AFTER THE BLUE WAVE: WHO ARE WE?

Economic Power, Democratic Life, and the Struggle Over What America Becomes

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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"Stop quoting laws to MEN WITH SWORDS."

— Pete Hegseth, November 14, 2026, reposting Marco Rubio's remarks about the International Criminal Court

The Victory—and What It Revealed

The Blue Wave. The Blue Tsunami. Commentators searched for a phrase big enough to describe the political upheaval—and then reached for the same old explanations. Inflation. Affordability. Campaign tactics. Trump's personality.

Voters handed Trump's party a sweeping defeat, and the experts were already sorting the results into the familiar little boxes of American election commentary.

But what if this was no ordinary election? What if Americans were reaching for something deeper: an idea of what their country ought to stand for, and what it means to be an American?

To understand the significance of the Blue Wave, we need to understand the America that produced it—and the America many people still believe is possible.

Consider the country that emerged from World War II. Americans had joined a worldwide struggle to defeat fascism. Black and white Americans fought the same enemy abroad, even as Black servicemen served in a segregated military and confronted discrimination at home.

Women helped keep factories, farms, offices, and families going, proving in the most material way how much the country depended on people it denied equal standing.

The war demanded cooperation, sacrifice, and a willingness to defend others against tyranny. It also exposed how far America had to travel before its own promises of liberty and equality meant what they said.

The years that followed brought extraordinary growth in productivity. For a time, many working families shared more fully in the gains, aided by strong unions, public investment, and political expectations that ordinary people deserved a fair share and a decent life. The benefits were never equally shared.

Segregation, discrimination against women, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and exclusion from good jobs and housing remained brutal realities. Still, a broader expectation took hold: prosperity ought to mean something for the people who produced it. That expectation, too, was the product of struggle.

There was also a competing ideal of national character: courage meant standing up to a bully, strength meant protecting people who needed help, and sacrifice for a common purpose could be more admirable than swaggering victory. Americans did not consistently live by those standards; plenty of the old heroism was tangled up with racism, sexism, and myths about manliness.

But the ideal itself posed a question that has returned with a vengeance: when did kicking down at someone weaker become a sign of strength?

For nearly half a century, the American economy has continued producing extraordinary wealth. But the political and economic settlement that gave many working people a stronger claim on that wealth has been dismantled piece by piece.

More and more of the gains went to the top. Corporate fortunes soared. Billionaires multiplied. Financial institutions extended their reach into nearly every corner of economic life.

Meanwhile, working people have lost ground in the struggle over who receives the rewards of their labor. The richest country in history has somehow found plenty of money for billionaires—and simultaneously found endless excuses for why the people who make the country run must settle for less.

An economy capable of producing so much has become remarkably skilled at telling its workers what they cannot have. And we're supposed to accept it as a fact of life that, in the richest country on earth, people go

homeless, suffer from treatable illnesses, or live in or near poverty.

The wealthy have also gained enormous power over how the rest of us live. Corporations fought unions, wealthy interests reshaped government policy, and working people lost power over decisions affecting their lives.

The people at the top didn't simply get obscenely richer. They gained control over workplaces, public policy, and the rules governing the economy. Who gave them the right to decide what ordinary Americans should expect from life?

Economic power doesn't stay in the economy. It buys influence in Congress and at the bargaining table. Vast sums can be deployed to shape a Senate contest, while a television network, a newspaper, or a social-media platform can be purchased outright.

Millions of people receive their news through outlets controlled by a handful of owners. Those owners cannot dictate what everyone thinks. People argue back, organize, and make up their own minds.

But ownership gives a few people enormous influence over which voices are heard and which ideas are treated as common sense. Power over money becomes power over public life.

Americans have long been encouraged to admire wealth as proof of achievement and to treat poverty as evidence of personal failure. Those ideas did not begin with today's billionaires. But they help justify the power billionaires now hold.

A great fortune becomes a credential; its owner is presumed to possess some almost preternatural gift for judgment. Apparently, knowing how to make money qualifies you to tell everybody else how to live—and what is right and wrong. Success begins to look like permission to make the rules—even when other people pay the price.

Then along came Donald Trump, a billionaire promising to rescue America's forgotten working people from the greedy elites. Quite a spectacle. He railed against the establishment while surrounding himself with billionaires and corporate power brokers.

He promised to drain the swamp while pursuing personal enrichment and policies favoring the wealthy. And he sold the whole arrangement as a working-class rebellion. With the help of right-wing media, Trump made handing still more power to the elites who already ran the country look like a revolution for those left behind.

Trump didn't invent this political and economic order. He inherited decades of concentrated wealth, organized political reaction, and a culture that increasingly confused winning with worth.

MAGA dressed itself up as a working-class revolt, then turned anger toward immigrants, political enemies, and convenient targets at home and abroad. Under Trump, that old pleasure of punching down took on a new viciousness.

MAGA had plenty of anger to go around. Somehow, the billionaires financing the movement always escaped it.

Parts of the media helped turn grievance into spectacle. Humiliating an opponent became a political achievement — "owning" someone, as the culture now puts it. The humiliation of another human being became part of the entertainment, and the cruelty was applauded as righteous anger. That is a peculiar definition of courage: find someone with less power than you and make them suffer.

Meanwhile, public debate about economic hardship kept returning to inflation, mortgage rates, tariffs, and taxes. These are real issues. They affect how people live. But they do not explain the deeper change: who owns the wealth, who controls the institutions, and who decides how the gains from economic growth are shared.

Consider housing. Politicians and economists argue endlessly about mortgage rates. Yet even if those rates fell to zero, millions of working Americans would still struggle to buy a home. Housing prices have risen far beyond what many ordinary incomes can support. Earlier generations bought homes at much higher interest rates, but working families had a better chance of carrying the overall cost.

The question is not simply what a bank charges to lend money. It is what has happened to wages, housing prices, and the other demands on household income—and who has the power to shape those conditions.

The same question runs through medical care, retirement security, and the necessities of everyday life. Decisions made in government and business have pushed more wealth upward while leaving working people with less power to demand their share.

Yet their hardships are described as technical problems, as though no one made the choices that produced them. Those who benefit make the decisions. Everyone else is told to be realistic about the results.

And under Trump, domination reached far beyond economic policy. Immigration enforcement left families and communities living under the threat of separation and disappearance. Political opponents faced intimidation. Officials turned fear and humiliation into instruments of government. At least two Americans were killed by federal immigration agents, and the administration was more interested in defending its authority than answering for their deaths.

This is not merely a dispute about government tactics. It is about the values we are being asked to accept. When cruelty becomes a political performance, what are people supposed to admire? When compassion is mocked as weakness and bullying praised as strength, what are we teaching our children—and what are we saying about ourselves? And when officials treat accountability as an insult, what remains of the promise that government answers to the people?

The same contempt for restraint can be heard in the administration's language abroad. In November, Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned the International Criminal Court by quoting a remark attributed to the Roman general Pompey: "Stop quoting laws to men with swords." Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth then repeated the warning, emphasizing "MEN WITH SWORDS" in capital letters.

So much for the self-image of America as democracy's defender. Here was the language of a warlord: we have the weapons, so spare us the law. Their immediate argument concerned international jurisdiction, not the authority of domestic law. But the image is hard to miss: the man with the sword need not listen. Power itself becomes the answer.

Millions of Americans refused to accept that answer. They filled streets and public squares in the No Kings demonstrations. They stood with neighbors threatened by immigration enforcement. They organized, protested, challenged public officials, and voted.

They were defending more than a collection of policies. They were challenging the claim that wealth or government office gives anyone the right to determine the country's future without answering to those who must live with the consequences.

The election did not create that resistance. It gave it another expression. Voters came to the polls with different grievances and hopes; no election result speaks with one voice. But across many of those different voices, the Blue Wave was also a refusal to normalize corruption, intimidation, and cruelty. It showed that concentrated power cannot guarantee public consent.

That refusal matters, but the election did not settle what comes next. The enormous fortunes and powerful institutions remain intact. So do the beliefs that justify extreme inequality and give the wealthy the right to rule over others. How did a democratic republic founded on liberty and equality reach this point?

To answer that question, we have to return to its promises—and to the people who fought to make them mean something.

Democracy's Promise—and the People Who Fought to Make It Real

In 1776, the American Revolution announced a radical idea: human beings are created equal, governments derive their authority from the people, and liberty is not a privilege granted by kings or masters. These were revolutionary claims. They challenged inherited power and opened the possibility that ordinary people could govern their common lives.

And then came the enormous, ugly contradiction.

The country proclaiming equality enslaved human beings. The republic celebrating liberty denied women full standing as persons and citizens, dispossessed and slaughtered Indigenous peoples, and used law and public force to protect the power of employers over workers. Its leaders proclaimed universal equality while denying it to millions.

The contradiction lived not only in the law but in everyday judgments about whose lives mattered and who was entitled to command. Slaveholders called domination natural. Employers invoked property rights to defend their control of work. Political leaders described the exclusion of women as common sense.

The law enforced these inequalities. Churches, newspapers, political leaders, and everyday customs supplied the justifications. What powerful people wanted could come to be treated as natural, moral, even divinely ordained.

But those founding promises did not belong forever to the men who first proclaimed them. Frederick Douglass

held up a mirror to America, exposing the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaimed liberty while keeping millions enslaved. Abolitionists refused to accept a nation that praised freedom while keeping people in bondage. Workers formed unions because the freedom to accept a job meant little when an employer could dictate every condition of their working lives.

Women demanded the vote. Civil rights organizers confronted segregation. Indigenous peoples fought dispossession and the denial of sovereignty. Again and again, people challenged institutions that had spent generations explaining why their exclusion was reasonable, necessary, or beyond change.

And respectable voices were always ready with advice: "Too radical." "Too disruptive." "Too expensive." "Too dangerous." "Plainly unrealistic." Or, in today's language, "overreaching." There has always been a sophisticated vocabulary for telling people to wait for justice—and for making delay sound like wisdom.

But people did not always wait. They organized, struck, marched, went to jail, and died. They confronted employers, police, courts, and authoritarian masters who claimed the right to dictate the terms of other people's lives.

Their struggles were not only for a vote, a contract, or a new law. They challenged the customs and beliefs that made domination seem proper. People told to "know their place" insisted on being treated as equals.

Those victories changed institutions. They also changed what Americans could recognize as an injustice. Economic interests mattered, but they do not explain everything. The abolitionists' fight against slavery, workers' demands for dignity, and the civil rights movement's struggle for equality all carried their own moral force.

Ideas helped people organize. Organization gave those ideas the power to change society.

Of course, the victories were incomplete. Some were weakened or reversed. And democratic rights never automatically guaranteed humane relations in a workplace, a neighborhood, or a family. We insist on democracy when choosing our political leaders. Why, then, do we accept so little democracy in the workplace, where so much of our lives is controlled by others?

The forces of reaction learned to organize, too. American history had always been a tug-of-war between democratic demands and the powers determined to contain them.

Beginning around 1980, a newly energized right welded together corporate interests, antiunion forces, religious conservatives, political organizations, donors, and expanding media networks. They fought over taxes and regulation, certainly. They also fought to define freedom, decide who deserved help, and restore the authority of people who believed they should not have to answer to anyone beneath them.

The right celebrated a particularly narrow version of individual freedom, along with patriotism, family, and national greatness. But whose freedom? Freedom for workers to organize—or freedom for employers to crush organizing? Freedom from discrimination—or freedom to preserve old hierarchies under new names? Freedom for ordinary people to influence public life—or freedom for great fortunes to wield still greater political power? Calling something "freedom" does not tell us whose freedom it protects.

Property has long carried special weight in American political life. The modern right gave that belief new force, often treating the decisions of owners and investors as more legitimate than the demands of the people who worked for them. In this view, the wealthy were not merely successful. Their success qualified them to tell the rest of us how society should be run.

Consider organized labor. In 1983, 20.1 percent of American wage and salary workers belonged to unions. By 2025, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that share had fallen to 10.0 percent. This was not simply a loss in membership. It weakened one of the chief ways working people could challenge corporate decisions—and act collectively in politics.

As unions lost strength, working people lost power. The economy kept producing more wealth, but workers had less ability to demand their share of it. Unions weren't the only defense against growing inequality, but they were among the strongest. And as they weakened, corporations and the wealthy gained even greater power to decide who got the rewards—and who was expected to settle for less.

A country dominated by concentrated wealth and political power can hold elections while leaving much of economic life beyond democratic control. It can praise the dignity of work while weakening the institutions that give workers a voice. It can proclaim equality before the law while allowing a few fortunes

outsized influence over Congress, the media, and communities across the country.

No secret room or master conspiracy is required. When wealthy interests possess disproportionate power in business, politics, and communications, their overlapping interests can push society in the same direction.

Trump inherited these contradictions. His movement joined the long campaign against workers' collective power to an open appetite for punishment, exclusion, and authoritarian rule. But economics alone cannot explain its appeal.

Racial prejudice, religious identities, political loyalties, and the pleasure of watching an enemy humiliated have histories of their own. Trump and his billionaire allies did not invent them. But the political right learned to use these forces to rally support for policies that strengthened the powerful.

American history offers another tradition. From abolitionists and union organizers to women's movements, the civil rights movement, and LGBTQ rights movements, people have challenged both the power of institutions and the beliefs that excuse their abuses.

They have insisted that freedom is not the privilege of an owner, a master, or a ruling class. It belongs to people whose lives are affected by the decisions being made.

That tradition lives on in Minnesota and in communities across the country resisting ICE, as well as in the nationwide No Kings demonstrations. In each, ordinary people are standing together against intimidation and the abuse of power.

Who Gets to Decide What We Deserve?

Who decided that the enormous wealth produced by American workers should give those workers so little say over the conditions of their own lives? And who decided that the people who control that wealth should determine how much everyone else is entitled to demand?

Look at what has happened to the rewards of economic growth. According to the Economic Policy Institute, from the end of 1979 to the third quarter of 2026, American productivity rose by nearly 96 percent. Inflation-adjusted hourly compensation for typical workers rose by only about 33 percent.

Workers became far more productive, but their compensation did not keep pace. That gap reflects decisions about wages, labor law, corporate power, and public policy. It was not an unavoidable law of nature. The economy did not simply forget to reward its workers; the institutions governing its rewards changed.

This was never a struggle among equals. Corporations and investors had money, lawyers, lobbyists, and an increasing say in the rules. Working people had fewer strong unions and less collective power. Those differences helped determine who received the gains. Then the people who benefited most began lecturing everyone else about what the country could afford.

Higher wages? *Too expensive!* Universal health care? *Be realistic!* Stronger labor protections? *Regulations hold back growth!* Greater economic security for working families? *We can't afford it!*

A handful of individuals can accumulate fortunes beyond imagination, and we're told that's simply how a successful economy works. But suggest that working people deserve greater control over their jobs or a fairer share of the wealth they produce? Well, that's impossible!

Which brings us to one of the most useful words in the vocabulary of the powerful: realistic. What a wonderful little word. It sounds mature. Sensible. Responsible. It's what serious people say when explaining why somebody else is asking for too much.

Apparently, it's perfectly realistic for billionaires to wield enormous influence over government. But guaranteed medical care? Greater democracy at work? Now you're talking crazy!

The wealthy have acquired enormous power to define what's possible for everyone else. Their assumptions are too often treated as common sense. But how did we come to accept these ideas in the first place?

Families, schools, churches, workplaces, political parties, and mass media all shape what people think they deserve. They carry different traditions, often at odds with one another.

Wealth gives some interests a much louder voice, particularly through the expanding commercial reach and concentrated ownership of mass media. Apparently, making a fortune proves you're smarter than everyone else. And if you're poor? Well, that's your own damn fault.

The selling of this worldview is itself big business. 'Fake it till you make it' has become a respectable piece of advice. Lie about your accomplishments, make a fortune, and suddenly you're a visionary.

Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos offered a good example of this. Sweeping claims about blood testing brought investment and prestige before the technology had been shown to work as promised. The scandal exposed more than one person's dishonesty. It showed how easily the appearance of success can be mistaken for proof of competence—or even virtue.

When a society treats wealth as proof of virtue, the wealthy gain more than money. They gain authority. And they can use that authority to promote the very values that justify their power.

Politics offers a harsher version of this argument. In a January 2026 television interview about American power overseas, White House adviser Stephen Miller, subsequently described as chief of staff, depicted the world as "governed by strength, ... force, ... power," calling these the "iron laws of the world." He was speaking about international affairs.

Listen to what is being offered as wisdom: the powerful set the terms because they have the power. No further justification is needed. That is the ideology of domination stated plainly.

Miller did not invent that view. For generations, those with wealth and power have demanded obedience, defended their privileges, and treated anyone who challenged their authority as an enemy. What is striking today is how openly powerful people celebrate it—and how easily they can broadcast it.

But a powerful official saying these things does not mean most Americans agree. The demonstrations and the Blue Wave tell another story. People can reject the values they are being asked to accept.

Nor does this problem belong to one party alone. Some Democrats, influential liberals, and respectable commentators have spent years telling working people to reduce their demands to what existing institutions will tolerate. Don't upset the donors. Don't look anti-business. Don't ask for too much. Too often, political "realism" means accepting someone else's limits before the argument even begins.

The deeper offense is not simply the unequal distribution of wealth. It is the claim that wealth gives its owners the right to decide the limits of other people's lives. Accept that claim, and wealth begins to look like wisdom. Domination looks like leadership. Compassion looks weak.

We teach children that liberty and equality belong to everyone, then expect them to admire a world that treats some people's hopes as unreasonable and others' privileges as sacred.

What exactly are we teaching them? That some people are born to command while others must endure? That winning makes deception acceptable? That another person's suffering does not matter if somebody powerful profits?

These are questions about institutions. They are also questions about what it means to be a good person—and what kind of people our society encourages us to become.

American history should have taught us something about the word "realistic." Frederick Douglass did not ask slaveholders to set the limits of freedom. Workers did not win the right to organize by accepting employers' judgments about what was reasonable. Civil rights organizers did not let segregationists decide how much equality could be tolerated. They challenged institutions and the ideas that made those institutions seem legitimate.

The people who control enormous wealth do not own the future. Holding political office gives no one the right to set the limits of democracy. The question is not whether every democratic aspiration can be fulfilled tomorrow. It is why those who benefit most from today's arrangements should decide which aspirations deserve to be taken seriously.

At that point, we are no longer arguing simply about wages, economic growth, or the results of one election. We are arguing about what it means to be human.

After the Blue Wave: What Kind of Society Will We Build?

The Blue Wave was a victory. But a victory over what—and for what? Millions of Americans refused to accept a politics of corruption, intimidation, and cruelty. Their resistance showed that even enormous wealth and official power cannot command the submission of an entire people. That is worth celebrating.

But the election did not redistribute the wealth. It did not dismantle the right-wing political organizations, corporate interests, or media networks that helped build the authoritarian movement. It did not erase the belief

that money makes some people more important than others, or that force and humiliation are signs of strength.

Those ideas have deep roots, and they won't disappear simply because their champions lost at the polls.

A demonstration can fill the streets. An election can remove officials. Both matter. Neither, by itself, builds lasting democratic power. The forces of reaction know this. They spent decades building institutions, cultivating loyalties, financing media, and preparing to govern.

Democratic movements need organizations capable of doing more than responding to the next emergency. We need stronger unions, organizations rooted in workplaces and communities, and lasting alliances among labor, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, and other democratic movements.

We need the ability to act together rather than fight our battles separately. People need power where they work, where they live, and where public decisions are made. Otherwise, an electoral victory leaves much of daily life under someone else's control.

But organization is not just a better machine for winning elections. We have to know what we are organizing for. Do we want a less offensive version of the same economic order? A more polite government that leaves powerful interests free to decide how much security working people deserve?

Or do we intend to change the institutions that put so much authority in so few hands?

And the challenge goes beyond institutions. A society can hold elections, treat them as proof of democracy, and still tolerate humiliation, racial hierarchy, contempt for the poor, or the abuse of people far from its borders. More democratic procedures do not automatically create decent human relationships. Neither does a fairer distribution of income.

We should be asking why our society rewards greed and ruthlessness—and why we've come to admire the people who practice them. We have to fight over the values that shape those relationships, just as earlier generations fought over the rights written into law.

There's another part of the American ideal worth defending: when faced with a problem, we investigate it, confront the evidence, and try to solve it. That's the spirit of science, too: finding out what's actually happening, even when we don't like the answers. But authoritarians would rather deny the evidence than admit there's a problem. Give them power, and that denial becomes government policy.

That is why "What does it mean to be a good person?" belongs in a political essay. It does not replace the struggle for wages, health care, or democratic control. It asks what those struggles are for.

What obligations do we have to a neighbor who is threatened? To a fellow worker we will never meet? To people abroad who face the consequences of decisions made in our name? A politics that treats such questions as sentimental has already surrendered too much.

And this struggle is hardly confined to the United States. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte defended a brutal campaign of killings in the name of law and order. In Argentina, Javier Milei has slashed funding for public services while celebrating the shrinking of government.

Around the world, powerful leaders invoke freedom, security, and national greatness while demanding that ordinary people bear the consequences of their decisions.

Consider the contradiction in America's own conduct. Beginning in 2003, the United States helped lead an international campaign against AIDS that saved millions of lives. Yet in 2025, as the Trump administration dismantled much of American foreign assistance, Bill Gates condemned Elon Musk's role in those decisions: "The picture of the world's richest man killing the world's poorest children is not a pretty one."

What does it say about our country when the power that once helped save millions of lives can also be used to abandon some of the world's most vulnerable people? Is this the America we want to be?

Democracy worthy of the name requires respect for human dignity—not just institutions that count votes. That commitment must shape both how people organize and what they demand.

Courage without cruelty, strength without the bullying, pride in a common life without racism or sexism: these should not be impossible ideals. A society that can applaud the bully can learn again to honor the people who stand against him.

These are not separate battles. The increasingly rapacious form of capitalism that concentrates wealth and strips working people of power has found willing partners in a right-wing politics of intimidation and

hierarchy. Its defenders call the privileges of the rich freedom, dress up obedience as patriotism, and teach people to mistake cruelty for strength.

What is under attack is not merely a set of programs or political rights, but the democratic claim that ordinary people are entitled to govern their own lives—and to treat one another as human beings.

For more than two centuries, Americans have struggled to give meaning to the promises of liberty, equality, and democratic government. Every major advance required ordinary people to confront powerful institutions that called the existing order natural, necessary, or impossible to change.

Those victories required more than protest. People refused to accept the limits imposed by the powerful—and organized to break those limits.

That remains our task, and it places a clear charge on progressives and the democratic left: *confront the assault as a whole.* Challenge the wealth that buys political power, the institutions that shelter it, and the ideology that persuades people to accept domination as the natural order of things.

We cannot win by waiting for the next election or hoping authoritarian movements collapse on their own. We need collective strength, durable democratic organizations, and the imagination to demand a society that puts human freedom ahead of the prerogatives of the powerful.

What kind of human beings do we intend to be? What obligations do we have to one another? And what kind of society would reflect those commitments?

These are not questions for a separate moral conversation after politics is finished. They belong at the center of political struggle.

The Blue Wave opened the door. It did not tell us what to build on the other side. Our future does not belong to those who rule through fear and cruelty. Nor does it belong to those who think they can decide how much democracy working people deserve.

It belongs to all of us who are prepared to struggle for a society worthy of our humanity—and of the highest ideals Americans have too often proclaimed but not yet fulfilled.

Please share this essay with organizations, colleagues, and others who may find it useful.

We welcome your thoughts: defend4demo@cbpr.org