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Steve Bannon, Trump Whisperer, Offers New Theory of Governing: Employ Committees of Congress To Prosecute Democrats

By Hamilton Fish

THE HOLIDAY SEASON THIS YEAR BROUGHT COMpeting versions of reality into focus. Hallmark-lite invocations of Peace and Joy stubbornly proliferated. Bezos and Co. will likely establish new milestones for online shopping. Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You" (which she first released in 1994) was the number one song in the world this week. And over at Instagram, scrolling addicts in the millions replayed Tom and Zendaya's every adorable interaction.

Photo by Mike Licht

With omicron tearing across the country, airlines shutting down, and intensive care units filling up disproportionately with the unvaccinated, Republicans continued to complain that Democratic efforts to protect public health and safety are an attack on personal freedom and a veiled attempt to further the interests of big government. Senator Joe Manchin went on Fox News to stymie the Biden agenda and oppose the extension of the child tax credit, making a strong case for excluding millionaires from public office and perhaps himself from the Democratic Party. Across the aisle, North Dakota's conservative Senator Kevin Cramer went on Fox News to argue that Manchin had in fact saved the Democratic Party, estimating that Manchin had protected three to four senators by his actions. The pope gave his annual Christmas message to a socially distanced audience, calling for more dialogue.

You could argue that all this amounts to normal media fare, at least by present-day standards. But there does seem to be a significant shift in the media's fairly recent and heated coverage of the fragility of democracy. *Newsweek* trumpeted that the idea that people would take up arms against an American election "is no longer farfetched." *CNN* reported the findings of a CIA researcher that the United States is "close to a civil war." *Foreign Affairs* argued, again, that the rise of authoritarian states and reactionary populists is the real threat to democracy.

In a widely touted article for *The Atlantic*, Barton Gellman cited the electoral rules changes recently put in place by state Republicans who "have been building an apparatus of election theft." The *Atlantic* piece built on Jonathan Winer's reporting in this publication on the Republicans' use of the State Legislative Doctrine to justify consolidating control over the outcome of elections (see "Roadmap for a Constitutional Coup," October 2021).

Gellman explores why seemingly rational people have adopted such unshakeable adherence to the false narrative of the stolen election and the illegitimacy of the current administration. (As with so many aspects of the Trump era, one feels here the sharp pang of recognition with conditions in wartime Germany, when ordinary people—neighbors and childhood friends—fell in thrall with authoritarianism and committed atrocities.)

There are many factors that explain the passion of Trump's admirers and the alternate realities they inhabit. Gellman demonstrates more clearly than ever how right-wing, fringe, and extremist groups have successfully deployed the internet and its vast realms of conspiracy-mongering and unvetted content to bypass traditional news media and shape the hardened views of their followers.

Arguably the most influential and surely the most resilient of the internet extremists is Stephen Kevin Bannon, whose astonishing biography includes a seven-year stint in the Navy (including several years as special assistant to the chief of naval

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operations at the Pentagon), Georgetown (where he received a master's in national security studies), Harvard Business School, Goldman Sachs, Hollywood film producer, co-founder of Breitbart News, CEO of Trump's 2016 campaign, and chief strategist to POTUS. Bannon was arrested and charged with conspiracy to commit mail fraud and money laundering in connection with the We Build the Wall campaign, but Trump pardoned him before his trial. Bannon's Twitter account was suspended after he recommended that Anthony Fauci be beheaded, and he was indicted by a federal grand jury on two criminal contempt charges after he defied a subpoena from the House select committee investigating the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6.

Bannon's ties to white supremacist groups in the United States and far-right Catholic extremists in Europe and Latin America may make him seem easy to dismiss, but given his strong ties to Trump, the extremist drift of the Republican Party, and the uncertainties surrounding the upcoming elections, he remains a dominant figure in domestic politics.

"If you want to control the administrative state and the apparatus, you have to engage in combat with it, right?"

These days, Bannon is trading cryptocurrency and presiding over two to three tapings a day of *The War Room*, his political talk show and top-ranked podcast, which are translated into Chinese and Japanese and carried over a mishmash of cable and streaming services since his banishment from Twitter. I listened in on Episode 1,472, recorded this past December 9, when his guest was Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz, the self-styled firebrand from the Florida panhandle.

Several themes with a direct bearing on the near-term future of democracy emerged from their exchange, but the starting point was clear. Much as these two felt the need to genuflect to the memory of Bob Dole, the Republican Party of Dole's era—a "party that won elections and lost the country"—is dead.

Not content with burying Dole, Bannon gratuitously goes after David Brooks, whom he pictures "with the wire-rimmed glasses, crying about the end of conservatism and the end of Edmund Burke and all that." Bannon speaks in rapid bursts, stepping on his sentences, spitting out words and phrases in a way that is sometimes hard to hear or unintelligible. Still, everything he says is carefully chosen and stems from or works toward a point in his framing.

Early in their conversation, Bannon introduces his ground strategy, in language that is sprinkled with the military metaphors he uses interchangeably when talking politics—the "little platoons" that go to the school board meetings, or "the little platoons that are becoming precinct committee men."

"This is the rise of the American *laobaixing*." Bannon embellishes his commentary with esoteric terms that send you racing to Google; this last reference is a Chinese word meaning "everyday, regular people."

Then he lays it out, putting chilling words in Gaetz's mouth that reflect Bannon's overall analysis and, at the same time, signal the teacher-and-pupil hierarchy in the relationship. "If you want to control the administrative state and the apparatus, you have to engage in combat with it, right?" (There are echoes here of Trump's public comments, in which, presumably with Bannon's encouragement, he frequently employed the language and imagery of warfare.) Bannon turns to Gaetz, "Walk through what you're trying to accomplish."

Gaetz is up, and quickly runs through a litany of ineffectual attacks on Democrats, their "addled" president, and legislative leaders "that would have a hard time winning elections for block captains." He singles out Hakeem Jeffries as the most talented Democrat, and Bannon oddly interjects that Jeffries is the next Speaker after Nancy Pelosi.

Gaetz spends a few more minutes scrambling for Bannon's approval, while reinforcing the impression that he is self-absorbed and delusional. "Democrats have to threat-construct around a series of political villains. And I'm willing to shoulder that burden," he continues. "If Republicans need to know how to be led. . . . I'll show them how to do it, so will Marjorie Taylor Greene." Yikes.

Then Gaetz hits his stride. "We will staff our committees with Republican leads who are not just there to engage in this theater of legislating with bills that will just be vetoed." Bannon concurs: "Hey, I was in front of these guys. It's all theater up there. It's performative."

Gaetz again.

> There is an investigation that is teed up, at least one for every single committee. I don't want a head of the Education and Labor Committee who wants to go and do an interesting little education bill, another version of No Child Left Behind. I want somebody who's going to expose the Chinese Communist Party ties to the Biden Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In Ways and Means,

> I don't want someone who's going to go carry water for the lobby core on K Street for another little carve-out or exemption. I want somebody who's going to go after an IRS that is targeting our people. In the Armed Services Committee, I don't want someone who's just primarily focused on getting a bill passed. I want to expose the way that they have targeted our military service members who don't share the woketopian view of the world.

To get a better feel for Matt Gaetz and his approach to his job in Congress, it is worth watching an episode of C-Span's coverage of the House Judiciary Committee. He stands apart from his colleagues and disrupts the hearings to the maximum extent allowed by the rules of the committee. He reads from prepared texts on topics unrelated to the hearing underway. Chairman Nadler is unfailingly courteous in the face of these outbursts; he indulges Gaetz's requests for rulings on minor parliamentary matters, he calms the frustrated members on both sides who are eager to proceed and embarrassed by Gaetz's theatrics. These are the finely tuned leadership qualities the junior congressman from Florida apparently wishes to transfer to his Republican colleagues.

[Peter Navarro:] "Spoiler alert: Fauci lied. Americans died. Pence betrayed Trump. China spawned the virus. CNN has blood on its hands. And I'm just getting started."

Returning to the podcast, Bannon takes back control of the discussion. "I want MSNBC to understand this." He adds, "What we're trying to explain to folks is that you have something that's impervious to elections, and that's this massive administrative state. And for all the limited-government conservatives, you won a ton of elections and you never got serious."

"I think this is brilliant, and it's never been done before. This is what Matt Gaetz says: Every committee's an oversight committee." Bannon finishes with a flourish: "All the apparatchiks are going to be in the dock."

Although Bannon refers frequently to MSNBC, it feels like he is using the term to cast a wider net, a catchall that includes his adversaries not just at the liberal cable news network and Microsoft but also Twitter and Google, and the banks, and the universities—in fact all of what for these purposes and in his mind would be considered liberal capital.

Gaetz follows with another salvo, this time aimed at "the people who are imposing the vaccine mandates, who are enriching themselves and who are selling out the country." (Can he mean the Frontline Doctors, the right-wing group of ersatz medical professionals that promotes and profits from fake cures for Covid-19? Probably not.)

Bannon then goes for the jugular. "This is a theory of governing, right? And it's fresh and new. This is Trumpism in power . . . the 4,000 shock troops we have to have that are going to man the government, and get them ready now, right? We're going to hit the beach. You have landing teams and beachhead teams. [Who is he talking to?] No more Trey Gowdys [the former Republican congressman from South Carolina], no more powder-puff derby. This is going to be hard-core accountability at every committee."

The twin forces that shaped Bannon's formative years were Catholicism and the military. He grew up in an Irish Catholic household and attended an all-male Catholic military school in Richmond, Virginia. What additional influences led him to embrace white nationalism and develop a taste for the language, imagery and tactics of the National Socialist German Worker's Party is grist for a more ambitious biography.

Gaetz again: "And we're going to start at the Department of Justice and the FBI. That's the job I want. Send me over to the Judiciary Committee, and their sphincters will tighten because they've been doing a lot of corrupt things over there. The FBI and Department of Justice have become the enforcement wing of the Democratic Party."

And Bannon adds: "They understand it. MSNBC understands that we're coming for them, or that we're going to come for this."

Bannon—and Gaetz, too, though to a lesser extent—is saying here that the goal is not modest reform of the intelligence agencies but a wholesale revamping of the intelligence apparatus that is the Deep State. In their conversation, Bannon calls for a Church Committee–style investigation of the intelligence community, which Gaetz unguardedly dismisses, perhaps because he's too young to recognize the implication.

Bannon then synthesizes the ground strategy with the new theory of governance. "I want everybody to understand that when you're out there at a school board meeting, when you're running for a county clerk, county commissioner on the elections, when you're trying to volunteer, or you're volunteering to be an election official or a poll watcher, or if you signed up to be a precinct committee member, we need you to do that. This is how it all ties together, OK? It ties together in a theory of governance that we are going to take on."

Before the last segment with Gaetz begins, there's a paid announcement that is worth citing, an ad for *In Trump Time*, by Peter Navarro who served in the Trump White House as assistant to the president.

> [Prerecorded voice-over, Peter Navarro] *In Trump Time* is the definitive insider's account of the Trump White House. Spoiler alert: Fauci lied. Americans died. Pence betrayed Trump. China spawned the virus. CNN has blood on its hands. And I'm just getting started. *In Trump Time*, my White House journal of America's plague year. Buy In Trump Time today on Amazon, and find out what really happened on November 3, January 6, and in a Wuhan bioweapons lab.

That ad is followed by one that Bannon reads on the air, on behalf of MyPillow.com and its founder and CEO Mike Lindell, a right-wing activist and ardent Trump supporter. Bannon even manages to get off a homophobic shot at Pete Buttigieg during the ad. He's talking about delivering the pillows in time for Christmas and says, "And here's the beauty of it, Pete Buttigieg does not have to come off parental leave to make sure that your gifts, that Santa's gifts, arrive."

Bannon opens the last segment with a roundup of his grievances:

> They [the liberal establishment] also control high culture, pop culture, low culture, Hollywood, the media, the universities, culture, the internet, cultures, the oligarchs in Silicon Valley, the world corporations, all of Wall Street. You know, it's . . . the billionaire donor class now supports it. So they control everything.
>
> Who are we? It's the American *laobaixing*, old hundred names [another Chinese term, also meaning "everyday people"], right? And now, but they're taking over school boards, they're taking over the election officials, they're taking over the Republican Party, and you got Matt Gaetz and a handful of cadre members out throughout the country saying, we're actually going to have another theory of governance.
>
> They're depressed, and Joy Ann Reid [the on-air program host at MSNBC] says, last night, "We don't have any sense of urgency." Matt Gaetz is going to have a Star Chamber.

I.F. Stone memorably observed that you can get all the information you need to cover the seat of government simply by going to the hearings on the Hill or reading the Congressional Record. In just this one short podcast featuring the brilliant tactician and key political adviser to the Trump administration in exile, and a half-cocked but easily underestimated right-wing agitator from the Florida panhandle, you can find large swaths of the pathology and strategy of the extreme right in American politics.

It's reactionary populism mixed with the politics of retribution: The stance is aggrieved, anti-establishment, and resentful of elites; the program is to purge the Republican Party, take over the mechanisms of democracy—from school boards to the oversight of elections—and convert the congressional committees into Star Chambers to prosecute political and cultural adversaries.

As detached from reality as the content of this program may seem, it is not some sideshow at the margins of American politics. These men and their ideas are driving a movement that is currently favored in the polls and poised to assume the reins of the Republic. ■

Hamilton Fish is the editor of The Washington Spectator.

Time to Terminate the Debt Ceiling

By Steven Pressman

The United States has once again dodged a bullet—the possibility of a government default on its debt.

Like people and business firms, governments must obtain loans when they spend more money than they receive. They borrow by issuing bonds that promise to repay the money at some future date plus interest. Total government debt is the sum of all outstanding government bonds.

The U.S. federal government currently owes $29 trillion, around 125 percent of U.S. gross domestic product, the national income that we have to repay this debt. One-quarter of this debt the government owes to itself. For example, the Social Security Trust Fund has a surplus of nearly $3 trillion, which it invests by purchasing government bonds. The rest of the $29 trillion it owes to private individuals and firms in the United States and abroad and to other governments, both domestic (state and local governments) and foreign.

Large government debt is not necessarily bad; its economic impact depends on the circumstances. During boom times, more debt is likely to cause inflation because it adds government borrowing and spending to all the other spending taking place in the economy. In a depressed economy, with falling tax revenues, the government must spend and borrow more in order to generate jobs and economic growth.

Whether debt is harmful also depends on how borrowed money gets used. An analogy with family finances is helpful here. Households borrowing to buy a home receive an asset that will likely increase in value over time. As long as they can repay their mortgage, the debt is not a problem. Similarly, government investments in education or infrastructure (the heart of President Biden's economic plan) yield long-term gains. Higher future incomes and increased government tax revenues will help repay the debt.

Many fear that enormous debt will bring about reluctance to lend money to the government, which in turn will raise borrowing costs for the federal government and for everyone competing with the government to borrow money. Unfortunately, we don't know where this tipping point might be. Our current level of debt has not created such problems. Nor did the 120 percent debt-to-GDP ratio at the end of World War II. To the contrary, the postwar decades are regarded as the "golden age" of U.S. capitalism because of the rapid economic growth and large gains in household income during these years.

This brings us to the issue of the debt ceiling—a limit on total government debt set by Congress. Unlike government debt, the debt ceiling is a serious problem, even though it was originally designed to solve one.

In the years prior to 1917, Congress would authorize the government to borrow money for a specific time period only. When a loan was repaid, the government could not borrow again unless authorized to do so by Congress. The Second Liberty

Bond Act of 1917 changed this. It allowed a continual rollover of debt without congressional approval. Congress enacted this measure so President Wilson wouldn't have to wait for lawmakers to return to Washington and approve spending for the war effort. Not wanting to sign a blank check, Congress limited borrowing to $11.5 billion and required legislative approval for any borrowing above this amount. The debt ceiling was thus born. Since 1917, the debt ceiling has been raised more than 100 times—with both Republicans and Democrats in the Oval Office.

While the debt ceiling was created to provide the executive branch with flexibility, today it mainly allows Congress to tie the hands of the White House and gives the opposition party an opportunity to score political points. In 2013, Republicans sought to use the debt ceiling to defund the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare). Democrats refused to cave to Republican demands. Yet because the government came so close to defaulting, its credit rating was downgraded. This affected the interest rate the government had to pay when borrowing money. Even slightly higher rates will lead to larger interest obligations and borrowing needs.

What we really need to do is dump the debt ceiling. Virtually every other nation operates without one. America could, too.

Our current debt ceiling is a result of the $2.3 trillion tax cut for corporations and wealthy individuals that President Trump and the Republicans passed in December 2017 (see my article, "*Tax Bill Rewards Wealthy but Fails to Help Economy*," in the February 2018 *Washington Spectator*). This bill also suspended the debt ceiling until July 31, 2021. On that date, U.S. government debt stood at $28.5 trillion, which became the new national borrowing limit. For a nation spending more than it receives in tax revenues (partly to deal with the economic consequences of a global health pandemic), this created a problem where one did not exist—the deficit ceiling had to be raised.

Republicans demanded that the Democrats controlling Congress and the executive branch increase the debt ceiling on their own. And they promised to filibuster any attempt to raise the debt ceiling. Democrats worried about being branded "profligate spenders" for tying the debt ceiling increase to a spending bill that they passed via budget reconciliation—even though the bill would largely pay for itself. After a game of political chicken, in early October, Senate Minority Leader McConnell said that Republicans would not filibuster and would allow the debt ceiling to rise by $480 billion, kicking the can down the road until early December. On December 9, the Senate approved a one-time increase in the debt ceiling without a (Republican) filibuster. At the time this piece was written, it was not clear how much the Democrats will raise the debt ceiling. More than likely, it will be a few trillion dollars, which should kick the debt ceiling problem down the road for a year or two.

What happens next remains unclear. When the new debt ceiling is reached, the federal government once again won't be able to borrow. Only cash on hand and new tax revenues can be used to pay bills. The Treasury can employ some "extraordinary measures" to conserve cash. One such measure delays funding retirement programs for government employees, with the expectation that when the debt ceiling is increased, the government will make good on these retirement contributions. Once existing cash no longer provides sufficient additional revenue, the Treasury must decide who gets paid out of daily tax receipts. Government troops may fail to get paid. Small businesses and college students who require loans may not be able to borrow money from the government. Retirees may not receive Social Security. When the government can't pay all its bills, it is in default.

Most economists, myself included, believe a government default would have catastrophic economic consequences. It would lead to more credit downgrades and higher interest rates as people think twice about lending money to the U.S. government. Markets would likely tank, as they have in the past when we came perilously close to default. An economic recession would likely follow. Preventing all this is essential.

One possible fix exists in the laws regarding government finance. The federal government cannot print paper money at will, but the U.S. Mint can create coins with few limits. Revenues from selling these coins to banks and collectors fund the operating expenses of the Mint (although pennies are a huge loss leader). Any additional revenue gets transferred to the U.S. Treasury and can fund government expenditures. Some have suggested minting a $1 trillion coin and giving it to the Treasury to spend without exceeding the debt limit (since there is no additional borrowing). Treasury Secretary Yellen has called this a "gimmick." Yet even a gimmick is far better than a government default.

What we really need to do is dump the debt ceiling. Virtually every other nation operates without one. America could, too. There is no evidence that the debt ceiling has reduced U.S. government debt. Killing the debt ceiling also has a certain logical appeal. Congress approved the spending and tax laws that require government debt and borrowing. They shouldn't also have to approve additional borrowing. Once should be enough.

The debt ceiling began more than a century ago because Congress couldn't quickly approve needed spending to fight a war. Members of Congress needed days to get to Washington as cross-country travel was mainly by rail. Under these circumstances, a debt ceiling made some sense. Today, when virtual votes are possible and air travel to Washington takes under a day, a debt ceiling is unnecessary. It is also an economic dumpster fire waiting to happen. Raising the ceiling for another year or two doesn't solve this problem. The best solution is for Congress to end this archaic provision. ■

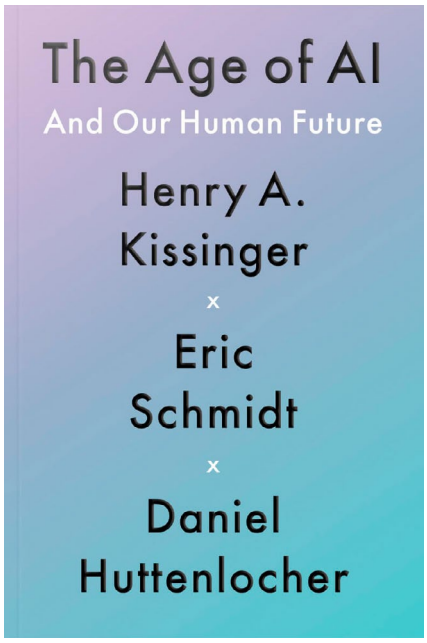
Steven Pressman is professor emeritus of economics and finance at Monmouth University and author of Fifty Major Economists, 3rd edition *(Routledge, 2013).*

The End of Enlightenment

The Age of AI: And Our Human Future
by Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher
New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2021, 272 pp.

By Marc Rotenberg

In 2018 Henry Kissinger published a remarkable essay in *The Atlantic* on artificial intelligence. At a time when most foreign policy experts interested in AI were laser-focused on the rise of China, Kissinger pointed to a different challenge. In "How The Enlightenment Ends" Kissinger warned that the Age of Reason may come crashing down as machines displace people with decisions we cannot comprehend and outcomes we cannot control. "We must expect AI to make mistakes faster—and of greater magnitude—than humans do," he wrote.



This sentiment is nowhere to be found in *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future,* coauthored by Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher. If Kissinger's entry into the AI world appeared surprising, Schmidt and Huttenlocher's should not be. Schmidt, the former head of Google, has just wrapped up a two-year stint as chair of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence. Huttenlocher is the inaugural dean of the College of Computing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The stories they tell in *The Age of AI* are familiar. AlphaZero defeated the reigning chess program in 2017 by teaching itself the game rather than incorporating the knowledge of grandmasters. Understanding the 3D structure of proteins, an enormously complex problem, was tackled by AI-driven protein folding which uncovered new molecular qualities that humans had not previously recognized. GPT-3produces text that is surprisingly humanlike. We are somewhere beyond the Turing test, the challenge to mimic human behaviour, and into a realm where machines produce results we do not fully understand and cannot replicate or prove. But the results are impressive.

Once past the recent successes of AI, a deep current of technological determinism underlies the authors' views of the AI future and our place in that world. They state that the advance of AI is inevitable and warn that those who might oppose its development "merely cede the future to the element of humanity courageous enough to face the implications of its own inventiveness." Given the choice, most readers will opt for Team Courage. And if there are any doubters, the authors warn there could be consequences. If the AI is better than a human at a given task, "failing to apply that AI … may appear increasingly as perverse or even negligent." Early in the book, the authors suggest that military commanders might defer to the AI to sacrifice some number of citizens if a larger number can be saved, although later on they propose a more reasoned approach to strategic defense. Elsewhere, readers are instructed that "as AI can predict what is relevant to our lives," the role of human reason will change—a dangerous invitation to disarm the human intellect.

The authors' technological determinism operates on several levels. The AI that will dominate our world is of a particular form. "Since machine learning will drive AI for the foreseeable future, humans will remain unaware of what it is learning and how it knows what it has learned." In an earlier AI world, systems could be tested and tweaked based on outcomes and human insight. If a chess program sacrificed pieces too freely, a few coefficients were adjusted, and the results could then be assessed. That process, by the way, is the essence of the scientific method: a constant testing of hypotheses based on the careful examination of data.

As the current AI world faces increasingly opaque systems, a debate rages over transparency and accountability—how to validate AI outputs when they cannot be replicated. The authors sidestep this important debate and propose licensing to validate proficiency, but a smart AI can evade compliance. Consider the well-known instances of systems designed to skirt regulation: Volkswagen hacked emissions testing by ensuring compliance while in testing mode but otherwise ignoring regulatory obligations, and Uber pulled a similar tactic with its Greyball tool, which used data collected from its app to circumvent authorities. Imagine the ability of a sophisticated AI system with access to extensive training data on enforcement actions concerning health, consumer safety, or environmental protection.

Determinism is also a handy technique to assume an outcome that could otherwise be contested. The authors write that with "the rise of AI, the definition of the human role, human aspiration, and human fulfillment will change." In *The Age of AI,* the authors argue that people should simply accept, without explanation, an AI's determination of the denial of credit, the loss of a job interview, or the determination that research is not worth pursuing. Parents who "want to push their children to succeed" are admonished not to limit access to AI. Elsewhere, those who reject AI are likened to the Amish and the Mennonites. But even they will be caught in The Matrix as AI's reach "may prove all but inescapable." You will be assimilated.

The pro-AI bias is also reflected in the authors' *tour de table* of Western philosophy. Making much of the German Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant's description of the imprecision of human knowledge (from the *Critique of Pure Reason*), the authors suggest that the philosopher's insight can prepare us for an era when AI has knowledge of a reality beyond our perception.

Kant certainly recognized the limitations of human knowledge,

but in his "What is Enlightenment?" essay he also argued for the centrality of human reason. "*Dare to know! (Sapere aude.)* 'Have the courage to use your own understanding' is therefore the motto of the enlightenment," he explained. Kant was particularly concerned about deferring to "guardians who imposed their judgment on others." Reason, in all matters, is the basis of human freedom. It is difficult to imagine, as the authors of *The Age of AI* contend, that one of the most influential figures from the Age of Enlightenment would welcome a world dominated by opaque and unaccountable machines.

On this philosophical journey, we also confront a central teleological question: Should we adapt to AI or should AI adapt to us? On this point, the authors appear to side with the machines, "it is incumbent on societies across the globe to understand these changes so they reconcile them with their values, structures, and social contracts." In fact, many governments have chosen a very different course, seeking to ensure that AI is aligned with human values, described in many national strategic plans as "trustworthy" and "human-centric" AI. As more countries around the world have engaged on this question, the expectation that AI aligns with human values has only increased.

A related question is whether the Age of AI, as presented by the authors, is a step forward beyond the Age of Reason or a step backward to an Age of Faith. Increasingly, we are asked by the AI priesthood to accept without questioning the Delphic predictions that their devices produce. Those who challenge these outcomes, a form of skepticism traditionally associated with innovation and progress, could now be considered heretics. This alignment of technology with the power of a reigning elite stands in sharp contrast to previous innovations, such as Galileo's telescope, that challenged an existing order and carried forward human knowledge.

There is also an apologia that runs through much of the book, a purposeful decision to elide the hard problems that AI poses. Among the most widely discussed AI problems today is the replication of bias, the encoding of past discrimination in hiring, housing, medical care, and criminal sentencing. To the credit of many AI ethicists and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, considerable work is now underway to understand and correct this problem. Maybe the solution requires better data sets. Maybe it requires a closer examination of decision-making and the decisionmakers. Maybe it requires limiting the use of AI. Maybe it cannot be solved until larger social problems are addressed.

But for the authors, this central problem is not such a big deal. "Of course," they write, "the problem of bias in technology is not limited to AI," before going on to explain that the pulse oximeter overestimates oxygen saturation in dark-skinned individuals. If that example is too narrow, the authors encourage us to recognize that "bias besets all aspects of society."

The authors also ignore a growing problem with internet search when they write that search is optimized to benefit the interests of the end-user. That description doesn't fit the current business model that prioritizes advertising revenue, a company's related products and services, and keeping the user on the website (or affiliated websites) for as long as possible. Traditional methods for organizing access to information, such as the Library of Congress Classification system, are transparent. The organizing system is known to the person providing information and the person seeking information. Knowledge is symmetric. AI-enabled search does not replicate that experience.

The book is not without warnings. On the issue of democratic deliberation, the authors warn that artificial intelligence will amplify disinformation and wisely admonish that AI speech should not be protected as part of democratic discourse. On this point, though, a more useful legal rule would impose transparency obligations to enable independent assessment. Distinguishing bots from human speakers on social media would be a good start.

Should we adapt to AI or should AI adapt to us? On this point, the authors appear to side with the machines, "it is incumbent on societies across the globe to understand these changes so they reconcile them with their values, structures, and social contracts."

Toward the end of their journey through the Age of AI, the authors allow that some restrictions on AI may be necessary. They acknowledge the effort of the European Union to develop comprehensive legislation for AI, although Schmidt had previously slammed the EU's initiative—most notably for the effort to make AI transparent and accountable.

Much has happened in the AI policy world in the three years since Kissinger warned that human society is unprepared for the rise of artificial intelligence. International organizations have moved to establish new legal norms for the governance of AI. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, made up of leading democratic nations, set out the OECD Principles on Artificial Intelligence in 2019. The G20 countries, which include Russia and China, backed similar guidelines in 2019. Earlier in 2021, the top human rights official at the United Nations, Michelle Bachelet, called for a prohibition on AI techniques that fail to comply with international human rights law. The UNESCO agency in November 2021 endorsed a comprehensive Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence that may actually limit the ability of China to go forward with its AI-enabled social credit system for evaluating—and disciplining—citizens based on their behavior.

The more governments have studied the benefits as well as the risks of AI, the more they have supported these policy initiatives. That shouldn't be surprising. One can be impressed by a world-class chess program and acknowledge advances in medical science, and still see that autonomous vehicles, opaque evaluations of employees and students, and the enormous energy requirements of datasets with trillions of elements will pose new challenges for society.

The United States has stood mostly on the sidelines as other nations define rules for the Age of AI. But "democratic values" has appeared repeatedly in the US formulation of AI policy as the

Biden administration attempts to connect with European allies, and sharpen the contrast between AI policies that promote pluralism and open societies and those which concentrate the power of authoritarian governments. That is an important contribution for a leading democratic nation.

Kissinger seemed well aware of the threat AI posed to democratic institutions. Information overwhelms wisdom. Political leaders are deprived of opportunity to think or reflect on context. AI itself is unstable, he wrote, as "uncertainty and ambiguity are inherent in its results." He outlined three areas of particular concern: AI may achieve unintended results; AI may alter human reasoning ("Do we want children to learn values through untethered algorithms?"); and AI may achieve results that cannot be explained ("Will AI's decision making surpass the explanatory powers of human language and reason?"). Throughout human history, civilizations have created ways to explain the world around them, if not through reason, then through religion, ideology, or history. How do we exist in a world we are told we can never comprehend?

Kissinger observed that other countries have made it a priority to assess the human implications of AI and urged the establishment of a national commission in the United States to investigate these topics. His essay ended with another warning: "If we do not start this effort soon, before long we shall discover we started too late." That work is still to be done. ■

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