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## **America Broke Something When It Gave Trump a Second Chance**

*di Jamelle Bouie*

The Heritage Foundation's "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise" — popularly known as Project 2025 — was much more than a wish list of conservative policy preferences. It was much more, even, than a blueprint for a second Trump administration.

Project 2025 was, above all, a statement of values and a theory of governance. Its authors did not simply want to move national policymaking to the right. They wanted to use the authority of the executive branch to impose a new regime on the United States.

"We are in the process of the second American Revolution," [declared](#) Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, in the summer of 2024. This revolution, he added, "will remain bloodless if the left allows it." Russell Vought, who leads the Office of Management and Budget and was, like Roberts, a key architect of Project 2025, [also spoke publicly](#) about the need for a "radical constitutionalism" and a tribune-like president who would dismantle the New Deal state, sell the scrap and return the nation to the status quo ante of the 19th century.

Much of the disruption and destruction of the past year and change is downstream of the revolutionary orientation of Roberts, Vought and the other alumni of Project 2025 who have taken up places in and around the Trump administration. To observe the aggrandizement of power in the executive, the decimation of the federal bureaucracy, the destruction of much of the nation's medical, scientific and public health infrastructure and the broad attack on racial and gender equality is to see the many faces of a furious effort to restructure the existing nation to match the one envisioned by these far-right ideologues.

If this is all true, and it is, then any plausible response to Project 2025 must include a larger vision for the future of the American Republic. A Project 2029 cannot be a collection of Democratic Party agenda items. It must articulate a broad new conception of the nation's political order — one that will guide the way a future Democratic-led government might wield power. Above all, Democrats must have a plan for reconstruction — for building something new on the wreckage of what President Trump, MAGA and the Republican Party have wrought — not for restoration of what was.

As it happens, [several Democratic groups are drafting the equivalent of a Project 2029](#). And so far, unfortunately, it is not the reconstruction agenda the country needs. It is, instead, just another Democratic Party policy document: a grab bag of ideas stitched together with the usual slogans and gestures toward economic populism.

It is not that these policies are bad. Most of them, from what has been revealed, are good: worthwhile plans to break up utility monopolies, support child-rearing, regulate social media and artificial intelligence, and curtail corporate abuse.

But none of this reflects or represents a far-reaching or comprehensive idea of what the nation might be. There is no coherent worldview at work, nor does there seem to be any inkling or awareness of the obstacles — structural, political and institutional — that will confront, and likely stymie, all but the most threadbare and ineffectual Democratic agendas for governing.

What difference will specific policy items make if there are profound obstacles to simply governing at all? A Project 2029 that has nothing to say about either the Senate filibuster, or an ideologically captured Supreme Court, or extreme partisan gerrymandering — among other concerns — is not a Project 2029 worth the time or effort.

The same is true for a Project 2029 that fails to speak to questions of constitutional authority. Democrats need a theory of constitutional power: a sense of what the Constitution *is* and how it both authorizes and legitimizes the kind of government they hope to build. For Trump-aligned conservatives, the Constitution is an unlimited grant of executive authority, where sovereignty lies with a president who is more

Bonapartist tribune than Madisonian chief magistrate. Their American Republic is not one led by and for self-governing individuals but one directed from above by an executive who claims to stand as the living embodiment of the national spirit. The entire country, in the words of the White House, must meet “the president’s priorities.”

By contrast, it is not clear that Democrats have any sense of what they want the American Republic to be, versus a sense of the kinds of policies they hope to institute. This is important because their constitutional vision, or lack thereof, will shape how they attempt to rebuild American democracy.

During Reconstruction, after the Civil War, Republicans worked to refound the nation as a democratic and egalitarian republic that embodied the values of the Declaration of Independence. “By the Constitution it is stipulated that ‘the United States shall guaranty to every state a republican form of government,’” said Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts [in his eulogy for Abraham Lincoln](#), “but the meaning of this guaranty must be found in the birthday Declaration of the Republic, which is the controlling preamble of the Constitution. Beyond all question, the United States, when called to enforce the guaranty, must insist on the equality of all before the law, and the consent of the governed.” Such, he continued, “is the true idea of republican government according to American institutions.”

It was this view that led Republicans, radical and otherwise, to write their aspirations toward freedom and political equality into the Constitution through the 14th and 15th Amendments. It also shaped how they responded to President Andrew Johnson and hostile Supreme Court justices, who tried to trim and curtail their vision. They did not just override Johnson’s vetoes; they also impeached him. And they did not just criticize the court; they took steps to tie its hands, limit its power and strip its jurisdiction. The extent to which Republicans in this era operated as an imperial Congress was the closest this country has ever come to congressional supremacy, the result of their expansive conception of American democracy.

As they look ahead to 2029 and beyond, Democrats need that kind of vision. They need, in particular, a commitment to a constitutional order centered on the power

and prerogatives of Congress. And they need to begin to work through the details of what this will mean in policy and in law. It is this work that will shape how Democrats approach the major concerns of the post-Trump moment: the state of the federal bureaucracy, the scope of executive power and the problem of judicial supremacy over the political system. It is ambitious, yes. But so was Project 2025.

“Broken eggs cannot be mended,” Lincoln observed in a reply to August Belmont, a leading Democratic Party organizer and financier in New York, who had forwarded to the president the comments of an angry Louisiana slaveholder who wanted restoration of the Union “as it was.” Not much later, Lincoln repurposed the quip in different form. “Broken eggs can never be mended,” he wrote in reference to the fate of slavery as the war carried on, “and the longer the breaking proceeds the more will be broken.”

Fort Sumter broke the Union and with it, slavery. Whatever the nation was or would be in the aftermath of the war, neither the nation nor its Constitution would protect, support or sanction human bondage.

You can think of this Trump administration as a similar state of affairs. The American people broke something when they gave Trump a second chance in office. And there is no going back to the Union as it was. If Democrats hope to lead the nation to any kind of recovery, much less renewal, they must understand and internalize this fact of the matter.

*Broken eggs cannot be mended.* To try to do so, to try to return to some notion of normality, is to court failure. Worse, it is to play a repeat of the last Democratic administration when, in pursuit of the familiar, the Democratic Party all but passed the baton back to reactionaries working toward something revolutionary.