

AS PREPARED

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Delivered at

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Wednesday, September 30, 2026

I. INTRODUCTION + TRUMP'S ACTIONS

Thank you, Avril, and congratulations on taking the reins here at Carnegie. I'm so glad to see you in this role.

I want to thank the Carnegie Endowment and everyone here today.

Almost a year ago, I gave a speech at Brookings where I popped a flare on the very real threats to our democracy here in America.

At that time, I talked about the legally questionable strikes in the Caribbean, President Trump's deployment of ICE and National Guard troops in American cities, and the increasingly authoritarian tactics he was using to hold on to power.

I said all of these actions were part of a very well-worn authoritarian playbook, similar to those used by leaders in other countries for centuries.

That playbook is simple: First: Get into power on an issue of common concern. Second, once you win: accumulate power; enrich yourself, your family, and your closest allies; and go after anyone who disagrees with you. Then, Step 3, use the levers of government to hold onto that power – by any means necessary.

Now, a year later, I think we can say that the playbook here at home is significantly worse. We've seen ICE kill unarmed citizens in our streets, sparking cultural backlash. We have a new Middle East war in Iran with no clear end in sight. We hear news stories of corruption every day, each more absurd than the last.

And we've seen the president weaponize the U.S. government against at least 20 of his perceived adversaries, myself included.

A month after my speech last year, the President called for me to be investigated, arrested, and hanged on charges of sedition after I made a 90-

second video. In February of 2026, he took me to the grand jury in an attempt to criminally indict me.

So I feel I've earned some street cred on the authoritarian playbook that President Trump and his team are employing.

But what this last year has clarified for me is that, as leaders, we have a responsibility not to just 'admire the problem', as we say at the Pentagon.

The American people are looking for a path through the dark tunnel and into the light.

So here's my best stab.

II. TWO VISIONS OF AMERICA

Right now, what is underlying the polarization in our country are two fundamentally different visions of America.

President Trump thinks America is unremarkable, mediocre, and in decline. He believes we are not exceptional in our role in the world, and we never were – same as China or Russia. And now, with AI, we are headed for inevitable destruction. His vision for our country, in this term, is quite literally the

opposite of Make America Great Again. Instead, he believes America is never again going to be great. Only someone with these beliefs can so fundamentally destroy our laws, our norms, and our spirit.

And because he believes we are broken beyond repair, he's just gonna get his. He's gotta cash out and get his cut for himself, his family, and his loyalists. He thinks America is the Titanic and he's charging the passengers for a seat on a lifeboat. And if you can't pay up, it's no problem for him. He believes in an America where the greedy get ahead, and the selfless are suckers.

That is not my vision of America. The America I know is filled with big-hearted people, who care about their neighbors and their community, and certainly the future for their kids. A society, stitched together by shared values of fairness and boundless optimism. America is a place where we do big things, and a shared set of laws allows anyone from anywhere to succeed. Because America is not the Titanic. With hard work, we can turn this place around.

The good news is that, deep in my bones, I know that there are more of us than them. It's why I know that we will get through this moment.

Because just as there's a playbook for authoritarian leaders to hold onto power, there's also one for getting out of that authoritarian leadership.

III. HUNGARY TOPLINE

Take the case of Hungary.

At the beginning of this month, I visited Poland and Hungary, our NATO allies. In the past six months, Hungary has quite literally taken the playbook to fight an authoritarian — a people's playbook, if you will — and dusted it off to make it more relevant for the 20th century.

And I must say, hearing about how the Hungarians have reclaimed their government gave me some real sparks of hope.

Just five months ago, a pro-democracy movement in Hungary achieved what many thought was impossible: they beat their authoritarian leader, Viktor Orban, ending his 16-year regime. Orban was elected in 2010 on the promise that he would put more money in the pockets of average Hungarians.

And throughout much of his tenure, he had a handshake agreement with the people: that they would look away and turn a blind eye as he rolled back democracy, because he would put more money in their pockets. But eventually, like so many authoritarian leaders, he overplayed his hand: he and his friends were getting rich. Everyday Hungarians were not. And of course, there was scandal after scandal. Despite that, Orban said: There's nothing to see here, don't believe what you're seeing with your own eyes.

Enter Peter Magyar, a long-time member of Orban's party. Two years ago, Orban tried to cover up a pedophilia scandal. Magyar broke with the party and started campaigning against Orban.

While Hungary is not an apples-to-apples comparison to America, the trip helped crystallize some of the very trends we're seeing here in our country:

IV. HUNGARY LESSONS

First, we need to build toward a tipping point on corruption and hypocrisy.

Authoritarians talk a big game about bringing down costs, but once in power, they enrich themselves at the expense of their own voters. They just can't help themselves. Eventually, that corruption trickles down to the average person.

At this point, Donald Trump is on track to be the most successful corrupt leader in the world's history. Best estimates are that he and his family have increased their net worth by more than 3.5 billion dollars. Add to that the sheer number of federal contracts thrown to Trump friends and family – and the true scale will take years to unearth. We're at the tip of the iceberg.

Quick Aside: At the CIA, I was an Iraq specialist. I spent a lot of time in Baghdad. Let me just say: Saddam Hussein would have spit out his tea at the level of corruption Trump and his family are currently engaged in: Palaces and golden ballrooms and arches dedicated to himself. Saddam would have been green with envy.

But it's not just straight financial corruption. President Trump is benefiting from political corruption. We need to make clear to the public that corruption at the top is taking money directly out of their pockets.

When Trump gains, you lose.

Take, as an example, how your electric bills keep climbing. That's because AI companies are building data centers that guzzle power, and President Trump is giving them tax breaks to do it.

Health care is getting more expensive, but Trump doesn't want your prices to go down – because the largest health care companies are some of his biggest donors.

If we learned anything from Hungary and other authoritarian countries, it's that eventually we hit a tipping point and the public will refuse to accept this level of corruption.

Second lesson: We have to lift the veil of fear.

One of the key tools in authoritarian governments is the wielding of fear. Just think about what Trump has done to our journalists, universities, law firms, and corporations that won't bow down to him. They're all just going to ground and trying to stay out of Donald Trump's firing line. They should be linking arms and working together to push back. But they're not.

Case in point: when we started reaching out to DC think tanks and universities to host this speech, institution after institution declined. Because they were afraid Trump would go after them. But Carnegie didn't hesitate to say yes. So, I want to shout-out Carnegie for giving me this platform.

In Hungary, everyone I talked to spoke about the fear under Orban: The press wouldn't report on him; People hid their organizing; Teachers were fired for speaking their minds. Then, enter Peter Magyar. It's not by mistake that his central slogan was: Don't Be Afraid. He led by example in a way that inspired the country.

Third: Build a broad coalition with a laser focus.

In Hungary, the lesson I drew very clearly was that you need a broad coalition to remove an authoritarian like Orban at the polls. Peter Magyar was a young, dynamic newcomer who used social media brilliantly – but just as relevant was the coalition he put together to oust Orban. Here in America, that coalition would be the equivalent of disaffected Trump voters, traditional Democratic voters, and young and first time voters.

It's important to note that the opposition parties had tried and failed to oust Orban in the 2022 elections. The people I talked to told me that the opposition parties spent their time squabbling amongst themselves in 2022: they fought over policy proposals, who would get what cabinet position after the election – all the while missing that their brand with the voters was dead in the water.

It is impossible for me to hear this and not think that a new coalition that crosses traditional party lines will be needed in 2028.

In putting together this winning coalition, Magyar did two interesting things: First, he ignored the traditional party leadership, essentially skipping over them and going right to their voters. And secondly, to keep his broad coalition together, he only focused on the things that united his coalition – like the economy, healthcare and childcare.

What we know here in the US, is that a new coalition is needed that crosses party lines to win in 2028. No litmus testing people out of a movement for change. And, I'd offer that after losing two of the last three elections to Trump, insiders in Washington need to accept that it's no longer Democrat vs. Republicans or Moderates vs. Progressives. That is fighting the last war. The tectonic plates of American politics are shifting beneath our feet. The real divide is those who believe in President Trump's vision of America – that we have no moral backbone, no core belief system, and we're in decline – and those who believe that the American spirit still lives, and that a new generation of leaders can and must renew it.

V. FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

So: A broad coalition is essential. But free and fair elections are required. One of the reasons I'm giving this speech is that the President is already using every tool at his disposal to intervene in our elections this November.

He has sued 30 states for their voter rolls, and tried to ban mail-in voting. And when that didn't work, he tried to make the Post Office the official judge of who gets to vote-by-mail. Luckily, Trump is failing to win in court, but we have to be prepared for the President to take even more aggressive action to avoid losing in just 34 days.

The authoritarian playbook is very clear: When you're at risk of losing, you either A: make up a threat that only you can protect the American people from, or B: find a way for federal law enforcement or the military to seize ballots or machines.

In Hungary, Orban used Plan A. One week before his election, he falsely claimed there was a major threat to an oil pipeline in an attempt to be seen as the only true protector. Luckily, the Hungarians saw through it. They knew it was all a ruse.

So there's a lesson for us: in the run-up to election day, we need to be alert and ready. If you hear in the next 34 days that there is a new security threat you've never heard of – that somehow requires federal law enforcement or the military, and not local police, an alarm bell should go off in your brain. Don't let him get away with that.

VII. FORWARD LOOKING AGENDA

So those are my four lessons that I took away from Hungary. But as we all know, getting through the dark tunnel and into the light doesn't stop with an election. It's critical to deliver for the people who stood up and voted for you.

So, what can we offer a big broad coalition that is willing to vote against a dictator? In my mind, we owe them three things.

First: We need to show people that the government can work in concrete ways.

It's striking: I hear the same thing from a Trump-voting farmer in Kansas to a Sheet metal worker in Chicago to a college student in Michigan's Upper Peninsula – the system is rigged against them. They do not know how they are

going to get ahead. And they know that AI and tech are just going to make it worse.

So the most important agenda to help real people is a Project 2029 for the middle class. That means big economic swings: declare a national housing emergency; create a public insurance option; and fix our taxes so that everyone pays their fair share.

Number Two: Accountability.

We need to hold accountable the people and institutions who stole billions of our taxpayer dollars and weaponized the government.

In Poland, they called this plan the Iron Broom – cleaning the place up.

The goal here is to have a list of ‘signature cases’ that go after some of the most obvious and harmful abuses of taxpayer dollars:

If Kristi Noem steered two hundred million in taxpayer dollars to a friend’s company to make her ads, she should be held accountable.

If Doug Burgum gave a thirteen-million-dollar no-bid contract for the Reflecting Pool that backfired immediately, he should be held accountable.

And, if Jeanine Pirro used the DOJ to go after the President's enemies, including me, she should be held accountable — and she should lose her law license.

And I would just remind these people: abusing taxpayer money for personal and political gain can land you a sentence of up to twenty years in prison.

But, retribution cannot be the only thing citizens see after the election. We need leaders that balance the need for accountability with also delivering positive results for the American people. That's gonna take discipline.

Number Three: We need to Trump-proof the government.

We need a plan to make sure that no one leader can ever do this again.

After Trump's first term, we talked about setting up a task force to do this.

Unfortunately, too many leaders, on both sides of the aisle, believed that the Trump era was behind us and not worth the heavy lift of changing laws to protect the future. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

So after we win an election: we need to deliver real results, hold signature cases accountable, and Trump-proof the government going forward.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Right now, when you look at what President Trump's doing or if you spend any time on social media, it's easy to feel pessimistic.

But I actually feel optimistic.

That's because to my core, I do not think that Americans share the dark vision of our nation that Trump does. I do not think that our best days are behind us. And I do not think that Americans are only in it for ourselves.

I believe that Americans want the best for each other and the future of this country. I believe that we are a people who will build the future with our own two hands – so that our children and grandchildren have a better life to look forward to.

And, I am optimistic because this isn't the only time in our country's history we've had a rough period. Even if it sometimes feels that way.

About every generation, we have one of these existential moments. Like the Civil War, the Great Depression, or the Civil Rights Movement.

Those moments in history where, just like today, we have folks looking at each other and saying: Are we going to get through this?

If you're like me and history gives you hope, then just think about all these tough moments in our history, and how we got out of them.

Every single time, we got through it with two things: engaged citizens and principled leaders.

That means normal people doing a little bit more than they were used to doing because the country they loved was in trouble.

And, just by showing up, you are engaged citizens. Thank you for that. The good news is: Just like there's an authoritarian playbook in use right now, there is also a playbook to push back. We just have to run the play.

Thank you for caring about what happens in your community and your country. I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to be the principled leader that you deserve.

I'll leave you with this: America is not a country that cowers. We're not at our end. We will get out of this. We will not give up the ship.

Thank you.