progressive Harvard-educated technocrat who believed in engineering society from the top down, and who understood the role of elites in engineering social change to be both positive and inevitable. It was Lippman, not Noam Chomsky, who coined the phrase “manufacturing consent,” and in doing so created the framework in which the American governing class would understand both its larger social role and the particular tools at its disposal. “We are told about the world before we see it,” Lippmann wrote. “We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.” Or as he put it even more succinctly: “The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do.”

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The collapse of the 20th-century media pyramid on which Lippmann's assumptions rested, and its rapid replacement by monopoly social media platforms, made it possible for the Obama White House to sell policy—and reconfigure social attitudes and prejudices—in new ways. In fact, as Obama's chief speechwriter and national security aide Ben Rhodes, a fiction writer by vocation, argued to me more than once in our conversations, the collapse of the world of print left Obama with little choice but to forge a new reality online.

When I wrote about Rhodes' ambitious program to sell the Iran deal, I advanced the term “echo chambers” to describe the process by which the White House and its wider penumbra of think tanks and NGOs generated an entirely new class of experts who credentialed each other on social media in order to advance assertions that would formerly have been seen as marginal or not credible, thereby overwhelming the efforts of traditional subject-area gatekeepers and reporters to keep government spokespeople honest. In constructing these echo chambers, the White House created feedback loops that could be gamed out in advance by clever White House aides, thereby influencing and controlling the perceptions of reporters, editors and congressional staffers, and the elusive currents of “public opinion” they attempted to follow. If you saw how the game worked from the inside, you understood that the new common wisdom was not a true “reflection” of what anyone in particular necessarily believed, but rather the deliberate creation of a small class of operatives who used new technologies to create and control larger narratives that they messaged to target audiences on digital platforms, and which often presented themselves to their targets as their own naturally occurring thoughts and feelings, which they would then share with people like themselves.

To my mind, the point of the story I was reporting, in addition to being an interesting exploration of how the tools of fiction writing could be applied to political messaging on social media as an element of statecraft, was twofold. First, it usefully warned of the potential distance between an underlying reality and an invented reality that could be successfully messaged and managed from the White House, which suggested a new potential for a large-scale disaster like the war in Iraq, which I—like Rhodes and Obama—had opposed from its beginning.

Second, I wanted to show how the new messaging machinery actually operated—my theory being that it was probably a bad idea to allow young White House aides with MFA degrees to create “public opinion” from their iPhones and laptops, and to then present the results of that process as something akin to the outcome of the familiar 20th-century processes of reporting and analysis that had been entrusted to the so-called “fourth estate,” a set of institutions that was in the process of becoming captive to political verticals, which were in turn largely controlled by corporate interests like large pharmaceutical companies and weapons-makers. Hillary Clinton would soon inherit the machinery that Obama and his aides had built along with the keys to the White House. What would she do with it?

What I did not imagine at the time was that Obama’s successor in the White House would not be Hillary Clinton but Donald Trump. Nor did I foresee that Trump would himself become the target of a messaging campaign that would make full use of the machine that Obama had built, along with elements of the American security state. Being physically inside the White House, it turned out, was a mere detail of power; even more substantial power lay in controlling the digital switchboard that Obama had built, and which it turned out he still controlled.

During the Trump years, Obama used the tools of the digital age to craft an entirely new type of power center for himself, one that revolved around his unique position as the titular, though pointedly never-named, head of a Democratic Party that he succeeded in refashioning in his own image—and which, after Hillary’s loss, had officially supplanted the “centrist” Clinton neoliberal machine of the 1990s. The Obama Democratic Party (ODP) was a kind of balancing mechanism

between the power and money of the Silicon Valley oligarchs and their New York bankers; the interests of bureaucratic and professional elites who shuttled between the banks and tech companies and the work of bureaucratic oversight; the ODP's own sectarian constituencies, which were divided into racial and ethnic categories like "POC," "MENA," and "Latinx," whose bizarre bureaucratic nomenclature signaled their inherent existence as top-down containers for the party's new-age spoils system; and the world of billionaire-funded NGOs that provided foot-soldiers and enforcers for the party's efforts at social transformation.

It was the entirety of this apparatus, not just the ability to fashion clever or impactful tweets, that constituted the party's new form of power. But control over digital platforms, and what appeared on those platforms, was a key element in signaling and exercising that power. The Hunter Biden laptop story, in which party operatives shanghaied 51 former high U.S. government intelligence and security officials to sign a letter that all but declared the laptop to be a fake, and part of a Russian disinformation plot—when most of those officials had very strong reasons to know or believe that the laptop and its contents were real—showed how the system worked. That letter was then used as the basis for restricting and banning factual reports about the laptop and its contents from digital platforms, with the implication that allowing readers to access those reports might be the basis for a future accusation of a crime. None of this censorship was official, of course: Trump was in the White House, not Obama or Biden. What that demonstrated was that the real power, including the power to control functions of the state, lay elsewhere.

Even more unusual, and alarming, was what followed Trump's defeat in 2020. With the Democrats back in power, the new messaging apparatus could now formally include not just social and institutional pressure but the enforcement arms of the federal bureaucracy, from the Justice Department to the FBI to the SEC. As the machine ramped up, censoring dissenting opinions on everything from COVID, to DEI programs, to police conduct, to the prevalence and the effects of hormone therapies and surgeries on youth, large numbers of people began feeling pressured by an external force that they couldn't always name; even greater

numbers of people fell silent. In effect, large-scale changes in American mores and behavior were being legislated outside the familiar institutions and processes of representative democracy, through top-down social pressure machinery backed in many cases by the threat of law enforcement or federal action, in what soon became known as a “whole of society” effort.

At every turn over the next four years, it was like a fever was spreading, and no one was immune. Spouses, children, colleagues, and supervisors at work began reciting, with the force of true believers, slogans they had only learned last week, and that they were very often powerless to provide the slightest real-world evidence for. These sudden, sometimes overnight, appearances of beliefs, phrases, tics, looked a lot like the mass social contagions of the 1950s—one episode after another of rapid-onset political enlightenment replacing the appearance of dance crazes or Hula-Hoops.

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Just as in those commercially fed crazes, there was nothing accidental, mystical or organic about these new thought-viruses. Catchphrases like “defund the police,” “structural racism,” “white privilege,” “children don’t belong in cages,” “assigned gender” or “stop the genocide in Gaza” would emerge and marinate in meme-generating pools like the academy or activist organizations, and then jump the

fence—or be fed—into niche groups and threads on Twitter or Reddit. If they gained traction in those spaces, they would be adopted by constituencies and players higher up in the Democratic Party hierarchy, who used their control of larger messaging verticals on social media platforms to advance or suppress stories around these topics and phrases, and who would then treat these formerly fringe positions as public markers for what all “decent people” must universally believe; those who objected or stood in the way were portrayed as troglodytes and bigots. From there, causes could be messaged into reality by state and federal bureaucrats, NGOs, and large corporations, who flew banners, put signs on their bathrooms, gave new days off from work, and brought in freshly minted consultants to provide “trainings” for workers—all without any kind of formal legislative process or vote or backing by any significant number of voters.

What mattered here was no longer Lippmann’s version of “public opinion,” rooted in the mass audiences of radio and later television, which was assumed to correlate to the current or future preferences of large numbers of voters—thereby assuring, on a metaphoric level at least, the continuation of 19th-century ideas of American democracy, with its deliberate balance of popular and representational elements in turn mirroring the thrust of the Founders’ design. Rather, the newly minted digital variant of “public opinion” was rooted in the algorithms that determine how fads spread on social media, in which mass multiplied by speed equals momentum—speed being the key variable. The result was a fast-moving mirror world that necessarily privileges the opinions and beliefs of the self-appointed vanguard who control the machinery, and could therefore generate the velocity required to change the appearance of “what people believe” overnight.

The unspoken agreements that obscured the way this social messaging apparatus worked—including Obama’s role in directing the entire system from above—and how it came to supplant the normal relationships between public opinion and legislative process that generations of Americans had learned from their 20th-century poli-sci textbooks, made it easy to dismiss anyone who suggested that Joe Biden was visibly senile; that the American system of government, including its constitutional protections for individual liberties and its historical system of

checks and balances, was going off the rails; that there was something visibly unhealthy about the merger of monopoly tech companies and national security agencies with the press that threatened the ability of Americans to speak and think freely; or that America's large cultural systems, from education, to science and medicine, to the production of movies and books, were all visibly failing, as they fell under the control of this new apparatus. Millions of Americans began feeling increasingly exhausted by the effort involved in maintaining parallel thought-worlds in which they expressed degrees of fealty to the new order in the hope of keeping their jobs and avoiding being singled out for ostracism and punishment, while at the same time being privately baffled or aghast by the absence of any persuasive logic behind the changes they saw—from the breakdown of law and order in major cities, to the fentanyl epidemic, to the surge of perhaps 20 million unvetted illegal immigrants across the U.S. border, to widespread gender dysphoria among teenage girls, to sudden and shocking declines in public health, life expectancy, and birth rates.

Until the fever broke. Today, Donald Trump is victorious, and Obama is the loser. In fact, he looks physically awful—angry and gaunt, after a summer and fall spent lecturing Black men, and Americans in general, on their failure to vote enthusiastically enough for his chosen heir, Kamala Harris, the worst major party presidential candidate in modern American history. The totality of Obama's failure left party donors feeling cheated. Even George Clooney now disavows him. Meanwhile, Trump and his party are in control of the White House, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court.

But reducing the question of what happened to Barack Obama's new American system to the results of a single election is in fact to trivialize the startling nature and ambition of what he built, as well as the shocking suddenness with which it has all gone up in smoke. The master political strategist of his era didn't simply back a losing horse. Rather, the entire structure he had erected over more than a decade, and which was to have been his legacy, for good or ill, has collapsed entirely. At home and abroad, Obama's grand vision has been decisively rejected by the people whose lives it was intended to reorder. The mystery is how and why

neither Obama nor his army of technocratic operatives and retainers understood the fatal flaw in the new system—until it was too late.

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE ON WHICH THE RAPID-ONSET POLITICAL enlightenment of our digital era was based did not, in fact, begin with Barack Obama. He was—at first, at least—the product being sold. Nor did it originate with the digital technology that has provided the mirror world with its startlingly speedy and effective and nearly universal circuitry.

The methodology on which our current universe of political persuasion is based was born before the internet or iPhones existed, in an attempt to do good and win elections while overcoming America's historical legacy of slavery and racism. Its originator, David Axelrod, was born to be a great American advertising man—his father was a psychologist, and his mother was a top executive at the legendary Mad Men-era New York City ad agency of Young & Rubicam. Instead, following his father's suicide, Axelrod left New York City for Chicago, where he attended the University of Chicago, and then became a political reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. He then became a political consultant who specialized in electing Black mayoral candidates in white-majority cities. In 2008, Axelrod ran the successful insurgent campaigns that first got Barack Obama the Democratic Party nomination over Hillary Clinton, and then elevated him to the White House.

Axelrod first tested his unique understanding of the theory and practice of public opinion, which he called “permission structures,” in his successful 1989 campaign to elect a young Black state senator named Mike White as the mayor of Cleveland. Where Black mayoral candidates like Coleman Young in Detroit and Marion Barry in Washington had typically achieved power in the 1970s and 1980s by using racially charged symbols and language to turn out large numbers of Black voters in opposition to existing power structures, which they portrayed as inherently racist,

White's history-making campaign attempted to do the opposite: To win by convincing a mix of educated, higher-income white voters to vote for the Black candidate. In fact, White won 81% of the vote in the city's predominantly white wards while capturing only 30% of the vote in the city's Black majority wards, which favored his opponent and former mentor on the city council, George C. Forbes, a Black candidate who ran a more traditional "Black power" campaign. Permission structures, a term taken from advertising, was Axelrod's secret sauce, the organizing concept by which he strategized campaigns for his clients. Where most consultants built their campaigns around sets of positive and negative ads that promoted the positive qualities of their clients and highlighted unfavorable aspects of their opponents' characters and records, Axelrod's unique area of specialization required a more specific set of tools. To succeed, Axelrod needed to convince white voters to overcome their existing prejudices and vote for candidates whom they might define as "soft on crime" or "lacking competence." As an excellent 2008 *New Republic* profile of Axelrod—surprisingly, the only good profile of Axelrod that appears to exist anywhere—put it: "David felt there almost had to be a permission structure set up for certain white voters to consider a black candidate," explains Ken Snyder, a Democratic consultant and Axelrod protégé. In Cleveland, that was the city's daily newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*. Largely on the basis of *The Plain Dealer's* endorsement and his personal story, White went on to defeat Forbes with 81 percent of the vote in the city's white wards."

In other words, while most political consultants worked to make their guy look good or the other guy look bad by appealing to voters' existing values, Axelrod's strategy required convincing voters to act against their own prior beliefs. In fact, it required replacing those beliefs, by appealing to "the type of person" that voters wanted to be in the eyes of others. While the academic social science and psychology literature on permission structures is surprisingly thin, given the real-world significance of Axelrod's success and everything that has followed, it is most commonly defined as a means of providing "scaffolding for someone to embrace change they might otherwise reject." This "scaffolding" is said to consist of providing "social proof" ("most people in your situation are now deciding to")

“new information,” “changed circumstances,” “compromise.” As one author put it, “with many applications to politics, one could argue that effective *Permission Structures* will shift the *Overton Window*, introducing new conversations into the mainstream that might previously have been considered marginal or fringe.” By itself, the idea of uniting new theories of mass psychology with new technology in efforts of political persuasion was nothing new. Walter Lippmann based public opinion in part on the insights of the Vienna-born advertising genius Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud’s nephew and the inventor of modern PR. The arrival of television brought political advertising and Madison Avenue even closer together, a fact noted by Norman Mailer in his classic essay “Superman in the Supermarket,” which channeled the insights of Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*. In 1968, the writer Joe McGinniss shocked at least some readers with *The Selling of the President*, his account of the making of Richard Nixon’s television commercials which showed Madison Avenue admen successfully selling the product of Nixon like dish soap. The title of

From top: Barack Obama with Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey after holding a ‘Twitter Town Hall,’ 2011; Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes at a White House press briefing, 2016; Obama and David Axelrod in Pennsylvania, 2008

MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES;
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“political consultant” was itself a creation and a consequence of the television age, signaling the triumph of the ad man over the old-fashioned backroom title of “campaign manager”—a function introduced to national politics by Martin Van Buren, the “Little Magician” from Kinderhook, New York, who built the Democratic Party and elected Andrew Jackson to the Presidency.

It is not surprising then, that following Axelrod’s 1993 success in electing Harold Washington as the first Black mayor of Chicago, Barack Obama—already imagining himself as a future president of the United States—would seek out the Chicago-based consulting wizard to run his campaigns. But Axelrod wasn’t interested. In fact, Obama would spend more than a decade chasing Axelrod—who was far better connected in Chicago than Obama was—in the hopes that he would provide the necessary magic for his political rise. The other Chicago kingmaker that Obama courted was Jesse Jackson Sr., whose Operation PUSH was the city’s most powerful Black political machine, and who liked Obama even less than Axelrod did. The reality was that Obama did best with rich whites, like the board members of the Joyce Foundation and the Pritzker family.

When Axelrod finally agreed to come onboard, he found that Obama was the perfect candidate to validate his theories of political salesmanship on a national scale. First, he engineered Obama’s successful 2004 Senate campaign—a victory made possible by the old-school maneuver of unsealing Republican candidate Jack Ryan’s divorce papers, on the request of Axelrod’s former colleagues at the *Chicago Tribune*—and then, very soon afterward, Obama’s campaigns for the presidency, which formally commenced in 2007.

It worked. Once in office, though, Axelrod and Obama found that the institutions of public opinion—namely the press, on which Axelrod’s permission structure framework depended—were decaying quickly in the face of the internet. Newspapers like the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, as well as national television networks like CBS, which Axelrod relied on as validators, were now barely able to pay their bills, having lost their monopoly on viewers and advertisers to the internet and to newly emerging social media platforms.

With Obama's reelection campaign on the horizon in 2012, the White House's attention turned to selling Obamacare, which would become the signature initiative of the president's first term in office. Without a healthy, well-functioning press corps that could command the attention and allegiance of voters, the White House would have to manufacture its own world of validators to sell the president's plan on social media—which it successfully did. The White House sales effort successfully disguised the fact that the new health care program was in fact a new social welfare program that would lower rather than raise the standard of care for most Americans with preexisting health insurance, while providing tens of billions of dollars in guaranteed payments to large pharmaceutical companies and pushing those costs onto employers. Americans would continue to pay more for health care than citizens of any other first world country, while receiving less.

As a meeting of Axelrod's theories with the mechanics of social media, though, the selling of Obamacare—which continued seamlessly into Obama's reelection campaign against Mitt Romney—was a match made in heaven. So much so, that by 2013 it had become the Obama White House's reigning theory of governance. A Reuters article from 2013 helpfully explained how the system worked: "In Obama's jargon, getting to yes requires a permission structure." Asked about the phrase, White House spokesman Jay Carney explained that it was "common usage" around the White House, dating back to Obama's 2008 campaign. The occasion for the article was Obama's use of the phrase permission structure at a press conference in order to explain how he hoped to break an impasse with congressional Republicans, for which he had been roundly mocked as an out-of-touch egghead by D.C. columnists including Maureen Dowd and Dana Milbank, and by staffers for Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell.

The joke was on them. What the White House understood, and which I came to understand through my reporting on the Iran deal, was that social media—which was now the larger context in which former prestige "legacy" outlets like *The New York Times* and NBC News now operated—could now be understood and also made to function as a gigantic automated permission structure machine. Which is to say that, with enough money, operatives could create and operationalize

mutually reinforcing networks of activists and experts to validate a messaging arc that would short-circuit traditional methods of validation and analysis, and lead unwary actors and audience members alike to believe that things that had never believed or even heard of before were in fact not only plausible, but already widely accepted within their specific peer groups.

“The effect of the permission structure machine is to instill and maintain obedience to voices coming from outside yourself, regardless of the obvious gaps in logic and functioning that they create.”

The Iran deal proved that, with the collapse of the reality-establishing function of professional media, which could no longer afford to field teams of independent, experienced reporters, a talented politician in the White House could indeed stand up his own reality, and use the mechanisms of peer-group pressure and aspirational ambition to get others to adopt it. In fact, the higher one climbed on the social and professional ladder, the more vulnerable to such techniques people turned out to be—making it easy to flip entire echelons of professionals within the country’s increasingly brittle and insecure elite, whose status was now being threatened by the pace and scope of technologically driven change that threatened to make both their expertise and also their professions obsolete. As a test of the use of social media as a permission structure machine, the Iran deal was therefore a necessary prelude to Russiagate, which marked the moment in which the “mainstream media” was folded into the social media machinery that the party controlled, as formerly respected names like “NBC News” or “Harvard professor Lawrence Tribe” were regularly advertised spouting absurdities backed by “top national security sources” and other validators—all of which could be activated or

invented on the spot by clever aides with laptops, playing the world's greatest video game.

Yet the extent to which reality was being regularly manipulated through the techniques of social psychology applied to the internet was not immediately apparent to outside observers—especially those who wished to see, or had long been conditioned to see, something else. The collapse of the press and the acceptance by flagship outlets of a new role as a megaphone for the Democratic Party meant that there were many fewer actual “outside observers” to blow the whistle. And in any event, Obama was on his way out—and Donald Trump, aka Orange Man Hitler, was on his way in.

The conspiratorial messaging campaign targeting Trump as a Kremlin-controlled “asset” who had been elected on direct orders from Vladimir Putin himself seemed more like the plot of a dark satire than something that rational political observers might endorse as a remotely plausible real-world event. Having reported on the Iran deal made it easy to see that Russiagate was a political op, being run according to a similar playbook, by many of the same people. Familiarity with the Iran deal made it easy for reporters at Tablet, particularly Lee Smith, to see Russiagate as a fraud from the beginning, and to see through the methods by which the hallucination was being messaged by the mainstream press.

What surprised me was how alone my colleagues were, though. The existence of dedicated journalistic observers who saw their allegiance as being to readers and not to any political party was itself a feature of a 20th-century system that was quickly going the way of the dodo. Observers who proclaimed their fealty to objective reporting practices and refused to identify with either political party no longer worked in the press—not after Trump was elected. To the extent that rational analysts of claims that the U.S. president was controlled by the Kremlin still existed, they worked in academic political science departments at distant state universities, and their voices were buried under an avalanche of permission structure propaganda amplified often several times a day on the front pages of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, which would win Pulitzer Prizes for publishing nonsense.

Needless to say, the model of politics in which operatives are constantly running permission structure games on the body politic, assisted by members of the press and think tankers eager to be of service to the party, has more in common with pyramid schemes and high-pressure network-marketing scams than it does with reasoned democratic deliberation and debate. At this point, it hardly seems controversial to point out that such a model of politics is socially toxic.

What's important to note are the specific conditions that had been set, and which turned this from the narrow campaign it might have been to a society-wide mass event—and which is why those who argued in these years that the Democratic Party and the Republican Party had anything like equal power were either evil or delusional or both. In the wake of Obama's reelection in 2012, the defection of large swaths of the Silicon Valley elite from the Republican to the Democratic Party led to a tremendous influx of cash into the coffers of the Democratic Party and its associated penumbra of billionaire-funded foundations and NGOs, along with a new willingness of Silicon Valley titans to work directly with the White House—which after all, retained the power, in theory, to regulate their quasi-monopolies out of existence. In field after field, from sex and gender, to church attitudes toward homosexuality, to formerly apolitical sources of public information, to voting practices, to the internal politics of religious groups, to race politics, to what films Americans would watch and how they would henceforth be entertained, the oligarchs would do their part, by helping buy up once independent social spaces and torque them to function as parts of the party's permission structure machine. The FBI would then do its part, by adopting political categories like “white supremacy” as chief domestic targets, and puppet groups in the vertical, like the ADL and the ACLU, would pretend to be objective watchdogs who just happened to come to the same conclusion.

Obamacare was followed by the Iran deal, which was followed by Russiagate, which was followed by COVID. Messaging around the pandemic was the fourth and most far-reaching permission structure game that was run by small clusters of operatives on the American public, resulting in the revocation of the most basic social rights—like the right to go outside your own home, or visit a dying parent or

child in the hospital. COVID also proved to be an excuse for the largest wealth transfer in American history, comprising hundreds of billions of dollars, from the middle and working classes to the top 1%. Most ominously, COVID proved to be a means for remaking the American electoral system, as well as providing a platform for a series of would-be social revolutions in whose favor restrictions on public gatherings and laws against looting and public violence were suspended, due to manifestations of “public opinion” on social media.

As COVID provided cover for increasingly extreme and rapid manifestations of rapid political enlightenment, numbers of formerly quiescent citizens began to rebel against the new order. Unable to locate where the instructions were coming from, they blamed elites, medical authorities, the deep state, Klaus Schwab, the leadership of Black Lives Matter, Bill Gates, and dozens of other more or less nefarious players, but without being able to identify the process that kept generating new thought-contagions and giving them the seeming force of law. The game was in fact new enough that Donald Trump didn't get it before it was too late for his reelection chances, championing lockdowns and COVID vaccines while failing to pay attention to the Democratic lawyers who were changing election laws in key states. Once Joe Biden was safely installed in the White House, Obama's Democratic Party could look forward to smooth sailing—protected by new election laws, the party's control over major information platforms, the FBI, and the White House, and a government-led campaign of lawfare against Trump. It was hard to see how the party could lose for at least another generation, if ever again.

BY THIS LATE DATE IN WESTERN CULTURAL HISTORY, THE MODERN IS itself a notably dated category. Whether it is a person or a thing or a style, we know exactly how it behaves, and how we are supposed to react. The modern is a character in an early Evelyn Waugh novel, unflappable in the face of the new. Then there is the conservative, who rejects the new in favor of the ancient verities of the Greeks or the Church. Both figures are

rightfully comic, with an accompanying tinge of the tragic, or else they appear to be the other way around. The verdict is in the eye of the beholder, meaning you and me.

The permission structure machine that Barack Obama and David Axelrod built to replace the Democratic Party was in its essence neither modern nor conservative, though. Rather it is totalitarian in its essence, a device for getting people to act against their beliefs by substituting new and better beliefs through the top-down controlled and leveraged application of social pressure, which among other things eliminates the position of the spectator. The integrity of the individual is violated in order to further the superior interests of the superego of humanity, the party, which knows which beliefs are right and which are wrong. The party is the ghost in the machine, which appears to run on automatic pilot, using the human desire for companionship and social connection as fuel for an effort to detach individuals from their own desires and substitute the dictates of the party, which is granted the unlimited right to enforce its superior opinions on all of mankind.

Constructing a giant permission structure machine that would mechanize the formation of public opinion through social media was never David Axelrod's intention. Axelrod wanted to help make society better by allowing white voters to obey the better angels of their nature and elect Black mayors, despite being racists. Everyone can agree that racism is bad, just like they can agree that poverty is bad, or disease is bad. The question is whether a given instance of racism or poverty or disease is so bad that, when it comes to eliminating or reducing their ill effects, all other human values, including the value of independent thought and feeling, should be trampled. If the answer is yes, you have placed your trust outside of the nexus of contingent human relationships into the hands of a larger, crushingly powerful machine that you believe might incarnate your idea of justice. That is totalitarianism, or as George Orwell put it in *1984*, the image of "a boot stamping on a human face—forever."

Every form of totalitarianism is unique. Nazi fascism was unique in its racist animus toward the Jews, who were responsible for the opposing sins of capitalism and communism alike, and also for the industrial efficiency in which the Nazi

program of mass slaughter was carried out. Soviet communism was unique in that it lasted much longer than Nazism did, and for the distinctive type of cynicism to which it gave rise. If the end product of Nazism was Auschwitz, then the end product of Soviet communism was the humor of the breadline. Soviet cynicism was a natural product of how the Soviets decided to rule, which was to demand absolute external compliance to party dictates in word and deed while at the same time allowing its subjects a separate space to think their own thoughts—provided that they never acted on those thoughts. The natural outcome of the Soviet system was compliance without belief.

“Twitter was worth more to Elon Musk than it was to anyone else with the money to pay for it. He understood Twitter and the permission structure machinery better than its would-be operators did.”

The effect of the permission structure machine is to instill and maintain obedience to voices coming from outside yourself, regardless of the obvious gaps in logic and functioning that they create. The clinical term for this state is schizophrenia, which is a term that had a deep hold over the 20th-century modern literary and social imagination, from popular works like *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and *Sybil* to theorizing by R.D. Laing (*The Divided Self*) and Gilles Deleuze (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*). Among the superior works of literature in this genre are Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Sylvia Nasar’s *A Beautiful Mind*, the singular *House of Leaves*, Greg Bottoms’ memoir *Angelhead* and many dozens of other books. The expected reaction within the genre to hearing such voices is horror.

This was not always the case, though. Neither Greek nor Hebrew literature, which are the two great narrative streams out of which what we know today as Western culture was formed, appear to have any equivalent to what we identify today as internal monologue. Instead, they are filled with talking bushes, plants, and animals. Above all, they are filled with the voices of gods—including God—which talk to humans in nearly every physical location imaginable, from mountaintops to the Road to Tarsus. Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel, Jesus, and Paul all heard voices. According to the Princeton University scholar Julian Jaynes, author of *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, human consciousness did not arise as a chemical-biological byproduct of human evolution but is instead a learned process based on the recent development and elaboration of metaphorical language. Prior to the development of consciousness, Jaynes argues, humans operated under a previous mentality he called the bicameral (two-chambered) mind, where in place of an internal dialogue, bicameral people regularly experienced auditory hallucinations directing their actions.

What the permission structure machine seeks to do is to undo the millennia-long work of consciousness by once again locating consciousness outside of the self—but clothing it as an internal product via the mechanized propagation of what Marxists used to call “false consciousness.” But where the progenitors of “false consciousness” in the Marxist lexicon are villains, working on behalf of the capitalist order by preventing workers from being cognizant of their own interests, the mechanized permission structure machine offers the reverse: The “false consciousness” it seeks to propagate is a positive instrument of the party’s attempt to establish the reign of justice on earth. Which is why the natural outcome of the automation of permission structures is not humor, however cynical, but institutionalized schizophrenia, instantiated within the structure of the bicameral mind. No matter how the bots that animate the mechanism position themselves, for whatever low-end careerist purpose, the voices they listen to come from outside. They are incapable of being truth-tellers, because they have no truth to tell. They are creatures of the machine.

IT TOOK THREE POWERFUL MEN, EACH OF WHOM HAD THE ADVANTAGE OF operating entirely in public, and with massive and obvious real-world consequences, to rupture the apparatus of false consciousness that Obama built. In doing so, they saved the world—for the moment, at least. While history will judge whether their achievements were lasting, it is clear that if they hadn't acted as they did, we would still be living inside the machine.

The first of these men was Elon Musk, who is notable for having purchased Twitter in 2022, after Joe Biden had been safely installed in the White House, and the social media site appeared perhaps to be reaching the end of its usefulness, for what was presented at the time and since as the wildly overblown price of \$44 billion. Twitter was hardly identical with the permission structure machine that Barack Obama, David Axelrod, David Plouffe, Dan Pfeiffer, Ben Rhodes, and the rest of Obama's operatives constructed in their takeover of the Democratic Party. The machine they built was much, much bigger than any social media platform. However, due to its first mover advantage, and the role it played within the sociology of journalism and other alloyed professions, Twitter was positioned to play an obvious and key role in the work of social signaling and coordination by which the party's permission structure machine functioned.

Twitter's significance, as part of the party's permission structure machinery, was key in part because, as the history of platforms and companies like Facebook, Google, Uber, Instagram, and TikTok shows, advantages of scale tend naturally toward localized monopolies. Twitter could play the signaling and coordinating function that it did in part because it was a monopoly, which is why Obama, Axelrod, Plouffe, etc. all had Twitter accounts. It's why the FBI came on board Twitter, to ensure that the tilt of the platform was coordinated with the FBI's role in the party's "whole of society" censorship efforts—whether directed against "disinformation," or COVID measures, or "white supremacy," or Donald Trump, or "insurrectionists." So why sell a key module in the permission structure machine to Elon Musk?

Part of the reason appears to be price. The \$44 billion that Musk eventually paid appears to be at least twice what any other plausible team of bidders offered. It is certainly possible that having decided to sell Twitter, the company's board was stuck—both practically and legally—when Musk decided that price was not an object, and that he was willing to massively outspend any other possible bidder. Twitter's board, and whoever they consulted within the ODP vertical, may have imagined that Musk would find an excuse to pull out of the deal—which he appeared at several points to be doing, though his reluctance may well have been a negotiating tactic.

It is certainly plausible that someone in Obama's universe saw the danger in selling Twitter to Musk. That it happened anyway suggests—as in the case of the lawfare campaign against Trump—that they hubristically believed in their own propagandistic accounts of their adversary as venal, corrupt, and weak, and of their own practical and moral superiority. Unable to think outside their own box, they may have reasonably expected that Musk could be constrained by the need to keep his advertisers by retaining the existing tilt of the platform's algorithms for as long as the platform itself continued to matter. To keep Musk in line, the party could cut the platform's advertising revenues by half or more at will by having its adjuncts in the censorship business label it a sinkhole of racism and depravity, and getting it banned from Europe and other global markets. As the reputational cost spread, Musk would have no choice but to eat a loss of tens of billions of dollars and sell, or else face the destruction of his other businesses—which the party could speed up by canceling contracts with NASA and other government agencies and opening multiple SEC and Justice Department investigations that would further augment his reputational risk—until he agreed to kiss the ring.

Where this analysis went wrong is the same place that the Obama team's analysis of Trump went wrong: The wizards of the permission structure machine had become captives of the machinery that they built. Bullying large numbers of people into faddish hyperconformity by controlling the machinery of social approval may require both money and technique, but it is not art or thought. In fact, it is something like the opposite of thought. Lost in the hypercharged mirror

world that they had created, they decided that having made themselves cool also made them right, and that evidence to the contrary could be safely dismissed as a “right-wing talking point.” Obama’s operatives shared the same character flaw as their master, a kind of brittle, Ivy League know-it-all-ness that demanded that they always be the smartest person in the room.

Donald Trump with Elon Musk in Brownsville, Texas, November 2024 BRANDON BELL/GETTY IMAGES

Musk, meanwhile, was entirely and sincerely his own man—a privilege that came in part from being the richest man in America, and in part from the nature of his businesses, which the Obama cadres appear to have misunderstood. Musk may have paid twice as much as the next-highest bidder for Twitter, if such a bidder actually ever existed. Except, it was also true that, as a business proposition, Twitter was worth more to Elon Musk than it was to anyone else with the money

to pay for it. That's because the value that Musk creates in his companies is a unique blend of high imagination and physical products which function as memes. In this area, at least, he understood Twitter and the permission structure machinery better than its would-be operators did. Buying a Tesla, or buying stock in Tesla, is different than buying a share of stock in GM or Daimler-Benz, or even Google and Facebook, because you are buying a share in Elon Musk—a 21st-century master technologist who is uniquely capable of imagining the very biggest things and turning them into physical realities. Musk's companies are worth hundreds of billions of dollars because of Elon Musk's unique ability to incarnate dreams and make teams of talented people believe them, too. His investors are buying pieces of those dreams, which are magic—components of a self-validating belief system that puts its faith in the power of the individual believer. Faced with the party's regime of increasing direct censorship over social media, Musk was aware, in a way his adversaries were not, that the party's ambitions to control content meant that he was coming perilously close to losing control over his own personal dream space, which provides a large share of the value of his companies. Once Donald Trump, a former president of the United States, was thrown off Twitter, the equation became quite obvious: Either the party would control Twitter, in which case Elon Musk was next up for shadow-banning, fact-checking, and eventual exile, at a cost of however many hundreds of billions of dollars to his personal brand, i.e., his companies, or else Musk could assert his own control over that space, by buying Twitter. When measured against the likely losses that would result from being silenced and thrown off the site, and his likely subsequent difficulties in raising public and private capital, \$44 billion was therefore an entirely reasonable cost for Musk to pay. The hitch in Musk's plan to buy Twitter was that it relied on the party being stupid enough to sell it to him. Luckily, unbelievably, they were that stupid—while crowing loudly that Musk was a sucker.

It is clear by now that the Obama party were the suckers—not Musk. In fact, the party's belated war on Twitter's new owner only served to convince other Silicon Valley oligarchs that whatever reputational risks they might incur by backing

Donald Trump would be outweighed by the direct risks that party weaponization of federal regulatory structures, which gave it effective control of markets and banks, would pose to their businesses. By letting Twitter go, and then making war on its new owner, in a belated attempt to get him to do their bidding, the Obama party showed both the scope of its ambition and also its hubris—a combination that split the country’s oligarchy on the eve of the key election that would have allowed the party to consolidate its power.

With Musk’s X now open to all comers, the party’s censorship apparatus was effectively dead. A new counter-permission structure machine was now erected, licensing all kinds of views, some of which were novel and welcome, and others of which were noxious. Which is how opinion in a free society is supposed to operate.

Elon Musk’s decision to buy Twitter was in turn a necessary precondition for the election of Donald Trump, which was in turn made possible by Trump’s own split-second decision on July 13, 2024, to turn his head fractionally to the right while delivering a speech in a field in Butler, Pennsylvania.

Trump’s head turn was a perfect example of an event that has no explanation outside the favor of the gods, or whatever modern equivalent involving wind factors and directional probabilities you might prefer to the word “God.” Trump was fated to win, just as Achilles was fated to overcome Hector, because the gods, or if you prefer the forces of cosmic randomness, were on his side, on that day, at that moment. That move not only saved his life by allowing him to escape an assassin’s bullet; it revitalized his chi and set in motion a series of subsequent events that generated a reordering of the entire world.

HEN THERE WAS ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU, WHO GAVE the story a further epic dimension by returning to the original field of battle. Bibi, as you may recall, played the role of Obama’s piñata during the fight over the Iran

T deal, fated to go down to defeat by opposing the will of a sitting U.S. president on a foreign policy question that most Americans cared very little about. But this past summer, Netanyahu turned himself into the active party, with the means to reverse Obama's achievement and unveil the origins of his power grab, by showing that the "peace deal" that he had sold to the American people—founded on the idea that Iran was itself a formidable adversary—was a mess of lies. Iran was not and never was a regional power, capable of "balancing" traditional American allies. It was a totalitarian shit hole regime that is deeply hated by its own people and throughout the region, entirely dependent on American backing in its efforts to gain a nuclear bomb. Netanyahu's decision to invade Rafah on May 6, 2024, was the culmination of two long and otherwise separate chains of events whose consequences will continue to reverberate throughout the Middle East, and also at home. Netanyahu had been promising to invade Rafah since February. The fact that he had not done so by May had become both a symbol of Israeli weakness and indecision in the face of a global onslaught of Jew-hatred, as well as the continuing solidity of the regional power structure established by Obama's Iran deal. Within that structure, Israeli interests were held to be subordinate to those of Iran, which was allowed to finance, arm, and train large terrorist armies on Israel's borders. Even when one of those armies decided to attack Israel in an orgy of murder and rape directed against civilians and recorded and broadcast live by the terrorists, Israel's response was to be limited by its subordinate place in the regional hierarchy, underlining a reality in which Israel was fated to grovel before the whims of its American master—and would sooner or later most likely be ground into dust.

Israel could not strike Iran. Nor could it directly strike Hezbollah, the largest and most threatening of the Iranian-sponsored armies on its border, except to retaliate tit-for-tat for Hezbollah's missile attacks on its civilian population. While it could invade Gaza, it could do so only while being publicly chided by U.S. officials from the president and the secretary of state for violating rules of wars that often appeared to be made up on the spot and were entirely divorced from common military practice and necessity. In particular, Israel was not to invade Rafah, a

Benjamin Netanyahu addresses a joint meeting of Congress in the chamber of the House of Representatives at the U.S. Capitol on July 24, 2024

KENT NISHIMURA/GETTY IMAGES

prohibition that ensured that Hamas could regularly bring in supplies and cash through the tunnels beneath its border with Egypt while ensuring the survival of its command-and-control structure, allowing it to reassume control of Gaza once the war was over, thereby assuring the success of U.S. policy, which was that Israel's military invasion of Gaza must serve as the prelude to establishing a Palestinian state—an effort in which Hamas was a necessary partner, representing the Iranian interest, and must therefore be preserved in some part, even after being cut down to size.

Netanyahu's decision to override the U.S. and take Rafah would turn out to be the prelude to a further series of stunning strategic moves which would enable Israel to smash the Iranian regional position and take full control of her own destiny. After conquering Rafah, in a campaign that the U.S. had said would be impossible without large-scale civilian casualties, Netanyahu proceeded to run the table in a series of rapid-fire blows whose only real point of comparison is Israel's historic victory in the Six-Day War. In fact, given the odds he faced, and the magnitude of the victories he has won, that comparison may be unfair to Netanyahu, who has provided history with one of the very few examples of an isolated local client redrawing the strategic map of the region against the will of a dominant global power. Netanyahu killed terror chiefs Yahya Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah; spectacularly eliminated nearly the entire upper military and political echelons of both terror armies on his border, Hamas and Hezbollah; turned both Gaza and Hezbollah's strongholds in southern Lebanon and Beirut into rubble; and finally, last week, took out the entire stock of modern tanks, aircraft, naval vessels and

chemical weapons and missile factories accumulated over the past six decades by the Syrian military.

While the questions of how and when the Iranian regime might fall are for the moment unanswered, it seems clear that Obama's imagined new regional order in the Middle East, centered on the imagined power of the ayatollahs, is now gone—having disintegrated on contact with Netanyahu's unanticipated willingness and ability to aggressively defend his castle. What role Biden's resentment of Obama, especially after the humiliation of his removal from the Democratic ticket, contributed to his continued public backing of Israel, and his repeated declarations of his own Zionism, can be left up to the individual imagination, and to the diligence of future historians. I doubt it was zero, though. Again, the fault in the Obama party's scheme to use Biden as an empty figurehead was the same fault in his handling of Musk: hubris.

PARALLEL TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE NEW REGIONAL ORDER THAT Obama decreed for the Middle East has been the collapse of the Obama-led domestic order at home. The coincidence marks the end of Obama's pretensions to be a new kind of world leader, running a new world order of his own making from his iPhone, grounded in his own strange combination of nihilism and virtue-mongering.

In fact, it can be argued that there is no coincidence here at all, since the division between Obama's program abroad and his role at home is largely artificial. At its core, Obama's Iran deal was an attempt to remake the Democratic Party in his own image, by establishing fealty to the ayatollahs as a litmus test for the party faithful—thereby elevating third-worldist “progressive” POC elements within the party at the expense of Jews, who undermined the premises of DEI ideology by doing well on standardized tests and making money and who were annoyingly loyal to Bill and Hillary Clinton, Obama's rivals for control of the party. Conversely, the recent disintegration of Obama's world-building project in Middle East has helped to

further collapse his mystique, by showing that his grand vision for America's role in the world was founded on sand. If Obama the global strategist is clearly a failure, and his hand-picked successors at home were a senile old man and a babbling idiot, then the country's corporate elite and tech oligarchy might rightly question the wisdom of continued payoffs to Obama's Chicago-style Democratic machine and make peace with Donald Trump instead. Which they did.

The same warning still stands, though. Just as America was unlikely to become a better place by letting White House aides manufacture "public opinion" through their laptops and iPhones, and license fact-free virtue campaigns on nearly every subject under the sun, from the wisdom of "gender-affirming" surgeries for children to defunding the police, it is also unlikely to become a better place if the right uses the same machinery to advance its own wishful imaginings, by costuming themselves in the robes of foreign churches while trumpeting the wonders of secret alien space technology and bemoaning the evils of the Allied side in World War II. In fact, the two groups share a great deal in common with each other, starting with their visceral dislike for the idea of American uniqueness. Exceptionalism is the master narrative of American greatness, and today its only true defender seems to be Donald Trump.

At the end of the day, Elon Musk may take ketamine all day long while wandering the halls of his own mind in a purple silk caftan. Donald Trump may be an agent of chaos who destroys more than he saves. Benjamin Netanyahu may or may not make peace with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, who may or may not turn out to be a good guy. Regardless of their faults, all three men shared a common trait at a critical moment in history—they trusted their own stubbornness against the mirror world of digitally based conformity. The human future rests on individuals in all walks of life and representing all parties and all currents of opinion being brave and independent-minded enough to make that same choice.

As for Barack Obama, I will admit that I wasn't sure I'd ever see him face the consequences of his own arrogance, obsession with personal power, and efforts at vanquishing the exceptionalism that makes this country different from every other one. But I guess, as a wise man once explained: "Life's a bitch."

David Samuels is the editor of *County Highway*, a new American magazine in the form of a 19th-century newspaper. He is Tablet's literary editor.

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