Project 2025: The Right’s Blueprint for Authoritarian Rule
A Zoom Talk - April 30, 2024

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I’ll begin with a terse but highly accurate quote from Prof. Thomas Zimmer, a German scholar of US politics who teaches at Georgetown University and who has made a very thorough study of Project 2025. He describes Project 2025 as “a plan to execute a comprehensive authoritarian takeover of American government.” Mull on that for just a minute … a comprehensive authoritarian takeover of American government. With our vaunted system of checks and balances, is such a comprehensive takeover even possible? The answer is, unfortunately, yes.

You have no doubt heard something in the news about Project 2025. It is getting some coverage, but not nearly enough, in my opinion, to match the scale of the threat it represents. And if you have seen some news coverage of the project, you may very well have been left with the impression that it is a Trump project. I mean, when you talk about an authoritarian takeover, it sure sounds Trumpian. But that would be an incorrect impression — Trump has embraced the plan, posting it on his campaign website — but Project 2025 is not just Trump. It is not a MAGA plan, it is not the work of the Freedom Caucus wackos in Congress, it is not QAnon conspiracy theorists railing at the deep state — although there is plenty of deep state paranoia present in the plan.

The key element to keep in mind is that Project 2025 has the backing of virtually the entire conservative right-wing movement, including what used to be referred to as the “Republican mainstream”. At last count, 101 conservative organizations and institutions are signed on and are actively participating in the development of this comprehensive plan. Major donors are financing the development and implementation of the Project — to the tune of $22 million to date.

You’ll recognize or at least have heard of many of the organizations that are actively participating in and promoting Project 2025: America First Legal Foundation, Claremont
Institute, Center for Renewing America, Alliance Defending Freedom … even Moms for Liberty, the rabid book-banning movement that has rapidly spread across the country. What this demonstrates is that there is a broad consensus throughout the Republican party in favor of authoritarian rule. And it is that broad consensus that makes Project 2025 the very real threat that it is.

Project 2025 was initiated by The Heritage Foundation, undoubtedly the single most influential conservative think tank in the country. The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973, inspired by what is known as the “Powell Memorandum.” The Powell Memorandum was a document written in 1971 by lawyer Lewis Powell, who would shortly thereafter become a Supreme Court Justice. His memorandum was basically an appeal and a blueprint for corporations to get more deeply and actively involved in the political sphere, mostly to counter growing criticisms of capitalism on college campuses. One of the tactics called for by Powell was to establish conservative think tanks in order to maximize corporate influence on political debates. The Heritage Foundation, initially funded almost entirely by Joseph Coors, grandson of the founder of Coors Brewing, was the first to answer Powell’s call. (I’m not sure which is Joseph Coors’ worst legacy — the Heritage Foundation or Coors Lite.

Just as an interesting aside, in the past I’ve given a lot of talks centered on the Powell memorandum. Back in 2011, just before the Occupy Wall Street movement, I gave a series of talks on economic and political inequality, still one of the most pressing issues of our time. Powell’s memorandum came up in those talks because when you look back at the statistics, you can see that our current economic inequality began in the wake of the Powell Memorandum. Outsized corporate influence in our politics can clearly be traced to the Powell Memorandum and the establishment of conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation. Project 2025 follows in that tradition.

The main document of Project 2025 is a 920-page series of essays, written by numerous authors, titled Mandate for Leadership. The Heritage Foundation issued its very first Mandate for Leadership in 1981, the first year of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. It was a blueprint for reducing the size of the Federal government, a traditional conservative aspiration. It has been estimated that out of some 2,000 policy recommendations made in that first Mandate for Leadership, the Reagan administration adopted some 60%.

The Heritage Foundation continued to issue a new Mandate for Leadership almost every election year, so the current iteration is following a long tradition. What is different this time around is the inclusion and participation of a broad swath of the conservative movement, not just Heritage Foundation. Other differences include the establishment of structures to actually carry out the comprehensive plan and plenty of dark money financing to underwrite the whole effort. But the biggest difference is in the ultimate goal: the traditional limited government worldview has given way to full blown
authoritarianism. If a president were to adopt 60% of the policy proposals in this year’s Mandate, we would be in very deep trouble as a democracy.

The Mandate for Leadership is just one of four pillars that constitute Project 2025, although it is the longest and wordiest part of it. The other pillars are: 1. A personnel database to ensure that a virtual army of conservative loyalists is ready to fill thousands of government positions; 2. A “Presidential Administration Academy” — yes, a “Presidential Administration Academy”, you can’t make this stuff up. The Academy is an online training system to get the newly recruited loyalists up to speed on how government works — or, in any event, how they want government to work — so that they will be ready to begin instituting the policy proposals of the Mandate from day one. And, finally, there is a “180-Day Playbook”. The 180-Day Playbook is the only part of Project 2025 that is not yet public. According to Project 2025, “The project will create a playbook of actions to be taken in the first 180 days of the new Administration to bring quick relief to Americans suffering from the Left’s devastating policies.” So we have that to look forward to.

Let’s take a look at two pillars that we know about — the personnel database and the Presidential Academy, before diving into the 900 plus pages of policy proposals. First, the personnel database.

To fully understand the immense impact that Project 2025 may have, we have to again first wind back the clock to the early days of the Heritage Foundation and the first years of the Reagan administration. At the time, the conservative movement was developing a new theory — new at the time — that became known as the Unitary Executive Theory. The main conservative argument here is that the Constitution’s Article II, which vests all executive power in the presidency, means the president has the power to control the entire federal executive branch.

Donald Trump, you may recall, famously gave us his interpretation of the Unitary Executive Theory by saying, “I have an Article 2, where I have the right to do whatever I want as president.” Of course, Trump isn’t really known for his nuanced interpretation of constitutional law, so what does the theory really mean?

When Congress passes legislation, it usually leaves it up to the discretion of the Department or Agency to work out the details of how the new law will be applied, based on the assumption that the people who lead these departments or agencies have greater expertise in their various fields than the 435 members of Congress.

Under the Unitary Executive Theory, it is solely up to the President to say how — or even if — any agency will enforce Congressional legislation. In other words, if a president doesn’t like a new Congressional policy, the president can order the appropriate agency to ignore the new law. Project 2025, however, goes even further than that. Over the years, Congress has created numerous agency and department
positions that, although they require a presidential appointment to be filled, the people so appointed cannot be fired by the president, except for cause. This was done precisely to avoid corruption and an overly powerful president. Project 2025 would overturn all of that.

There are over 4,000 presidentially appointed positions throughout the federal government, with only a comparative handful requiring Senate confirmation. There are also some 50,000 positions that are deemed to be “policy-adjacent” or “policy advisory” and the people who fill those positions are career civil servants who are currently protected from politically-motivated termination.

These civil servants are people who work diligently to ensure that Congress’s laws are carried out fairly and equitably and free of politics. I lived in Washington for many years and I knew a lot of civil servants — they were my friends and neighbors. They are decent, hardworking people who are proud to serve their fellow Americans. Most of them could be making more money in the private sector, but they are committed to public service. And they have developed valuable expertise in their various fields, the loss of which could be very damaging to all Americans. These are the people who the right-wing has dubbed the deep state.

Most of the people in these positions remain in place from one administration to the next, a testament to their technical expertise in a given policy area. Project 2025 would make all of those positions vulnerable to termination at the will of the president. Trump actually took action on this idea during his time in office. Toward the end of his term, Trump signed off on what was known as “Schedule F,” which would have made those 50,000 civil servants vulnerable to termination by the president. But Trump’s Schedule F ploy came too late in his administration to actually be put to use and President Biden promptly repealed Schedule F upon taking office. Project 2025 would recreate Schedule F on day one. And that’s where Project 2025’s personnel database comes into play. And this is also why the entire enterprise is so dangerous.

You may recall that in 2016, the conservative establishment was late to the game in embracing Trump. As a result, there was no plan and no pathway to offer policy proposals let alone supply the personnel to carry out conservative plans. The Trump circle was also utterly unprepared to populate a government, let alone formulate anything approaching a coherent policy vision. This incompetence is what led to the so-called “adults in the room” who filled out high level positions in that first Trump administration, people like John Kelly as White House Chief of Staff, Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, and H. R. McMaster as National Security Advisor. They were supposed to keep things from running off the rails, something they were ultimately unwilling or unable to do. But the fact is, they also were not right-wing extremists willing to embrace authoritarianism. This time around, the conservative right-wing movement is positioning itself to provide the policies and personnel to insure that their authoritarian vision is implemented.
If you’re going to replace up to 50,000 people, you need a huge pool of potential new appointees and hires. Project 2025 has set itself up as a personnel screening service to develop that required pool of potential employees. This is akin to how the Federalist Society provided the first Trump administration with a complete list of pre-selected candidates for Supreme Court and federal court nominations.

But they don’t seem to be screening for expertise or experience in various policy areas. Far from it, their priority is to screen candidates for their loyalty to the project.

As the political news website Axios put it, the employment application is striking for its “emphasis on what you believe rather than your credentials or accomplishments. It reflects a vision for a centralized administration where people throughout the administration would pick up the phone and say: ‘Yes, sir.’”

The employment application, with a fairly extensive questionnaire, is available online. To access it, all you have to do is enter a cell phone number to get a one-time pass code — which I did, of course. I used the Peace and Justice Center’s phone number. I’ll sure be looking forward to the text messages I’ll no doubt be seeing from here on out.

Let’s take a look at this employment application. After getting your basic information like name, address, email, etc., the questionnaire opens with a single multiple choice question: “Select the option(s) that best describe your political philosophy” The choices are: Traditional conservative, Fiscal conservative, Libertarian, Moderate, Social Conservative, Neoconservative, Liberal, Paleoconservative, or Progressive. In far right lingo, a Paleoconservative is what the rest of would call a Christian Nationalist. You are then asked why you chose the label you did; you’re asked to name one person, past or present, who has influenced your philosophy; name one living public policy figure whom you greatly admire and why (I believe this is not a multiple choice question.)

Most of the rest of the questionnaire is made up of simple statements that you are asked to say whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with. See if you can guess the correct answers — or maybe I should say the “right” answers — that right to select immigrants based on country of origin • The education industry should be opened to increased competition through vouchers or tax credits for private schools (I find the use of the term “education industry” to be an interesting choice) • In combating censorship by Big Tech, we must look to more than just the free market • The federal government should recognize only two unchanging sexes, male and female, as a matter of policy • and, my favorite … • The President should be able to advance his/her agenda through the bureaucracy without hindrance from unelected federal officials.
The questions go on and on in this manner. Clearly they are screening for only the best and the brightest. Anyway, after completing the questionnaire, you are asked to list all your social media accounts, upload your resume and click “Submit”. And that’s it. You’re on your way to a new career in authoritarian government. Congratulations!

If you managed to complete the questionnaire in an approved manner, you are then invited to participate in the Presidential Administration Academy, which is, as it is described on the Project 2025 website, "a one-of-a-kind educational and skill-building program designed to prepare and equip future political appointees now to be ready on Day One of the next conservative Administration. This academy provides aspiring appointees with the insight, background knowledge, and expertise in governance to immediately begin rolling back destructive policy and advancing conservative ideas in the federal government."

All the courses, we’re told, are online and will take between 30 and 90 minutes to complete. The courses lead to a number of "certificates" that are on offer. Current certificate programs are: Prepared to Serve, Conservative Governance 101, The Administrative State and the Regulatory Process, and Conservative Governance: Advancing Policy. Future certificates will be offered for Conservative Governance: Managing Federal Personnel and Grants, Contracts, and the Federal Procurement Process.

The faculty for the Presidential Administration Academy, we’re told, is “a distinguished roster of former political appointees from four previous presidential Administrations, as well as from policy experts, practitioners, and subject-matter experts representing more than 100 partner organizations.”

After earning your various certificates, the next level of advancement is an invitation to participate in in-person training sessions, which, we’re told, will begin ramping up as the election draws closer.

So those are the basics of the personnel aspects of Project 2025 — finding and training 50,000 loyal recruits ready from day one to fight the deep state.

Let’s turn our attention now to the behemoth Mandate for Leadership, the 920-page document that outlines the broad policy goals of Project 2025. Now, I have to admit that although my goal was to read the entire 920 pages, I’m sorry to report that I failed in my efforts. I did read a hell of a lot of it, so you wouldn’t have to, but as the pages went by I could feel my humanity draining from me. I think you’ll understand once you hear some of this. So I had to bail out on the full read. But I learned plenty before succumbing.

The Forward to the Mandate for Leadership was written by the head of the Heritage Foundation, Kevin Roberts. His introduction is a handy guide to everything that follows.
in the Mandate. Just one sample should serve to give you the flavor of the introduction, and indeed, the entire 920-page opus.

Roberts promises to “restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children.” How does Project 2025 foresee restoring the family? By deleting the following terms “from every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exist.” The terms to be deleted are: “sexual orientation and gender identity (‘SOGI’), diversity, equity, and inclusion (‘DEI’), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights.”

The entire introduction — indeed, the entire 920 pages of the Mandate for Leadership can be summed up as an anti-woke screed.

Each chapter of the Mandate for Leadership focuses on a different cabinet department, covering all of them, plus a good many previously independent agencies, such as the Federal Reserve, the Export-Import Bank, the Small Business Administration, the Federal Election Commission, and even the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. As the Mandate notes, “Every Republican President since Richard Nixon has tried to strip the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) of taxpayer funding. The next conservative President must finally get this done and do it despite opposition from congressional members of his own party if necessary.”

We don’t have the time to go through every one of these chapters — there are 27 in all — but some choice selections will give you a good idea of the policy proposal aspect of Project 2025.

Let’s start with the Department of Education, since protecting our children seems to be a priority for these people. The very first sentence of this chapter says, “Federal education policy should be limited and, ultimately, the federal Department of Education should be eliminated.” The overall goal, of course, as it has been for a long time, especially for the Evangelical right, is to hand over massive amounts of taxpayer money to private, presumably Christian schools in the form of school vouchers. But they don’t stop at elementary and high schools. They have plans for higher education, as well. “Rather than continuing to buttress a higher education establishment captured by woke ‘diversicrats’ and a de facto monopoly enforced by the federal accreditation cartel, federal postsecondary education policy should prepare students for jobs in the dynamic economy … and expose schools to greater market forces.”

According to Project 2025, the Environmental Protection Agency, “has been a breeding ground for expansion of the federal government’s influence and control across the economy.” The report rails against the “Biden Administration’s assault on the energy sector, forcing the economy to build out and rely on unreliable renewables.” The answer,
of course, is to gut “job-killing regulations that serve to depress the economy and grow the bureaucracy.”

To the extent that climate is mentioned at all in this chapter, it is presented as a diabolical tool of the left. “Mischaracterizing the state of our environment generally and the actual harms reasonably attributable to climate change specifically is a favored tool that the Left uses to scare the American public into accepting their ineffective, liberty-crushing regulations, diminished private property rights, and exorbitant costs.”

That makes it pretty clear that there will be zero efforts to address climate change under a new conservative administration, or even any efforts toward clean air and water. This kind of attitude toward climate change and the environment is found throughout the document. The chapter on the Executive Office of the President, for instance, rails against “the Biden Administration’s climate fanaticism,” and demands that the National Security Council stop paying attention to “social engineering and non-defense matters, including climate change, critical race theory, manufactured extremism, and other polarizing policies.”

In his introduction, Heritage president Kevin Roberts described environmentalism this way: “It is not a political cause, but a pseudo-religion meant to baptize liberals’ ruthless pursuit of absolute power in the holy water of environmental virtue.”

Take that you ruthless woke liberals!

Let’s take a look at how Project 2025 addresses another hot button issue, abortion. In the chapter on the Department of Health and Human Services, Project 2025 takes direct aim at the Centers for Disease Control, the CDC. This chapter outlines plans to change the basic mission of the CDC — it could continue its public health data-gathering, but it would be barred from making any sort of public health recommendations, which is basically the main mission of any public health organization, because, according to the authors, such recommendations constitute a “political function.” What would this mean in a Project 2025 defined world? “Never again should CDC officials be allowed to say in their official capacity that school children ‘should be’ masked or vaccinated (through a schedule or otherwise) or prohibited from learning in a school building.”

So, no more public health recommendations, but CDC can continue to collect public health data. To what end? According to the policy recommendations, the CDC could play a critical role in putting an end to “abortion tourism”, noting that “liberal states have now become sanctuaries for abortion tourism.” In order to put an end to this liberal state tragedy, the CDC “should use every available tool, including the cutting of funds, to ensure that every state reports exactly how many abortions take place within its borders, at what gestational age of the child, for what reason, the mother’s state of residence, and by what method. “ Imagine a massive database such as this in the hands
of a patriarchal administration determined to strip away the rights of women … What could possibly go wrong?

The agenda here is abundantly clear: a national abortion ban. The report says “HHS should return to being known as the Department of Life by explicitly rejecting the notion that abortion is health care.” The Secretary of HHS should guarantee “that all HHS programs and activities are rooted in a deep respect for innocent human life from day one until natural death: Abortion and euthanasia are not health care.” Medical abortion and what the report calls “mail-order abortions” or are to be outlawed.

Christian Nationalist attitudes toward the so-called culture wars are rife throughout the text of Project 2025. The Department of Labor should “Rescind regulations prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, transgender status, and sex characteristics.” Clearly, the biggest challenge in the labor market and the economy generally is the inability to discriminate like we used to.

The Department of Defense should “Reverse policies that allow transgender individuals to serve in the military. Gender dysphoria is incompatible with the demands of military service, and the use of public monies for transgender surgeries or to facilitate abortion for service members should be ended.” The Pentagon should also reinstate any servicemember who was discharged for refusing the COVID vaccine and “abolish newly established diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and staffs.”

Well, I think you get the picture. Project 2025 is a comprehensive plan to massively expand presidential power. It is a comprehensive plan to dismantle the “administrative” state — that is, to dismantle regulatory agencies that protect people and give corporations free rein to maximize profits — and to weaponize what remains in order to transform the government and the country into a corporate-friendly, white Christian patriarchy.

The dangers lurking in the purple prose of Project 2025 arise from the broad consensus with this clearly authoritarian plan that now exists within one of the country’s two major political parties, the danger arises from the highly organized approach that is already underway — and has been underway for over a year now — to staff the government with 50,000 loyal culture warriors to carry out the plan, and the danger arises from billionaires opening their wallets to insure the success of the plan.

And here’s a really important thing to keep in mind: If a Republican is not sworn in on January 20, 2025, there will be a Project 2029. After 40 years of pushing the unitary executive theory, they are not about to give up now, not when they’ve already organized a massive infrastructure to accomplish their ends.

There is also danger in the fact that Project 2025 is not getting the media coverage and close examination that it deserves, one of the main reasons I wanted to be sure that the
Peace and Justice Center does its part in trying to expose the goals and methods of Project 2025. Other grassroots groups can help this effort by also helping to spread the word and raise the alarm.

There is no magic bullet or step-by-step plan that I can offer to specifically counter Project 2025, except to say that we — as the “woke” activists that we are — should be organizing just as hard and as comprehensively as the hopeful authoritarians are organizing. We should be ringing the alarm bells about Project 2025 and demanding that our media outlets cover the story. And we need to get the story out ourselves. We can continue organizing to get corporate and fat-cat money out of politics. We must keep organizing to restore women’s rights and to preserve the hard-won rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

I'll end with an appropriate quote from the historian Howard Zinn. “When we organize with one another, when we get involved, when we stand up and speak out together, we can create a power no government can suppress.”

As activists, that has always been our mission. But now, as we stand at the precipice of possible authoritarian rule, we must redouble our efforts. The future depends on it.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

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