

[00:00:20.980]

Welcome to the Making Sense podcast, this is Sam Harris. OK, well, it has been two weeks since the election. And those of you who don't spend a lot of time on social media may not be seeing how crazy it is out there. All I can say is we appear to be living through a very dangerous moment. And Trump and his enablers in their desperation to hold on to power are making our situation much more dangerous. I want to elaborate on something I tweeted after it became obvious that Biden had won the election.

[00:01:01.410]

This was around November 6th, I think. I wrote, there's a needle that we really must thread successfully. Contempt for Trump and his enablers in government is a patriotic necessity, contempt for 70 million Trump voters is a serious error. Life is complicated. So I want to spell this out a little more, because very few people are threading the needle successfully or even attempting to thread it, and some people have confused what I was saying there with people like AOC seeming to call for vengeance against Trump supporters.

[00:01:41.420]

She went so far as to encourage people to keep lists of everyone who had supported Trump in any capacity. I think it's quite clear that nothing good is waiting for us down that path. Over 70 million people voted for Trump. And there are many reasons for people to have done this or to have found that they just couldn't vote for Biden. And Trump is as much a symptom as a cause of the division in our society now. I mean, he is not Stalin.

[00:02:14.240]

He is not Hitler. He is a vindictive little con man who got plucked out of a carnival somewhere by Mark Burnett and put on television for over a decade. Trump is the quintessential American fake. And it's been astounding to watch such a bizarre and insubstantial person accomplish one crazy stage dive after the next, because there were millions of upraised hands waiting to catch him and to bear his weight. So there are real social problems at the bottom of all this that we have to address, and we won't address any of them by writing off everyone who voted for Trump as racist or otherwise irredeemable.

[00:03:02.610]

But there are many people in my circle, friends and colleagues and podcast guests. Who are making the opposite error? Many of them are almost exclusively focused on the problem of the far left, and this is causing them to significantly discount the harm that Trump has caused and is actively causing to our society. Some of these people are Trump supporters, but many aren't. And they've been taking the Trump team's allegations that the election was stolen through massive voter fraud way too seriously.

[00:03:36.520]

And they're extending a principle of charity to Trump and to the rest of his team that is, frankly, delusional. Again, there is a needle to thread here, and many people don't appear to even see it, insofar as I've noticed what others in the so-called intellectual dark web have been saying. Is generally not something I want to be associated with. I don't want to single anyone out in particular, but allow me to take this moment to turn in my imaginary membership card to this imaginary organization.

[00:04:08.830]

I mean, the idea was always tongue in cheek, from my point of view. It was a funny name for a group of people who are willing to discuss difficult topics in public, mostly on podcast. But it never made sense for us to be grouped together as though we shared a common worldview. I never saw much downside to it, and I didn't much think about it. But in the aftermath of this election. With some members of this fictional group sounding fairly bonkers, I just want to make it clear that I'm not part of any group, right?

[00:04:40.360]

So if you want to criticize my ideas, that's great. But I only represent myself here and no one else

speaks for me. We have a crisis of legitimacy now on all fronts. People have lost their trust in our institutions and this is understandable given all that's happened over the last four years. Trust in media has almost collapsed. But that doesn't mean there still isn't a difference between the New York Times and Breitbart or between journalists who are doing their best to report facts even while they harbor their own political biases and political operatives or conspiracy theorists who are obviously spreading lies.

[00:05:20.970]

So as bad as things are in mainstream media and don't get me wrong, they're quite bad. You simply can't place equal blame on both sides politically at this moment. And we have a sitting president who is essentially a known conspiracist. So if you find yourself saying things like all politicians lie or Biden is just as corrupt as Trump, you have become part of the problem of misinformation in our society. Biden would have to be a supporter of antifa and lying about literally everything to be comparable to Trump.

[00:05:56.970]

Biden's next tweet would have to say something like, we have evidence that the CIA invented the coronavirus to kill black people, he would have to be that maniacal and the whole Democratic Party along with him, for there to be an equivalence between Trump and Biden or between Republicans and Democrats at this moment. Yes, there is influence peddling and bad incentives and opportunism and cowardice and the whole carnival of human error on both sides of our politics. But the Republican Party has become a personality cult devoted to a fake strongman who really is doing his best to undermine our democracy.

[00:06:39.630]

So a special focus on Trump and his enablers is totally warranted right now. And again, there is a needle to thread here. There is a difference between Trump and his inner circle and his most abject supporters in Congress. There's a difference between these people who are attempting to hold on to power illegitimately by vomiting lies on everything in sight and the millions of people who voted for Trump who are to one or another degree taken in by these lies. Now, at the time I'm recording this, it seems safe to claim the following, there appears to be no credible evidence of significant voter fraud in the 2020 election.

[00:07:22.410]

And whatever the Trump campaign is bringing forward is being looked at by the courts and so far is being thrown out by the courts. Ironically, because we have such an uncoordinated election system, it appears to be very difficult to manufacture fraud at scale. And what has been alleged here is massive fraud across many states, several of which have Republicans in key positions of power. And strangely, the Democrats are alleged to have rigged the election for president, but they didn't think to also win the Senate and to get rid of Mitch McConnell and they lost seats in the House.

[00:07:55.740]

So this election fraud was really a work of subtle genius. And needless to say, all the Republicans in Congress have celebrated their victories in the House and the Senate, and these votes were cast on the same ballot they're disputing in the presidential race. This is the very essence of incoherence and hypocrisy, just as it was when Trump's campaign began demanding that we stop counting ballots in states where he was ahead, while simultaneously demanding that we keep counting them in states where he was behind.

[00:08:25.380]

There's now such a degradation of our politics that people don't even feel the need to lie coherently. It's just a continuous carpet bombing of our information landscape with bullshit. So at this moment, it certainly appears that Biden won the 2020 election far more decisively than Trump won in 2016 and Trump claimed massive voter fraud in that election to write the election he won to become president. He even claimed that Ted Cruz was guilty of voter fraud in the Iowa caucus.

[00:08:57.820]

This is what he does and it's part of the authoritarian playbook. Trump is a con man who has no respect for anything beyond himself, and he certainly has no concern for the health of our democracy. These are facts about his mind that he confirms for us on a daily basis. Now, obviously, any credible accusation of voter fraud should be looked at by the courts, but it's very important to point out that no one has been denying this basic principle of election fairness.

[00:09:33.360]

But this was not like Bush versus Gore in 2000, which came down to five hundred votes in a single state. Here we are talking about tens of thousands of votes in several states. A bigger margin than Trump won by in twenty sixteen, to which Hillary Clinton quickly conceded. Right, even though she won the popular vote and President Obama immediately began cooperating with the transition team. While Trump is still refusing to cooperate with Biden's two weeks into this process, and more importantly, so are the leaders in the Republican Party.

[00:10:06.090]

That's how perverse this has gotten right now. Biden should be getting a daily security briefing and his team should be speaking with foreign leaders on secure lines facilitated by the State Department. They should be able to speak with officials in every branch of our own government so they can get up to speed. Normally, all of us would be going on while the election gets certified in the coming weeks. And normally the transition team would be given funds and access to government buildings at this point.

[00:10:35.610]

And yet all of these resources are being denied to them. The real problem is that all of this controversy is being manufactured by bad faith actors. I mean, you can be confident that no one on Trump's team thinks he lost due to election fraud rather than attempting to delegitimize our democracy by pretending to think there was massive election fraud. It's like a soccer player who takes a dive and begins writhing around on the ground. Right, hoping to deceive the ref and to win a penalty kick and possibly win the game that way, no matter how good he makes it look, the soccer player knows he wasn't fouled.

[00:11:20.850]

This is cheating. Trump and his enablers are hoping to hold on to the presidency by pretending they were fouled and they're looking for a referee, whether a court or state legislature, who just might award them a winning penalty kick. Short of that, they're trying to motivate the base in Georgia so they can hold on to the two Senate seats will be decided in a runoff election in January. And beyond that, Trump and his family are clearly trying to monetize their cult so they can do who knows what to further debase American society after Trump leaves office.

[00:11:56.960]

Again, let me be clear. I believe that everything I'm saying about Trump's attempt to undermine our democracy is as objective and uncontroversial and non-partisan as saying something like Trump doesn't want to release his tax returns. I mean, how can I say that Trump doesn't want to release his tax returns? What am I, a mind reader? He's even said on a few occasions that he wants to release his tax returns is just that they're under audit, you see.

[00:12:25.210]

Why not take the man at his word? Well, if you are that confused about who this man is, then there really is nothing I or anyone else can say to persuade you on these points. So let me just bracket what will otherwise be totally unacceptable to you by saying that my admins on these points is coming from a very clear sense that what I'm saying is not just my opinion about Donald Trump. I believe I'm making factual statements about what he has done and why he has done it.

[00:13:00.010]

The man really doesn't want to release his tax returns for whatever reason. I don't have to be a clairvoyant to know that. It's the only rational interpretation of his actions. And he really did try to steal the presidency two weeks ago, and he appears to still be trying, however hopeless that might be. I

mean, think about this chain of events. We have a president who for months railed about how unreliable our election system was and about how mail in ballots in particular were guaranteed to produce massive fraud.

[00:13:37.630]

And he made these claims entirely without evidence while being someone who votes by mail himself in Florida. And he said over and over again that we need a result on election night, knowing that the vote count always continues over subsequent days and that in this election, the later votes would disproportionately be weighted toward Biden. Literally for months, Trump stigmatized mail in ballots. In a calculated effort to get his supporters to vote in person, knowing that in-person returns are generally counted first on election night, in fact, Republican lawmakers seem to have collaborated in this scheme by not allowing mail in ballots to be counted early in several key states.

[00:14:23.230]

And in fact, the Republicans trying to starve the post office of funding over the summer. And Trump admitted that this was to keep them from being able to handle a surge in mail, in ballots. And all of this occurred during the covid pandemic, during which for nearly nine months, Trump downplayed the risk of the disease even as a quarter of a million people died from it. So he knew the concern about the coronavirus was also heavily biased along political lines because he had worked hard to biocide himself.

[00:14:52.630]

And this caused in-person voting to be even more heavily weighted toward his supporters. I mean, it sounds totally fantastical, but all of this happened in plain sight, Trump trying to engineer an episode of reality television that could have ushered in the end of our democracy. He was obviously hoping to step before the cameras in the wee hours of Wednesday morning with a significant lead in the polls and to then demand that the vote counting stop. He was stage managing an attempted theft of the election, all the while encouraging his supporters to believe that the election was being stolen from him as the counting of ballots continued.

[00:15:34.150]

And he did this all in a context in which he, as the sitting president of the United States, refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power in the event that he lost. So it's really hard to exaggerate how far from normal we had drifted when Trump stepped in front of the microphone on election night. We had a president of the United States declaring that he had won re-election by a large margin when there were millions of votes still being counted and every reason to believe that most of those votes would be for his opponent in the most prominent members of the Republican Party, supported him in this.

[00:16:14.210]

That is what has become of our politics. So in my view, this was a terrifying lurch toward authoritarianism, even if in many ways Trump is a fake authoritarian and it could have worked. We could have lost our democracy two weeks ago. But the problem is nearly half of our society doesn't know that, in fact, nearly half of our society is being told right now that we have lost our democracy because the election of Joe Biden was a fraud.

[00:16:49.080]

This is a dangerous loss of social cohesion, and it has been engineered by Trump and the Republican Party. I mean, imagine you're on a plane at 30000 feet and the pilot comes over the P.A. system and says, I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but we've heard credible reports that there's a bomb somewhere on the aircraft. Some people are saying it's in the luggage. Some people are saying it might have been smuggled on board by food service and it might have been placed in an overhead compartment by one of your fellow passengers.

[00:17:20.250]

But just sit tight. We're going to get to the bottom of this. Imagine the panic that would cause and now imagine what you would think of the pilot if you knew that he was lying. Imagine the mind of a

pilot who has assumed so much control over the lives of his passengers, who would tell a lie like that. What sort of person would do that? That's the president right now. The situation is almost certainly worse, in fact, in the Trump campaign is aggressively fundraising on the back of their fake allegations of election fraud, the fund raising is ostensibly for all their legal actions, but most of the money will be used for other purposes to pay down their campaign debt and to form a Trump political action committee.

[00:18:14.020]

Trump's even threatening to run for president again in 2020 for. So the president is like a pilot who's just announced that there's a bomb on the airplane, but if you just get out your credit card and donate generously to the Trump bomb squad fund, he might be able to land the plane safely. But it's a fake crisis and he's just stealing money from millions of frightened and angry people and creating more division in our society in the process and actually increasing the likelihood that the plane we're all on at this moment will crash.

[00:18:47.290]

And this is why it is appropriate to be outraged over this behavior. Trump and the people closest to him know exactly what they're attempting to do to our democracy. They understand that amplified conspiracy theories increases the risk of serious violence and social disorder, and they absolutely know that they're putting our country at needless risk by not giving the Biden team the resources they need for a smooth transition. And this is not at all analogous to what's happening on the left. Yes, it also sows division in our society to call half the country racist.

[00:19:29.230]

But the people who are doing that really are confused, right? They think half the country is racist. And I'm sure the confusion extends all the way up to the top. Right. Someone like AOC thinks half the country is racist, but Trump and his team know that they lost the election. They know why they're doing what they're doing. They know they are trying to eke out some personal advantage at massive social cost. That's what's so reprehensible. Obviously, I don't know what's going to happen next, I am reasonably confident that the tide has turned here.

[00:20:08.140]

And that our institutions are strong enough, and when push comes to shove, the military and law enforcement are professional and apolitical enough that Trump can be dragged kicking and screaming out of the White House in January if need be. But honestly, I think this pressure test of our institutions nearly failed. And that's scary. A few days after the election on November 6th, the journalist Jim Sciutto tweeted, a new restricted national defense airspace has been put in place over presidential candidate Joe Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware.

[00:20:49.790]

And then Samantha Power, who was our U.N. ambassador under President Obama. She also happens to be married to Cass Sunstein, who is a constitutional law scholar who's been on this podcast. Samantha forwarded this tweet with the comment, It's real. Our institutions will hold. Now, I practically burst into tears when I read that tweet and here's why. The fact that that was ever in doubt that our institutions would hold. The fact that there was even a question as to how the military would respond if we had a madman in the White House refusing to admit that he had lost an election and demanding that we stop counting votes in states where he was ahead and continue counting them in states where he was behind, the fact that I can even understand Samantha's tweet, it's real.

[00:21:43.840]

Our institutions will hold. The fact that I can pass the fucking sentence is evidence of a crime. That has been committed against all of us and everyone who's been accusing Trump's critics of having Trump derangement syndrome has been party to this crime. You really have played a game of chicken with our democracy. And in my view, you actually do have a lot to apologize for, this is not partisanship. This has never been a difference of opinion. We can have those.

[00:22:21.670]

But you have protected a man who was manifestly unfit to be president. And that has been obvious since day one and long before day one. Yes, as I said, there is corruption and confusion and bad incentives and ordinary human frailty on both sides of our politics, and yes, we have a crisis of legitimacy in our society that is bigger than Trump. But Trump is the most malicious exploiter of it, and you cannot let your gaze wander from the core truth of this moment.

[00:22:58.490]

We have a sitting U.S. president who is trying to hold on to power by shattering every Democratic norm we have, and failing that, he is trying to sabotage the presidency of his successor for his own personal gain, and he has refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power. This is probably the lowest point in our democracy since the Civil War. And of course, there is a silver lining to this, if the worst doesn't happen, if Trump's attempt to delegitimize the election fails and it now seems virtually certain that it will.

[00:23:37.960]

And if we don't see some crazy degree of violence or political assassinations sparked by his conspiracy theories, we have discovered that much of what keeps our democracy intact is not a matter of our laws, but of our political norms. So many safeguards against corruption and abuses of power and a creep toward authoritarianism depend on the decency of the people in power. And what Trump has taught us beyond any possibility of doubt is that we can't rely on human decency. We need a system that can handle a psychopath in the White House.

[00:24:15.610]

However, it seems clear that most Trump voters really don't understand what's happening, and I know that sounds patronizing, but it's not meant to be. I mean, there are reports of people in ICUs right now dying from covid who still think covid is a hoax. That's how crazy our information landscape has become. And Trump has worked tirelessly to make it that crazy. Remember, Trump launched his political career with the birther conspiracy, and when he came to office in 2016, about a third of Americans believed the birther conspiracy and 72 percent of Republicans believed it.

[00:24:58.030]

Let that sink in. During the 2016 campaign, 72 percent of registered Republicans believe that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and therefore that his presidency was illegal and illegitimate. And things have only gotten worse. Trump is president of the United States, he has tweeted Kuhn articles suggesting that Obama and Biden had members of SEAL Team six murdered to conceal the fact that they never actually killed Osama bin Laden. The president of the United States tweeted that. Now, if you don't think that's a catastrophe for our country and for the world to have promoted such a person to the highest position of power.

[00:25:45.430]

I'm afraid that's on you caring about this sort of thing isn't Trump derangement syndrome. If you don't care about a U.S. president who lives as freely as he breathes, who makes a laughing stock out of our country with nearly every utterance that's on you. These things actually matter whether they matter to you or not. So who do we hold accountable for what has happened here and for what has almost happened and for what may yet happen? I do think we need to give something like 70 million people a mulligan here and then make a serious effort to solve the social problems that caused so many of them to support Trump.

[00:26:32.860]

No doubt this is a conversation that will absorb many future episodes of this podcast. But we run a serious risk of moral hazard if there are no consequences for the people who decided to torch our democracy on the chance that they might personally gain from it. Imagine that a man attempts to rob a bank, but it doesn't work out. Let's say that after he's pulled out his gun and started screaming for everyone to get down on the floor and perhaps after he's pistol whipped the guard, something goes wrong and it becomes clear that he won't be able to rob the bank.

[00:27:10.050]

After all, what's the point of no return reputational? What's the last moment where you get to say, sorry, this isn't really a bank robbery? I'm not actually a bank robber. Everyone can get up off the floor now. We're just going to have to agree to disagree about what happened here. I do think a line has been crossed here, again, not necessarily with respect to our laws, but with respect to norms that are even more important than many of our laws.

[00:27:39.610]

Is it illegal for a sitting president to not commit to a peaceful transfer of power? Is it illegal for him to pretend to think that there was massive election fraud and to claim to have won an election that he really lost? Is it illegal for him to spread socially toxic lies every hour on social media? It doesn't seem so. But that's not the point. Trump has still managed to do tremendous harm to our society and he seems committed to doing further harm.

[00:28:12.160]

So at a minimum, I believe the right way to treat Trump and his crime family after January 20th is the way we treated O.J. Simpson after he was acquitted of a double murder that everyone knew he had actually committed, which just let them fall into oblivion. Of course, I'm under no illusions that will actually happen. But it should happen, we should all do our best to withdraw our attention from this man who has gotten more attention in the last four years than any person in human history.

[00:28:46.480]

And for those of you who still think that not acknowledging how bad Trump is is the only way to resist the craziness coming from the left. All I can say is that it seems quite clear that you're wrong. And Trump was never an answer to the problem of the far left. In fact, the left has drawn a massive amount of energy and seeming credibility from him. It's true that the problem of illiberalism on the left has been growing for a long time, but it has gotten as bad as it has under Trump, and Trump has been bringing gasoline to that fire again because it has always served his personal interests to do so.

[00:29:31.160]

What we need is real moderation and pragmatism and professionalism in our politics now. And while I was never very enthusiastic about Biden and Harris, there is a big difference between both of them and AOC. And again, if you want a real parallel for the dangerous insanity that's been encouraged by Trump, you have to go further left than AOC. Trump is President Kuhnen right now. The most destructive thing about the Trump presidency has been the orgy of lying and misinformation that has subsumed everything in our public conversation, the utter devaluation of truth has been the worst part because it affects everything else.

[00:30:19.290]

Anyway, the next two months should be very interesting. I certainly expect there will be a transition to a Biden presidency. But who knows, really? It still feels like something bad can happen here. But even after a smooth transition, there will still be a lot of hard work to do to steer our culture toward basic sanity on real issues, the pandemic, the economic effects of lockdown, wealth inequality, more generally, social cohesion. Collisions with foreign adversaries like China and Russia, cybersecurity, climate change, the list of challenges is quite long and daunting, and it seems clear that only a fact based discussion will help us meet them.

[00:31:16.420]

And with that, I will leave you, as always, thanks for listening.