MacLeish/Oppenheimer, Trump, and the “Conquest of America”

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Abstract Archibald MacLeish (Pulitzer prize-winning poet/playwright) published his highly acclaimed essay “The Conquest of America” in the August 1949 Atlantic Monthly. His essay focused on an American crisis of national purpose, and central to his account is the importance of a national image for America. In particular, he called for a redeclaration of American purpose by appealing to a Jeffersonian “Revolution of the Individual.” MacLeish’s friend Robert Oppenheimer responded to his essay with high praise but also criticism. In this article, we use the MacLeish/Oppenheimer exchange as a springboard for a discussion of the crisis of American democracy today exemplified by the election of Donald Trump. We take a synthetic approach, relying not simply on MacLeish/Oppenheimer but more importantly on contemporary scholars. We attempt to construct an American image with a realistic meaning for today. The image includes three interweaving political components—Liberal Democracy, Liberal Nationalism, Liberal Internationalism—complemented by America’s historical role as Democracy’s Vital Center. After sketching this national image, we discuss each component, touching on several contemporary issues as well as the general nature of the image in light of Trump and the current crisis of American democracy.

Keywords: American image, liberal democracy, liberal nationalism, liberal internationalism, democracy’s vital center

Introduction

In 2010, we published a paper entitled “MacLeish, Oppenheimer, and “The Conquest of America” in the journal Soundings. Our paper resulted from a project that focused on the 1949 essay “The Conquest of America” in the Atlantic Monthly by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and playwright Archibald MacLeish. In addition, we considered a response to MacLeish’s
essay by Robert Oppenheimer, the famous physicist and so-called father of the atomic bomb.

This project proved interesting for us on several dimensions beyond the biographical. For instance, MacLeish and Oppenheimer, who were friends, serve as classic examples of public intellectuals in 20th-century America as well as a micro-study in the social networking of intellectuals. Moreover, they were American elites connected to formulating both U.S. foreign and domestic policies, and they presented ideas to the public concerning the nature and direction of American democracy as well as threats to America itself. Hence, they are important to the sociology of Cold War intellectuals as well as the history of ideas and may point to orientations that are relevant today.

Upon completing our work on MacLeish and Oppenheimer, we moved on to separate projects – one writing a book on poetry and the other a book on Oppenheimer. However, in 2016 with Donald Trump becoming the Republican presidential nominee, we raised the possibility that if Trump is elected, we may be required to join forces again and return to MacLeish’s “The Conquest of America.” What follows resulted from this return.

This article has three parts. First, we return to MacLeish’s essay and Oppenheimer’s response using this as a springboard for discussing the so-called Trumpian crisis. Given that MacLeish and Oppenheimer were responding to a crisis in America at the beginning of the Cold War, they could provide ideas and orientations for helping us to understand the rise of Trump and remedies to the current “Crisis of American Democracy” (Levitsky, “Crisis” 6). In particular, there is the necessity for a positive “image of America” and for balancing complementary demands. Second, we sketch what we take as a viable American image/vision for our times in light of the presidency of Trump. In developing this image, we take a synthetic approach relying not simply on MacLeish and Oppenheimer but also on contemporary scholars. Third, we move beyond this sketch using works by political scientists and philosophers Michael Walzer, William Galston, David Miller, John Ikenberry, and Michael Sandel. Interestingly, both MacLeish and Oppenheimer touch on themes developed by these scholars.
MacLeish/Oppenheimer and “The Conquest of America”

When MacLeish’s essay “The Conquest of America” (abbreviated “Conquest”) appeared in the August 1949 Atlantic Monthly, it provoked considerable comment in American newspapers and even a response in Pravda. When this Pulitzer Prize-winning poet chose his provocative title, he could not have known that the Soviets would test their first atomic bomb the same month his essay appeared. But this ominous event, which broke America’s atomic monopoly, provided his essay a deeper resonance.

MacLeish received complimentary letters from McGeorge Bundy, at that time a Harvard professor and member of the Council of Foreign Relations (“I think your piece in the August Atlantic is magnificent [Day 41]); Harold Ickes, former Secretary of the Interior (“You have done excellently a job that needed to be done” [41]); Robert Hutchins, chancellor of the University of Chicago (“Your article in the Atlantic is wonderful” [41]); and Adlai Stevenson, governor of Illinois and the future Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956 (“From all I hear [your essay] has attracted more attention than anything you have written for some time” [41-42]).

MacLeish received praise from Oppenheimer as well: “I had seen it [your essay] with delight and read it more than once not only with gratitude but with attention. I am very, very glad that you wrote it and put it out” (Day 50). Oppenheimer added that MacLeish’s essay had left him with “one worry,” which will be considered later in this section (50). First, some biographical remarks on MacLeish and then a synopsis of “Conquest.”

Biographical Remarks. MacLeish (1892-1982) was born in Illinois. His mother was a college professor and educational leader, his father a very successful merchant. MacLeish graduated in 1915 from Yale University majoring in English, married in 1916, and joined the U.S. Army in 1917, serving in France as an artillery officer. He was shocked by the death of his younger brother, who was a pilot shot down and killed shortly before the end of the war. Like many writers of his generation, MacLeish was embittered and came to see the Great War as “an enormous fraud and fabrication . . . nothing but a commercial war” (Drabeck 232). After the war, MacLeish graduated at the top of
his class from Harvard Law School and quickly went on to teach and become a successful lawyer.

In 1923, he and his wife headed for Paris and would not return to the U.S. until 1928. Having published his first volume of poetry during the war, MacLeish now hoped “to become an accomplished poet” and his wife Ada “a professional singer” (Barber, “MacLeish” 270). During this time, “they joined the expatriate literary community, meeting writers such as E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway” (270).

MacLeish flourished and became an accomplished poet and playwright. He won his first Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1933 and another in 1953, and yet another for drama in 1959. He was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University from 1949 until his retirement in 1962. Elected in 1946 to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he served as its president from 1953 to 1956. MacLeish was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and the National Medal for Literature in 1978. He died in Boston in 1982.

Most twentieth-century American poetry that concerns itself with political subjects assumes an adversarial stance toward the political center by challenging its authority, values, and decisions. MacLeish stands out as one of the few major poets consistently interested in articulating, shaping the values, and defending the legitimacy of that center. Moreover, he was the only major poet who belonged to the center. He worked for his friend Henry Luce at Fortune and became its most prolific writer during the 1930s. He admired and became a friend and vigorous supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, and even wrote speeches for the president. In government, he served as Librarian of Congress (1939-44), Assistant Director of the Office of War Information (1942-43), Assistant Secretary of State (1944-45), and Chairman of the American Delegation to the UN Conference in London that founded UNESCO in 1945.

Turning to MacLeish as a poet and writer, by the early 1930s his crucial goal was “to identify or generate a vision of humanity, a motivating ‘image of mankind in which men can again believe.’ This image, both in its American and its worldwide version, would express and thereby advance democracy,
cultural coherence, ‘brotherhood,’ and human potential” (Barber, “Search” 31). His hope was that the arts, especially poetry, could foster such a public vision and support progressive political action. For him, poetry can take “a form of public speech engaged with contemporary sociopolitical existence” and can be “an activity not primarily of self-expression but of ongoing communication” (Newcomb 10, 18).

Poetry, as a form of public speech, might offer a counter-discourse to the authoritative and present us with a motivating image/vision of what is possible. MacLeish was critical of high modernist poetry that emphasized the private realm and avoided the political; he was also critical of poetry that could only be appreciated by specialists. In turn, he was criticized as “simply a literary and political opportunist” (Newcomb 24). He “met his fiercest resistance when he enlisted art [and poetry] for a social purpose” (Barber, “Search” 32).

Like Oppenheimer, MacLeish became a target for political attack. The FBI maintained a thick file on MacLeish, and he was labeled a fellow traveler and “pink” by voices on the Right and even an unconscious fascist by voices on the Left. Fortunately, he never faced the brutal attacks and public humiliation suffered by Oppenheimer. Nevertheless, as “The Conquest of America” demonstrates, MacLeish did not hesitate to confront the anti-communist hysteria of his time as well as Joseph McCarthy and his minions.

Synopsis of “The Conquest of America.” MacLeish, as we have already suggested, was disillusioned by World War I and its aftermath. However, after World War II he saw an enormous opportunity to remake the world with America taking the lead, an opportunity embodied most palpably in the United Nations and the prospects for international cooperation. When Cold War rivalries vitiated this possibility, a real danger arose that the victory in World War II, as in World War I, would be squandered. To help bring this danger clearly into literary focus, MacLeish’s 1949 “Conquest” presents an alarming diagnosis and indictment of America. His six-page essay is captivating, disturbing, and rhetorically moving. Despite its account of betrayal and failure, the essay ends with an affirmation and a prognosis of hope since “the cock has not crowed for the second time” (“Conquest” 22).
To capture the reader's attention, MacLeish begins his 1949 essay by speculating about what might be written about “the conquest of the United States by the Russians” (“Conquest” 17) from the perspective of a historian in the 1980s. The conquest would not be military, but a conquest of ideas and spirit. His hypothetical diagnosis commences with an indictment: in the late 1940s, America, the most powerful nation ever known, surprisingly defined itself negatively, not positively—by what it was against, not what it was for. The American people lost their way and “wandered into the Russian looking glass, primarily because [they] were unable to think” (18). Foreign policy became “a mirror image of Russian foreign policy: whatever the Russians did, [they] did in reverse” (17). Moreover, even “religious dogma was Russian dogma turned about: the first duty of a good Christian in the United States in these years was not to love his enemies but to hate the Communists” (17).

Regrettably, Americans did not “understand the nature of the crisis” or “the character of the role [they] were called upon to play” (“Conquest” 18). They took Communism as “a great new revolutionary force” and assumed “the way to resolve the crisis, therefore, was to resist and contain and presumably strangle the Communist revolution.” For MacLeish, this was “a delusive belief” since the rise of Communism did not precipitate the crisis. It was instead a deep and fundamental crisis in civilization and culture “produced by the cumulative changes of many centuries.” Americans were blind because the “true revolutionary force in our epoch” began in the eighteenth century and was now centered in America, not Russia (18). The real conflict was between all forms of authoritarianism both Right (Fascism) and Left (Communism) on the one hand, and “the dream of a whole and responsible human freedom on the other” (19).

As a warrant for his argument, MacLeish offered a model of history in striking contrast to the Marxists. In MacLeish’s model, the world of authoritarianism, in which individuals are strictly defined by and find fulfillment only in the social order, peaks in the European Middle Ages. The Renaissance marks the first stirrings of a flowering of freedom that finds its significant expression at the end of the 18th century, most powerfully in the ideas of the American Revolution. By the mid-20th century, the world of authoritarianism is “dying” but “not altogether dead,” while Jefferson’s “new world” of individual freedom “is conceived but not yet born,” and MacLeish and his con-
temporaries find themselves in “the interval between the two” (“Conquest” 19). Communism seeks to turn back “the current of human evolution to that decaying city of hierarchical and disciplined order” (19) and is thus a reactionary rather than a revolutionary force of world history. The true revolutionary force is Jeffersonian individualism and democracy.

MacLeish was convinced that the United States had no choice but to arm itself and resist the Russian threat. The trouble arose when this resistance “became an end and object in itself” (“Conquest” 21). Resistance should be only a means for moving ahead with the American purpose and providing “a positive and believable alternative to the grim choice the authoritarians hold before mankind” (19). This failure may well turn out to be “the costliest blunder” (21) in American history since only by presenting “a true alternative” (19) can the authoritarians be defeated. Such a failure would bring the harshest indictment from the peoples of the world: “we [Americans] had it in our power at a critical moment in history, when the whole future of humanity hung in [the] balance, to present a true and hopeful alternative to the iron choice with which the world [was] faced and . . . we did not do it” even though this “alternative was the course to which our whole past and our entire tradition had committed us” (21). As expected, MacLeish looks to Jeffersonian individualism and democracy for his “positive and believable alternative” (19) when in the last section of his essay he calls for “a redeclaration of the revolution of the individual in terms which would have realistic meaning in this time” (21, italics in original).

From a purely American perspective, another danger arose: “the falsification of the image of the American people” and thus the undermining of “the spiritual integrity of the nation” (“Conquest” 20). For MacLeish,

The soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself; the aspect in which it sees itself against the past; the attributes to which its future must respond. To destroy that image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation, for to destroy the image is to destroy the means by which the nation recognizes what it is and what it has to do. But the image a people holds of itself is created not by works alone or myths but by its actions. Unless the actions are appropriate to the image, the image is blurred. If the actions deny the image, the image is destroyed. (20)
Given “the negative and defensive and often frightened opinion of these years” as well as actions opposing its values (e.g., support for Franco and fascist Spain as a counter to Communism and Russia), the American image has been “falsified” (20). This is an image long cherished by the American people, who see “themselves as beginners and begetters, changers and challengers, creators and accomplishers” and, most importantly, as people dedicated to freedom and democracy (20).

At the end of “Conquest,” MacLeish reminds his reader that even though the American people have failed to act at this “moment of decision” and assert their “moral purpose,” they “have not yet denied that purpose—the cock has not crowed for the second time” (22). They have lost “momentum” and “initiative,” but they “have not yet rejected [their] role as a revolutionary people moving with the great revolutionary current of history.” Time is short, and “only by affirmative recommitment to the revolution of the individual” can America regain its “vital and creative impulse” (22) and present to the world “a true and hopeful alternative” (21).

Oppenheimer’s Response to “Conquest.” MacLeish sent Oppenheimer a copy of “Conquest” along with a “warm note” apparently inviting him for his thoughts on the essay (Day 50). In a letter dated September 27, 1949, Oppenheimer responded, “I am very, very, glad that you wrote it and put it out.” Oppenheimer praised its first sections where “the present state of affairs is portrayed against the anguish of the implication of how things ought to be” and remarked, “This is masterful; and you will not need to be told how it speaks to my thought.” However, Oppenheimer wrote that he had “one worry which even the rereading left” (50). The trouble arose in the last section with MacLeish’s insistence that the revolution of the individual as articulated by Jefferson is the affirmation needed for solving our ills and presenting the world with a hopeful alternative.

Rather than overemphasizing “the emancipation of the individual from society,” wrote Oppenheimer, MacLeish ought to acknowledge “with an awareness that the past one hundred and fifty years have rendered progressively more acute, the basic dependence of man on his fellows” (Day 50). Further, any account must reflect “the profound part that culture and society play in the very definition of human values, human salvation and liberation” (50). Because “man is both an end and an instrument,” wrote Oppenheimer, the
“affirmation” that MacLeish called for in “Conquest,” which certainly has to do with freedom, must be “something far subtler than the emancipation of the individual” (50).

Oppenheimer conceded that he could not articulate such an affirmation himself, but wrote that “because I think that there will be real novelty and real creation in what we have now to say and think and do...I take a more tolerant attitude towards the confusions and rumblings of the last years” (Day 51). Interestingly, Oppenheimer reminded MacLeish of “the night you spent with Bohr” and wrote, “I think that Bohr’s point is much too narrow to comprise anything like the whole of what we need to understand and to resolve. But in a narrow range it does have that new insight into the relations of the individual and society without which we can give an effective answer neither to the Communists nor to the antiquarians nor to our own confusions.” Oppenheimer closed his letter by re-emphasizing his delight and gratitude to MacLeish for having written “Conquest” and his “conviction that it will help.” MacLeish replied in a letter dated October 6, 1949, stating, “It was extraordinarily kind of you to write me at such length. The point you raise is, of course, the central point of the whole business. I want to think about it and to write to you later” (51). Our research has not turned up a later letter to Oppenheimer on this topic.1

This private exchange between Oppenheimer and MacLeish on America and its Cold War policy is noteworthy on several levels. It demonstrates the social networking of the American political elites who were public intellectuals, reveals the terms of a debate internal to liberal democracy as it struggled to define itself in relation to Communism, and points towards contemporary discussions of liberal democracy.

**Sketching an American Image**

**Preliminary Remarks.** MacLeish’s 1949 essay bears notable connections to the past and present. For instance, in the year “Conquest” appeared, the influential book *The Vital Center*, by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., was also published. Like MacLeish, Schlesinger “pits liberal democracy” against “its deadly international antagonists—fascism on the right, communism on the left” (Schlesinger 52).
Another important connection is Benedict Anderson’s remarkable book *Imagined Communities* on the origin and spread of nationalism. For Anderson, the nation “is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). His analysis of nationalism focuses not on Europe, but on North and South America as well as Southeast Asia. According to Anderson, of the many seminal events in the rise of nationalism, “the Declaration of (the Thirteen Colonies’) Independence in 1776, and the successful military defense of that declaration,” stand out (192). This republican independence “was felt to be something absolutely unprecedented, yet at the same time, once in existence absolutely reasonable” and exportable, especially to other regions like South America (192).

For Anderson, the nation as a shared imagination is a powerful social construct with “underpinnings in real material conditions” (Calhoun, “Importance” 12), especially in the communicative realm like print-capitalism (e.g., newspapers, books), maps, and museums, and “the ‘end of the era of nationalism’...is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 3).

MacLeish’s “Conquest” works on three levels with respect to Anderson’s account of nationalism as shared imagination. For one, it is a concrete case of print-capitalism in action, namely, an essay in a national magazine addressing the public on a national concern. Secondly, the national concern is an existential threat to the nation, requiring a vigorous, self-defining response. Thirdly, and most resonating, MacLeish, like Anderson, stresses how imagination is crucially important to making and sustaining a nation (e.g., “The soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself....To destroy the image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation”) as well as guiding it into the future. Though MacLeish died in 1982, the year before Anderson’s book appeared, he surely would have embraced this remarkable book, which substantiates many of his views and efforts while giving prominence to the American Revolution. As an American poet, playwright, essayist, journalist, and member of the Roosevelt administration, such is to be expected.
Given the current crisis of American Democracy exemplified by the presidency of Donald Trump, MacLeish’s essay speaks to the present. Its apocalyptic title “The Conquest of America” is as pertinent and forewarning today as it was in 1949, perhaps more so. In 1949, America faced a single, powerful threat from the Soviet Union as well as threats from within. Remember, for MacLeish, the real, historic danger was not military conquest but internal—a conquest of ideas and spirit. To counter this, he called for a redeclaration of the revolution of the individual. America has always faced foreign threats; however, today they appear more diverse and less focused than the Soviet threat of 1949. More significant for America today are the challenges and threats from within, which have substantially increased over what they were in 1949, perhaps being the greatest since the American Civil War.

These domestic threats for present-day America are numerous and alarming. In large part, they arose from the forces of globalization and technological change resulting in “a sharp decline in manufacturing jobs” and “a hollowing out of the middle class” while America became more diverse and secular (Howell 106). Now the American population is strongly divided and extremely polarized—culturally, socially, and politically. These divisions and polarizations are grounded materially (geographic location, extreme economic inequality), socially (e.g., racial, religious), and institutionally (e.g., a constitution that enables minority rule) (Levitsky, Tyranny 59–64). In addition, given the extreme polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties, federal and state governments are divided and extremely polarized, resulting in dysfunction and a damaging distrust of government overall. An erosion of institutional norms in government and democratic backsliding have also arisen along with distrust of other basic institutions (e.g., media, universities) as well as professional experts (e.g., medical doctors, scientists). Violent protests by the Right and Left have occurred and, most disturbing, there has been a rise in domestic terrorism. Alarmingly, threatening signs continue—uncivil discourse, media polarization in both presentation and audience, numerous conspiracy theories, the rise of militia groups, calls for Christian nationalism and White nationalism, and the list goes on.

Without doubt, the presidency of Trump stands out as the most visible example and consequence of these threats. Having no governmental or military experience and a confrontational personality, Trump was democrati-
cally elected to the most powerful political office in the United States. While
president, he fomented domestic division, undermined international relations, embraced dictators, mishandled a deadly pandemic, and was twice impeached. Most alarming, after Trump lost the 2020 presidential election to Joe Biden, he promoted the lie of widespread election fraud, worked to overthrow the election, and then urged his supporters to march on the U.S. Capitol to stop the peaceful transfer of power. Trump is a populist demagogue; many suspect him of fascist tendencies. In his 1939 essay “Freedom to End Freedom,” MacLeish portrayed a haunting image, more realistic today given Trump: “though difficult to imagine a communist America, ‘it is easy to imagine what a fascist America would be like’” (Day 52).

Given this crisis of American democracy, can the exchange between MacLeish and Oppenheimer offer guidance in constructing an American image that could be meaningful today?

For contemporary readers MacLeish’s revolution of the individual may be too sweeping and grand. Though critical at times, MacLeish is overly optimistic, making few references to past American transgressions; his redeclaration of the American purpose lacks sufficient detail. Further, as pointed out by Oppenheimer, MacLeish is fixated on the individual over the collective and communal. Also, there are glaring absences—women, racial minorities, indigenous people—excluded by a concept of individuality that seems to be restricted to white men.

Even given these faults, MacLeish’s “Conquest” has something to offer. For one, it is useful to think about how the United States can define itself positively, not negatively—what it is for, not what it is against. Central to this are a shared imagination and image. This image must conjoin past, present, and future as well as provide understanding, motivation, and guidance. By empowering national identity and aspirations, it can furnish a much-needed framework for discussion and debate. Furthermore, as MacLeish held, this image must be especially concerned with liberty and the individual. However, in any such realistic image, as Oppenheimer pointed out and MacLeish agreed, there will be necessary tensions, for instance, between the individual and community. Oppenheimer suggested the notion of “complementarity” might be of use here (see endnote 1). His appeal points to the need for recognition and balance of contrary demands within a pluralist society. Finally,
both MacLeish and Oppenheimer, who were public intellectuals and part of the political establishment, viewed the Cold War as requiring an ideological project of ideas and moral frameworks. Given the success of this American-led coalition against the Soviet Union, this offers an important lesson about the role of ideas and images in forging coalitions today.

**Sketch of an American Image.** A national image should provide a cognitive, collective representation that reflects and conveys the ideas and values of the people of a country. These ideas and values furnish meaning and identity to the collective and are not simply reducible to the beliefs and preferences of individuals. Like a person’s self-image, a national image is a presentation, though not of an individual, but of a nation. Among other things, national images can motivate as well as assist in framing national discussions, debates, and decisions.

In proposing an American image, our overall approach is pragmatic, centrist, and avoids grand theory and comprehensive doctrines. The components of the image are strongly interrelated, but the image does not imply a deductive understanding or structure. We contend the image can assist in furnishing shared conceptual resources to help collectively recognize and coherently address national problems and challenges.

The image includes three political components: *liberal democracy*, *liberal nationalism*, and *liberal internationalism*. The phrasing of each component consists of a political noun modified by the adjective “liberal.” As Michael Walzer emphasizes, “[l]ike all adjectives, ‘liberal’ modifies and complicates the noun it precedes; it has an effect that is sometimes constraining, sometimes enlivening; sometimes transforming” (73). For example, consider “liberal democracy” while taking democracy to denote government by the people with majority rule. Liberal democracy would put limits on majority rule, say by enshrining individual rights (e.g., freedom of speech) which cannot be overruled by the majority. Interestingly, as Oppenheimer might point out, this example involves a tension between the individual and community. This tension can be addressed and reduced, as we will show later, but cannot be eliminated. Moreover, as Walzer argues and will be seen in the next sections, “liberal” is a strong adjective, suggesting pluralism and distaste for comprehensive doctrines and their final endings while lowering “the stakes of political conflict” (75).
We now sketch an American image. First, assuming these three political components are given, America is to a significant degree and aspires to be a liberal democracy committed to liberal nationalism and liberal internationalism. Second, looking to history and the world today as well as borrowing a term from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., America is “Democracy’s Vital Center." American centrality here has several dimensions including the historic, international, economic, and military, but this should not be taken as advocating American hegemony. More will be said about this historical centrality in the section on liberal internationalism. Most importantly, this American image entails a moral project given the modern democratic revolution with its normative justification and the challenges confronting it.

In the following three sections, each political component is considered in detail, providing understanding of each and the interrelations between them. The first component, “Liberal Democracy," is concerned with governance and hence is fundamental, with the other two components having supporting and augmenting roles. For instance, a country can be a liberal democracy without being committed to either liberal nationalism or liberal internationalism.

**Liberal Democracy**

The political scientist William Galston provides an insightful characterization of liberal democracy in his article “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy." First, he sets forth the republican principle of popular sovereignty, namely, that a government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. Next, democracy with majority rule furnishes a mechanism for consent, but to be liberal it must meet certain conditions to avoid abuses of majority rule. Most important, democracy (government by the people) “requires both the equality of all citizens and a broadly inclusive citizenship” (Galston 9). In particular, since equality here implies that citizens have an equality at essential stages in the collective making of political decisions, there must be certain rights—voting rights, freedom of speech, assembly, and the press—which cannot be overridden by majoritarianism.
Another essential for liberal democracy is constitutionalism, which “denotes a basic, enduring structure of formal institutional power, typically but not always codified in writing” (Galston 9). However, to protect liberty and hence to be liberal, the institutional power of government must be limited and constrained by design (e.g., separation of powers, checks and balances). Finally, we reach “the core idea of liberalism: recognizing and protecting a sphere beyond the rightful reach of government in which individuals can enjoy independence and privacy” with unalienable rights (e.g., freedom of religion, pursuit of happiness) (10).

With the above in mind, Galston ventures a concise characterization of liberal democracy:

This type of political order rests on the republican principle, takes constitutional form, and incorporates the civic egalitarianism and majoritarian principles of democracy. At the same time, it accepts and enforces the liberal principle that the legitimate scope of public power is limited, which entails some constraints on or divergences from majoritarian decision making. (10)

Given this characterization, what is the state of liberal democracy in the world today? For Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institute, the “world is mired in a deep, diffuse, and protracted democratic recession” which began in 2006 (Diamond, “Global” 182). According to him, fewer than half of the states today are democracies. Most alarming, “democracy is at risk in the very country that has traditionally been its most ardent champion”—the United States—which is now, according to Diamond, ranked as a “flawed democracy” by The Economist (182). For Diamond, though President Trump “deserves much of the blame,” we must remember that “American democracy was in peril before Trump assumed office” (183). In addition, many scholars like Diamond hold that the “holy grail for democratic development” is “good governance” that provides the people prosperity, security, and peace (166). Given the rise of China and its successes without democracy, along with absolute monarchies like Saudi Arabia and illiberal democracies like Singapore, America’s failure in governance could have worldwide implications in the struggle between democracy and autocracy.

The challenges confronting effective democratic governance in America today are multiple, complex, and intertwined. Domestically, they range from major flaws in governmental institutions to significant political and societal
problems. We consider one such challenge to effective governance by way of illustration, namely the extreme political polarization/partisanship of the American electorate. This major challenge serves to illustrate the difficulties and demands of participation in large-scale, diverse democracies.

Of course, some partisanship is expected, even healthy. By formulating and championing their platforms for collective action and imagination, political parties assist the electorate in debating and making informed decisions. However, extreme partisanship/polarization can be harmful and even dangerous. During the last few decades, partisanship in the U.S. has increased to extreme levels. More Americans now see politics as a form of warfare between good and evil. Increasingly, Republicans and Democrats take members of the other party as enemies and not as loyal Americans in competition and political opposition. As Craig Calhoun emphasizes, “It is not just that citizens disagree sharply about current conditions, who or what is responsible, and paths forward. They also exaggerate their disagreements, turn to ad hominem abuse, and are led by political or social media provocateurs to attack their opponents as enemies” (“Degenerations” 331). As president, Trump was “polarization personified” (Mettler 193).

Distinguishing between ideological and affective polarization may be helpful at this point. Ideological polarization (related to ideas) is founded on differences ranging from political orientations (e.g., free markets) to particular policy issues (e.g., size of defense budget). An electorate so polarized would be focused on ideas and, most importantly, open to debate and compromise since political opponents are viewed as legitimate. Affective polarization (related to emotions) involves social and normative identity reflecting a combination of in-group favoritism and out-group animus. Many scholars point to affective polarization for understanding the increase in partisanship in America. In particular, there has been a significant increase in out-group animus with in-group favoritism remaining fairly constant. An electorate so polarized would emphasize winning at all costs and be less open to debate and compromise since the out-group is viewed as illegitimate (Finkel, Iyengar).

This in-group/out-group explanation of extreme polarization is reasonable and attests to the increase in the homogeneity of both the Republican and Democratic parties over the last few decades. For example, the Republi-
can/Democratic divide of today tracks many of the social and normative divides—rural/urban, men/women, white/Black, working class/professional class, Christian/secular, pro-life/pro-choice. More alarming, there are agents, organizations, and chaos-seekers who benefit financially and politically by stoking this extreme sectarianism.

How might this extreme polarization be addressed? Numerous scholars have recommended various “avenues of intervention that hold particular promise” for ameliorating this polarization (Finkel 536). We highlight two such avenues. First, assuming that such polarization is in large measure caused by domestic agents and domestic failures, a natural avenue for addressing this is to focus on politicians and other political elites. In particular, politicians need to turn down the heat by reducing their sectarian behaviors and increasing their bipartisan behaviors. To accomplish this, supports for sectarian behavior (e.g., gerrymandering) must be curtailed or eliminated, and supports for bipartisan behavior (e.g., public financing of elections) must be expanded or created.

From a more structural perspective, political parties and their leaderships need to be better gatekeepers at stopping unqualified, and many times fringe, candidates from being nominated. Party gatekeeping offers protection, though no guarantee, from a hostile takeover (e.g., Trump and the Republican Party). Since the 1970s, gatekeeping has become more difficult due to the increasingly central role of primary elections over the declining role of party professionals and elders. By focusing on competence to govern and such things as coalition building, party regulars served as a professional vetting mechanism to block candidates who were unqualified, overly polarizing, or dangerous to democracy. Though primary elections provide the essential, direct democratic input for the party, such elections today are susceptible to dangerous manipulation. For instance, traditional media can be “a powerful accomplice to fringe candidates who play their cards right” since “extremism, outrage, and conflict are catnip for journalists” and provide these candidates with national coverage while silencing more traditional candidates. Except for the United States, “no other major democracy routinely uses primaries to select party nominees” (La Raja).
With this in mind, scholars have recommended changes to the presidential nomination process. These changes would enhance gatekeeping and hence professional vetting by increasing the role of party insiders. Recommendations include increasing the role of superdelegates and “routing more campaign money through party organizations.” With such changes, political parties would now have two strong, complementing filters for gatekeeping—primary elections and professional vetting by the party. One might worry that this increased role for party insiders violates democratic principles. Perhaps, if one equates democracy with elections, but democracy is not simply elections. Pragmatically speaking, increasing the power of party insiders at this juncture helps check the power of billionaires, media elites, celebrities as well as unqualified and dangerous candidates, while protecting democracy and helping to reduce the polarization of the electorate (La Raja).

A second avenue for addressing extreme polarization is to focus on the electorate and its need to be well-informed about societal and political issues. Meeting this critical epistemic need requires collective as well as individual efforts since many Americans today “are not only uninformed, but also misinformed, and deliberately misinformed” (Iyengar 98).

Collectively, the number of reliable, high-quality information sources (like PBS, the National Constitution Center) must be increased and promoted. Further, when appropriate, legal actions must be pursued (like Dominion Voting Systems v. Fox News Network, Erica Lafferty, et al., [Sandy Hook Families] v. Alex Jones, et al.) to deter media outlets and individuals from propagating disinformation and fake news. In addition, new regulations and more robust ethical guidelines are needed for media outlets. For instance, with respect to broadcast media, one recommendation is “a restoration of a version of the Fairness Doctrine,” which was repealed during the Reagan administration (Leiter 903).

Looming large, of course, is the rise of online social media along with media fragmentation in general, resulting in a cacophony of voices, misleading information, fake news, and a lack of epistemic guidance for evaluating unfiltered materials. Moreover, this online landscape provides for rapid, attention-grabbing, widespread but targeted disinformation driven by political and financial interests. And it is easy to use and essentially cost-free. This interactive environment, initially viewed as a liberating technology, has defi-
nite negative costs: rising incivility, cognitive and emotional manipulation of users, and the fostering of political extremism. Echo chambers and conspiracy theories arise “sustained by people who think of themselves as actively ‘doing their research’ by consulting multiple websites like enthusiasts for a particular diet or vitamin supplement” (Calhoun, “Democracy” 140). Hence, in important ways, “Americans do not just disagree, they live in different realities” (140).

Given the epistemic potential of this media environment coupled with its many dangers and distractions, information literacy is now a vital component for the electorate. Information literacy would enable citizens to “locate, access, retrieve, evaluate, interpret and act on information” (De Paor, 4)—both online and offline (books, newspapers, radio, TV). In addition, people need to “understand the environment in which information is circulated, created and disseminated” (5) to evaluate these materials and protect themselves from manipulation, fraud, and addiction. To promote information literacy, educational institutions and organizations have definite roles. Of particular note are libraries which collect, maintain, and provide access to informational resources. They furnish quiet places and most are public—a place for all people. Most important, librarians teach how to use the library and its informational resources, and hence are natural teachers helping citizens with information literacy. In fact, libraries from the University of Michigan Library to the Dallas Public Library are now offering courses and workshops on information literacy.

As Librarian of Congress, MacLeish would certainly applaud these initiatives by librarians to assist the public and help reduce polarization. In all likelihood, however, he would place these initiatives within a broader framework or strategy. In 1942, as head of the Office of Facts and Figures and coordinating information about the war effort, he delivered an address called “The Strategy of Truth” at the annual luncheon of the Associated Press. Even though he was speaking to journalists, his strategy involved more than print media and included such media as radio and film.

The strategy was to promote the truth and expose the lies to maintain the American will against the onslaught of Nazi propaganda. He stated, “Specifically, it is necessary to develop and to perfect a strategy of defense against the devices of political warfare which will insure the certain and continu-
ing defense of the republic on that front. That strategy, I think, is neither
difficult to find nor difficult to name. It is the strategy which is appropriate
to our cause and to our purpose—the strategy of truth” (MacLeish, “Strat-
egy” 28). This strategy opposes “the frauds and deceits by which our enemies
have confused and conquered other peoples” with “the simple and clarify-
ing truths by which a nation such as ours must guide itself” (28). However,
“the strategy of truth is not, because it deals in truth, devoid of strategy. It is
not enough, in this war of hoaxes and delusions and perpetuated lies, to be
merely honest. It is necessary also to be wise. And, above all, to be forearmed
with wisdom” (28). MacLeish’s call for a strategy of truth speaks again today,
but now the threat is internal to America itself.

**Liberal Nationalism**

In our sketch of an American image, America is to a significant degree and
aspires to be a liberal democracy committed to liberal nationalism and lib-
eral internationalism. Liberal nationalism as a major topic in political theory
arose in the 1990s and continues today. Numerous scholars have contributed
to the understanding of liberal nationalism, and many advocate for it as well.
Central to this development is the work of David Miller, of Oxford University,
who argues that Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) has “some claim to be considered
the founding father of contemporary liberal nationalism” (102). Yael Tamir,
a scholar of liberal nationalism and former Israeli politician, did her Ph.D.
under the supervision of Berlin and dedicated her 2019 book *Why National-
ism* to him “with much love and admiration to my great teacher and mentor.”

First, a few comments on how the terms “nation” and “nationalism” are gen-
erally used in sociological and philosophical discussions. The term “nation”
typically describes a significant form of community (often based on ethnicity
or culture) in which members have a common social identity with duties of
loyalty and concern for both the community and its members. Membership
in the nation is mostly involuntary, related to birth and socialization. Hence a
nation has a historical and generational structure relating the past, present,
and future, typically supported by a cultural heritage of national narratives,
mythologies, and symbols. Most important, the nation today is consistently
a domain of political organization related to sovereignty and territorial con-
trol, that is, the nation-state. As Anderson holds, nations are powerful social constructs of shared imagination embedded in material and cultural conditions.

The term “nationalism” generally describes a strong, affirmative stance concerning nationhood. Though there are varieties of nationalism, they share common orientations and beliefs concerning the centrality of the nation. First, nationalism holds that there are primary emotional-social needs for humans to belong to communities. Some of these needs can be met by the nation, which is a paradigmatic case of collective identity and solidarity. Second, nationalism holds that the nation can make significant normative claims on its members that are legitimate, especially concerning loyalty to the nation and its collective enterprises. Third, in many cases, nationalism emphasizes the supremacy of national claims over other claims, especially related to collective self-defense, sovereignty, and national prosperity.

Further, nationalists tend to hold that the nation-state is the “highest social group of real consequence in the modern world” (Mearsheimer 2). Not surprisingly, nationalism rejects both atomic individualism and global cosmopolitanism. We can conceptually navigate in this nationalistic space using adjectival forms. For example, consider White nationalism, Hindu nationalism, and German nationalism, which imply that some of the social needs and normative claims as well as membership are related to race, religion, and ethnicity, respectively.

Nationalism has a questionable, if not bad, reputation today due to its association with right-wing authoritarians. Many consider nationalism as irrational, aggressive, and overly romantic as well as a form of false consciousness. These views are understandable since, as Anderson holds, nationalism is a dynamic mixture of the bad and the good—“nasty wars and national liberation movements” (Calhoun, “Importance” 16).

Is it possible to separate in meaningful ways the bad and the good here? Liberal nationalists hold there is such a possibility. Further, though the adjectival form “liberal nationalism” is in tension with itself, they maintain that it is not a contradiction in terms and can be made sufficiently coherent to further our understanding and illuminate what is possible. In fact, this concep-
tual tension could simply reflect a pluralist world and its inherent tensions (e.g., individual vs. community).

Even with the abundance of scholarly activity concerning liberal nationalism, one can gain an appreciation and a working understanding of it. First, central to any nationalism is a shared national identity of the people along with a specification of its features and significance. Also, any nationalism and hence national identity must be considered both normatively and motivationally. At this point, making the following three-part distinction is instructive: Conservative (Ethnic) Nationalism, Liberal Nationalism, Civic (Political) Nationalism.

Civic nationalism is based only on a shared political identity of its citizenry having “common rights, duties, and values” (e.g., voting, paying taxes, military service), “irrespective of any ethnic or cultural differences among the citizenry,” and so political “statehood is the forge of nationhood” (Roshwald). In contrast, conservative nationalism is based on a sense of kinship and possibly shared ancestry that predates political statehood. Its national identity goes beyond the political to include other shared traits and traditions (e.g., linguistic, religious, racial) that “are seen as manifestations of such quasi-familial connections” (Roshwald).

According to liberal nationalism, what civic nationalism requires (i.e., political identity) is normatively justifiable but incomplete. A national identity should go beyond the political to the cultural so as to enhance national belonging and community, and hence address the social and psychological needs of the citizenry. Just as important from the perspective of motivation of the citizenry, the solidarity provided by national identity is essential for a liberal democratic state to function successfully—promoting social trust, avoiding dangerous polarization, and addressing social justice. According to Tamir, civic nationalism “offers a model that is too abstract and legalistic” and its national/civic identity is just “too thin” (“Civic” 433).

In contrast, conservative nationalism is normatively problematic, especially given the modern pressures of globalization, diversity, and immigration. With national identity based along the lines of kinship/ancestry, conservative nationalism is prima facie exclusionary with a proclivity towards discrimination with respect to minorities and immigrants as well as a xenopho-
bia that can be prone to violence. Further, given an ethnocultural identity, conservative nationalism is overly motivated to resist change and the inclusion of others. Hence, its national/ethnic identity is just “too thick.”

With the above in mind, liberal nationalism sets forth an alternative that addresses the shortcomings of civic nationalism and seeks to tame the dangers as well as eliminate the illiberal features of conservative nationalism. According to liberal nationalists, the central key is a shared national identity, which “should be considered a project and not an essence,” but is more than simply a commitment to a political contract (Duchesne 847). At this point, we turn to Miller’s views on liberal national identity and its role.

First, liberal “national identities are always complex, containing many different cultural, historical, and political elements, so that in order to count as sharing in the identity, a person does not have to embrace them all” (Miller, “Coherence” 27). Second, liberal “national identities are always in the process of being renegotiated as new arrivals and the upcoming generation challenge the existing ways of understanding” national identity (27). Most important, a distinctive feature of this identity must be its inclusivity—being reflective of and sensitive to national minorities and their rights as well as “realistically accessible for immigrants” (Holtug 81). Hence, liberal national identity cannot be defined “in terms of physical features such as race or descent” (“Coherence” 33). Furthermore, though national identity can be an important source of a person’s overall identity, it should not be exclusive, for it works with and supports other kinds of identity coming from local communities, religious and cultural groups, political associations, professional organizations, and so forth (Miller, “Crooked” 118).

Most important, by belonging to a nation, citizens incur special obligations to compatriots, and strong national identities serve the citizenry in fulfilling them. Given also that national identity with its solidarity is essential in promoting such things as social trust, states have “reason to engage in identity-promoting activities, such as introducing a national curriculum in schools, promoting national culture by funding the arts, or encouraging immigrants to familiarize themselves with elements of the national culture” (Miller, “Coherence” 35). In addition, liberal nationalists hold that citizens have duties to outsiders such as universal respect for human rights and hold that all “nations have valid claims to self-determination” (Miller, “Crooked”
In particular, Miller takes a position he calls “weak cosmopolitanism,” which holds that “the fulfillment of global obligations is compatible with the discharge of specific duties to compatriots” (Erez 191).

Liberal nationalism provides a flexible framework with resources and perspectives to address many significant issues confronting democracies today, especially social justice. It supports civic education, national narratives that are motivating and reflectively critical but not alienating, national responsibility and justice, social recognition of difference, and civility with social norms of tolerance and forbearance. To highlight what liberal nationalism means as a political orientation, we first briefly touch on religion and national culture. After this, we consider the ideas of Michael Sandel on “meritocracy” and “contributive justice.”

First, “liberal nationalists tend to shy away from religion as an aspect of national identity” (Holtug 81). One reason here is that “this would make membership difficult for immigrants and other minorities who have a different faith” (81). Religion has been historically divisive, leading to conflicts both domestically and between nations. Further, from an identity perspective, religious belief, unlike ethnicity or race, is “a matter of conscience, so asking others to adopt a new religion amounts to violating their freedom of conscience,” and hence their autonomy (Lenard 168).

Though not an element of liberal national identity, religion can legitimately be part of national culture and hence contribute to national solidarity. As expected, government should not only accommodate religious practice but can support it in certain ways, even given separation between state and religion. Religious accommodations might follow a rule-and-exemption approach, for example, a law for military service with exceptions for religious pacifists. Legitimate ways for government to support religion are numerous: not taxing religious organizations, funding for religious schools, providing military chaplains.

In addition, symbolic religious elements can play legitimate roles in national culture—national holidays connected to religion, governmental oaths with religious references, national prayer days. The use of such elements along with their communicative meanings must be largely inclusive, not involve coercion, and though annoying to some, not threatening, especially to vul-
nerable minorities. Christmas as a national holiday appears to meet this given its secularization and that one need not be Christian to partake in Christmas celebrations—an instance of “belonging without believing” (Laborde 179). Religious funerals are perhaps the best illustration of “belonging without believing.”

We now turn to Sandel, who is a political/moral philosopher at Harvard University with a global reputation: live audiences in the tens of thousands and internet audiences in the millions. He has even been called “a rock star moralist” (Hochschild). In his highly acclaimed 2020 book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel makes a few passing references to nationalism but does not discuss nationalism, let alone liberal nationalism, at any length. However, we contend that Sandel’s thinking about meritocracy and contributive justice can be integral to an American image that is consistent with liberal nationalism and also addresses Oppenheimer’s point that MacLeish had focused too exclusively on “the emancipation of the individual from society” (Day 50).

Sandel begins by warning that these are “dangerous times for democracy” even in the United States: growing inequality, extreme political polarization, increasing political violence, and vigorous public support for autocrats as exemplified by the election of Donald Trump (17). His overall goal is to contribute to a communitarian diagnosis and understanding of this malaise and then recommend a moral-political framework on how to address it, providing the element that Oppenheimer found missing in MacLeish’s essay.

Central to his diagnosis is meritocracy—a social system in which advancement, reward, and status are based on individual abilities, talents, and efforts (Celello). Meritocracy has a definite appeal by emphasizing the individual and connecting to such American ideals as the Self-Made Man, the Rugged Individual, and even Free Labor. Further, combined with equal opportunity and a level playing field, meritocracy has a strong ethical attraction.

However, for Sandel, meritocracy has a dark side, as the title of his book suggests. It resonates with neoliberalism and market-driven globalization with their emphasis on deregulation, free-trade agreements, free movement of capital, and reduction of the welfare state. In addition, meritocracy corrupts institutions, especially higher education. College education has become a central sorting machine for meritocracy by providing degrees and creden-
tials based on so-called merit (Sandel, *Tyranny* 155). Education is now treated as “a purely instrumental good, a way of preparing people to compete in the labor market” (Sandel, “Meritocracy” 198), and mistakenly suggests to politicians and citizens that “education is a universal problem solver” (*Tyranny* 96).

When Sandel turns to moral psychology, the dark side of meritocracy comes more fully into view, for there are winners and losers. First, consider the winners. Though there are “wounded winners” (e.g., psychologically damaged students), a meritocratic hubris can arise among the winners that is dangerous for the polity (177). Even “a fair meritocracy, one without cheating or bribery or special privileges for the wealthy, induces a mistaken impression—that we have made it on our own” (14). Thinking “of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient” makes it harder for us to learn gratitude and humility, and hence harder to care for the common good (*Tyranny* 14).

For the losers, the social and psychological consequences are more damaging: humiliation, resentment, despair. Moreover, the “meritocratic mantra ‘you can make it if you try’” is a doubled-edged sword (Sandel, “Meritocracy” 197). Its first cutting edge “invites those who struggle in the new economy to blame themselves rather than the system” and produces a “nagging self-doubt” (197). The second edge is the “noble lie” that such inequality is legitimate (Sandel, *Tyranny* 77). For the American working class, these psychological struggles, combined with stagnant wages and the loss of manufacturing jobs, lead to a politics of anger and resentment exemplified by the election of Trump. More disturbing are the deaths of despair resulting from alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicide.

With this initial critique of meritocracy in hand, Sandel sets forth his moral-political framework for addressing this democratic malaise. Central to his discussion is the notion of contributive justice. Generally speaking, justice has to do with fairness (i.e., what one deserves and what one is required to do) and can be applied to institutions and practices as well as individual actions. Philosophers distinguish different types of justice (e.g., procedural justice, corrective justice, distributive justice). For instance, distributive justice is concerned with the distribution of goods and resources, and hence the welfare state.
Likewise, contributive justice is concerned with contributions within the framework of collective groups (e.g., family, team, religious organization, nation). As expected, there are both duties and rights here. For instance, one is expected to do one’s fair share and not free-ride. More important, in many discussions of contributive justice, a fundamental right is for everyone in the group to have “an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to effective decision-making and constructive labor” of the group (Pitt 7). Also, contributive justice calls for a fair allocation of the burdens of the group, especially those related to work.

With respect to contributive justice, Sandel focuses on the role of work in a democratic society. According to him, our market-driven society with its flawed meritocratic ethic has not only produced economic hardship but “inflicted a more insidious injury on working people: eroding the dignity of work” (Sandel, Tyranny 198). This erosion is deeply problematic since besides being economic, work is important culturally and is a significant “source of social recognition and esteem” (198). Furthermore, work is important personally and can be a major source of developing one's capacities and furthering one's social understanding as well as a source of satisfaction and self-esteem. Moreover, “the way a society honors and rewards work is central to the way it defines the common good” (205). Like MacLeish, Sandel rejects consumerist and utilitarian notions of the common good (e.g., maximizing GDP) and embraces a civic conception more in the republican tradition with its emphasis on producing/working (not consuming), cultivating citizens for self-rule, and providing social solidarity. He goes beyond MacLeish in arguing that meaningful work needs to be more widely shared among the population. Tedious work should also be shared both actually and symbolically as a gesture of understanding and appreciation (see Gomberg, Sayer, Timmermann). Sandel’s vision is in the American tradition of the agrarian yeoman and the proud craftsman, and his call to “renew the dignity of work” (222) is the linchpin of his vision.

Does Sandel have something to offer liberal nationalism? The answer is clearly yes, especially given his critique of meritocracy. Given its dangers like fomenting extreme polarization, meritocracy can pose a direct threat to the national identity and shared solidarity so central to liberal nationalism. In fact, Sandel holds that the combination of market-driven globalization
and meritocracy has “devalued national identities and allegiances” (Sandel, Tyranny 20). Sandel's critique has loosened the grip of meritocracy on the political imagination (Tsai 80).

Embedding Sandel's idea of distributive justice into liberal nationalism reminds us that MacLeish's radically autonomous individual bears responsibility to others in the community. Because liberal nationalists argue that “the implementation of social justice, not least egalitarian redistribution within the framework of a robust welfare state, relies on a shared national identity” (Holtug 78), liberal nationalism can be seen as necessary for distributive justice.

Similarly, one could hold that liberal nationalism with its shared national identity is necessary for contributive justice. Interestingly, in 2022, Sandel replied to commentaries on his book The Tyranny of Merit by saying: “My argument is simply that distributive justice is not a sufficient response to systemic inequalities of income, wealth, power, and social esteem that neoliberal globalization, backed by meritocratic conceptions of success, has produced. In addition to distributive justice, we need contributive justice—giving everyone . . . an opportunity to contribute to the common good and to win social recognition and esteem for doing so” (Sandel, “Meritocracy” 197-8). Consequently, liberal nationalists should consider support for contributive justice as a necessary component of national identity.

**Liberal Internationalism**

This section begins with a characterization of liberal internationalism and then turns to what might be called the crisis of global order. For perspective and insight, we turn to John Ikenberry's award-winning 2020 book A World Safe for Democracy. Ikenberry, Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, is a leading scholar of liberal internationalism and considered by some its preeminent theorist.

Liberal internationalism is a theory of international relations with historical roots going back to the 18th century. It can be viewed as a cluster of interrelated and reinforcing ideas, principles, and themes whose principal actors are nation-states, with liberal democracies playing a vital role. While recognizing that states are competitive, self-interested, and power-seeking, lib-
eral internationalists emphasize their interdependence and hence recommend cooperation to achieve mutual gains.

Their vision for the international order—open, rule-based, progressive, peaceful, prosperous—is based on a network of cooperation among states based on such means as open markets and collective security. Central to this network are international and supranational institutions and organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Bank, Nuclear Nonproliferation regime, multinational corporations). Such mechanisms not only coordinate activities and bring to light new possibilities, but also serve to constrain and even limit the sovereignty of states.

In contrast to authoritarian states, democracies are particularly able and willing to operate in, and even help to construct, such an international order. Underlying this vision is the premise that cooperation will “have a modernizing and civilizing effect on states, undercutting illiberal tendencies and strengthening the fabric of international community” (Ikenberry, “Liberal” 72). Consequently, liberal internationalism is both a theoretical perspective and, according to its proponents, a project as well. This project is progressive, implying democratic solidarity, social justice, and human rights.

Liberal internationalism can be effectively contrasted with both “political realism and the revisionist left” (Ikenberry, World 21). Political realism, which emphasizes that states are fundamentally self-interested and power seeking, is the traditional rival to liberal internationalism and counsels against utopian thinking with regard to the international arena. For realists, international cooperation, despite appearances, is based on a substrate of power-politics among states. So states must be exceedingly watchful, and perhaps the optimum scenario is a balance of power, giving rise to genuine restraint and no war. Consequently, for the realist, liberal internationalism is dangerously misguided and can lead to a false sense of security in an anarchic order. Perhaps more dangerous, liberalism (and hence liberal internationalism) “harbors a deep universalist impulse to remake the world in its image, and this leads liberal states—particularly powerful ones—to pursue interventionist policies” such as the disastrous second Iraq War led by the United States (21).
The revisionist left sees liberal internationalism negatively in at least two ways. First, regarding their progressive project, liberal internationalists “gesture in the right direction—toward principles of justice, equality, and rights—but their programs are simply too modest” (Ikenberry, World 23). Second and more sinister, the liberal internationalist project is politically and morally suspect. Since the end of World War I, “liberal internationalism has provided the ideas and organizations for Europeans and Americans to project power, protect their interests, and legitimate their dominance” (22).

Ikenberry acknowledges these criticisms, conceding that liberal internationalism harbors such “moral tendencies and activist impulses,” but holds that “it is ultimately a reform-oriented and pragmatic endeavor” (Ikenberry, World 24). Moreover, modern liberal internationalists “do not embrace democratic governments, market-based economic systems, and international institutions out of idealism or tools of empire but as arrangements better suited to realizing human interests than the alternatives” (24). For Ikenberry, the overshadowing peril today is our retreat from liberal internationalism, which is one of the causes of our current “Crisis of Global Order.”

Though the rise of the current crisis of global order is multifaceted, the end of the Cold War serves as a focal point for understanding its rise. During the Cold War, the international arena was in large measure bipolar with the United States serving as the military and economic foundation of the largely liberal international part of this bipolar world. With the collapse of the illiberal Soviet Union, democracy along with liberal internationalism appeared to be on the march with the United States as its vital center.

However, cracks in its foundation quickly materialized. For instance, a constitutive feature of this liberal community was the security it provided against the Soviet Union, but now that was gone. Further, new states in Eastern Europe and Asia widened the array and diversity of a potential liberal order. The liberal order became “wider but shallower” and allowed illiberal states “to pick and choose their connections to it” (Ikenberry, World 258–9). Most significant, the failure of Russia and China to liberalize and democratize were major blows and helped undermine faith in liberal internationalism. In addition, there were the 9/11 attacks on the United States and its blundering responses as well as the 2008 financial crisis.
The dramatic rise beginning in the 1980s of neoliberalism and economic globalization, with its winners and losers, also contributed to the crisis of global order. The vast bulk of the gains have gone to two very different groups. One group “consists of workers in countries like China and India who have taken low-end manufacturing and service jobs at very low wage levels and have experienced dramatic gains” relative to their impoverished beginnings (Ikenberry, World 277). In fact, since 1990, “more than a billion such people have moved out of extreme poverty. . . . The other group is the top 1 percent—even the top 0.01 percent—who have experienced massive increases in wealth” (277). All the while, “middle and working classes in the advanced industrial countries have seen the fewest gains” along with the erosion of social supports (277).

In conjunction with this crisis, the liberal international project is threatened from both the outside and inside. Outside threats include illiberal challengers like China and Russia, who could serve as the vanguard of a long-term challenge to the liberal order. More concerning is the major geopolitical shift in which “China has become too big to be integrated in a US-led liberal international order” (Ikenberry, World 280). Moreover, a great concern is that China may “perfect an authoritarian model of industrial society that can compete with—and even surpass—the long-term growth capacity of liberal democracy” and hence offer “the world an illiberal pathway to modernity” (301). If China does succeed here, a rivalry could “easily become a Cold War-style struggle between deeply antagonistic ideological and political projects” (301).

Inside threats include national-populist movements and their leaders. The most far-reaching manifestation of this materialized in the United States, the main architect and guarantor of the liberal international order, with the rise of Trumpism. As president, Trump “took American democracy to the brink” by not conceding his electoral defeat and fomenting insurrection against a peaceful transfer of power (Haberman 506). Even after all this and under criminal indictment, about a third of the American electorate still did not abandon Trump.

Just as alarming, for “the first time since 1945, the United States found itself led by a president who is actively hostile to the core ideas of liberal internationalism” (Ikenberry, World 2). Under the banner of “America First,” Trump
“abandoned commitment to fight climate change, defend democratic institutions, and uphold the multilateral agreements of an open and rules-based global system” (3). All the while, he quarreled with democratic allies while embracing illiberal leaders like Putin and Kim Jong Un. With the above in mind, a strategic question begins to arise: Is the United States capable of remaining a strong, stable democracy as well as a faithful steward of the liberal international order that it has led for over 75 years?

Even with these threats and failures, however, the international liberal order has demonstrated strength and durability. The order encompasses “a wide range of states outside the West [who] have sought to get into this order to enjoy its benefits” (Ikenberry, World 281) while accommodating diverse models of capitalism and economic development—statist models, market-fundamentalist models, and embedded-liberalism models which emphasize social welfare and managed openness. Further, most institutions of this order, like the UN, do not require their backers to be liberal democracies, just status quo states capable of fulfilling their commitments. For Ikenberry, “the ultimate source of the resiliency of liberal international order” is that “more people stand to lose from its undoing than stand to win” (284).

In the last pages of his book, Ikenberry points to “The Road Ahead.” First, he emphasizes that liberal internationalism “must define itself less as a grand vision on a global march toward an ideal society, and more as a pragmatic, reform-oriented approach to making liberal democracies safe” (World 307). Fundamental and pragmatic, “The Road Ahead” addresses two types of order, reflecting an ambivalent tension within liberal internationalism itself. One is a “small and thick” vision of order consisting exclusively of liberal democracies and hence more capable of agreeing upon and pursuing their social purposes and collective protection. The other is a “large and thin” vision of order consisting of all states, even illiberal states (310). Agreement here is more difficult, but there is commonality of interest, especially given that most problems—terrorism, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, global warming—are not unique to liberal democracies and require worldwide responses.

For Ikenberry, “liberal democracies must work at building both types of order” (World 310). However, characterizing this second order as Westphalian, he presents a stark warning: If this “Westphalian order comes to be dominated by illiberal rather than liberal states, the very viability of lib-
eral democracies may be compromised—in other words, there is some ‘critical proportion’ of illiberalism that liberal internationalism may not be able to survive in a Westphalian order” (310), and hence the title of his book *A World Safe for Democracy*.

Given this warning, the previous question—whether the United States is capable of remaining a strong democracy and faithful steward of the liberal international order—becomes more pressing. Given its power and historical significance, the United States is necessary for providing this critical mass of liberal states to counter any strong illiberalism in the international order. In short, America must continue to serve as *Democracy’s Vital Center*, at least for the foreseeable future. As mentioned earlier, American centrality here should not be taken as advocating American hegemony in the international order.

Ikenberry is unsympathetic to any “grand Enlightenment narrative in which deep forces of modernity are inexorably moving societies toward liberal democracy” and hence would reject MacLeish’s revolution of the individual (*World* 304). He finds agnostic liberalism, which acknowledges “value pluralism” and holds that “human history is not inherently progressive” (305), appealing as “a needed corrective to liberalism’s tendency toward grandiosity” (306). However, Ikenberry appears most sympathetic to a “more tempered outlook,” namely that liberal democracies can “bend the arc of history in their direction” (305). With struggle and compromise in a world of contingency and unintended consequences, humans appealing to reason and moral commitment can in significant ways make things better “through incremental and pragmatic reform of their institutions” (306). A main focus of Ikenberry’s discussion is the agnostic liberalism of Isaiah Berlin, who might be considered the founding father of liberal nationalism. And Ikenberry holds that Berlin’s “agnostic view is not necessarily incompatible with the liberalism of ‘bending the arc’ of history” (306).

In concluding this section, we touch on two topics—immigration and embedded liberalism. Given that nationalism and internationalism are two sides of the same coin, this discussion illustrates with some specificity the interweaving of liberal nationalism and internationalism along with liberal democracy.
Immigration is a major topic in political thought and highly controversial today, fomenting division and fueling rightwing movements like Brexit and Trumpism. This is not surprising since immigration is conceptually, and literally, a significant intersection where both the national and international meet, especially for liberal democracies. Though some (e.g., cosmopolitan egalitarians) argue for open national borders, the most defensible position holds that a state has a right, and even an obligation, to control its borders (and hence immigration) and can exclude outsiders. Defenders of such control point to a state's right to self-determination, national security, protecting social benefits, and preserving national culture.

However, states also have obligations and duties to outsiders. Turning to Miller’s views on immigration policy for liberal democracies proves insightful here. For him, such policy is to be guided by four values: “weak cosmopolitanism, national self-determination, fairness, and social integration” (Miller, Strangers 157). To sharpen this discussion, we now restrict ourselves to refugees (as distinct from economic migrants) and focus on weak cosmopolitanism and fairness.

For Miller, refugees are “best understood as people whose human rights would be unavoidably threatened if they remain in the place they inhabit, regardless of whether the threat arises from state persecution, state collapse, or natural disaster” (Strangers, 167). Given weak cosmopolitanism, obligations arise for states to take them in or move them “to places where their human rights are properly secured” (168). In other words, states are required to provide refugees safe haven but not necessarily permanent residency or citizenship. In general, Miller bases human rights on human needs broadly conceived (e.g., rights to food, shelter, and medicine as well as freedom of association and equality before the law), though he holds that there is no general human right to immigrate since states must control their borders and large-scale immigration can be transformative.

From the perspective of fairness, refugees take precedence over other migrants, and the refugee burden is to be fairly and widely shared among states. What is fair should ideally involve formal agreement between states, perhaps by means of an international organization, but if not, then “each state needs to make a conscientious effort to work out what its fair share of
the refugee burden should be and then admit on that basis” (Miller, Strangers 162).

A state can certainly do more than its fair share, but such a choice “would need to gain the explicit consent of its citizens” since “resources that could otherwise be used to promote social justice at home” (Miller, Strangers 36) are going to non-citizens, and the citizens have collectively done their fair share. This point is important since “doing something more” here is collectively decided and, most significantly, “humanitarian in nature, and not something that justice demands” (163). A state can receive recognition nationally and internationally for such a humanitarian response—perhaps even national honor—which enhances its national identity and standing.

National responsibility takes center stage in a refugee crisis especially when a state is partly responsible for causing the crisis. The intuitive idea is that members of a state “can be held collectively responsible for redressing the harm that their nation’s political leaders and official agents—whether past or present—inflicted on outsiders through their unjust acts and policies” (Herr 272). Though there are numerous ways for redressing such harms, one response might be taking in a large number of refugees regardless of the expense. In contrast to the above, such a response is now required by justice and is not simply humanitarian in nature.

Furthermore, even though members of the responsible state are not morally blameworthy unless they have participated in the unjust acts, they can be held “outcome responsible” for past harms committed by the nation and hence responsible for reparations. Fulfilling such indirect responsibilities can be difficult and demanding, but liberal nationalists would remind us that the individual is not wholly autonomous but participates in a national identity that is affective and intergenerational, pointing to the past and future, and hence can help bolster and sustain a nation in fulfilling its responsibilities, avoiding “national embarrassment if not shame,” and perhaps regaining national honor (Herr 273).

Ranjoo Herr makes a compelling case for a more robust response by the United States to the Central American refugee crisis given past U.S. imperialism in the region. She looks at El Salvador as a stark example where the United States prolonged the Salvadorian civil war in the 1980s and recklessly
deported tens of thousands of gang members in U.S. prisons to El Salvador (Herr 273–5).

Like immigration, embedded liberalism is a major topic in political thought and arises at the intersection of the national and international. In a 1982 article, John Ruggie inaugurated the term “embedded liberalism,” which refers to the international political-economic regime that emerged after World War II and lasted roughly to 1985. Ruggie was Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and an influential policymaker at the United Nations. His 1982 article on “Embedded Liberalism” is today the most widely cited article in international political economy literature (Adler 4).

The embedded liberal regime, which was led by democracies and especially the United States, arose as a result of a postwar social bargain. To enhance prosperity and peace while avoiding economic depressions and wars, policymakers would “reorganize and rebuild the world economy by restoring open markets, promising to mitigate their adverse social consequences and thereby preempting societal demands, from both the left and right, to replace markets altogether” (Abdelal 151). In other words, embedded liberalism promotes a world economy of managed openness with social protections coming from the nation-states and pointing towards the social welfare state.

As noted earlier, this social bargain finally collapsed by the 1980s due in large part to the rise of neoliberalism with its market-fundamentalism. Note the terminology here. An “embedded” (liberal) economic order reflects the principles and values of the (liberal) society in which it is situated. On the other hand, a “disembedded” economic order (e.g., a collection of markets) is somehow separate from society and functions according to its own logic and principles—even suggesting a scientific orientation with the possibility of rigor and prediction. Neoliberalism with its market fundamentalism can be seen as the culmination of “disembedding” first national markets, then cross-border markets, and ultimately global markets (Abdelal 151–2).

According to Ruggie, by abstracting from the social, neoliberalism lost sight of the most essential principle: markets need “to enjoy social legitimacy, because their political sustainability ultimately depends on it” (Abdelal 151).
Now given that “our current era of globalization and its neoliberal paradigm have reached the point themselves of suffering from a profound crisis of legitimacy,” Ruggie calls for “a renewal of embedded liberalism and a revitalization of global governance” (153).

Over the years, Ruggie has focused on embedding “the activities of transnational corporations, particularly with regard to core standards in labor and human rights,” embedding the international financial system, and embedding “the formal rules and informal norms of international organizations” (Abdelal 151). Of particular note is Ruggie’s work at the UN formulating policies like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which have been referenced in numerous legal cases involving companies and used in corporate governance. Such activities are part of an overall effort to normatively shift corporate governance “beyond shareholder primacy toward some form of stakeholder governance” (Ruggie 179). Here stakeholders consist of customers, employees, suppliers, local communities, as well as shareholders. The aim of the principles is to help embed organizations and markets, making them more legitimate and hence sustainable.

Robust social protections provided by nation-states to their citizenry are central to the renewal of embedded liberalism. Like national security, a state must provide social security and especially economic security for its citizens. Once more, given the strong interests and powers that actively resist such protections, liberal nationalists would stress that the implementation of robust welfare protections relies on a strong, shared national identity where fellow citizens view one another more as compatriots than simply civic associates. Further, a nation seeking robust welfare protections should frame this as a combination of distributive justice and fraternal obligation founded on a shared national identity and not simply as an extension of charity or benevolence. Lastly, a state with a secure citizenry is increasingly capable of moving into the international arena, fulfilling its national responsibilities and contributing to a more safe, just, and prosperous world for all humankind.
Concluding Comments

In the spirit of MacLeish and Oppenheimer, and taking a synthetic approach which relies on the work of numerous scholars, our overall goal in this paper was to present an American image with a realistic meaning for today. We contend that we have moved toward, and possibly met, this goal by presenting: America—a Liberal Democracy committed to Liberal Nationalism and Liberal Internationalism—as Democracy’s Vital Center.

Before addressing limitations and shortcomings of this image, we proffer a few remarks on its general features and strengths. First, the image is clearly an American image representing the United States and its political commitments and aspirations as well as providing America with a unique and historic role. Second, the image is understandable, easily communicated, and invites engagement. For instance, its overall political structure uses familiar terms and is easily grasped, comprising three distinct but interwoven components.

These three political components mirror such tripartite acclamations as “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” of the French Revolution, and especially “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men” of the 1860 Republican campaign for the U.S. presidency. Each component presents a political term (Democracy, Nationalism, Internationalism) but then quickly qualifies and complicates it as liberal. This immediately invites and helps frame public discussion and civic imagination. Finally, America’s recent historical role as democracy’s vital center grounds the image and calls for further discussion and imagination.

In addition, though the image ranges widely from the individual to the national and international, it has an overall coherence within flexible yet definite limits. In part, this coherence is structurally based on symmetry and analogy, but more is involved here. For instance, as shown in the previous sections, its coherence is strengthened since normative reasoning and dilemmas/problems that arise in one component arise in similar ways in the others. Further, there is mutual support and balancing among the components of liberal democracy, liberal nationalism, and liberal internationalism. A particular strength of this image is that its commitment to liberal democracy is not ideological; rather, it provides an institutional framework
within which ideologies across a broad left-to-right range can flourish. Liberal democracy serves as the linchpin of the image, complemented and augmented by liberal nationalism and internationalism.

Notably, though many problems and tensions can be resolved, the coherence of this image is not achieved by dismissing the recalcitrant. Instead, the image helps frame and soften problems and tensions by suggesting balance, compromise, and tolerance as elements of pluralism. Moreover, the coherence of the image does not rely upon a master narrative, let alone some comprehensive doctrine or grand theory (like Marxism, Kantian universalism, libertarianism, utilitarianism), yet it operates within a framework committed to justice, human rights, and community. As illustrated in earlier sections, our approach aligns with more flexible doctrines like pragmatism, an American philosophy connected with the democratic tradition. Speaking generally, the coherence of this American image is surely significant, for when things hang together but are not forced together, this promotes believability and understanding.

Our portrayal of America moves beyond simple images like “A City Upon a Hill,” not only by virtue of its overall structure but by providing room for fine-grained additions concerning national and international issues (e.g., a strategy of truth, distributive and contributive justice, embedded liberalism, shareholder capitalism) as well as allowing for criticism of actual social arrangements (e.g., poverty, refugee crisis, dark side of meritocracy). However, the contents of these elements are not fully determined by the structure of the image. And when in place, such elements can evolve over time, providing for development and accommodation, and can even disappear with new elements arising. Most important, the image helps frame these elements and promotes civic cognition. Such framing is analogous to how a genre frames a work of art or how space-time and causality frame human perception and thought.

Not surprisingly, this American image and our portrayal of it are open to numerous questions and criticisms. For example, what about a national narrative that is historically grounded, inclusive, and motivating? This is certainly not taken up in our analysis. However, not only does the image accommodate considerations of national narrative, it even welcomes such a narrative given America’s commitment to liberal nationalism and the importance
of historical understanding and collective meaning. With this in mind, and given that such narratives can be contested, the image offers significant openness and flexibility for such a narrative along with its evolution or even replacement. However, any national narrative would be constrained by the overall structure of the image, for example, by having to connect to America as a liberal democracy and to its recent historical role as Democracy's Vital Center.

How might such a narrative be construed? We would suggest that it should be taken up not as a master narrative but more as a regulative ideal combining both idealism and pragmatism. In other words, such a narrative is an ideal in the sense that it might never be fully instantiated but can be approached over time. Most important, the collective investigations and discussions needed for such a narrative help promote crucial understanding and move us towards the social and material conditions necessary for such a narrative.

A general criticism might be that this American image is unduly structural and institutional, and hence at most tenuously connected to social and political movements (e.g., civil rights or global environmental movements). In some cases, this criticism has definite weight, especially for morally and politically grounded movements. But this criticism must be tempered since the image can be directly relevant to national movements and can be related to global movements through its commitments to democracy and liberal internationalism. When connections are lacking, this is in large part resulting from the image being national and centrist in its orientation.

A more substantial criticism is that even though this American image is understandable, believable, and actionable, it is insufficiently motivating and lacks the necessary emotional appeal. At first glance, this appears significant given the current social and political environment. Today in an age of disinformation, we are confronted with extreme polarization combined, most alarmingly, with politics as entertainment. As entertainer and master of invidious phrases (from “American Carnage” to “Make America Great Again”), Trump fragmented America, captured the Republican Party, formed a winning coalition, and became president of the United States. For some commentators, the rise of Trump and his continuing presence is not an anomaly and could signal a new turn in politics, and perhaps a paradigm shift for the
study of power founded on entertainment, media manipulation, and taking truth and falsity as secondary to style. Looking to the French intellectual Guy Debord, we might say that Trump has obtained spectacular power by turning many in the electorate from citizens to spectators and euphoric followers by flouting social norms and appealing to primal emotions through spectacle (Lynch 612).

Though there is something to this criticism, it is an overstatement and misses our main goal. The image or affirmation that MacLeish and Oppenheimer call for is something more substantial, and more subtle, than a media image, message, or spectacle intended to move audiences emotionally and convert people to followers. For them, such an affirmation would address the ills of the American republic and present a hopeful alternative, recognizing such things as the basic dependence between humans as well as the “profound part that culture and society play” in human values and liberation. We have attempted to follow them in this endeavor.

Though the immediate emotional appeal of our American image has limits, upon reflection it can be found genuinely appealing by being realistic but hopeful, coherent, inclusive, and easily grasped in its overall structure. It can also be reflectively motivating by emphasizing that democracy is a collective project and Americans have a historic role in building a world safe for democracy. Of particular note, the image provides powerful tools for addressing the challenges that America faces today. For instance, its liberal nationalism component confronts Trump on his own turf as a self-declared nationalist by directly challenging any ethnic/racial/religious nationalism.

Turning directly to Trump, he has demonstrated the fragility of liberal democracy in America and disturbingly advanced our understanding of what is politically possible. In particular, Trump has provided many people with a vivid understanding based on firsthand experience of how American democracy can be undermined using lies, misinformation, and criminal actions even within governmental, legal, and social structures. With transgressive discourse and performativity, he fostered the identity and won the support of a large segment of the American electorate and fused this with the support of one of America’s two major political parties. Most disturbing, Trump has shown that the “Conquest of America” is not only possible but feasible given certain plausible conditions, many of which still exist today.
Fortunately, he and this danger are no longer hiding in plain sight. By becoming president, Trump has established that though chaotic forces can win elections, they cannot govern, let alone lead. This is handwriting on the wall for his supporters and the Republican Party. For his opponents and the Democratic Party, they must understand that Trump functioned and still functions as “a unifying point” for millions of Americans, including many who have been forgotten, underrepresented, and victimized by the dark side of meritocracy (Venizelos 658).

Confronting these dangers calls for work and due diligence on numerous fronts. For one, it must be realized that truth-telling by itself, without the framing of a political narrative or detailed image, is not sufficient. Without such framing, truth-telling is not only vulnerable to demagogues but can be confusing for both the individual and deliberating public (Goldfarb 216). Our attempt at such an image was taken up in part with this in mind.

We began this article on a personal note and will end in a similar manner. The day after the 2016 presidential election was a solemn day at Lebanon Valley College, and we remembered our earlier discussion about the possibility of joining forces and returning to MacLeish’s “Conquest” if Trump was elected. We hesitated, then waited, but with the attack on the Capitol Building and Trump’s “Big Lie,” we decided to step forward and try doing our part. The central result is this American image, and we believe MacLeish and Oppenheimer would welcome our attempt and be “glad that [we] . . . put it out” along with a “conviction that it will help.” Crucially important, this image complements and reinforces many global cosmopolitan images.

On December 24, 1968, nearly two years after Oppenheimer’s death, the Apollo 8 astronauts orbiting the moon became the first humans to see and photograph Earth in the vast void of space. On Christmas day on the front page of the New York Times, MacLeish proposed that this photograph has given us a new image:

> Formed as it was in the minds of heroic voyagers who were also men, it may remake our image of mankind. No longer that preposterous figure at the center, no longer that degraded and degrading victim off at the margins of reality and blind with blood, man may at last become himself.

To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together,
brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now they are truly brothers. (MacLeish, “A Reflection”)

Though gendered, this worldwide, cosmopolitan image is startling, and in some ways frightening, calling for collective reassurance and action for all humankind. Oppenheimer would certainly be “very, very glad” that MacLeish had “put it out” and would express his “conviction that it will help.”

**Works Cited**


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Notes

1. Oppenheimer's references to Niels Bohr are intriguing but not surprising. After Einstein, Bohr was perhaps the greatest physicist of the 20th century, and he had a formative influence on Oppenheimer's intellectual and political thought during and after the war. “Oppenheimer not only admired [Bohr], but revered him as well” (Day 111). During 1944, Bohr met separately with Roosevelt and Churchill concerning the atomic bomb and the postwar world, and the possibility of a terrifying arms race. In these meetings, Bohr advised approaching the Russians about the atomic bomb, but this did not occur. Bohr also made several extended visits to Los Alamos
during the war and, in Oppenheimer’s words, was more “a scientific father confessor to the younger men” than a technical adviser (89–90). Furthermore, Bohr is known for advocating and promoting international cooperation in science and the ideal of an open world. What Oppenheimer means by “Bohr’s point” in his letter is uncertain, though most likely it involves Bohr’s notion of “complementarity” as illustrated in atomic physics (wave-particle duality in particular, mutual exclusion and joint completion in general) and its possible application to tensions like the individual and community/society, a major topic in social and political thought. Furthermore, during the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to addressing complementarity, Oppenheimer developed his views on science using robust communitarian ideas and extended them to society in various ways.

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