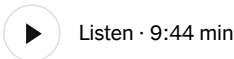


DAVID FRENCH

# The Fire of Stupidity Cannot Be Contained

May 31, 2026



By David French  
Opinion Columnist

See more of our coverage in your search results.

Add The New York Times on Google ↗

It's the year 2026, and sometimes it feels as if we're taking a nice leisurely walk through a Museum of Wretched Ideas.

Consider what's happening at home. Tariffs raise prices and restrain economic growth, while the federal government embraces both Gilded Age corruption and a version of the spoils system.

A disturbing number of young people on the right are fascinated with fascism. An extraordinary 34 percent of young people overall express a favorable view of communism, and young Americans are far more likely than their parents or grandparents to say that political violence is "sometimes OK."

And hovering over American culture like a dark cloud is the rise of antisemitism on both the left and the right. Once again, ancient slanders are circulating through the culture.

Or consider what is happening abroad. Germany rearms to confront the Russian threat. Japan rearms to deter China. War rages in Europe and in the Middle East. Threats of territorial expansion haunt the world. Russia is trying to grab Ukraine. China continues to covet Taiwan. And the Trump administration, incredibly enough, has cast its expansionist eyes on Greenland.

When you step back and actually think about it, these trends are confounding. I mean, I can understand the temptation to return to some of the discredited ideas of the recent past, I guess, but to revive so many, all at once? And to do it so soon after those wretched ideas ravaged the world?

What is going on?

**The answer lies** in part in the interplay between two political sayings that are so oft-repeated that they have become clichés. When they should be top of mind, though, they seem to have lost

their impact.

Here's the first (and you can probably say it along with me), from George Santayana in 1905: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We can argue about the precise historical parallels, but the echoes of the past are everywhere.

Here's the second, from Winston Churchill in 1947: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried."

It is no coincidence that authoritarianism is once again appealing to people at a time when two things are happening at once. Liberal democracies are struggling to meet the needs of a substantial portion of their citizens, and entire generations have come of age with no living memory of the totalitarian horrors of the 20th century.

**Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter** Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

In other words, millions upon millions of people are enduring democracy as "the worst form of government" without the necessary balanced understanding (that citizens in the mid-20th century had gained through firsthand observation) of "except all those other forms that have been tried."

So even fascism and communism — for some people, at least — are no longer avatars of atrocity, but dynamic alternatives to a sclerotic present. In their frustration, all too many people are attracted to the theoretical benefits of authoritarianism, and they don't have the experience or the education to understand its actual and inevitable defects.

They do not understand the link between their fashionable and transgressive ideologies and the oceans of blood that fascism and communism spilled across the globe.

In this ahistorical context, even political violence can seem justified — perhaps even a bit daring and romantic — unless you've lived through, say, the riots that swept American cities in the 1960s, a cataclysm that was far more violent, deadly and prolonged than anything that happened in the United States in 2020.

The compromises and restraints of diplomacy, which can often mean granting painful concessions to terrible regimes, can seem like a fool's errand, unless you've witnessed the indescribable horrors of world wars.

I'm reluctant to draw exact matches between current and past events. Should we compare Vladimir Putin's ambitions in Ukraine with Hitler's partition of Czechoslovakia in 1938? Or with Stalin's Winter War against Finland at the outset of World War II? Or maybe it's more reminiscent of the instability of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.

As for the rise of antisemitism, are we approaching a dangerous spectrum that ranges from the Dreyfus Affair to Kristallnacht?

But debating the precise analogues can obscure the underlying truth — we are heading

backward, toward the great crimes and mistakes of the past. We know what happens when militarily aggressive great powers seek more territory. We know what happens when a culture indulges — and promotes — conspiracy theories about Jews. We know that even the most utopian forms of authoritarianism devolve into regimes of grinding oppression and profound corruption. Some are always more equal than others.

**In 2024**, I taught an undergraduate class with a catchy title, “Why American Politics Went Insane.” At the risk of shortening a semester to a sentence, the devolution proceeded in three stages, from victory to separation to radicalization.

When the Cold War ended, the United States, for the first time since the wars against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, faced no external challenges to its prosperity and power. We were, in the words of the former French foreign minister Hubert Védérine, the “hyperpower.”

I began with “The End of History,” to borrow a term from Francis Fukuyama’s misunderstood book, but I began with his prescient warning near the end:

If men cannot struggle on behalf of a just cause because that just cause was victorious in an earlier generation, then they will struggle *against* the just cause. They will struggle for the sake of struggle. They will struggle, in other words, out of a certain boredom: for they cannot imagine living in a world without struggle. And if the greater part of the world in which they live is characterized by peaceful and prosperous liberal democracy, then they will struggle *against* that peace and prosperity, and against democracy.

That is exactly what we are doing. We are struggling against one another. Some of us are struggling against democracy itself. America is the only nation out of 25 comparable countries in which a majority of people believe that their fellow citizens are morally bad. It should be no surprise, then, that negative partisanship (when you support your party primarily because of your disdain for its opponents) is a central factor in American politics.

This drives us apart. Ever increasing numbers of American citizens live in one-party states or so-called blowout counties, where one side or the other wins presidential elections by 50 points or more.

And what happens when people of like mind gather together? The law of group polarization, first applied to political decision making by the law professor and author Cass Sunstein in 1999, teaches us that when like-minded people deliberate, they become more extreme.

Create a monoculture, and red becomes deep red. Blue becomes deep blue. And as the two sides move farther apart, both geographically and ideologically, we lose even the capacity to understand each other’s lives and thoughts.

If I taught the class over again, though, I’d add a fourth stage: amnesia. The problem isn’t just that we’re at each other’s throats; it’s that we’re turning to the worst of recent history’s alternative ideas in response.

It’s no coincidence that this is happening at a time when a generation of world leaders has no experience with world wars and rising millions of young people have no experience with real fascism and actual communism.

When experience ends, education has to begin. You can't just know what the Holocaust was; you also have to understand the Holodomor. The phrase "the guns of August" should mean something to you, and when you see every great power press on the military gas — with no one pumping the brakes — that should trigger the most urgent concern.

Few things are demonstrating that what's old is new again more than the rising tide of antisemitism. How many times must ancient lies be debunked? Must it happen every generation, for thousands of years?

**So now we** face a test. Can we educate ourselves away from disaster? Is there enough knowledge left to penetrate not just the minds, but also the hearts, of people who are deeply discontented?

A few weeks ago, a clip from the remarkable HBO series "Band of Brothers" went viral online. It was from the episode in which the boys of Easy Company discover a concentration camp. The impact is visceral. It's impossible for a decent person to watch it without vowing to himself or herself, "Never again."

I'm also reminded of a horrific scene at the opening of Netflix's science fiction drama "3 Body Problem," featuring a struggle session during China's Cultural Revolution. Once again, the impact is visceral. The brutality is hard to watch.

Television isn't enough. Books aren't enough. The stories of fathers and mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aren't enough. It will take everything — watching, reading, listening — to make us remember.

We have to know that the world as it is, with all its inefficiencies and injustices, is better than the world that was. I pray that we can learn that lesson before bitter experience teaches us once again that *this* imperfect democracy and *this* frustrating liberal world order are infinitely better than the violence and oppression — the deliberate starvation and slaughter of millions of men, women and children — of the none-too-distant past.

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.*

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is "Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation." You can follow him on Threads (@davidfrenchjag).

---

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: The Fire Of Stupidity Cannot Be Contained