

THE CORRUPTION OF LINDSEY GRAHAM

*A case study in the rise of
authoritarianism.*

BY WILLIAM SALETAN



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Introduction

The Republican party was in big trouble, and Lindsey Graham knew it. It was January 21, 2016, and the senator was taking questions at a press conference. A month earlier, he had abandoned his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Now two men he despised, Donald Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz, were leading the race.

Graham thought either of them, if nominated, would lose the general election. Choosing between them, he told reporters, was “like being shot or poisoned. What does it really matter?”

Two months later, in March, Graham changed his mind. He endorsed Cruz and joked that it was better to be poisoned than shot. “Donald is like being shot in the head,” Graham told talk-show host Trevor Noah. “You might find an antidote to poisoning, I don’t know. But maybe there’s time.”

Graham was wrong. Trump wasn’t a shot to the head. He didn’t kill the GOP. In fact, he won the election.

Trump turned out to be poison. Over the next five years, he thoroughly corrupted Graham’s party. Republican leaders had time to counteract the poison, but they never did. One reason was that the poison moved slowly. Graham and other Republican politicians lost the ability to see what they were becoming. They rallied around an authoritarian, excused authoritarian acts, and embraced authoritarian ideas.

This is a story about how that happened.



Before we start, I should tell you what this article isn't. It isn't a rant about Graham's servility or hypocrisy. And it isn't a profile.

Many other journalists have written about Graham and Trump. Most of them have focused on the personal relationship between the two men. They examine the ways in which Graham's evolution was distinctive.

I'm not interested in what's distinctive about Graham. I'm interested in what isn't. How does his story illuminate what happened to the whole Republican party? How did the poison work?

We need to answer these questions because the authoritarian threat is bigger than one man. Donald Trump's ascent to the presidency destroyed the myth that the United States was immune to despotism. Our institutions and the people who run them are vulnerable. We have to confront these vulnerabilities and learn how to deal with them before our democracy is threatened again.

So why focus on Graham?

First, because he was a central player in the Republican party's capitulation to Trump. And second, because he talked constantly. He produced an enormous trove of interviews, speeches, press briefings, and social media posts. Through these records, we can see how he changed, week to week and month to month. We can watch the poison work.

It's a slow death. The surrender to despotism doesn't happen all at once. It advances in stages: a step, a rationalization. Another step, another rationalization. The deeper you go, the more you need to justify. You say what you need to say. You believe what you need to believe.

So let's go back to the beginning. Let's see who Lindsey Graham was before he drank the poison.

Chapter 1

Graham's Moral Clarity

Trump announced his presidential campaign in June 2015. Right away, Graham recognized how dangerous he was.

Trump had long peddled the myth that President Barack Obama was a Muslim born in Kenya. In his announcement speech, Trump implied that most Mexican immigrants were rapists or drug mules.

Graham assessed the New York businessman as “hateful,” a “kook,” a “demagogue,” and a “race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot” who “represents the worst in America.” He identified patterns of behavior that made Trump a menace to the nation: belligerence, ruthlessness, indifference to facts, and a penchant for targeting minorities.

But Trump wasn’t just a demagogue. He called for authoritarian measures. Graham condemned each of them.

Stealing oil from U.S.-occupied countries.

On August 16, 2015, Trump said American troops should “take over the oil” in Iraq and use the profits to “take back money for our soldiers.”

Graham denounced this idea as theft. “Is that what we are coming down to?” he asked. “To say we are going to send an American ground force back to Iraq to get their oil? . . . Is that who we are as Americans now?”

Deporting American citizens.

Trump demanded the mass expulsion of illegal immigrants. On August 24, Fox News host Bill O’Reilly asked him whether he would deport a hypothetical Los Angeles family in which the parents were undocu-

mented but the children were “American citizens, born here.” Trump said he would.

Graham called Trump’s position “Joseph McCarthy-like.” He pointed out that “deporting American citizens, children of illegal immigrants, is unconstitutional.”

Summary execution.

On October 8, Trump said Bowe Bergdahl, an Army sergeant who was under investigation for possible desertion but had yet to be charged, “should have been executed.”

Graham protested that Trump, with lethal intent, was proposing to “deny due process.”

Banning Muslims.

On November 19, Trump endorsed surveillance of Muslims in the United States. Graham rebuked him, explaining that “it’s not constitutional to follow someone because of their faith.” He warned that Trump was fomenting sectarian persecution. As an illustration, Graham pointed to a Virginia mayor’s suggestion that the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II could be a model for dealing with Syrian refugees.

“I’m running for president of the *United States*, where you can come and worship God your way or not at all,” said Graham. “There’s 3,500 American Muslims in uniform. . . . What are they fighting for as American Muslims? The same freedoms that you and I enjoy. God bless them.”

On December 7, Trump called for a “complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” Graham, in response, accused Trump of “playing on prejudice.” “Every candidate for president needs to do the right thing & condemn @Realdonaldtrump’s statement,” Graham tweeted.

Retributive torture.

On November 23, Trump said detainees accused of terrorism should be waterboarded even if their suffering elicited no information. “If it

doesn't work, they deserve it anyway," said Trump. In a debate on February 6, 2016, he repeated: "I would bring back waterboarding, and I'd bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding."

After the debate, Graham disavowed Trump's remarks. "We don't torture people," he said. "That makes us better."

Targeting noncombatants.

In December 2015, Trump said he would "take out" terrorists' family members, threaten the "lives" of those family members, or make them "suffer." He said he would do this intentionally, not just as collateral damage (in a strike aimed at the terrorists themselves) or during interrogations to avert an imminent attack, but as "retribution" and a deterrent.

Later, when Trump was advised that the military might refuse such orders because they were illegal, he shot back: "They're not going to refuse me. . . . If I say, 'Do it,' they're going to do it."

Graham was appalled. He protested that Trump would "kill . . . innocent people" and make the United States "barbaric like our enemies." In March and April 2016, Graham threatened not to support Trump in a general election, in part because Trump might "order our troops to commit war crimes."



Graham didn't just repudiate Trump's savagery. He castigated the Republican National Committee and other Republican presidential candidates for failing to join in the repudiation.

"Where is the party leadership?" Graham demanded in August 2015, as Trump promoted bigotry, oil theft, and violations of the Constitution. "Where are the other candidates?" Months later, Graham complained that the candidates were "cerily silent" about Trump's proposed Muslim ban.

In Graham's view, the silence was dangerous for three reasons.

Appeasement encourages the aggressor.

As Trump preached barbarism and surged in the primaries, Graham heaped scorn on Republican leaders who “hid in the corner, because they were worried about the consequences of taking on the bully.” Yielding to the bully would only embolden the bully.

Appeasement corrupts the appeasers. At a campaign stop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, three days after Trump proposed the Muslim ban, Graham told Republicans that if the GOP failed to stand up to this demagogue, it would lose its reason for existence. “I’m not afraid of him leaving,” Graham said of Trump’s threat to bolt the party. “You know what I’m afraid of? That *we’re* afraid of him leaving.”

“Let your fear go, folks, as Republicans,” Graham told the Portsmouth audience. “Stand up for what makes us great. Tell Donald Trump, ‘You’re wrong.’ Don’t be afraid of him leaving and losing an election. I’m not afraid of losing an election. I’m afraid of losing our soul.”

Appeasement empowers the mob. The menace on the horizon wasn’t just Trump. It was Trump’s voters. Behind the authoritarian was an audience that loved his brashness, his bigotry, and his contempt for rules. Republican leaders were tiptoeing around Trump to avoid alienating those voters.

Graham didn’t want to cater to these people. In September 2015, he lamented that Trump had “consolidated all the Republicans who think Obama’s a Muslim and that he was born in Kenya.” “I’m going for the other crowd,” said Graham.

Two weeks later, at a Trump rally, a man in the audience claimed that Obama was a Muslim and “not even an American.” Trump, instead of correcting the man, played along. Graham was mortified. “We’re looking for a leader who will push back at this kind of hateful stuff,” he pleaded. “Don’t be afraid of losing a vote.”

As other candidates placated Trump and courted his voters, Graham berated them. In December, Cruz declined to condemn Trump’s pro-

posed Muslim ban, and he offered his own plan to suspend entry of Middle Eastern refugees. Graham, in disgust, accused Cruz of “trying to get all the Trump people when Trump falls.”

“This is not a policy debate, Ted,” said Graham. “This is about you and us and our character as a party.”



One moment is particularly haunting. It was March 7, 2016, after a string of primaries had essentially winnowed the race to Trump and Cruz. Graham, who had suspended his own campaign months earlier, was on CNN, imploring Republicans of good will to unite against Trump. In addition to Trump’s “race baiting” and “religious bigotry,” the senator reminded viewers that Trump had “said he would order our soldiers to kill innocent children, civilian noncombatants.”

In the interview, Graham acknowledged that his party’s sickness went deeper than Trump. He estimated that 35 percent to 40 percent of Republicans felt “the world that they knew growing up is being lost. They feel like the Mexicans are taking their jobs. . . . There’s a market out there for ‘Send them all back.’” Trump was gaining strength, Graham explained, because he knew how to “prey on people’s fear.”

Republican leaders could have intervened to stop Trump, but they hadn’t. “When he said most illegal immigrants are rapists and drug dealers . . . looking back, we should have basically kicked him out of the party,” said Graham. Instead, the party’s elders and rival presidential candidates had “hid in the corner,” allowing the menace to “grow.”

That was a fatal mistake, said Graham. “Any time you ignore what could be an evil force, you wind up regretting it.”

Graham thought he was talking about the past. He didn’t realize that he was describing the future.

Of Losing and Winning

How did a senator who clearly understood every element of the oncoming disaster—Trump, his angry fan base, and the timidity of the Republican elite—become part of the evil that followed? The first piece of the answer is that Graham, like many other Republicans who initially opposed Trump, had made a political calculation. And that calculation turned out to be wrong.

In TV appearances, Graham often said he would “rather lose without Trump than try to win with him.” That sounded brave. But Graham didn’t really believe Trump could win. He didn’t think he might need to suck up to Trump, because he assumed that the businessman-candidate was so toxic—in particular, so abrasive to women and to Hispanic voters—that even if he managed to win the nomination, he would lose badly in a general election.

So in 2015 and early 2016, Graham found it relatively easy to speak out against Trump. He didn’t think he had much to lose. His courage hadn’t been tested.

In May 2016, that began to change.



On the morning of May 3, the day of the Indiana primary, Trump went on Fox News and falsely suggested that Cruz’s father was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The smear vindicated everything Graham had said about Trump. “Any doubt left Trump is completely unhinged?” Graham asked on Twitter. “His assertion Ted Cruz’s father was associated with Lee Harvey Oswald should remove ALL doubt.”

That night, as the returns came in from Indiana, it became clear that Trump had beaten Cruz soundly. Cruz dropped out of the race, leaving Trump as the presumptive nominee.

This was a turning point in Trump's rise to power. By capturing the nomination, he established himself as the sole alternative to the likely Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton. And that step, in turn, gave every Republican politician a stake in his candidacy. With Trump at the head of the ticket, the party's hopes of holding the House and Senate hinged on how well he performed against Clinton.

Up to this point, Graham and other Republican critics of Trump had depicted his slurs, outbursts, and despotic ideas as evidence of his unfitness for office. Now they had an incentive to reformulate their criticisms as advice. Instead of rejecting him as an unacceptable leader, they would ask him to stop saying unacceptable *things*.

Initially, Graham resisted this pivot. In a CNN interview on May 6 and a formal statement on May 9, he repeated that he couldn't "in good conscience support" the presumptive nominee, since Trump hadn't "displayed the judgment and temperament to serve as Commander in Chief."

But Graham's refusal came with a caveat. If Trump were to beat Clinton—if he were to become president—Graham would set aside his misgivings.

"Do you think he has any ability to prove you wrong?" CNN's Dana Bash asked Graham.

"Yes," said Graham. "He can win."



On May 11, five days after that interview, Trump phoned Graham. He chatted him up and asked for advice on national security. Graham loved it. This was what the senator had hoped for. If he couldn't be president, he wanted to shape the president's foreign policy.

Almost immediately, Graham began to change the way he talked about Trump. On May 12, he praised the presumptive nominee for asking "good questions" and for "reaching out to many people . . . a wise move on his part." Graham said he had enjoyed their conversation, and he credited Trump with a "great sense of humor."

On May 20, Graham returned to CNN. He thanked Trump for calling “to pick my brain,” and he did something that would soon become a routine practice for establishment Republicans: advising Trump through the TV. Everyone knew Trump watched cable news, so Graham spoke directly to him. “Here is what I would say to Mr. Trump,” said Graham, addressing the situation in Syria. On North Korea, the senator counseled: “I would focus on China.” On Iraq: “Here’s what I would tell Mr. Trump.”

The interviewer, CNN’s Kate Bolduan, noted the change in Graham’s demeanor. “Are you warming to Donald Trump?” she asked.

“Well, I’ll talk to him,” said Graham. “We have major differences. . . . But he’s got a 50/50 chance of being president.”



Graham was starting to let go of his resistance to Trump. It wasn’t just because of Trump’s flattery. Graham also had practical reasons. He wanted Republicans to keep control of Congress. And he hoped that if Trump won, he could build a relationship with the new president and influence the administration’s foreign policy.

But Graham didn’t want to think of himself as a sellout. He didn’t want to think he was abandoning the principles he had articulated in opposition to Trump. He wanted to believe that for some good reason, those principles no longer applied.

And so, in the days after his phone call with Trump, Graham began to formulate a rationale for accepting the authoritarian candidate.

The rationale was democracy.

Motivated Reasoning

When people ask how an aspiring authoritarian gained power in the United States, they often assume that our democratic system or democ-

matic culture should have thwarted him. But just the opposite happened. America's self-image as a strong, rational democracy contributed, paradoxically, to Trump's ascent. Within the Republican party, his success in polls and primaries earned him respect as the people's candidate. And that gave politicians like Graham an excuse to bend the knee.

In the first weeks of Trump's campaign, Graham predicted that the newcomer would lose because Americans, and Republicans in particular, were too good to elect such a scoundrel.

- “I believe in democracy,” Graham declared at a forum in Iowa on July 18, 2015. He said Trump would lose because “the good people of Iowa, the good people of New Hampshire, and the good people of South Carolina are going to figure this out.”
- “He will fade over time,” Graham said of Trump on July 22, 2015. “I have a lot of confidence in the Republican party.” Even if Trump were to win the nomination, the senator ventured, “There’s no way he could win a national election . . . because America is a good place.”
- “There have been people in the past who have been demagogues that prey on the weak, the different, that appeal to our prejudices,” Graham observed in another July 22 interview. “Let me tell you how it always ends: The demagogue loses. Because this is America.”

None of those predictions came true. Trump didn't fade. He captured the nomination. The “good people” of South Carolina—Lindsey Graham's base—voted for Trump in that state's Republican primary.

Clearly, Graham had miscalculated. Maybe the voters were wrong. Maybe America wasn't always a good place. Maybe sometimes the demagogue won.

But to face that possibility, Graham would have to rethink everything. He would have to oppose the Republican ticket. He would have to

reconsider his role in the party. He would have to defy the voters of his own state.

So instead, he turned the other way. He told himself that democracy had worked. The good and wise Republicans of South Carolina and other states had chosen Trump, not Graham. They must have known better than Graham did. And if the good people of America went on to elect Trump, then Graham would accept their judgment. He wouldn't just tolerate their decision; he would embrace it. He would defer to the people's verdict. He would withdraw his criticisms of Trump.

Did Graham really believe this? Did he honestly think that the voters knew best and that their ballots somehow cleansed Trump? Probably not. But that was the rationale Graham began to articulate in public. And over time, he increasingly behaved as though he did believe it. That's how rationales often work. You espouse them—at first uncertainly or insincerely, later with conviction—because you need them to justify what you've done or what you want to do.

That's what Graham did as he turned toward Trump. On May 20, when Bolduan asked Graham if he was warming to Trump, Graham pointed out that Trump “did an amazing thing. He beat me and, you know, 16 other people.” And when Bolduan asked whether Trump was unqualified to be president, Graham no longer responded in the affirmative. “That's up to the American people,” he told her.

In the name of respecting the people's will, Graham renounced his right to judge the man who had earned his party's nomination. He pleaded that it was “uncomfortable to say that somebody's not qualified, who beat you.”



Through the summer and fall of 2016, Trump continued to lash out at minorities, the democratic process, and the rule of law. In June, he claimed that Gonzalo Curiel, a federal judge born in the United States, should be barred from presiding over a Trump-related lawsuit be-

cause the judge's "heritage" presented "an inherent conflict of interest." Trump explained: "We're building a wall. He's a Mexican."

Trump also said a Muslim judge might be ineligible to preside over the case. A few days later, after a terrorist shooting in Orlando, he denounced immigration from "Muslim countries" and repeated his call for "the ban." In July, he falsely suggested that Khizr Khan, the father of an American soldier who had died serving in Iraq, had prevented his wife from speaking at the Democratic convention because their family was Muslim.

In rallies, interviews, and debates, Trump told his followers that American democracy was a sham and that if he were to lose, the outcome would be illegitimate. In August, he predicted that the "election is going to be rigged." He asserted that if Clinton were to win Pennsylvania, it would mean that Democrats had "cheated." In September, he refused to say that he would accept Clinton as president. In October, he accused the Obama administration of letting illegal immigrants "pour into the country so they can go and vote." He repeated that "the election is absolutely being rigged . . . at many polling places," and he refused to pledge that he would accept the results, claiming that "millions of people that are registered to vote . . . shouldn't be registered."

When reporters pressed Graham about Trump's eruptions, the senator expressed his disapproval. But he no longer portrayed these episodes as evidence of Trump's unfitness. Instead, he described them as politically unhelpful, and he urged Trump to revise them or at least not to repeat them.

When Trump called for a crackdown on Muslim immigration after the Orlando shooting, Graham nudged him to "get back on track." When Trump smeared the Khans, Graham counseled him to move on. "If you really want to be president . . . this is the best chance you'll ever get," Graham told the nominee via a CNN interview. "Every day that we talk about Mr. Khan and Donald Trump, it's bad for Trump."



Graham still recognized Trump as an authoritarian. On June 7, he acknowledged that Trump's attacks on Curiel were "not consistent with a rule-of-law nation." But nine days later—after Trump had repeated his call for "the ban" on travel from Muslim countries—Graham told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt that his main concern was keeping Trump on message so Republicans could hold Congress. "I think the Senate is 50/50 if Trump can keep it close," said Graham.

Graham no longer focused on protecting America from Trump. Instead, he focused on protecting the GOP's electoral prospects, which in turn meant protecting Trump from himself. In 2015, Graham had sought to expose Trump's autocratic personality; now he tried to hide it.

In addition, Graham no longer saw Trump's resilience—his ability to rise in polls despite one damning statement or revelation after another—as a troubling sign. Instead, he saw the nominee's indestructibility as an asset.

"Trump is getting better," Graham boasted as Trump closed the gap with Clinton in early September. "You can see a more disciplined message. . . . He's had massive political body blows that would knock anybody else out." If Trump could just "hold it together for another eight weeks," said Graham, "you're going to have one hell of a race." Two weeks later, he urged Trump to "take it to her. . . . If you win, Donald, I'll help you where I can."

In the final weeks, Trump absorbed more blows, including the release of an *Access Hollywood* video that showed him bragging about groping women. But WikiLeaks, using material hacked by the Russian government, came to his aid by leaking emails to embarrass Clinton. When Trump, in his final debate with Clinton, refused to pledge that he would accept the election's outcome, Graham complained that the nominee was "doing the party and country a great disservice." It was a telling construction: party first, country second. What worried Graham most was that Trump's attacks on democracy might cost the GOP a victory.

They didn't. On election night, Graham watched in amazement as Trump beat Clinton. Better yet, Republicans kept the House and Sen-

ate. The party's work to prop up Trump had paid off. He was going to be president.

And Graham was going to become his best friend in Congress. It was time to get to work.

Chapter 2

A Trump's Best Friend

On November 17, 2016, a week after Trump's election, Graham went on TV to start sucking up. He had congratulated the president-elect; now he wanted to build a relationship. "I'm in the book. Call me if you need me," Graham told Trump through the CNN camera.

Sucking up to a new president was normal. But sucking up to this president would be different. Already, Trump had indicated that he would make his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, a power broker in the government. It was the kind of thing monarchs and dictators did. But Graham, when he was asked about it, chose not to quibble. "I am all for it," the senator told CNN. "I'm all for him [Kushner] being able to help President Trump in any fashion the president deems appropriate."

Any fashion the president deems appropriate. Graham wasn't just endorsing the arrangement. He was signaling that Trump could do as he pleased.



But Graham wasn't offering his fealty for nothing. He had a worthy purpose in mind.

When critics write about the GOP's capitulation to Trump, they tend to dismiss the capitulators as hollow careerists. In some cases, that's true. But even people with strong commitments and good intentions can end up collaborating with an authoritarian.

Graham, for instance, cared intensely about national security and foreign policy. That gave Trump enormous leverage over him, because on those subjects, the president had almost total control.

Trump was an isolationist. Graham was an internationalist. He hoped to persuade Trump to keep troops in Syria, support NATO, and stand up to Russia. It would be a huge undertaking and a constant struggle.

In studying Graham's transformation, this was one of the most striking things I found: In moments when Graham was most fiercely defending Trump's abuses of power, he was simultaneously lobbying Trump to adopt, or at least not to abandon, hawkish foreign policies. At times, the senator all but admitted that he viewed this as a transaction.

Graham wanted the United States to stand up to tyrants abroad. And to achieve that, he was willing to compromise the rule of law at home.

The other thing you have to understand about Graham—and about many other Republicans who initially seemed too sensible to yield to Trump—is that they fell for the president-elect's buffoonery.

Cynics sometimes say that American democracy survived Trump's presidency because unlike successful autocrats in other countries, he was too stupid and self-absorbed to gain absolute power. That might be true. But in seducing Republican elders, Trump's stupidity was an asset.

Graham and many of his colleagues knew Trump was a brute. But they also knew he was an idiot, and this gave them a false sense of security. They thought he was too inept to endanger the republic.

The Republicans who made pilgrimages to Trump Tower after the 2016 election, and who later paid their respects at the White House, didn't see themselves as Trump's pawns. They thought *they* were manipulating *him*. And this illusion of control blinded them to the force he gradually exerted over them.

Graham, without realizing it, had a useful term for this Trumpian force. The term was "orbit."

To Graham, being in Trump's orbit meant access. In a 2019 interview with *New York Times Magazine* reporter Mark Leibovich, the senator would use this term to describe how he had plotted his approach to Trump. "I went from, 'OK, he's president' to 'How can I get to be in

his orbit?” Graham explained. Then, over time, Graham had worked his way into Trump’s “smaller orbit.”

Graham described this process as though he were maneuvering a spacecraft. But orbits are tricky. Once you’re in orbit, you no longer control your trajectory. You’re in the grip of the object you’re orbiting. And it can be hard to escape.



In the early days of 2017, Graham began to work his way into Trump’s circle. He flattered the incoming president and abased himself. “Donald, you beat me like a drum,” he told Trump in a Fox News interview. “We’re going to make America great again.”

Backstage, Graham reached out to Kushner. By March, he was lunching with Trump, exchanging jokes, and offering advice on Iran and North Korea. “I’m humbled by being beat, and I accept your victory,” he told the president. He would later recall telling Trump, during this conversation, “I am all in for you.”

Over the next several weeks, their relationship grew: dinners, long phone calls, and eventually golf. Under Graham’s influence, Trump’s foreign policy became more assertive. But at home, Trump was incorrigible. He continued to attack human rights and democratic institutions. Graham, despite his concerns, offered only entreaties and half-hearted attempts to coach the president.

Here’s some of what Trump did in the months after his election:

He alleged massive voter fraud. In late November 2016, Trump claimed that millions of illegal ballots had robbed him of victory in the popular vote. (He had won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million ballots.) Trump repeated this falsehood in his first days in office.

No previous president had so wildly slandered American democracy. But Graham responded only with political advice. “Watch what you say,”

he counseled Trump, or “you’re going to shake confidence in your ability to lead the country.”

He refused to acknowledge foreign interference. In December 2016, when U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Russia had interfered in the election on Trump’s behalf, Trump rejected their findings and attacked the agencies. Graham recognized Trump’s reaction as pathological: Trump viewed any talk of foreign interference as an attack on him, and he couldn’t distinguish the national interest from his personal interest. This made him mentally incapable of confronting Russia over anti-American operations that were designed to help Trump politically.

But Graham didn’t want to antagonize Trump. So in January, he credited the president-elect with “progress” toward acknowledging what Russia had done. And in March, he pleaded on behalf of the intelligence agencies: “I would beg the president to recognize them as the heroes they are.”

He defended torture. On January 25, five days into his presidency, Trump reaffirmed his support for torture. ISIS was “chopping off the heads of our people,” he fumed, and “we have to fight fire with fire.” But two days later, he grudgingly agreed to defer to Defense Secretary James Mattis, who opposed waterboarding.

Graham decided that was good enough. He set aside the moral question, on which Trump was unrepentant, and applauded the president for yielding to Mattis’s position that “torture, including waterboarding, is not an effective tool for obtaining information.”

He attacked the press. On February 17, Trump called the “FAKE NEWS media” “the enemy of the American people.” Graham disagreed, but he brushed off Trump’s menacing language, and he said the president had a point. “America is not becoming a dictatorship,” Graham scoffed when he was asked about Trump’s statement. He added, “I

would say this to the American press corps: When it comes to Trump, you are over the top. You are acting more like an opposition party.”

He claimed that his predecessor had wiretapped him. On March 4, Trump accused Obama of “tapping my phones in October, just prior to [the] Election.” Trump’s allegation was bizarre and false, but Graham dismissed it as a side issue. When the senator was asked whether Trump should apologize, he ducked. “That’s up to him,” said Graham. “He’s the president.”

Again and again, Graham downplayed Trump’s eruptions or pretended that he could be coached out of them. But it was Graham, not Trump, who began to change.

The clearest example was Trump’s persistent campaign to block Muslims from entering the United States. In December 2015, when Trump first proposed the idea, Graham denounced it. Then, in June 2016, Trump modified his language to hide the bigotry. Instead of referring explicitly to Muslims—against whom Trump continued to display animus—the new version of the ban would apply to “areas of the world where there’s a proven history of terrorism.”

At that time, in 2016, Graham held firm against the euphemism and the ban. “I’m unnerved to hear that Donald Trump talks about a Muslim ban as the way to solve the problem,” he said.

But Trump didn’t let up. A week into his presidency, he announced a ban on “entry into the United States” from “countries referred to in section 217(a)(12)” of the Immigration and Naturalization Act. That meant seven predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

This time, Graham accepted the euphemism. “It’s clearly not a Muslim ban,” the senator argued on Fox News. “There are Christians and other people in these countries that can’t travel either.”

Graham’s rationalization was spurious. On the same day Trump announced the ban, he promised to make it easier for Middle Eastern Christians—not Muslims—to come to the United States. But now that

Trump was president, Graham didn't want to fight with him. So he ignored Trump's bigotry, and he said courts had no authority to "second-guess" the president's decision.

Altered Bargains

For three months, Graham's bargain—going easy on Trump's domestic behavior while pressing him on foreign policy—paid off. From Syria to Iran to North Korea, Trump was doing what Graham wanted. "I am, like, the happiest dude in America," Graham exulted in a Fox News interview on April 19. "I am all in. . . . Mr. President, you're doing a good job. Keep it up."

Then, on May 9, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey.

The Comey firing, while technically legal, was a blatantly authoritarian act. The FBI had been investigating relationships between the Russian government and the 2016 Trump campaign. Trump had just fired the man in charge of that investigation. It was the kind of thing that happened all the time in autocracies. Now it was happening in the United States.

In a phone call before the announcement, Trump gave Graham a cover story. He told Graham that Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein had instigated the firing and that the reasons, which had nothing to do with the Russia investigation, were laid out in a memo from Rosenstein.

Graham, like other congressional Republicans, bought the story and peddled it on TV. "To suggest otherwise, show me proof," he said.

Almost immediately, the story fell apart. On May 10, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump had told Rosenstein to create the memo as a pretext for the firing. On May 11, in an interview with NBC News, Trump said he had been thinking about "this Russia thing with Trump and Russia" when he decided to fire Comey. That same day, the *Times* reported that Trump, according to Comey, had privately pressed Comey for his loyalty—with apparently unsatisfactory results—before firing him.

On May 16, the *Times* reported that Trump had been trying to corrupt Comey for months and that Comey had documented this pressure campaign in contemporaneous memos. One of the memos described a February 14 meeting at which Trump had asked Comey to drop the FBI's investigation of Mike Flynn—at the time, Trump's national security advisor—for lying to the FBI. Specifically, Flynn had misled the FBI about his back-channel phone calls with Russia's ambassador to the United States in December, shortly after Russia helped Trump win the election.

By this point, it was clear that Trump had fired Comey because Comey had ignored Trump's signals to curtail the Russia investigation. The firing was corrupt, and Graham knew it.

How can we tell Graham knew it? Because in numerous on-camera interviews, he spoke candidly about Trump, Comey, and the investigation.



From Graham's interviews during this time, we know he believed:

- that Comey was honest,
- that Trump often lied,
- that Trump had pressed Comey for personal loyalty,
- that Trump had asked Comey to “go easy” on Flynn, and
- that Trump, by his own admission, had fired Comey over the investigation.

Based on these beliefs, we can infer that Graham also knew:

- that Trump had used Rosenstein to cover up his corrupt motives, and
- that Trump, as he continued to deny Comey's account, was still lying.

In the days and weeks after the firing, Graham repeatedly implored Trump not to impede or shut down the investigation, especially after it was handed off to Special Counsel Robert Mueller. That's another window into Graham's mind: He felt it was necessary to tell Trump not to obstruct the inquiry, because he believed this was what Trump wanted to do.

In a June 8 interview on CBS News, when Graham was asked about Trump's private attempts to coerce Comey, the senator admitted what he really thought of the president: "Half of what Trump does is not okay. If you try to convict him for being a bull in a china shop, crude and rude, you'd win. I mean . . . this is Donald Trump."

What Graham recognized in Comey's memos and in Trump's public behavior was confirmation of everything Graham had said in 2015. Trump had the mentality of an autocrat. Now that he was in power, he was trying to rule like an autocrat. He hadn't changed a bit.

But Graham had. He was now an influential adviser to the president. He was in Trump's orbit.

Trump's Pro-Bono Lawyer

The Comey firing was a turning point in Graham's relationship with Trump. In 2016, he had tried to coach Trump through a series of authoritarian outbursts. At that time, the stakes were lower, because Trump was only a candidate. Then Trump became president and continued the

outbursts. The danger to the country had increased, but again, Graham confined himself to coaching.

The Comey firing, coupled with the exposure of Trump's efforts to corrupt the Russia investigation, escalated the crisis. Trump now held the power of the presidency, and he was using it to shield himself from accountability. He was directly attacking the rule of law.

Graham believed in the rule of law. But he didn't want to turn his back on the president in whom he had invested so much. So he looked for a way to defend Trump without betraying the law.

The solution, he decided, was to become, in effect, Trump's attorney.

In the weeks after Trump fired Comey, Graham continued to speak to Trump through TV cameras. But the senator's advice was no longer about Syria or Iran. It was about the Russia investigation.

Graham wasn't a member of the president's legal team. But he had worked as a defense attorney in the military, and he knew what kind of counsel Trump needed. "You need to listen to your lawyers, Mr. President," he told Trump in one interview. "I am trying to help you. But every time you tweet, it makes it harder on all of us who are trying to help you."

Thinking like a defense attorney eased Graham's dilemma. Representing the president's legal interests felt like a responsible thing to do. And it allowed Graham to set aside his troublesome obligations as a senator. He could stop worrying about the country and just focus on serving his client.



The first thing Graham did was abandon all discussion of Trump's character. In 2015, Graham had explained how Trump's depravity led to heinous ideas such as torture and banning Muslims. Now, in his informal role as an attorney, he could ignore Trump's personal corruption and stick to the letter of the law.

By coercing and firing the FBI director, Trump had subverted the principle of accountability. But could anyone prove he had violated

a statute? Trump's private demands for Comey's loyalty were "not a crime," Graham argued. And Trump's warnings to the FBI director were insufficient to convict the president of obstructing justice.

On June 15, in a radio interview with Brian Kilmeade, Graham parsed Trump's February 14 conversation with Comey. "He didn't say, 'Stop the Russian investigation,'" Graham pointed out. "He said, you know, 'Could you go easy on Mike Flynn?'" Trump was just trying to be a good guy, Graham argued. "There's no belief in my mind he was trying to stop the investigation illegally."

Trump's words belied this gloss. The day after he fired Comey, the president had met privately with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In the meeting, he had told Lavrov, "I just fired the head of the FBI. . . . I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off."

The remark to Lavrov underscored Trump's corrupt motives. But when Graham was asked about the Trump-Lavrov meeting, he insisted that "the president didn't do anything illegal."

As Trump's advocate, Graham selectively withheld information. On May 18, behind closed doors, Rosenstein briefed senators on the memo he had written about Comey's shortcomings as FBI director, which Trump had solicited to justify the firing. Graham emerged from the briefing to tell reporters that Rosenstein had defended what he wrote in the memo. But when Graham was asked whether Rosenstein had been "tasked" to write the memo, he declined to answer.

He also tried to silence his client. After Comey testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee on June 8, Trump offered to testify in response. As a senator, Graham should have welcomed the offer. Instead, he advised Trump to say nothing. "It is inappropriate for the president to testify publicly," said Graham. "It's not good for our democracy."



To accommodate Trump's abuses of power, Graham would have to do more than reorient his moral framework. He would have to revise some of his previous positions.

To begin with, Graham had to reverse his portrayal of Comey. Previously, Graham had recognized the FBI director as a “good man.” On May 10, immediately after Trump fired Comey, Graham acknowledged that Comey was “very sincere” and “a fine man.” But after the *Times* reported on May 11 that Comey had told associates about Trump’s attempts to corrupt him—and after the paper revealed that Comey had recorded these events in memos—Graham realized that Comey’s credibility had to be destroyed. So he recast the former director as a bitter hatchet man.

Comey “was fired. Almost everybody fired is mad at the person that fires them,” Graham told Kilmeade on June 2. He warned of a “hit job on President Trump, where Comey just talks about selective conversations between him and the president in the White House and tries to create an impression of maybe obstruction of justice.”

Two weeks later, Graham went after Comey again. “After he gets fired, he talks about bad encounters with the president, which he did absolutely nothing about, in terms of reporting it as a crime,” Graham charged. “He’s got a political agenda.”

This whole line of attack was a sham. Comey hadn’t waited until he was fired to record his bad encounters with Trump. He had documented the encounters months earlier, in real time. That was the point of the memos. It wasn’t Comey who had changed his story. It was Graham.



The second thing Graham needed to adjust was the hard line he had drawn against intimidation of the FBI. On March 4, at a town hall in South Carolina, Graham had pledged to “make sure the FBI, if they are investigating Trump-Russia ties . . . should be able to do it without hesitation or fear.”

Now that Trump’s attempts to intimidate the bureau had been exposed—including the sacking of its director—the “hesitation or fear” standard had to be dropped. So Graham switched to a more flexible position. Intimidation and decapitation of the FBI were okay, he reasoned, because firing one person wouldn’t necessarily stop the investigation.

“I don’t believe the system’s been compromised,” said Graham. “The system is bigger than Mr. Comey.”

Graham also needed to revise what he had previously said about Flynn’s back-channel phone calls with the Russian ambassador. In February, Graham had stipulated that if Flynn’s conversations included “the idea that the Trump administration would relieve existing sanctions, that would bother me greatly.” The reason, Graham had explained, was that such discussions would have undercut the sanctions and would have rewarded Russia for intervening in the U.S. election to install a Russia-friendly president.

On May 8, the day before Trump fired Comey, Graham had reaffirmed that stipulation.

After the firing, and after Comey’s memos were revealed, this stipulation became a problem. If Flynn’s phone calls with the ambassador were improper, then Trump’s pressure on Comey to drop the Flynn investigation might qualify as obstruction of justice.

So Graham dropped the stipulation. In the months after Comey’s termination, he came around to the view that if Trump had fired Comey for investigating Flynn, that was fine, because “what Flynn lied about is not a crime.”

“I don’t think it’s wrong for a transition person to talk to a foreign government about changing policy,” said Graham, outlining his new position. “I don’t have a problem with the Trump administration reaching out to the Russians [to say] ‘We’re going to take a different view about sanctions.’”



Flynn’s conversations with the ambassador were okay under Graham’s new standard in part because they had taken place after the election. Graham could still say there was no proof of collusion between Russia and Trump or Trump’s aides during the campaign. Without proof of collusion, Graham figured, nothing Trump had done to Comey could

count as obstruction of justice, because there was no underlying crime to hide.

Then the proof showed up. On July 8, the *Times* revealed a meeting that had been held a year earlier at Trump Tower. In the meeting, which took place on June 9, 2016, three top officials in Trump's campaign—his son, Don Jr.; his son-in-law, Kushner; and his campaign chairman, Paul Manafort—had sat down with a Russian lawyer connected to the Kremlin.

In an email chain to set up the meeting, an intermediary working with the Russian side had offered “to provide the Trump campaign with some official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary,” as “part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.” Those were the exact words in the email. To this, Trump Jr. had replied: “If it’s what you say I love it.”

These explicit references, in writing, to the Russian government and its support of Trump made the Trump Tower meeting an open-and-shut case of attempted collusion. And Trump had tried to cover it up. On July 31, 2017, the *Washington Post* reported that the president, in an attempt to play down the meeting, had personally dictated a misleading public statement that concealed the Russian offer.

Faced with this evidence, Graham did what he had to do. He narrowed his definition of collusion.

Graham argued that the Trump Tower meeting didn't count—“We've found no collusion,” he continued to insist—in part because Trump's son didn't think it was collusion. “Don Jr. didn't know it was inappropriate,” Graham pleaded, ignoring the email in which Don Jr. had explicitly welcomed the Russian offer to collude. “It was a mistake. He didn't commit a crime.”

Graham now also specified that collusion had to involve Russian “intelligence services.” Back in February and March, he had defined collusion broadly—as “activity between the Russians and the Trump campaign” or “campaign contacts between the Russians and the Trump campaign.”

After the Trump Tower revelations, Graham tightened his language. In December 2017, he defined collusion as a conspiracy “to coordinate with Russian intelligence services.” In April 2018, he said he was still awaiting proof that the campaign had collaborated with “Russian intelligence services . . . I’ve seen no evidence of that.” In June 2018, he dismissed the Russian visitors to Trump Tower as “these kind of weird Russians. . . . I’ve seen absolutely no evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign [and] any Russian intelligence service.”

In December 2018, Graham added two further provisos. First, he said the purpose of the Russia investigation was specifically to look for collusion pertaining to emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee. By this definition, the Trump Tower emails, which apparently had nothing to do with the DNC, were irrelevant.

Second, Graham said the central question was whether “the Trump campaign [got] an advantage from colluding with the Russians.” This proviso created another reason to ignore the Trump Tower episode. The Russians who came to Trump Tower didn’t have the dirt they had promised. Therefore, the Trump campaign got no advantage from the meeting, and Graham could still claim that there was “no evidence of collusion.”

Democracy-Washing

With each adjustment, Graham became more adept at accommodating Trump’s transgressions. But one big problem remained. In 2015, Graham hadn’t just criticized Trump’s behavior and ideas. He had indicted the man’s character. He had explained why Trump was fundamentally dangerous.

Now that Graham was trying to charm, appease, and protect Trump, that indictment was an embarrassment. Graham needed to make it go away.

The senator couldn’t erase his words. But there was another way to expunge them: He could argue that voters, by electing Trump, had

rejected and discredited Graham's criticisms of him. Democracy had cleansed the authoritarian.

Graham had begun to form this idea in 2016. Now he fully embraced it. At a Senate hearing on March 20, 2017, two weeks after his first lunch with the president, Graham joked that he would never have criticized Trump during the campaign, "saying all the things I said," if he had known Trump was going to win. "But apparently what I said didn't matter. And that's okay with me," said Graham. "The American people chose Donald Trump."

Later, Graham used the same argument to renounce his most famous line about Trump. "I said he was a xenophobic, race-baiting religious bigot," Graham recalled. "I ran out of adjectives. Well, the American people spoke. They rejected my analysis."

Graham didn't really believe, as a general rule, that elections nullified his criticisms of the winning candidates. The 2008 and 2012 elections hadn't softened his views about Obama, and the 2020 election wouldn't stop him from maligning Joe Biden. The only president truly cleansed by the judgment of "the American people," according to Graham, was the one who subverted his accountability to the people.



Graham didn't just invoke democracy to repudiate his own criticisms of Trump. He also invoked it to defend Trump against criticisms from others. In October 2017, when former President George W. Bush spoke out against "bullying and prejudice in our public life"—a comment widely recognized as a rebuke of Trump—Graham replied that Trump, not Bush, had the support of the people. "Donald Trump couldn't have won without rejecting the last 16 years," said Graham. "There were a lot of people like Bush running in our primary, and all of them got creamed."

In particular, Graham said the election had vindicated Trump's harshness. On *Meet the Press*, Graham told Chuck Todd: "The first thing

Donald Trump talked about was pretty tough. And he never stopped, and he won.”

“What does that say about us?” asked Todd.

“It means that we want somebody who’s not traditional,” Graham replied.

This was an inversion of what Graham had said in 2015. Back then, he had disowned Trump’s voters as bigots and haters. “I’m going for the other crowd,” he had professed.

But now Graham was embracing Trump’s voters. He called them *we*.

Graham offered the same retort a month later, when Republican Sen. Jeff Flake of Arizona was caught criticizing Trump on a hot mic. “President Trump is president because the country elected him,” said Graham. “So you’ve got to give the president some credit for having a message and an agenda that people like.”

As Trump pressed on, Graham trailed after him, making the necessary adjustments. On November 28, the *Times* reported that the president, in conversations with advisers, was still claiming to have won the popular vote. He was also still disputing the authenticity of Obama’s birth certificate. When CNN’s Kate Bolduan asked Graham about Trump’s bizarre statements, the senator blamed the media for fussing about them. “What concerns me about the American press,” Graham complained, “is this endless, endless attempt to label the guy as some kind of kook, not fit to be president.”

It was a strange accusation. The *Times* story hadn’t called Trump kooky or unfit. That language had come from Graham. “I think he’s a kook. I think he’s crazy. I think he’s unfit for office,” the senator had said of Trump in February 2016.

But that was long ago. By November 2017, Graham no longer recognized his own words.

Chapter 3

Power Shift

On January 11, 2018, a year into his presidency, Trump exploded during a White House meeting on immigration. He was angry about proposals to let in more people from Haiti, El Salvador, and Africa. “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” he demanded.

Republican senators in the room were taken aback. Afterward, when they were asked about the president’s outburst, some of them denied that they had heard it. Graham, who had spoken up against Trump’s slur during the meeting, refused to tell reporters what Trump had said. When they asked why, he explained: “Because I want to make sure that I can keep talking to the president.”

Trump’s eruption and the scramble to cover it up marked a shift of power in Washington. In his first year as president, congressional Republicans had chosen to excuse and protect him. They thought they were deciding how far to let him go. By his second year, the dynamic had changed. Congressional Republicans were no longer humoring him. They were afraid of him.



One reason why authoritarians tend to gain strength, even in some democratic countries, is sheer determination. The authoritarian’s will to accumulate power is stronger than the will of his opponents to stop him. Over time, that imbalance grinds down both his adversaries and his allies. The aggressor advances; the compromisers retreat.

Graham had seen this happen in other countries. Now it was happening in his country. And he was part of it.

He understood that in theory, Congress was supposed to check the president. In 2016, when Trump and Hillary Clinton were competing for the White House, Graham had talked about the importance of applying congressional “brakes” to their bad ideas. In February 2017, a month into Trump’s presidency, Graham had assured Democrats, “To the extent that Donald Trump becomes the problem, we will push back.”

It didn’t turn out that way. In his first year in power, Trump pushed harder than Congress did. As he crossed one line after another—banning travel from several Muslim countries; firing James Comey; pardoning former Sheriff Joe Arpaio, an anti-immigrant scofflaw—congressional Republicans gave way. Trump gunned the accelerator, and the brakes wore down.

Like many other Republicans, Graham liked having a forceful president. He knew that in foreign policy, this was an asset. In April 2017, when Trump fired missiles into Syria, Graham told the world: “If you’re an adversary of the United States, and you don’t worry about what Trump may do on any given day, then you’re crazy.” A year later, after Trump had threatened North Korea with “fire and fury,” Graham declared that Kim Jong-un, the North Korean dictator, had “put himself in the crosshairs of Donald Trump.” Graham warned Kim: “If you play Trump, that’s the end of you.”

But strongmen—Kim, Putin, Trump—don’t just threaten other countries. They also bully their own people. Graham made this point, inadvertently, when Trump slapped tariffs on China in July 2018. “If I were y’all, I’d work with him [Trump], or else,” Graham advised China’s ambassador to the United States. “Do not get on the wrong side of this guy. I’ve been there.”

Graham thought that was a good line. He meant it as a warning to China. He didn’t recognize it as a warning to America.



Why do political elites miss these warning signs? Why do they align themselves, often fatally, with rising authoritarians?

One reason is that they think they're special. They think they can protect themselves and manage the authoritarian by building personal relationships with him. They tell themselves he's really a good guy. They tell themselves he's their friend.

After the immigration meeting, Graham claimed that the president who had behaved badly that day—which happened to be a Thursday—wasn't the real Trump. The real Trump, Graham insisted, was "Tuesday Trump," who had presided over a friendlier meeting two days earlier in front of C-SPAN cameras. "The president that was on TV Tuesday is the guy I play golf with. He was charming, he was funny," Graham told WLTX, a South Carolina TV station. "That's the guy I know."

When Graham was asked whether Trump was a racist, he shot back, "Absolutely not." He explained:

You could be dark as charcoal [or] lily white. It doesn't matter, as long as you're nice to him. You could be the pope and criticize him. It doesn't matter; he'll go after the pope. You could be Putin and say nice things, and he'll like you.

Here's what I've found: He's a street fighter. It's not the color of your skin that matters. It's not the content of your character. It's whether or not you show him respect and like him. And if he feels like . . . you don't like him, he punches back.

Graham was trying to say that Trump didn't care about color. But he was also admitting that Trump didn't care about morals. All Trump cared about was loyalty to Trump. He was a ruthless, belligerent narcissist.



In the months that followed this episode, Graham often referred back to “Tuesday Trump.” He implied that this genial version of Trump was the real thing and that the nastier version, Thursday Trump, was an aberration.

This theory didn’t make much sense. The Tuesday meeting was the one recorded for TV. It was far more likely that the real Trump was the one who had erupted on Thursday, when the cameras weren’t running.

But Graham wanted to believe he could bring out Trump’s jovial side. He had seen it on the golf course. He told himself that Trump just needed love. And he hoped that by lavishing praise on Tuesday Trump, he could coax the president to behave nicely.

At best, this was self-deception. Golf was a completely misleading context in which to judge Trump’s character. Only the president’s friends or sycophants were allowed to play golf with him. On the golf course, he was happy because nobody got in his way.

In a constitutional democracy, people did get in the president’s way. And that infuriated Trump. He needed more than love. He needed compliance.

Sooner or later, if you tried to appease Trump, you would have to choose between him and the rule of law. An authoritarian cares more about power than anything else. So eventually, to stay on his good side, you have to accept his authoritarianism.

That was the lesson of the Comey saga. First comes the intimate dinner and the request for loyalty. Then comes the request to drop an investigation, exonerate the president, or look the other way. Either you draw a line, or you betray your country.

Comey chose his country. Graham didn’t. The senator thought this was just one concession. He thought he was still the same man.

But he wasn’t. The act of concession changes you. You don’t just learn how to bend. You also learn how to tell yourself that you never bent.

How Checks and Balances Fail

On January 25, a few days after Graham helped to cover up the “shithole” outburst, the *Times* revealed that Trump’s efforts to derail the Russia investigation hadn’t ended with firing Comey. In June 2017, the president had ordered White House Counsel Don McGahn to fire Mueller. Trump had relented only after McGahn said he would resign rather than carry out the order.

The *Times* report showed that Trump had persisted in his schemes to obstruct justice and that he was still lying about it. It confirmed what Graham had said in 2015: Trump was incorrigibly corrupt. But by 2018, Graham had learned how to navigate the corruption. He had defended the firing of Comey. So he could defend the attempt to fire Mueller.

On January 28, in an ABC News interview, Graham offered several excuses for Trump’s attacks on the investigation. “Every president wants to get rid of critics,” the senator argued. He praised Trump for backing down after McGahn threatened to quit. “He did not fire Mr. Mueller,” Graham pointed out. “To the president’s credit, he listened.”

The interviewer, Martha Raddatz, noted Trump’s pattern of obstruction. In addition to his attack on Mueller, she observed, the president had “tried to prevent Attorney General [Jeff] Sessions from recusing himself from the Russia investigation, asked Comey to drop the Flynn investigation before firing him, and dictated that misleading statement about Don Jr.’s Trump Tower meeting.”

Graham sidestepped the question. And when Raddatz asked about the possibility of Trump testifying before Mueller, the senator advised Trump to clam up. “If the president wants to talk to Mr. Mueller,” he warned, “before he makes that decision, if I were him, I would talk to my lawyers.”

Graham agreed, in theory, that a president shouldn’t have limitless power to fire people who were investigating him. He reminded Raddatz that he had signed on to a bill that would let judges review any termina-

tion of a special counsel. “I’ve got legislation protecting Mr. Mueller,” he said. “And I’ll be glad to pass it tomorrow.”

But the bill never passed—it never even came up for a vote—and its demise exposed a weakness in our constitutional republic: Checks and balances don’t work if one branch is unwilling to confront the other.



On April 9, the FBI raided the home and office of Trump’s longtime attorney, Michael Cohen. Media reports said the raids stemmed from an investigation initiated by Mueller. The raids alarmed and infuriated Trump. When reporters asked him whether he would fire Mueller, the president claimed that “many people” had advised him to do just that. “We’ll see what happens,” he said.

The next day, the *Times* reported that in December, Trump had “told advisers in no uncertain terms that Mr. Mueller’s investigation had to be shut down.” This time, the provocation was a report that Mueller’s team had subpoenaed Trump’s bank records. Trump had withdrawn his demand only after his lawyers ascertained that the report wasn’t true.

This was the third time Trump was known to have fired or attempted to fire the person in charge of the Russia investigation. And he was itching to try again. Sources involved in talks with the president told CNN that in the wake of the Cohen raids, Trump was considering firing Mueller’s supervisor, Rosenstein, in order to get at the special counsel.

Graham clearly believed that Trump was serious about trying again. In a Fox News interview, he implored Trump not to do it. “Mr. President, if you’re watching. I think you’re going to be fine, unless you screw this up,” he pleaded. “Let the process play out.”



On April 11, Graham sponsored a new bill to allow judicial review of any decision to fire a special counsel. (He would later explain that he had

signed onto the bill at the request of a Democratic senator.) But some of Graham's Republican colleagues worried that the bill would antagonize the president. Telling Trump what he couldn't do would be "poking the bear," one senator cautioned. Another fretted about "picking an unnecessary fight with the president."

Graham felt the heat, too. He later told Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, the authors of *The Divider*, that in a private conversation with him, Trump "went apeshit" over the bill.

On April 17, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that he wouldn't even let the Senate vote on the bill. He said it was futile because Trump would veto it. "Even if we pass it, why would he sign it?" McConnell asked.

And with that, the system of checks and balances failed. A bill to forestall authoritarianism was shelved because it would offend the authoritarian.

Graham didn't mind. When he was told of McConnell's decision, he gave his assent. "That's his decision to make," said Graham. "I'll leave it up to the majority leader how to run the floor."

Two days later, Graham offered Trump his full allegiance. "I believe President Donald J. Trump will run for reelection," he announced. "And I intend to support him."

Unconditional Love

Graham's commitment to a second Trump term, barely a year into Trump's first, handed the president a blank check. It was one thing to accept, out of respect for democracy, the election of an incipient despot. It was another thing to tell him, as he abused his office to protect himself, that he had his party's support to remain in power for another seven years.

By this point, Graham routinely spoke of Trump in worshipful terms—"He's a force of nature"—and had largely abandoned any interest in scrutinizing him. In 2016, Graham had criticized Trump for

openly encouraging Russia to hack Clinton's emails. But in 2018, when Mueller released evidence that Russian intelligence officers had tried to fulfill Trump's request, Graham said nothing. In 2017, Graham had talked about examining Trump's finances, possibly through his tax returns. But in 2018, Graham brushed off that idea, calling Trump's returns "the last thing on my mind."

When reporters brought up Graham's past criticisms of Trump, the senator disowned them. "I said a lot of things. Nobody cared," he shrugged. "Everything I said before is in my rearview mirror."

Meanwhile, even Trump's aides began to acknowledge his authoritarianism. His "impulses are generally anti-trade and anti-democratic," wrote Miles Taylor, a senior official in the Department of Homeland Security, in a *Times* op-ed that was published anonymously. "In public and in private, President Trump shows a preference for autocrats and dictators."

In Bob Woodward's book, Fear, senior aides called the president "unhinged" and "off the rails." The book revealed, among other things, that Trump had called Sessions a "traitor" for failing to control the Russia investigation.

Graham wasn't interested. "The op-ed and the book won't matter in 2020," he assured Fox News viewers.

On August 6, at a Republican dinner in Greenville, South Carolina, Graham flaunted his connections to Trump's family. "I've never had more access to a president than I have with Donald Trump," he told the audience. He described a small dinner gathering he'd had the previous night with Melania Trump, Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, and three Fox News hosts. And he defended Kushner's role in the 2016 Trump Tower meeting.

Graham told the crowd in Greenville that Kushner was innocent because once Kushner saw what the Russians had brought, he had asked his assistant to call him out of the meeting. The Russians had promised dirt on Clinton, but they had failed to deliver it. Kushner, realizing that the conversation was a waste of time, had bugged out. He had failed to report the meeting to the FBI, and he had omitted it from security-clearance

forms that subsequently asked about his contacts with foreign governments.

All of this behavior was consistent with a failed collusion attempt. But by Graham's definition, failed collusion didn't count. There was "zero evidence" of collusion, he told the audience.

Graham said he'd had enough of the media going after Trump. "People are pretty tired of it," he grouched. So he told the audience in Greenville that he had a new message for Trump.

"Here's what I told the president," he said. "If you feel good doing it, do it."



What Trump felt like doing was firing people who investigated him or who failed to protect him from investigations. And Graham, who had previously opposed such blatant subversions of justice, now found reasons to indulge them.

In 2017, when Trump fired Comey, Graham had scrambled to invent specific excuses for the termination. But by the spring of 2018, Graham had moved on to an expansive view of presidential power.

On April 10, Graham declared on Fox News that in the absence of proven collusion—as redefined, narrowly, by Graham—the president had absolute authority to terminate the FBI director. As long as Trump hadn't colluded with "Russian intelligence services," Graham contended, "Why he fired Comey doesn't matter, because he could fire Comey for the way he looks."

Four months later—and two weeks after the dinner in Greenville—Graham all but invited Trump to fire Sessions. In July 2017, Graham had warned, "If Jeff Sessions is fired, there will be holy hell to pay." But on August 23, 2018, after a year of Trump's wrath over Sessions's recusal from the Russia investigation, Graham surrendered. "For the good of the nation, I think we need an attorney general that has the confidence of the president," he concluded. "You serve at the pleasure of the president."

Trump didn't just want Sessions to rein in the Russia inquiry. He also wanted him to withhold indictments of other Republicans for insider trading and stealing campaign funds. On September 3, the president excoriated Sessions for allowing federal prosecutors to bring charges against “two very popular Republican Congressmen”—Chris Collins of New York and Duncan Hunter of California, both of whom later pleaded guilty—thereby depriving the GOP of “two easy wins” in the upcoming midterms.

Trump's condemnation of the indictments was openly corrupt. But Graham—while conceding that it would be wrong to exempt Republicans from the law—again defended the president. “There's been a long-standing policy when it comes to prosecuting public officials: Don't try to interfere with the election,” Graham argued. That was “the president's main point,” he insisted.

Sessions didn't yield to Trump's pressure. Later that year, Trump fired him. Graham said the president's decision was fine. It couldn't be obstruction of justice, Graham explained, because Trump had an “almost unlimited ability to fire the attorney general.”

Through all of this, Graham saw himself as an institutionalist. But he was gradually undercutting the institutions of constitutional democracy. The arguments he was invoking—that it was good to have a leader who inspired fear, that the president had broad license to fire the people in charge of investigating him, that the chief executive had a mandate for anything he did, and that the only important thing was achieving results—were pillars of authoritarianism.

Normalization and Polarization

When historians try to explain the decline or fall of a democracy, they often look for fatal moments or decisions. But sometimes there's no decision. Sometimes it's just inertia. By the fall of 2018, the threat to American democracy was about to escalate for entirely mundane reasons: normalization and polarization.

When an authoritarian rises to power in a democratic country, it can be a shock. But over time, the shock wears off. As the new leader tramples norms and rules, people get used to it. That's part of what happened to Graham and his colleagues in Trump's first year. They got used to the president's behavior. It began to feel normal.

Normalization is corrosive. It numbs you to the authoritarian's crimes. You stop noticing what's happening. Or you no longer care. Or you get used to defending the leader's abuses, as Graham did.

The second stage is more serious. Once the authoritarian's allies have normalized his behavior, they rally around him just as they would rally around any other leader of their party. And they attack his opponents just as they would if he were a normal president.

This changes the nature and consequences of their collaboration. By treating any criticism of the president as an attack on the party, and by savaging anyone who gets in his way, they become soldiers for authoritarianism. They don't just protect the leader. They clear his path as he abuses and expands his power.

The first target of this swarming behavior, in Trump's case, was Comey. In October 2016, Trump had praised Comey for announcing, in a letter just before the election, that he was reopening the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton. There's disagreement about how much the letter affected the election, but it clearly helped Trump. Only later, after Comey documented Trump's efforts to stifle the Russia investigation, did Republicans turn against the FBI director and caricature him as anti-Trump hack.

On April 10, 2018, as Comey prepared to tell his story in a book, MSNBC aired new evidence that backed him up. Comey hadn't just written memos about Trump's attempts to corrupt him. He had also reported some of Trump's behavior to Dana Boente—at that time, the acting deputy attorney general—and Boente had recorded Comey's account in notes. The notes showed that Comey, unlike Trump, had said then what he was saying now.

The Republican National Committee responded with a coordinated attack on Comey. Graham joined in the smear campaign, claiming that

Comey had a “bias against President Trump” and was “part of an effort at the FBI to give Clinton a pass.” “He’s no longer the former director of the FBI,” said Graham. “He’s a political operative.”

As more people who had worked with Trump began to tell stories similar to Comey’s, Graham and other Republicans turned on them, too. The reason why so many witnesses described Trump as ruthless, Graham argued—and why so many people in law enforcement were investigating the president—wasn’t because he was truly corrupt. It was because all these people had it in for him.

Graham pointed out, correctly, that some parts of the Russia inquiry had been mishandled. In particular, investigators had mised a court to get a surveillance warrant against Carter Page, a marginal character who turned out to be irrelevant. Graham tried to spin these minor issues into a larger conspiracy. On September 2, 2018, he claimed that “the Department of Justice and the FBI” were “out to get Trump,” and he vowed to target these agencies in the coming year. On September 23, he accused them of plotting to oust the president. “There’s a bureaucratic coup going on at the Department of Justice and FBI,” he charged.

At the time, this escalation of Graham’s language didn’t seem significant. But in retrospect, it begins to explain what happened four days later.

The Kavanaugh Fight

On September 27, Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology, appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee. She testified that Brett Kavanaugh—who at the time of the hearing was a federal appellate judge nominated by Trump to the Supreme Court—had sexually assaulted her 36 years earlier. Kavanaugh, testifying after her, angrily denied it.

When Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin suggested that Kavanaugh should request a suspension of the confirmation process until the FBI could investigate Ford’s allegation, Graham exploded. In a four-minute rant, he savaged his Democratic colleagues, accusing them of sand-

bagging Kavanaugh. Any senator who voted against the nominee was “legitimizing the most despicable thing I have seen,” he sputtered. To Democrats on the committee, he seethed: “Y’all want power. God, I hope you never get it.”

Graham’s tirade shocked his colleagues in both parties. Nothing in the hearing or in his prior relationship with Kavanaugh or Durbin seemed to explain the intensity of his rage. But he had been building toward this moment for months, demonizing anyone who threatened Trump. He needed to hate the Democrats. And now he did.

Those four minutes pushed Graham over the edge. It wasn’t the speech that changed him. It was the response to the speech. In a phone call, Trump congratulated him. “Wow! Remind me not to make you mad,” said the president. Sean Hannity told Graham it was “your finest moment ever.” Republican audiences suddenly adored Graham. In South Carolina, his approval rating soared.

Graham reveled in his newfound fame. He began to tell stories about his four minutes of fury. “I was the voice of millions of Americans,” he said. “I hope I spoke for you.”

In the past, Graham had described Democrats as misguided but well-meaning. Now he condemned them as malicious. “The Democratic party is organized around what they hate,” he told one Republican audience in October. “They will do anything to get their way,” he told another. “It’s not enough to have [Kavanaugh] on the Court. They’ve got to be punished.”

Graham declared himself a changed man. He warned that the Democrats had “brought out a different side of Lindsey Graham.” On October 7, as the midterms approached, he told Fox News, “I’ve never campaigned against a colleague in my life. That’s about to change.” Over the next month, he traveled from state to state, urging voters to purge Democratic senators and “kick their ass at the ballot box.”

It worked. On November 6, four Democratic senators lost their seats. Republicans increased their majority. Graham was about to become chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

But in the House, it was a different story. Democrats picked up 41 seats, gaining control of the chamber. For the first time in his presidency, Trump was going to face real resistance.

Graham was determined to break that resistance. He was ready to go to war for Trump.

Chapter 4

Domestic Enemies

On November 26, 2018, Graham got a treat: He would share the stage with Trump at a rally. Graham's stern words about Trump in 2015 were long forgotten. His tirade against Democrats at the Kavanaugh hearings had made him a hero on the right. And his work to defeat Democratic senators in the midterms had solidified his standing in the GOP.

At the rally in Tupelo, Mississippi, Trump lambasted illegal immigrants and the "Russian witch hunt." He lavished praise on Graham, recalling the senator's "brilliant" words in defense of Kavanaugh. And he summoned Graham to the podium, calling him "my friend" and a "star."

The crowd cheered. Graham beamed. The next day, he was still glowing.

Graham had finally earned Trump's love. He was earning the love of Trump's voters, too. These were the voters Graham had shunned as haters in 2015. But now they welcomed Graham, because he was giving them what they wanted: resentment, wrath, and the vilification of Trump's opponents.

As Trump polarized America, this enthusiasm from his fan base galvanized Republican allegiance to him. Some lawmakers had been with him from the beginning. Others had fallen in line when he captured the nomination or when he became president. Still others, worn down by his aggression, had eventually surrendered to exhaustion or fear.

But as Trump's base became the party's base, there was one more reason to give in: Republican politicians who embraced him would be

loved. And the more fiercely these politicians affirmed his view of the world, reviling his enemies and defending his abuses of power, the more love they would get.



Four days after the rally in Mississippi, Graham spoke at a Republican breakfast in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He recalled his four minutes of glory at the Kavanaugh hearings. “I spoke for you,” he told the crowd. “I unloaded.”

The fight over Kavanaugh, Graham explained, was just one battle in a great war against Trump’s enemies. Every Republican had to stand with the president, because any attack on the president was an attack on all conservatives. “It’s not just about Trump; it’s about *us*,” Graham said. The goal of Democrats, he told the audience, was “to destroy us.”

As Graham traveled his home state that winter, this was his message to Republicans: In the struggle between Trump and the Democrats, there could be no middle ground. Democrats were vicious and had to be defeated. “They hate us,” he said. On court appointments and related issues, he charged, “there’s nothing they won’t do.”

In the old days, Graham hadn’t talked this way. He had often worked with Democrats on legislation. He still would, but something had changed. He had decided—or at least had decided to tell himself—that something about the Kavanaugh fight justified a more zealous allegiance to Trump.

Politically, this was the shrewd play. Graham was up for re-election in 2020, and he needed Trump’s voters to win his primary. But that didn’t fully explain his behavior. Even after his re-election, Graham never went back to equivocating about Trump.

He wasn’t alone. To varying degrees, this transition was happening across the party. In Trump’s first two years, many Republican lawmakers had felt obliged to explain or answer for his misdeeds. Often, they had acknowledged inconvenient facts or legal constraints that stood in his way. But over time, fatigue, partisan anger, and political necessity hard-

ened them. They were developing the indifference necessary to protect a tyrant.

To rationalize their increasingly militant devotion, they convinced themselves that the president's enemies were the greater threat. They claimed that Democrats would do anything to destroy Trump and the country. And that paranoid fantasy created a permission structure for Republicans to do anything in Trump's defense.

Situational Commitments

Eleven days after the breakfast in North Myrtle Beach, Trump summoned Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Chuck Schumer—the Democratic leaders in the House and Senate, respectively—to the White House. He told them he would shut down the government unless Congress appropriated money for a wall on the Mexican border. “If the Democrats do not give us the votes,” Trump proclaimed, “the Military will build the remaining sections of the Wall.”

The shutdown began on December 22. Two weeks later, on January 4, Trump threatened to declare a “national emergency” that would allow him to bypass Congress and unilaterally fund his wall.

Before Trump became president, Graham had opposed such imperial abuse of executive power. In 2014, when President Barack Obama overhauled immigration policy by executive order, Graham had called Obama's decision to “unilaterally change immigration” a “tremendous presidential overreach.” In 2016, he had denounced Obama's order as “unconstitutional.”

But now that Trump held the White House, Graham endorsed unilateral presidential authority. “Speaker Pelosi's refusal to negotiate on funding for a border wall/barrier . . . virtually ends the congressional path,” said Graham. “Democrats will do everything in their power to stop Trump in 2020,” he concluded. “Mr. President, Declare a national emergency NOW. Build a wall NOW.”

As Democrats held their ground—and some Republicans hesitated to support such a grave expansion of presidential power—Graham dialed up the pressure on senators who dared to resist Trump. “We’re going to build a wall one way or the other,” he told Democratic lawmakers on January 30. The president “has all the power in the world to do this,” he said. Raising a finger to punctuate his threat, he warned lawmakers in his own party, “To my Republican colleagues: Stand behind him. And if you don’t, you’re going to pay a price.”

Graham’s threats completed a four-year turn in his views on intimidation. In 2015 and 2016, he had recognized Trump’s despotic personality as a danger to the country. Then, in 2017 and 2018, he had found a good use for the president’s bullying: scaring foreign adversaries. Graham had warned them to comply with Trump’s demands, or else.

Now Graham came full circle. The adversaries he sought to intimidate were no longer foreign governments. They were his own colleagues. And Trump was his weapon.



The wall fight marked a new stage of Graham’s collaboration with the president. He wasn’t just protecting Trump from accountability. He was helping Trump usurp power.

The Constitution prohibits federal spending without congressional authorization. Previous presidents had issued emergency declarations, but never to override Congress. Despite this, Graham said Republicans had to stand with Trump against the Democrats. “What they’re trying to do is basically destroy America as we know it,” Graham said of the opposition party’s resistance. To break that resistance, he contended, the president “has to declare a national emergency.”

Some Republican senators worried about the implications for constitutional democracy. What would happen, they asked, if presidents began to commandeer the Treasury routinely, or if they declared states of emergency to enact other policies they couldn’t pass through Congress?

Graham advised his colleagues not to fuss about that. “To all my Republican colleagues who worry about the precedent we’re setting for the future and the legal niceties, here’s what I would say,” he told them. “It’s not what a Democrat may do in the future [that] should drive your thinking.” He counseled them to set aside such institutional concerns and focus instead on the urgency and popularity of securing the border.

Even if the emergency declaration were to be found unconstitutional, said Graham, Republicans should support it, at least for now, because it was politically useful. If the courts were to block it, he argued, Trump would “be seen as . . . fighting for what he promised, and the Democrats are on the wrong side of border security. There is no losing.” Graham called it “a great issue for 2019 and 2020.”



On February 15, Trump did it. He declared an emergency to take money for the wall, claiming—falsely—that America was under attack. “We have an invasion of drugs, invasion of gangs, invasion of people,” the president asserted.

Sixteen states filed suit against Trump’s power grab, asking the courts to step in. So Graham began to think about how Trump could manipulate the courts. In a radio interview on February 22, Hugh Hewitt urged Graham to consider “expediting” the confirmations of Trump-friendly appellate judges so they would be in place “before the barrier/wall issue comes up from the district court.” Graham replied, “Yeah, we will get them on the floor. . . . We’re thinking about changing the rules so that the thirty-hour period to debate a judge is reduced to two hours.”

Two weeks later, Graham explained to Sean Hannity how Trump could argue in court that he had congressional approval to seize the money, even though he didn’t. To stop Trump, Congress would have to pass a resolution of disapproval. The president would then veto it. If either chamber failed to muster the two-thirds majority necessary to override his veto, the resolution would fail. “When it goes to court,” Graham proposed, “the president will say, ‘Wait a minute, Congress *did*

act. They [passed] the resolution; I vetoed it; and the Congress sustained my veto. That's acting.”

This was an extralegal authoritarian pact between the executive and a faction of Congress. The president, backed by one-third of one chamber, would seize powers constitutionally reserved to Congress. And the judiciary, having been stacked by the executive through unusual procedures, would stand back and accept it.

And that's pretty much what happened. The House and Senate voted to invalidate Trump's declaration. On March 15, he vetoed their attempt to stop him. And because Republican lawmakers stood with him, Democrats failed to override the veto.

Three months later, in a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court allowed Trump to proceed with the wall. Brett Kavanaugh cast the deciding vote.

Lie for Me

A week after Trump vetoed the resolution to deny him emergency powers, Graham moved on to his next mission: burying the Russia investigation.

On March 24, Trump's new attorney general, William Barr, phoned the senator with a heads up: Robert Mueller had filed his report on the investigation. Barr told Graham that the report was ambiguous as to whether Trump had obstructed justice. The attorney general explained that Mueller had handed off the question of prosecuting Trump, essentially telling Barr, “I don't know, you decide.”

Barr also sent Graham a summary of the report. The summary included Mueller's stipulation that the report didn't “exonerate” the president.

For two years, Graham had promised Trump that Mueller would “clear” him. In June 2017, the senator told Fox News viewers that Mueller had “determined there's no obstruction case.” In September 2018, he claimed that “Mueller won't find anything” and “the Russia

probe is falling apart.” In February 2019, he predicted that the investigation would “result in no evidence of collusion.”

The actual report, as summarized by Barr, reached no such conclusions. Barr’s summary said the report “did not establish,” at a level sufficient for prosecution, that Trump’s campaign had “conspired or coordinated” with Russia. The summary didn’t say that Mueller had concluded there was no collusion, much less that he had found no evidence of collusion. In fact, the full report—which would soon be released, but hadn’t yet been shown to Graham or anyone else outside the Department of Justice—presented extensive evidence of collusion and obstruction.

But Graham was determined to end the threat to Trump. So he lied. He pretended that the report had cleared the president.

In the days after Barr issued his summary, Graham lied relentlessly:

- March 25: “The conclusion was firm, without equivocation, that no one on the Trump campaign colluded with the Russians when it came to the 2016 election.”
- March 25: “He [Mueller] has rendered his verdict: There is no collusion.”
- March 26: “Mr. Mueller said there was no evidence of collusion between President Trump or anybody on his campaign with the Russians, period.”
- March 28: “Mueller has concluded there was no collusion.”
- March 31: “The conclusions are, there was no collusion, there was no obstruction. . . . Mr. Mueller, for two years, looked at this very hard. He came out with the conclusion there was no collusion.”

None of this was true. But Graham didn’t focus on facts. He focused on destroying what he called the “collusion narrative.” He had prepared

his message—that the report exonerated Trump—and he delivered that message with gusto.

In fact, he said the whole investigation had been unnecessary. “They spent \$25 million trying to figure out whether or not President Trump colluded with the Russians,” Graham told a Republican audience on March 30. “They could have given me 50 bucks, and I could have given them the answer.” The next day on Fox News, he scoffed, “This whole thing was ridiculous if you know the president.”



Mueller’s full report, released on April 18, detailed several channels of attempted collusion. In addition to the Trump Tower meeting, the report found that Trump and his aides had tried to coordinate their activities with public releases—planned by Russia’s partner, WikiLeaks—of material hacked by the Russians from Clinton and the Democrats. The report confirmed that after Trump publicly invited Russia to find Clinton’s emails, hackers affiliated with the Russian government had tried to do just that. And Trump’s campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, had passed internal campaign documents to an associate who was connected to Russian intelligence.

Mueller also presented evidence of obstruction of justice. In addition to Trump’s coercion of Comey and Trump’s attempts to fire Mueller, the report showed that the president had told McGahn to give false testimony. And on July 19, 2017, Trump had instructed his former campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, to tell Sessions to abort the Mueller investigation. According to the report, Trump had told Lewandowski “that if Sessions did not meet with [Lewandowski], Lewandowski should tell Sessions he was fired.”

None of this information seemed to trouble Graham. He simply repeated his lies.

Graham now had access to the full report, so he knew that what he was saying wasn’t true. Yet he kept going:

- April 24: “He was cleared, without any doubt, about colluding with the Russians.”
- May 1: “Mr. Mueller and his team concluded there was no collusion.”
- May 1: “The Mueller report said there was no collusion, no conspiracy. . . . Mueller exonerated the president, in terms of working with the Russians.”
- May 29: “The report shows there was no collusion between the Trump campaign and any member or operative of the Russian government.”
- June 15: “[Mueller] tells us there’s no collusion.”
- July 14: “Mueller said there was no collusion.”

Graham lied even more egregiously about the evidence of obstruction. “There was no effort by Trump to impede the Mueller investigation,” he proclaimed on April 24, ignoring the 40 pages in which Mueller had documented Trump’s efforts to impede the investigation. Graham repeated this preposterous denial in one statement and interview after another. He also repeated—again, falsely—that Mueller had issued a verdict of “no obstruction.”

On *Face the Nation*, Margaret Brennan asked Graham about the June 2017 conversation in which Trump had ordered McGahn to fire Mueller. Graham replied: “I don’t care what happened between him [Trump] and Don McGahn.”

Mueller tried to correct the public misrepresentations of his report. On May 29, he stipulated: “If we had had confidence that the president clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said so.” On July 24, he reaffirmed that “the president was not exculpated for the acts that he allegedly committed.”

Graham responded by rebuking the special counsel. The only thing that mattered, said Graham, was that Mueller had failed to prove Trump was “guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Mueller said it was up to Congress to decide what to do with his report. But when the House Judiciary Committee subpoenaed McGahn to testify about Trump’s obstruction, Trump defied the subpoena and blocked McGahn and other aides from testifying.



Graham endorsed the president’s defiance. He urged Trump to fight the Democrats “tooth and nail” because they were “trying to destroy him and his family.” Stonewalling was justified, according to Graham, because the House inquiry was illegitimate. “You’re not covering anything up when you’re fighting a bunch of politicians trying to destroy you and your family,” he reasoned.

Trump, for his part, was unrepentant. In fact, he said that if Russia or China were to offer him damaging information about a political opponent—the same pitch that had led to the Trump Tower meeting—he would listen to the offer again. He ridiculed the idea of reporting such an offer to the FBI.

And Graham defended him. In 2017, Graham, alarmed by the Trump Tower emails, had read them aloud at a Senate hearing. He had emphasized that anyone who received such a message—“suggesting that a foreign government wants to help you by disparaging your opponent”—should “call the FBI.” But now Graham needed to excuse Trump’s contempt for that rule. So he argued that reporting such offers from foreign governments “has not been recent practice.”

“I meet with foreign people all the time. So does the president,” said Graham. “Sitting down and talking with somebody is fine. . . . You don’t call up the FBI every time somebody talks to you.”



None Dare Call It Authoritarianism

Why didn't Graham and other Republicans understand that they were enabling authoritarianism? Because they saw themselves as serving a man, not an idea. They thought authoritarianism was a doctrine. If you didn't espouse the doctrine, you weren't an authoritarian.

But that isn't how authoritarianism emerges in a democracy. It doesn't appear in the form of an idea. It appears in the form of a man.

So Graham and his colleagues didn't think they were doing anything unusual. Trump was the leader of their party. They would follow him wherever he went. They thought that was how party politics worked.

In some ways, this was less dangerous than an ideological commitment. If Trump were to lose power, then perhaps his party—lacking an explicitly authoritarian belief system—could revert to democratic norms.

But in other ways, it was more dangerous. The party would defend anything Trump did. And he wasn't just a bully. He was a plunderer and a racist.



On July 14, as Congress was awaiting Mueller's testimony, Trump lashed out at a group of Democratic congresswomen—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib—who had compared some migrant detention facilities in the United States to concentration camps.

The president said these women “originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world.” He said they had no business “viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.”

All three congresswomen were American citizens. Two had been born in the United States. But it wasn't hard to figure out Trump's angle. Two of the women were Muslim: Omar was from Somalia; Tlaib was from a family of Palestinian origin. Ocasio-Cortez, born in the Bronx, was of Puerto Rican ancestry.

Three days later, Trump denounced Omar at a rally. The crowd chanted, "*Send her back! Send her back!*" In his speech, Trump accused the congresswomen of "trying to tear our country down." "They're always telling us how to run it," he said. "If they don't love it, tell them to leave it."

Like other elected Republicans, Graham didn't want to defend such overt racism. But he did want to defend Trump. So he pretended that the president's attacks on the congresswomen weren't bigoted. Trump had good reason to "go after" them, Graham said, because "they're running our country down. He's tired of that."

When Democrats complained about Trump's remarks, Graham tuned them out. "If you are a Republican nominee for President—or President—you will be accused of being a racist," he tweeted, dismissing the accusation.

On July 18, reporters pressed Graham about Trump's statements and the rally chant. Graham responded by defining racism in a way that excluded Trump's remarks. Explicit attacks on a person's ancestry, including calls to leave the country, weren't racist, Graham suggested, as long as the targeted person was a member of the political opposition. "A Somali refugee embracing Trump would not have been asked to go back," Graham asserted. "If you're a racist, you want *everybody* from Somalia to go back."

The congresswomen had it coming to them, said Graham. They had been "incredibly provocative," he grouched. "When you start accusing people of running concentration camps, who work for the United States government, you're going to be met with some pretty fiery responses."

With that, Graham crossed a line that was familiar in authoritarian countries. Four years earlier, he had recognized Trump as a race-baiting bigot. Now, with a revised vocabulary and a clear conscience, Graham

was rationalizing ethnic persecution. Targeting Americans based on their ancestry was understandable and not racist, under his new definition, if they were guilty of not “embracing Trump.”



Soon after that episode, Graham found a way to accommodate one of Trump’s proposed war crimes: using the U.S. military to loot other countries.

In October, Trump said he would pull American forces out of Syria. He framed this policy as a business decision. “The U.S. is always the ‘sucker,’ on NATO, on Trade, on everything,” the president complained. He protested that America’s Kurdish allies in Syria “were paid massive amounts of money” and that housing ISIS fighters in American prisons was a “tremendous cost.”

On Twitter, Trump made his position clear: “WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT.”

Graham vehemently opposed the pullout. He understood that by “benefit,” Trump meant money. He also understood that Trump had been talking for years about taking oil from Middle Eastern countries. So Graham decided to persuade Trump that keeping troops in Syria could pay off in the form of oil revenue.

On October 14, Graham and retired Army Gen. Jack Keane showed Trump a map of the Syrian region where American forces were present. Graham and Keane pointed out the oil fields. A week later, in a lunch with the president, Graham followed up, stressing the importance of controlling the oil.

It worked. Trump agreed to keep troops in Syria. “He sees the benefit . . . of controlling the oil as part of a counter-ISIS strategy,” said Graham.

To Graham, keeping U.S. forces in Syria wasn’t about the money. It was about standing with the Kurds and thwarting ISIS and Iran. But to please Trump, Graham endorsed what he had condemned in 2015 and 2016: using the military to expropriate foreign oil.

“President Trump is thinking outside the box,” Graham boasted on Fox News on October 20. “I was so impressed with his thinking about the oil.” The senator outlined the business arrangement: “We’re on the verge of a joint venture between us and the Syrian Democratic Forces . . . to modernize the oil fields and make sure they get the revenue—not the Iranians, not Assad. And it can help pay for our small commitment.”

A week later, at a White House briefing, a reporter asked Graham: “By what warrant or legal right in international law does the United States take the oil of the sovereign nation of Syria?” Graham replied that the Syrian government didn’t control the oil fields; the American-backed rebels did. Using the oil revenue to subsidize American troop deployments, as well as to help the rebels, “doesn’t violate any law,” he maintained. In fact, he proposed, “We can double or triple the oil revenues . . . So this is really a brilliant move by the president to lock the oil down.”

Graham was getting exactly what he had bargained for. In exchange for defending and facilitating Trump’s corruption, he was helping to shape America’s role in the world.

But morally, the deal was getting more and more expensive. And there seemed to be no price Graham wouldn’t pay.

Chapter 5

The First Impeachment

On September 26, 2019, Graham ran into two reporters outside a steakhouse in Washington. That morning, the House Intelligence Committee had released a whistleblower complaint that outlined a new Trump scandal. In a July 25 phone call, Trump had pressed Ukraine’s new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to investigate Joe Biden, who at that time was the Democratic frontrunner to challenge Trump. In the phone call, Trump had reminded Zelensky that the United States, through military aid, was protecting Ukraine.

In the September 26 conversation, as recounted in *The Divider*, Graham told the reporters that Trump had just called him to ask how to deal with the scandal. The senator’s advice was to deny the allegations and attack the accusers.

“He’s a lying motherfucker,” Graham told the reporters, referring to Trump. But despite this—and despite whatever Trump had done—Graham predicted that congressional Republicans, out of party loyalty, would stand by him. “He could kill fifty people on our side,” said Graham, “and it wouldn’t matter.”

That was the condition of American democracy after three years of Republican consolidation around Trump. The president, shielded by his party, could no longer be held accountable.

“Enough Is Enough”

The Ukraine scandal was a natural sequel to two corrupt episodes Graham had already defended.

In the Russia affair, Trump had gotten away with soliciting foreign interference to aid his campaign against Hillary Clinton. So in his next campaign, he tried a similar maneuver, this time approaching Ukraine in hopes of targeting Biden.

Trump had also succeeded in confiscating funds for his border wall. So now he tried to override Congress again, this time by blocking money instead of spending it. Before Trump’s phone call with Zelensky, the White House suspended military aid that Congress had approved for Ukraine. Trump and his agents used the suspension—along with a prospective White House meeting, which Zelensky wanted and Trump withheld—as leverage to pressure Zelensky to announce an investigation of Biden.

To the president’s critics, his coercion of Ukraine was confirmation of his unfitness for office. They saw his long trail of corruption—collusion with Russia, obstruction of justice, tax evasion, sexual assault, hush money, crooked pardons—as an accumulation of evidence against him.

But his supporters saw it the other way around. To them, the pattern was persecution: Trump had faced one investigation after another not because he had broken laws but because his enemies controlled the investigating entities—the media, the FBI, the House of Representatives—and were determined to take him down.

This was a major reason why the institutions of a free society failed to stop Trump. His accumulating transgressions didn’t just galvanize the opposition. They also galvanized his allies. Every new investigation became, in the eyes of his supporters, another reason to stand with him against the media, the Democrats, and the “Deep State.”

Even allies who recognized Trump’s corruption, as Graham did, lost patience with the investigations. They grew tired of defending the president, but they didn’t blame him. They blamed the investigators. Every

day that Graham had to spend talking about Trump's latest scandal—Russia, Ukraine, whatever—was exasperating. Graham just wanted it to end.

“This constant nagging and criticizing everything he does has driven me into his camp, like a lot of people,” Graham told Sean Hannity in January 2019. “Enough is enough.”

Don't Even Pretend To Be a Fair Juror

Republican lawmakers had no interest in hearing about Trump's latest misconduct. Before the Ukraine investigation could even begin, they dismissed it.

On September 25, the day after Nancy Pelosi announced that the House would open an inquiry to collect evidence and determine whether impeachment was warranted, Graham rejected the idea and denounced the inquiry as illegitimate. “The only reason Democrats are trying to impeach the president,” he scoffed, “is because they don't believe they can beat him at the ballot box.”

Graham pursued the strategy he had recommended to Trump: deny and attack. “I have zero problems” with the Trump-Zelensky phone call, he declared on September 29, three days after his conversation outside the steakhouse. Instead, Graham targeted the public servants who had exposed Trump's extortion. “I want to know who told the whistleblower about the phone call,” he demanded.

In 2018, Graham had blamed the Russia investigation on anti-Trump conspirators in the FBI and the Department of Justice. Now he blamed the Ukraine investigation on the “intel community,” especially the CIA. “When you find out who the whistleblower is, I'm confident you're going to find out it's somebody from the Deep State,” he predicted on Fox News. “It would blow them out of the water if, in fact, the whistleblower was connected to a Democratic candidate and came from the CIA world that's been trying to destroy the Trump presidency [since] before he got elected.”

The new evidence against the president could be ignored or discounted, in Graham's view, because the Ukraine investigation was part of the plot against Trump. It was "just a continuation of an effort to destroy the Trump presidency," he told reporters on November 1. "It seems to never end." On November 14, he urged Senate Republicans to tell Democrats: "You had your shot with Mueller. Nothing happened. Let it go."

Graham called the Ukraine inquiry "a lynching in every sense." "The whole thing is illegitimate," he said. He assured Trump's supporters, "I have the president's back, because I think this is a setup." Privately, he indicated that he believed Trump had blocked the aid to pressure Zelensky to open a Biden investigation. But in public, Graham insisted, "There is no evidence at all the president engaged in a quid pro quo."

Weeks before the House began its hearings, Graham pronounced the impeachment case "dead on arrival in the Senate." He refused to read transcripts of witness testimony, watch the hearings, or hear witnesses in a Senate trial. "I have made up my mind," he announced on December 14. "I'm not trying to pretend to be a fair juror."



Graham still claimed to believe in democracy. But democracy, as he now interpreted it, meant that no president could be removed during his term. To begin with, Graham argued that removal would override the will of the voters who had elected the president to serve a full four years. It would be "destroying a mandate from the people," he said. In addition, conviction in the Senate could bar Trump from holding office in the future—a prohibition that, according to Graham, would "nullify the upcoming presidential election," in which Trump was seeking another term.

Only the people, voting every four years, could choose the president, Graham insisted. Any other intervention would "take the voters' choice away."

Protected by this semi-autocratic theory of democracy, the president could do as he pleased. During the Russia investigation, Graham had

struggled to excuse Trump's obstruction of the fact-finding process. But in the Ukraine investigation, Graham didn't bother to invent excuses. He openly encouraged Trump to bar aides from testifying and to withhold documents requested by Congress. "If I were the president, I wouldn't cooperate with these guys at all," he said.

Graham also expanded his defense of collusion. He did this to justify Trump's requests to the Ukrainian government, which—while nominally disguised as appeals to expose corruption—were clearly aimed at helping Trump politically. The requests had come from Trump and his personal agents, not from the Department of Justice. And the requested act was a televised announcement—specifically, it was planned for CNN—not a careful examination of what Biden had or hadn't done.

For three years, Graham had been sleepwalking toward authoritarianism by following a lawyerly reflex: Every time Trump abused his power, Graham broadened his interpretation of presidential authority to cover the offense. That was what Graham did now. He argued, in effect, that the president was entitled not only to obstruct the House investigation, but also to conspire with and coerce Ukraine.

At a news conference on January 24, 2020, a reporter asked Graham: "What legitimate foreign-policy interest could be served by having the president of Ukraine go on CNN and announce an investigation into one of [Trump's] political rivals?" Graham replied that Trump had every right to "insist that the Ukrainians cooperate with us on an investigation."

Two days later, the *Times* reported that John Bolton, Trump's former national security advisor, had witnessed—and had documented in a book manuscript—a meeting in which Trump opposed releasing the aid to Ukraine until Zelensky's government helped Trump and his allies investigate Biden and other Democrats. Several Republican senators wanted Bolton to testify at the impeachment trial. But Graham worked behind the scenes to make sure he was never heard.

Even if everything Bolton had reported was true, said Graham, it wouldn't matter. The senator maintained that even if Trump had explicitly told aides to "put a freeze on the aid because I want to look at

the Bidens,” that was okay. “The president would have been wrong *not* to ask the Ukrainians to help,” said Graham.



On February 4, as Republican senators prepared to formally reject the articles of impeachment, Graham gloated that they had “kicked Schumer’s butt.” “The biggest winner of all, by far, is President Trump,” he crowed. “He comes out of this thing stronger.”

The next day, Trump was acquitted on a party-line vote. Then came the retaliation. On February 7, Trump began to purge officials who had told the truth about his scheme.

By now, Graham was a practiced apologist for the president’s reprisals. In 2017, he had defended Trump’s firing of Comey. In 2018, he had defended Trump’s firing of Sessions. And in January 2020, he had defended Trump’s removal of Marie Yovanovitch, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, who had been targeted by Trump’s agents in that country as an obstacle to their plot against Biden. When Graham was asked about the ouster of Yovanovitch, he shrugged that Trump “can fire anybody he wants to.”

So on February 7, when the White House expelled Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a National Security Council staffer who had testified about Trump’s phone call and other elements of the Ukraine scheme, Graham again stood with the president.

The expulsion was flagrantly vengeful: Vindman and his brother—who had also worked for the NSC but, unlike Vindman, hadn’t testified—were marched out of their offices by security guards. But Graham implied that Vindman deserved it. “People in his chain of command have been suspicious of him regarding his political point of view,” the senator insinuated. “When a military officer engages in political bias, they need to be held accountable.”

Graham wasn’t done. He called on the Senate to investigate Trump’s enemies and track down the whistleblower who had revealed the presi-

dent's extortion attempt. "We're not going to let it go," Graham vowed. "Who is the whistleblower?" he demanded.

Strange New Respect

Graham was working his way through a transformation that became common among Republican politicians during the Trump years. The first stage was selective toleration of the president's abuses. The second was a gradual loss of will to resist him. The third was descent into a polarized worldview that made it easier to rationalize devotion to him. Graham had embraced that worldview during the Kavanaugh hearings. Now he finished his conversion by retracting his prior heresies.

He began by renouncing the Mueller investigation. In 2018, Graham had acknowledged that Mueller's inquiry was well founded and responsibly managed. "He's looking at things unrelated to the dossier," the senator had reminded Mueller's conservative critics.

Now Graham rewrote that history. On May 6, 2020, he declared, "The entire Mueller investigation was illegitimate to begin with." On Twitter, he wrote: "Now I know why Mueller didn't find anything -- there was nothing there to find. Before it even started, they (FBI/DOJ) knew." On July 28, he claimed that the FBI's Russia investigation "was rotten to the core and the Mueller investigation had no lawful predication."

One by one, Graham went through the roster of Trump's accomplices, seeking to exonerate them or minimize their crimes. He cast aside his previous acknowledgments of their corruption.

The Flynn case, in particular, illustrated Graham's transformation. Flynn had been handsomely paid by Russian state media prior to the December 2016 phone calls in which he signaled to Russia's U.S. ambassador that Trump would relax American sanctions against Moscow. Flynn had also worked secretly as a foreign agent for Turkey.

Graham understood that all of this was suspicious. In February 2017, he had criticized Flynn for undercutting the sanctions. And in May

2017, he had faulted the Trump White House “for not properly vetting Gen. Flynn’s contact with Turkey and Russia.” The senator had praised Sally Yates, the former acting attorney general, for reporting Flynn’s conversations with the ambassador to Trump’s White House lawyers.

But by later that year, after Trump was caught trying to squelch the FBI’s investigation of Flynn, Graham shifted his position. In December 2017, he said Flynn’s offer to loosen the sanctions was fine.

And Graham’s shift didn’t stop there. In September 2019, he claimed that the true villains were the U.S. officials who had exposed Flynn’s calls. “It should bother every American that the president-elect’s transition team is being surveilled by the intelligence community,” he fumed. “They’re about to set new policy. What business is it of the outgoing administration to surveil the incoming administration?”

On May 25, 2020, Graham joined Lara Trump, the president’s daughter-in-law, for a half-hour conversation streamed by video and sponsored by Trump’s re-election campaign. Graham defended Flynn’s calls with the Russian ambassador and said the Obama administration “had no business listening” to what was said. He suggested that Obama’s officials had listened in because they were “trying to spy on the Trump campaign”—a bizarre allegation, since Flynn’s calls had taken place after the campaign was over.

Lara Trump denounced the whole investigation. She praised Graham for “leading the charge” to find out how “this Russian hoax started.” She suggested that “the whole thing was actually an attempt to nullify the legitimate results of the 2016 election.”

Graham nodded as she spoke. “Right,” he said.

During their conversation, Graham also tried to whitewash the evidence against Paul Manafort, Trump’s 2016 campaign chairman, who had participated in the Trump Tower meeting. Mueller had found that during Trump’s campaign, Manafort met with and ordered the sharing of campaign documents with an associate who was connected to Russian intelligence. But in the video with Lara Trump, Graham claimed that in Manafort’s case as well as Flynn’s, there wasn’t “any evidence found

to suggest that they worked with the Russians in any way during the campaign.”

Why would Graham say such things? What had happened to him?

One answer appeared in the video as he spoke with Lara Trump. “Huge Memorial Day Sale,” said a banner across the bottom of the screen. “Get your I Heart Trump Tee!” said another. “Get the limited edition Boaters For Trump hat!” said a third. “Visit shop.donaldjtrump.com.”

Graham wasn’t just a senator anymore. He was part of Trump’s fundraising operation. And the relationship was mutual. In the months after Republican senators acquitted the president, Graham used his alliance with Trump to solicit donations for his own re-election. He routinely went on Fox News to ask viewers for money—“If half the people listening today would send me a buck”—in the name of fighting for the president. Later, to build up his database of donors and supporters, he would launch an annual “Trump Graham Golf Classic.”

Money wasn’t driving all of Graham’s decisions. But it was part of the web that gradually corrupted him and other Republican politicians. Trump controlled what they needed: endorsements, money, and Republican primary voters.



By the spring and summer of 2020, Trump was in the cleanup stage of the Russia and Ukraine scandals. While exacting vengeance against people who had stood up to him, he was determined to protect those who had remained loyal. That meant blocking the justice system from punishing his accomplices who had been convicted of crimes.

One was Roger Stone, who in 2016 had served as the chief conduit between Trump and WikiLeaks, Russia’s partner in the operation to hack Clinton and help Trump. In November 2019, Stone had been convicted of witness tampering, false statements, and obstruction of the congressional investigation into Russia’s election interference.

Trump intended to pardon Stone or commute his sentence so he would never go to jail. It was a transparently corrupt bargain: Stone had covered for Trump, and now Trump was paying him back. And Graham said it was fine. Trump had “all the legal authority in the world” to pardon Stone, the senator asserted in February 2020. Graham claimed, preposterously, that Trump’s unilateral power to pardon Stone was part of “a brilliant and intricate system of checks and balances.”

In July, when Trump commuted Stone’s sentence, Graham endorsed the decision, arguing that the Mueller investigation was “biased and corrupt.” Trump would later grant all three men—Flynn, Manafort, and Stone—full pardons. On Twitter, Graham applauded the pardon of Flynn, calling him “the victim of a politically motivated investigation and prosecution.”

The pardons were a classic authoritarian move. They exploited a weakness in the Constitution—a virtually unchecked presidential power—to shield Trump’s accomplices from the rule of law. By doing so, they also shielded the president, against whom the accomplices had refused to testify.

But the pardons were backward-looking. They tied up loose ends from Trump’s previous crimes.

The next stage of Trump’s assault on democracy wasn’t going to be about corruption. It was going to be about violence, ruthlessness, and civil war.

Summer of Rage

In May, police officers in Minneapolis killed a black man, George Floyd, in the course of arresting him for allegedly passing a fake \$20 bill. The killing—for which one officer was later convicted of murder—was captured on video and broadcast everywhere. Protests and riots erupted in many cities, and Trump responded by threatening to send in troops. “Liberal Governors and Mayors must get MUCH tougher or the Federal

Government will step in and do what has to be done,” he tweeted. “And that includes using the unlimited power of our Military.”

Graham endorsed the president’s threat. “I fully support the use of federal forces, if necessary, to restore order,” he wrote. Three weeks later, as some people tore down statues in protest over police violence and other grievances, Graham condemned these troublemakers as domestic enemies. “We’re at war with them, politically. They want to destroy America as we know it,” Graham told Fox News viewers. “To the listeners out there: You may not believe you’re in a war. But you are, politically. And you need to take sides, and you need to help this president.”

In Washington, Trump and Graham wielded power without remorse. In September, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, and Republicans—having already installed two Supreme Court justices during Trump’s term—vowed to ram through a third.

Grabbing the third court seat was, like the pardons, constitutionally permitted. But it was an egregious betrayal. In 2016, Graham and his Republican colleagues had refused to let President Obama fill a vacant Supreme Court seat on the grounds that it was an election year. In 2018, Graham had pledged to apply the same rule to Trump. “If an opening comes in the last year of President Trump’s term, and the primary process has started, we’ll wait till the next election,” Graham promised at the time.

Now Graham abandoned that promise. “The rules have changed,” he declared. Speaking for his Republican colleagues, he vowed, “None of us are going to blink.”

As Election Day approached, Graham made the rounds on conservative radio and TV, raising money by hawking himself as a Trump diehard and scourge of liberals. “They hate my friggin’ guts,” he boasted on Sean Hannity’s radio show on September 17. “Let’s kick their ass.” A week later, on Mark Levin’s show, he bragged, “The liberals hate me for Kavanaugh. They hate me for Trump. . . . I need people listening to your radio show, if you can afford five or ten bucks, go to LindseyGraham.com.”

Meanwhile, Trump prepared his followers for battle. He claimed that massive election fraud was underway, and he refused to say that he would surrender power if he lost the official vote count. “The Democrats are trying to rig this election, because that’s the only way they’re going to win,” he alleged on September 12. When reporters asked whether he would “accept the results of the election” and commit to a “peaceful transferral of power,” he refused to answer. “There won’t be a transfer,” he said. “There’ll be a continuation.”

On October 7, during the vice presidential debate, moderator Susan Page noted Trump’s ominous statements. She asked Mike Pence: “If Vice President Biden is declared the winner and President Trump refuses to accept a peaceful transfer of power . . . what would you personally do?”

Graham ridiculed the question. Page’s query “about a peaceful transfer of power was the dumbest question in the history of #VPDebates,” he tweeted. “Only in Washington is this an issue.”

Even after multiple threats by Trump to defy the election results, Graham kept feeding the fires of rage. On October 31, at a rally in Conway, South Carolina, the senator bragged that liberals “hate my guts.” He pledged to stand with Trump, and he celebrated the president as America’s bully. “Donald Trump has got everybody you want to be scared, scared,” Graham told the crowd, naming Mexico and China in particular. He joked that he had warned foreign leaders about Trump: “He’s a little crazy. I’d watch what I do, If I were y’all.”

But it wasn’t Mexico or China that Trump was about to attack. It was the United States.

Chapter 6

Insurrection Day

Three hours after the polls closed in South Carolina on November 3, 2020, Graham got the good news: The Associated Press projected that he would win re-election. His job was secure for another six years.

When Trump saw the news, he phoned Graham to congratulate him. Graham responded with encouragement. “Hang in there,” he told the president. “It’s looking pretty good for you.”

But the night wasn’t good for Trump. As ballots were counted into the next day, it became increasingly evident that he would lose.

This was Graham’s chance to let go. Like many other Republicans, he had offered his fealty when Trump won the presidency. Then, for four years, Graham and his colleagues had defended or ignored Trump’s abuses of power. They had rationalized this complicity as a necessary bargain: By earning the president’s trust, they had influenced his policy decisions and restrained his worst impulses.

Now that bargain was no longer necessary. Trump would soon be out of power. The danger he posed to the United States and to the world was receding. Graham was free.

But Graham couldn’t let go. Those four years had changed him. He wasn’t his own man anymore. He was Trump’s man.



When a politician submits to an authoritarian, the politician tells himself that the alliance is only temporary. Sometimes the authoritarian has a

mass following; sometimes he already has power. The politician wants access to that following and that power. He imagines that eventually he can leave the alliance just as easily as he went into it.

But submission changes the one who submits. The more you contort yourself to serve the leader, the more you forget what you once believed. The more you rely on the leader for strength, the weaker you become. The more you cater to the leader's adherents, the more you become what those adherents want you to be.

The outcome of this process isn't just that you can't leave. It's that you no longer want to.

To let go of Trump, Graham needed one of three things:

1. an understanding of the gravity of Trump's crimes and the threat Trump posed to the country;
2. an alternative vision of the Republican party—one guided by principles, not by devotion to Trump; or
3. a willingness to lose the next election to the Democrats.

By November 2020, Graham no longer possessed any of these. He had rationalized so much corruption that he was largely desensitized to it. He had lost faith in the viability of a Trump-free Republican party. And he had convinced himself that Democratic-led government would be ruinous. Therefore, Republicans had to win the next election. And to win, they had to placate Trump.



The first thing Trump wanted was a united push by Republicans to discredit the election results. He made this clear in public and in private phone calls with Graham. So the senator complied. “The allegations of wrongdoing are earth-shattering,” Graham told Fox News viewers on November 5. “Philadelphia elections are crooked as a snake. . . . You’re

talking about a lot of dead people voting. You're talking about in Nevada, people voting who are not legal residents."

This was a big change from 2017. Back then, when Trump claimed that voter fraud had robbed him of victory in the 2016 popular vote—though he had won the Electoral College—Graham had warned the president that such reckless allegations would "shake confidence in your ability to lead the country." But now that the nation's political system had rejected Trump, the president no longer cared about public confidence. He didn't want to preserve faith in the system. He wanted to destroy it.

Over the next month, Graham peddled one bizarre tale after another: rigged computers, dead voters, fake ballots from nursing homes. In private, he ridiculed affidavits that alleged voter fraud. "I can get an affidavit tomorrow saying the world is flat," he told an aide. But on TV, he hyped affidavits as evidence that the election results couldn't be trusted.

Graham, like Trump, was repeatedly advised that his allegations were baseless or far-fetched. And like Trump, he refused to back down. In a press briefing on November 6, a reporter alerted Graham to what Republican Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania had said that morning: There was "simply no evidence" of "any kind of widespread corruption or fraud" in Pennsylvania's election. Graham shrugged off the warning. "Philadelphia's not the bastion of free and fair elections," he sneered.

The next day, as continuing tabulations closed off any chance of a Trump victory, all the major TV networks, including Fox News, announced that Biden had won. But Graham refused to accept their verdict. "These computers in Michigan do not pass the smell test," he protested, adding that the same "software was used all over the country." He went on: "We have evidence of computers flipping Republican votes to Democratic votes. . . . Do not concede, Mr. President. Fight hard."

On November 12, Fox News host Steve Doocy pointed out that the election wasn't particularly close. Trump trailed Biden by "tens of thousands of votes" in several states, Doocy reminded Graham, and therefore the outcome could be reversed only by "some sort of systemic fraud, some gigantic thing." Graham replied that thousands of votes should be

disqualified in Nevada, and he rehashed bogus stories about fraudulent ballots.

By the end of November, all the decisive states had certified their election tallies. On December 1, Attorney General William Barr added that despite investigations by the FBI and U.S. attorneys of various Republican allegations about the election, he had “not seen fraud on a scale” that could change the result.

But Graham still didn't let up. “I sent an affidavit over, signed by a gentleman in Pennsylvania . . . about backdating ballots,” he told Fox viewers on December 3. “Sean Hannity had a gentleman on his show a night or two ago that claims that he took ballots from New York to Pennsylvania. . . . That would be an earth-shaking revelation.” (Both stories were unfounded.) On December 11, Graham endorsed a Texas lawsuit that sought to void the election results from Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Overturning the Vote

Graham didn't just dispute the election's outcome. He tried to overturn it. On November 13, he phoned Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's Republican secretary of state, and asked whether Raffensperger could discard all mail ballots from counties in which relatively high numbers of voter signatures were thought to be dubious. Raffensperger interpreted this as a corrupt suggestion; Graham later insisted he was just asking questions.

Meanwhile, Graham openly pressured Georgia officials to override the state's results. A week after the call to Raffensperger, Graham claimed on *Fox & Friends* that fishy signatures should have voided 32,000 ballots in Georgia, “more than enough” to put Trump ahead. “We're going to fight back in Georgia. We're going to fight back everywhere,” he vowed.

On December 7, after Republican Gov. Brian Kemp refused to overturn Georgia's results, Graham responded with a public threat: “if you're not fighting for Trump now when he needs you the most as a Republican

leader in Georgia, people are not going to fight for you when you ask them to get re-elected.”

At no point did Graham endorse violence or explicitly ask state officials to do anything illegal. Despite his incendiary rhetoric and his misleading claims of fraud, he made it clear that he would accept court rulings and would support the peaceful transfer of power. American democracy survived the weeks after the 2020 election in part because Graham and other senior Republicans didn’t cross that line.

But that low standard, paradoxically, allowed Graham and his colleagues to rationalize their complicity in spreading propaganda about election theft. They pretended that their personal scruples—each of them, individually, would stop short of violence or open defiance of the Supreme Court—kept them faithful to democracy and the rule of law.

They were officially against arson, even as they soaked the house in gasoline.

Later, in books and articles about this period, Graham would depict himself as a voice of reason, working behind the scenes to calm the president’s anger. But even in private, he didn’t push Trump to concede. In fact, he encouraged Trump to “keep fighting” in the courts.

At the same time, on TV, Graham fed Trump’s supporters many of the falsehoods and apocalyptic fantasies that would ultimately drive them to insurrection. He didn’t use the word “rigged,” but he repeatedly told Fox News viewers that the electoral system was so stacked against them and so riddled with fraud that Republicans couldn’t prevail. “If we don’t fight back in 2020, we’re never going to win again presidentially,” he charged.

On November 9, Graham told Sean Hannity’s four million viewers that Democratic victories in elections were systematically corrupt. “We need to fight back,” he demanded. “We win because of our ideas. We lose elections because they cheat us.” On December 7, he told Hannity’s audience that Democrats in Georgia had to be stopped before they “steal another election.” On December 9, he suggested that the presidential vote tallies couldn’t be trusted because Trump had “won 19 of 20 bellwether counties that predict 100 percent who’s going to be president.”

“How could it be,” Graham asked, that Republicans “grow our numbers in the House, hold the Senate, and Trump loses?”

Even after the Supreme Court dismissed the Texas lawsuit on December 11, and even after the Electoral College confirmed Biden’s victory on December 14, Graham refused to say the election was over.

As Trump, Graham, and other Republicans worked to sow unrest, the country’s elders worried. In a *60 Minutes* interview on November 15, former President Barack Obama cautioned Americans: “There are strongmen and dictators around the world who think [they] can do anything to stay in power.”

Four days after that interview, Graham ridiculed such comparisons. He assured Fox News viewers that Trump was nothing like a dictator. In the left’s hysterical vocabulary, Graham jeered, “A dictator is a conservative fighting for their cause, standing up for their rights.”

On January 6, 2021, thousands of Americans, heeding the president’s call to rise up against a stolen election, descended on the Capitol to fight for his cause.

What You Wish For

The attack on the Capitol shook Graham. For four years, he had rationalized and collaborated in everything Trump did: obstructing justice, seizing emergency powers, purging whistleblowers, refusing to accept electoral defeat. But the violence Graham saw that day dismayed him. So did Trump’s failure to call off the mob. The president, in Graham’s mind, had finally gone too far.

According to Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns in *This Will Not Pass*, Graham phoned White House Counsel Pat Cipollone during the attack. He told Cipollone that if Trump didn’t step up to condemn the violence, “We’ll be asking you for the Twenty-Fifth Amendment.” Under that amendment, Vice President Pence and the cabinet could formally deem Trump “unable to discharge” his duties, thereby replacing

him with Pence. Essentially, Graham was telling Cipollone that Trump, in his present state, was unfit to govern the country.

That night, after the mob dispersed, Graham rose in the Senate to call for unity. He finally said what he had failed to say for two months: that the stories of massive voter fraud had been debunked, that Trump's election challenges had failed in the courts, that the judiciary was the final arbiter, and that Biden was the legitimate president-elect.

"Trump and I, we've had a hell of a journey. I hate it to end this way," said Graham. But it was time, he concluded, to certify the vote of the Electoral College. To his colleagues who were still trying to block the certification, he responded: "Count me out. Enough is enough."

It seemed that Graham was finally breaking with Trump. But that impression was mistaken. In fact, he was plotting Trump's return to power.



Graham had been thinking about a Trump restoration since the first days after the election. "I would encourage President Trump, if, after all this, he does fall short . . . to consider running again," the senator told Brian Kilmeade in a radio interview on November 9. "Grover Cleveland won the popular vote, lost the electoral vote in his first term. . . . Grover Cleveland came back. Donald Trump should think about it."

In a phone call on November 18, Graham advised Trump: "You're going to be a force in American politics for a long time. And the best way to maintain that power is to wind this thing down in a fashion that gives you a second act, right?" A month later, he told the president that for 2024, "You've locked down the Republican party nomination if you want it."

January 6th complicated this plan. Instead of swallowing his grievances and leaving office, Trump had incited violence against Congress. When Graham, hours after the attack, said he hated to see Trump's term "end this way," he wasn't renouncing Trump. He was lamenting the

damage that awful day had done to Trump's reputation and his chances of a political comeback.

At a press conference on the afternoon of January 7, Graham condemned the violence. He also lauded Pence for resisting a pressure campaign, in the days before January 6th, to refuse to count electoral votes. Graham described this pressure campaign in the passive voice so he wouldn't have to mention that Trump was its perpetrator.

Before the attack, Graham had privately advised Pence that the scheme was unconstitutional. Now the senator made his opposition public. "The things he was asked to do in the name of loyalty were over the top, unconstitutional, illegal," said Graham.

When a reporter pointed out that the pressure had come from Trump, Graham argued that Trump's motives were understandable. "The president's frustrated," said Graham. "He thought he was cheated. Nobody's ever going to convince him that he wasn't."

This was a remarkable statement.

Graham wasn't just saying that Trump had been misled. He was saying that Trump was impervious to correction. Like a rapist who refuses to believe that a woman has said "No," Trump could never accept, regardless of the evidence, that the voters had rejected him. And Trump hadn't just stewed about his unfounded grievance. He had, as Graham conceded, acted on that grievance by defying the Constitution in an attempt to stay in power.

Graham was describing an incurable authoritarian. But the senator didn't recoil, as he might have five years earlier. He was now so accustomed to defending Trump that even a coup attempt—by a man who, as Graham acknowledged, would never recognize that the coup attempt was wrong—couldn't shake the senator's loyalty. In Graham's lawyerly mind, Trump's impenetrable certitude wasn't an autocratic pathology. It was an excuse.

A reporter asked Graham whether the president was "mentally unwell." Graham said no, and he blamed Trump's illegal ideas and false claims about the election on "very bad advisers." But Graham knew that the root problem was Trump. He knew that Trump had chosen those

advisers precisely because they told him what he wanted to hear. The senator would later admit that Trump “would have believed Martians fixed the election if we had told him, because he wanted to believe it.”

Graham wasn’t even confident that Trump would leave office peacefully. At his press conference, he struggled with that question:

Reporter 1: Do you trust the president not to incite the kind of violence that he promoted yesterday in the next two weeks?

Graham: I’m hoping he won’t. I’m hoping that he will allow [Chief of Staff] Mark Meadows to continue the transition. . . . My hope is that we can move forward in the next 14 days. But this will depend on what the president does. . . .

Reporter 2: Senator, do you believe that the events yesterday disqualify the president from seeking the office again in the future?

Graham: I’m not worried about the next election. I’m worried about getting through the next 14 days.

Graham didn’t mention at the press conference that he had privately threatened to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment. But given Trump’s behavior on January 6th, he held out the possibility of using that provision. “I don’t support an effort to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment now,” he said. But “if something else happens, all options would be on the table.”

In the months after the insurrection, Graham and many other Republicans would try to whitewash what Trump had done and what they

had said, both on January 6th and in the weeks leading up to it. But the video of the January 7 press conference stands as a record of what Graham actually believed.

- He believed that Trump had tried to remain in power, against the people's will, through illegal and unconstitutional acts.
- He believed that Trump would never concede, and therefore Trump would never renounce his coup attempt or accept the Biden administration's legitimacy.
- He believed that Trump might incite further violence and might not agree to leave office.

And yet, despite all of this, Graham intended to restore Trump to power.

The Day After

On January 8, the day after that press conference, a band of Trump supporters hounded Graham at Reagan National Airport, calling him a “traitor.” This incident later gave rise to a legend, promoted by Trump, that the airport confrontation had chastened Graham and pushed him back into the president's camp.

But there's no evidence that Graham had wavered in his intention to put Trump back in the White House. Indeed, soon after the press conference, Graham reassured the president that his remarks on the Senate floor about their journey together—“I hate it to end this way,” “Count me out,” “Enough is enough”—were about giving up on the 2020 election, not about giving up on Trump.

In fact, Graham was so committed to Trump that to shield him from accountability, the senator was willing to use the threat of bloodshed.

On the morning of January 13, as the House moved toward impeaching Trump, Graham tweeted that taking such a step “could invite further violence.” That evening, after the article of impeachment was approved, Graham again warned that a hasty impeachment and Senate trial “could insight [incite] further violence.” On Hannity’s show, Graham repeated three more times that impeachment and prosecution in the Senate would “incite violence”:

These actions, if they continue, will incite more violence. Every time you asked President Trump to calm his people down, to reject violence, to move on, he has done it. Now, how has he been met? I think outrageous misconduct by the Congress itself. . . . What good comes from impeaching President Trump after he’s out of office? . . . It will divide the country. It will incite violence. . . . If you want to end the violence, end impeachment.

Graham wasn’t endorsing violence. He was just stating as a fact that more people would get hurt if Congress pursued a path he didn’t like. He was using the prospect of violence as leverage to protect Trump from the legal consequences of his failed coup. A mob assembled by the president had just attacked Congress. And Graham was suggesting that if Congress didn’t take his advice, something like that would happen again.

Graham’s rebuke to the House—that it should have “met” Trump in a more conciliatory way after he agreed, belatedly, to reject violence—implied that the peaceful transfer of power was no longer an ironclad rule worthy of congressional enforcement. It was an act of grace by the president, for which Congress should have been grateful. And the trade Graham offered—“If you want to end the violence, end impeachment”—was an overt threat.

In all his years of service to Trump, this was the lowest tactic to which Graham had stooped.



On the other hand, Graham worried that Trump couldn't afford to be perceived as deliberately fomenting or condoning mayhem. That was the charge in the article of impeachment: incitement of insurrection. To beat that rap and clean up Trump's image, Graham needed to dissociate the president from the people who had attacked the Capitol.

With that in mind, Graham returned to the White House and coached the president through the final days of his term. On TV, the senator peddled a new narrative: Trump had never intended violence, had nothing to do with the perpetrators, and was horrified by what they had done.

In reality, Trump sympathized with the perpetrators and told aides he wanted to pardon them. Graham knew such pardons would be politically disastrous. So he scrambled to head them off.

On January 17, Graham went on Fox News with a prepared message. "There are a lot of people urging the president to pardon folks who participated in defiling the Capitol, the rioters," he said. Graham explained that it would be wrong to pardon them. Then he appealed to Trump's self-interest. Pardoning the rioters, he cautioned, "would destroy President Trump."

That was an odd statement to make if Trump intended to leave office three days later and never return. But Trump did intend to return, and Graham intended to help him. That was why Graham protested, in the same interview, that a conviction in the impeachment trial would "disqualify President Trump from ever holding office again."

The Trump 2024 campaign was already underway.



How had the United States come to this? How could a senior senator and many of his colleagues defend a president who had used violence in an attempt to stay in power? How could they justify returning such a man to the nation's highest office?

Political violence was common in other countries, and elites often tolerated it. But America was supposed to be different. How could that kind of tolerance happen here?

One answer is that the senators who held Trump's fate in their hands were, in many cases, the same senators who sometimes excused and collaborated with strongmen in other countries. They decided to deal with Trump the same way.

Graham, for instance, had made his peace with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He didn't like Erdoğan's suppression of dissent or his increasing centralization of power. But he worried that Erdoğan might turn Turkey away from NATO and toward Russia. So Graham decided that the United States should suck it up and "do business with Erdoğan."

Later, Graham would make a similar calculation in Saudi Arabia. In 2018, after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the brutal murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Graham had vowed never to deal with MBS. But in 2023, Graham flew to Saudi Arabia and met with the crown prince to "enhance the U.S.-Saudi relationship." In an interview with *Al Arabiya*, Graham explained his reversal: "The Kingdom has just purchased \$37 billion of 787 Boeing Dreamliners made in South Carolina. . . . I got a hard and fast rule: You buy \$37 billion of products made in my state, I'm gonna come and say thank you."

Trump hadn't ordered the killings of any journalists. But he was a lot like Erdoğan. He had seized emergency powers to override the will of Congress. He had called for jailing his political opponents. And two weeks before the January 6th attack, at a White House meeting, Trump and a circle of loyalists—including the now-pardoned Flynn—had discussed proposals to claim emergency powers again, this time to seize voting machines and, if necessary, use the military to "rerun" the 2020 election.

In the days after Trump's coup attempt, Graham decided that just as the United States needed Erdoğan, the GOP still needed Trump. "President Trump's going to be the most important voice in the Republican party for a long time to come," Graham advised Republican senators on January 17. If those senators were to convict Trump at his impeachment trial, he warned, "it would destroy our party."

The destruction, in Graham's mind, would arise from Trump leaving the GOP. On January 19, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the president, irked that some Republicans weren't standing by him, was talking about forming a "Patriot party." "I hope he doesn't. I hope he'll stay the leader of the Republican party," said Graham.

Over the next two weeks, Graham came up with various arguments against convicting Trump. All of them were phony.

- Graham said it was cruel and pointless to impeach Trump, since Trump was leaving office and returning to private life. But Graham knew it was neither cruel nor pointless, since Graham was plotting to bring Trump back to power.
- Graham complained that the House had impeached Trump without calling witnesses. Yet Graham also warned Democrats not to call witnesses in the Senate.
- Graham claimed that Trump's incitement of the January 6th attack wasn't serious enough to warrant impeachment. But Graham applied no such standards to other presidents: He had led the impeachment of President Bill Clinton for covering up an affair, and he would later demand Biden's impeachment for failing to stop illegal immigration.

At one point, Graham admitted that he was offering arguments "to my Republican colleagues, if you're looking for a reason to stop this impeachment and to dismiss it as soon as possible."

Graham's real reason—the only stated reason that matched his behavior—was that if Republican senators turned against Trump, Trump would destroy the GOP. “Without his help, we cannot take back the House and the Senate,” Graham advised Republicans on January 20. The senator repeatedly underscored that point, and on February 13, he got his wish: Forty-three of the Senate's fifty Republicans voted to acquit Trump, blocking his conviction and clearing his path to run for president again.

Preparing Trump for his return would take time. There was a lot of whitewashing to do. A poll taken during and after the impeachment trial showed that 55 percent of Americans believed he shouldn't be allowed to hold office. He would have to fix that.

“You are the hope, the future of conservatism,” Graham told Trump, speaking to him through the camera during a February 16 appearance on Hannity's show. “But we've got to make some changes to get back the White House in 2024.”

Fortunately, Trump still had a grip on the GOP. In that same poll, 75 percent of Republicans said they wanted him to play a prominent role in the party.

And that, said Graham, was Trump's path back to power. “You own the Republican party, my friend.”

Chapter 7

Return of the Orange God-King

On February 22, 2021, a month after Trump left office—and a week after he was acquitted by the Senate for a second time—Graham went on Fox News to promote the ex-president’s comeback. Trump was going to be the keynote speaker at the upcoming Conservative Political Action Conference. “He’s been working the phones. I was with him all weekend,” said Graham. He called Trump “the alternative to Joe Biden” and urged Republicans to “get behind” the former president.

Six days later, in his speech to CPAC, Trump conceded nothing. He repeated that he had won the election, and he denounced the judiciary for failing to keep him in power. “This election was rigged, and the Supreme Court and other courts didn’t want to do anything about it,” he raged. The crowd responded with a chant: *You won! You won!*

Trump called for the abolition of early voting. He said the United States should have taken Iraq’s oil. He derided Mitch McConnell, who had condemned Trump’s role in the insurrection. And he vowed to purge congressional Republicans who had voted to impeach or convict him. In particular, he targeted Rep. Liz Cheney, the chair of the House Republican Conference.

“Get rid of ’em all,” Trump told the cheering crowd. “The RINOs that we’re surrounded with will destroy the Republican party and the American worker and will destroy our country itself.”

RINO Hunting

Trump's declaration of war on RINOs—Republicans in name only—set the stage for the next two years. He could no longer control the party through presidential power. But he still had a weapon: fear.

To regain power, Trump needed to reestablish the idea that any Republican who didn't support him was a RINO, because Trump *was* the party.

He was well positioned for this fight. In polls, more than 60 percent of Republicans said the election had been stolen, more than 50 percent said Trump was “the true president,” and more than 20 percent endorsed the attack on the Capitol.

In Washington, elected Republicans were divided into three camps. The first, which included Graham and most congressional Republicans, refused to hold Trump responsible for January 6th. The second group, represented by McConnell, held Trump responsible but didn't want to dwell on it, since that might hurt the party politically. The third and smallest group, led by Cheney, rejected Trump as unfit to serve.

This wasn't a split between the center and the right. Cheney and McConnell were staunch conservatives. In fact, they agreed with Graham on foreign policy far more than Trump did. So why should Graham stay with Trump?

Originally, Graham had aligned himself with Trump because Trump had the Republican nomination for president. Then it was because Trump had the presidency. And because the alternative to Trump was the Democrats. And because working with Trump seemed the most likely way to strengthen America's role in the world.

But none of that was true anymore. Everything Graham had once claimed to value—constitutionalism, human rights, national security—was now pitted against loyalty to the former president.

The Iron Lady

Cheney had announced her judgment of the January 6th attack shortly before she voted to impeach Trump. She said he had “summoned this mob, assembled the mob, and lit the flame.” She pointed out that he “could have immediately and forcefully intervened to stop the violence. He did not. There has never been a greater betrayal by a president of the United States of his office and his oath to the Constitution.”

McConnell had announced his position at the Senate trial. He concluded that Trump couldn’t be convicted for a technical reason—because he was no longer president—but that he was guilty of a “disgraceful dereliction of duty.” Among other things, said McConnell, “The leader of the free world cannot spend weeks thundering that shadowy forces are stealing our country and then feign surprise when people believe him and do reckless things.”

Trump resolved to punish these two troublemakers. Toppling McConnell would be difficult, in part because he had pledged to support Trump if the former president won the 2024 nomination, and in part because McConnell generally tried to avoid talking about the unpleasantness of January 6th. Cheney, however, was an easier target.

The campaign against Cheney unfolded in two stages. The first step was to oust her as chair of the House Republican Conference. The second was to defeat her in a primary. By late January, Trump was working both angles. “It’s time to get this RINO out of GOP leadership!” Donald Trump Jr. tweeted.

In Wyoming, Trump’s advisers looked for a candidate to run against Cheney. In Washington, Trump anointed one of his sycophants, Rep. Elise Stefanik, to replace her as chair of the conference.

Cheney directly challenged Trump’s authoritarianism. She called on Republicans to define their party by ideals, not by a man. “We believe in the rule of law, in limited government, in a strong national defense,” she asserted. “We Republicans need to stand for genuinely conserva-

tive principles, and steer away from the dangerous and anti-democratic Trump cult of personality.”

Trump couldn’t smear Cheney as a leftist—in every way, she was more traditionally conservative than he was—so instead, he called her a bloodthirsty hawk. “This warmongering fool wants to stay in the Middle East and Afghanistan for another 19 years,” he jeered. He also ridiculed her performance in polls. “Liz Cheney is polling sooo low in Wyoming,” he crowed, “that she is looking for a way out of her Congressional race.”

Graham had heard these taunts before: the endless wars, the sorry poll numbers. They were the same jabs Trump had thrown at him in 2015, when Graham was a lonely hawk defending the Constitution against a demagogue.

Cheney was a reminder of the man Graham had once been.



Cheney had tolerated Trump’s corruption in office. She had opposed his first impeachment and had voted for him in 2020. But January 6th was too much. She recognized that what she had seen in other countries—a tyrant trying to overthrow democracy—was happening in her own country.

This wasn’t just a tantrum or a riot. It was “an attack on the Capitol of the United States,” she concluded. “I’ve worked in countries around the world that don’t have peaceful transitions of power, countries that have autocracies,” she warned Americans. “It can happen very, very quickly.”

And the threat hadn’t passed. She pointed out that the demagogue who had attempted the January 6th coup was still working to “delegitimize” the political system. “Trump is seeking to unravel critical elements of our constitutional structure that make democracy work—confidence in the result of elections and the rule of law,” she wrote.

Somehow, Graham had lost the ability to see these truths. He saw a troubled golf buddy, not the thug who had sat in the White House, patiently watching his followers overrun the Capitol. In interviews with Bob Woodward and Robert Costa for *Peril*, Graham conceded that

Trump had “darkness” and “personality problems.” But he insisted that the former president was “redeemable.” He told the authors that “the problems created with Trump’s personality are easier to fix than if the party blew completely up and we had a civil war.”

Graham didn’t mean an American civil war, the kind of nation-rending conflict he had rhetorically promoted in 2020. The “civil war” he dreaded was just a fracture in the GOP. A Republican split over Trump was unacceptable, in Graham’s view, because it might help Democrats win the next election.

To avoid that risk, Graham urged McConnell to stop antagonizing Trump and start sucking up to him, as Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, was doing. “We don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of taking back the majority without Donald Trump,” Graham pleaded.

Everybody understood the situation: Trump was holding the party hostage. Graham and McCarthy were eager to pay the ransom. But the ransom Trump demanded—Cheney’s head—was just the start. He wanted to maintain control of the party. He wanted to regain control of the country. And he had already shown that he was willing to use force.

That was what Graham, McCarthy, and the other advocates of appeasement refused to acknowledge. To avert a figurative civil war, they were risking a literal civil war.



At first, Graham tried to protect Cheney. In early February, when Trump’s allies sought to eject her from her leadership post, the senator defended her. But by late February, he was advising her to “reconcile” with Trump. And by May, he was ready to dump her.

Cheney’s ouster, which was accomplished on May 12, showed that Trump was still a live threat. His electoral defeat, his failed coup attempt, his departure from office—none of it had finished him. Congressional Republicans were unwilling to resist him. And they were willing to get rid of anyone who stood in his way.

These collaborators told themselves they were just doing what their constituents wanted. That was how Graham rationalized his decision to turn against Cheney. The conference chair should represent House Republicans, he reasoned, and those Republicans had every right to fire Cheney for dissent. “She has taken a position regarding former President Trump which is out of the mainstream of the Republican party,” he explained.

It wasn’t just House Republicans who still loved Trump. It was Republican voters. “The people who are conservative have chosen him as their leader,” said Graham. “The people have chosen him. Not the pundits.”

CPAC illustrated the point. “Not one person” at that conference was willing to criticize Trump, Graham observed. That “tells you a lot about the strength of President Trump.” The takeaway, Graham concluded, was simple: “This is his party.”

Graham’s argument was notable in two respects. First, it was unmoored from any beliefs about freedom, the Constitution, the role of government, or America’s role in the world. The party’s putative leaders would do whatever the current base of the party wanted. This flexibility was essential, because what the current base wanted wasn’t a principle. It was a man.

Second, the argument was circular. Trump had transformed the base by bringing in his followers and driving out his critics. Voters who saw him as a dangerous demagogue were leaving the party. Republican members of Congress who opposed him were retiring or being purged.

Graham put the point bluntly. The lesson of Cheney’s expulsion from leadership, he warned, was that “people who try to erase him [Trump] are going to wind up getting erased.”

That was why nobody at CPAC had spoken up against Trump. The people who were willing to speak up against him weren’t at CPAC. They had been erased.

Through this process, the GOP was remaking itself. Trump was changing the base. The base, in turn, was redefining the Republican

“mainstream.” And the party elite, by purging dissenters, was completing the cycle.

That was how the Republican party, in the name of listening to “the people,” emptied itself of all commitments but one. As Graham put it: “Donald Trump is the organizing principle, America First, to the Republican party.”

Loyalty Über Alles

In late May, two weeks after House Republicans sacked Cheney, Graham made it clear that all values or ideas under discussion within the party would be subordinated to Trump.

The Reagan Foundation and Institute was launching a speaker series titled “A Time For Choosing.” Republican leaders had been invited to answer the question “What should the Republican Party stand for?”

Graham rejected the question as asked-and-answered. “The Republicans have already chosen,” he declared. “If the primary were held tomorrow, President Trump would win . . . going away.” The more important question, Graham countered, was about personal loyalty, not ideas. “Would you support President Trump if he’s our nominee? Every Republican needs to be asked that question,” he said.

Meanwhile, Graham peddled a new conspiracy theory about the 2020 election. He claimed that a “Deep State’ science department” had “played a prominent role in the defeat of President Trump” by suppressing evidence that a Chinese lab leak had caused the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was a lot like the corrupt Russia investigation, Graham suggested. “They shut down an inquiry that I think could have changed the election,” he told Brian Kilmeade. If Graham couldn’t prove that Trump had been cheated after ballots were cast, he would argue that Trump had been cheated indirectly, before people voted.

On June 18, Graham spoke in Florida at a conference of the Faith & Freedom Coalition. He proudly asserted that on his first visit to Trump

in the White House, he had told the president, “I think God has put you here.” Graham also told the crowd that there had been “a lot of shenanigans” in the 2020 election. A month later, on Fox News, he repeated that Trump “owns the Republican party. . . . This is the party of Donald Trump. If you think otherwise, you’re in for a rude awakening.”

By the fall of 2021, Graham was ready to go after McConnell. Trump was angry at McConnell for cooperating with Democrats on raising the national debt ceiling. Graham entered the fight on Trump’s side and advised McConnell that he had better appease Trump, or else. “If you’re going to lead this party in the House [or] the Senate, you have to have a working relationship with Donald Trump,” said Graham. He made it clear that if McConnell failed to satisfy Trump, Graham would vote to oust McConnell as the party’s Senate leader.

This threat made a mockery of Graham’s original rationale for supporting Trump. In 2015 and 2016, he had tried to keep Trump out of power. Only after Trump won the 2016 election had Graham fully submitted to him. At that time, Graham reasoned that he should serve the new president for two reasons: because Trump had a mandate from the people and because Trump held the nation’s most powerful office.

Now Trump had lost his mandate and his office. McConnell, conversely, had been overwhelmingly re-elected to the Senate and to his post as Republican leader. If Graham truly revered democracy, he would expect Trump to make peace with McConnell.

Instead, Graham demanded that McConnell make peace with Trump. Now that the principle of respecting democracy no longer justified submission to Trump, Graham discarded the principle. He didn’t revere the will of the people. He revered the will of Trump.



Graham told his Republican colleagues that by staying in Trump’s orbit, he was tempering the former president’s behavior. He told the same story to reporters who asked about his friendship with Trump. But Trump

showed no signs of being tempered. Instead of backing away from his attacks on the rule of law, he became more aggressive.

On January 29, 2022, at a rally in Texas, Trump offered to pardon people convicted of crimes on January 6th. “If I run and if I win, we will treat those people from January 6th fairly,” he said. “And if it requires pardons, we will give them pardons, because they are being treated so unfairly.”

The next day, Trump defended his attempt to have Pence, in Trump’s words, “change the Presidential Election results.” In a written statement, Trump said the vice president had the right to do this unilaterally. Trump condemned a bill that would “take that right away,” and he lamented that Pence “didn’t exercise that power, he could have overturned the Election!”

When Graham was asked about Trump’s preemptive offer of pardons, he called it “inappropriate.” But he still didn’t blame Trump for inciting the people whose crimes the former president was openly defending.

A week after Trump’s comments about pardons and overturning the election, the Republican National Committee adopted a resolution of censure. It wasn’t a censure of Trump. It was a censure of Cheney and another House Republican, Adam Kinzinger, for working with Democrats on a committee to investigate January 6th. The resolution declared that the RNC would “immediately cease any and all support” of Cheney and Kinzinger.

The RNC agreed with Trump that people who were under investigation for their roles on January 6th, or in various plots to overturn the election, were the true victims. They were “ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse,” according to the resolution.

McConnell spoke out against the resolution, but Graham defended it. Graham said the RNC was standing up, rightly, for “the people who went to the rally.” He agreed that they were just “exercising their constitutional rights.”

During the summer of 2022, a series of hearings held by the House January 6th Committee exposed Trump’s conspiracies to overturn the 2020 election. He had tried to coerce the Justice Department to declare

the election corrupt. He had pressured state officials to “find”—Trump had used that exact word—enough votes to overturn the results. He had told his militant supporters to march on the Capitol, knowing that many of them were armed. Then, for hours, he had watched the attack on TV, rebuffing entreaties to tell the mob to go home.

None of this moved Graham. On June 9, as the hearings opened, he said the committee was just “trying to blame President Trump” and “change the outcome of the midterms.” There was no good reason to air the evidence, Graham suggested, since January 6th was “something every American’s made up their mind about.”

Weeks later, after dozens of witnesses had testified about Trump’s crimes, Graham dismissed the committee as a “sham, one-sided Star Chamber tribunal.” Nearly all the witnesses were Republicans, but Graham pretended that the hearings were a partisan hit job. “This investigation would make the Soviet Union cringe,” he scoffed. “Everybody on the committee has one goal: They want to get Trump.”

On June 17—a day after witnesses described Trump’s persistent attempts to coerce Pence to overturn the election—Graham spoke in Nashville at another conference of the Faith & Freedom Coalition. “You know what I liked about Trump? Everybody was afraid of him, including me,” Graham told the crowd. “Don’t you miss that? Don’t you miss an America that people respected and were a little bit afraid of?”

Three hours later, Trump showed up to tell the Nashville audience what he would do if he regained power. “January 6th defendants are having their lives totally destroyed,” he said. “If I become president someday—if I decide to do it—I will be looking at them very, very seriously for pardons.”

Republicans didn’t have to put up with this. There were many other politicians the party could nominate for president instead of Trump. The most obvious was Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. But Graham—who had said in 2016 that the nominee should be anyone but Trump—now insisted that only Trump would do. “This is Trump’s party,” said Graham. “I like Ron DeSantis, but I know what I’m getting with Trump: the good, and the bad, and everything in between.”

Endgame

In August, six weeks after the January 6th Committee detailed Trump's complicity in the attack on the Capitol, Graham again invoked the threat of violence on Trump's behalf.

When Trump left the White House in January 2021, two weeks after his coup attempt, he took hundreds of classified documents—apparently in violation of the law—to his Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago. For a year and a half, despite multiple requests to return the documents, he failed to surrender many of them. So on August 8, 2022, while Trump was away, the FBI searched the estate to recover the documents.

When Trump found out about the search, he erupted. He asserted, falsely, that the estate was “under siege, raided, and occupied” by agents who might have planted the documents.

Graham joined Trump in smearing the FBI. The search was part of an “endless effort to destroy Donald Trump,” the senator suggested.

Then Graham went further. “If there's a prosecution of Donald Trump for mishandling classified information,” he predicted, “there'll be riots in the streets.” The reason, he explained, was that Trump's supporters would be furious, because Hillary Clinton hadn't been prosecuted for having classified files on a server in her basement when she was the secretary of state.

Three minutes later—in case anyone thought he was joking or speaking figuratively—Graham repeated his warning. “If they try to prosecute President Trump for mishandling classified information,” he said, “there literally will be riots in the street.”

Again, Graham wasn't endorsing riots. But for the second time in two years, he was raising the prospect of violence to discourage legal action against Trump.

In effect, Graham was exploiting the threat of bloodshed—which was all too plausible after January 6th—and he was laundering that threat into a high-minded rationale about keeping the peace. Without any

explicit or implicit coordination, Graham had formed a symbiotic relationship with Trump's militant supporters. They supplied the prospect of violence. And he used that prospect to intimidate public officials who sought to hold Trump accountable to the law.



As the 2022 midterms neared, Graham dialed up the rage. "I want every liberal to be miserable come election night," he told Fox News viewers. He said a victory for Herschel Walker, the Republican nominee for senator in Georgia, would be especially sweet "because they hate him so much."

In 2015, Graham had rebuked Trump for vilifying illegal immigrants as invaders. "Beating on immigrants is, like, the oldest game in the book," the senator had complained. "In Donald Trump's world, you know, the illegal immigrant's going to rape your wife and steal your job."

But that was then. Now Graham played the same game. He told Fox viewers, "Our way of life is under attack. Your family's under attack. We're being invaded by illegal immigrants."

After the polls closed on November 8, 2022, Graham misled Fox viewers about the results, and he suggested that if Republicans lost, the vote counts were fishy. On November 9, he claimed that the race for governor of Arizona was "over"—Republican Kari Lake would win comfortably—and that based on the returns from Nevada, Adam Laxalt, the GOP's nominee for the Senate, would definitely take that seat. "There is no mathematical way Laxalt loses," Graham declared in a Republican conference call on November 10. "If he does, then it's a lie."

But it wasn't a lie. Laxalt and Lake were defeated, and Republicans came up short in their bid to retake the Senate. Trump and Graham responded by blaming McConnell and trying to oust him from GOP leadership. They failed.

On November 15, Trump announced that he would run to reclaim the presidency. He said the United States should adopt a policy inspired by China's dictator, Xi Jinping: immediate, one-day trials—followed by

execution—of anyone charged with selling drugs. Trump also pledged to send the National Guard into American cities to “restore public safety,” “even if they don’t want the help.”

Graham loved the speech. “If President Trump continues this tone and delivers this message on a consistent basis,” the senator tweeted, “he will be hard to beat.”

On December 3, Trump called for the “termination” of constitutional constraints on the seizure of power. He claimed that Twitter and other Big Tech companies had conspired with Democrats to defeat him in 2020, and therefore he should be immediately reinstated as president or the election should be redone. “A Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution,” Trump wrote.

When reporters asked Graham about Trump’s statement, he conceded that it was “inappropriate.” But he also said the former president had a point. “What happened at Twitter was wrong,” Graham argued. He complained that Trump’s enemies were always trying “to bend the rules to get Trump.”

When Graham was asked whether Trump’s statement disqualified him from the presidency, he replied: “I don’t think so.”

In fact, Graham insisted that Trump—the man who had just called for suspending the Constitution—was the only person fit to lead the nation. And the reason, according to Graham, was that no one else could inspire the same fear.

On January 28, 2023, Trump came to South Carolina to unveil his campaign leadership team in the state. Graham stood proudly beside him. In his speech, Trump repeated that “massive cheating” had cost him the 2020 election. He also defended the insurrection, complaining that “law enforcement” had “put American patriots in jail.”

Trump had learned from his time as president. What he had learned was that civil servants—government employees dedicated to the United States, not to him—had gotten in his way. In a second term, he would purge them. “We’re going to find the Deep State actors who have burrowed into government, fire them, and escort them from federal build-

ings,” he declared, bringing to mind images of the expelled Vindman brothers. “And it’ll go very quickly.”

When Trump finished speaking, Graham shook his hand and congratulated him. Two days later, Graham went on Fox News to call for the former president’s restoration. He bragged that Trump had “scared the crap out of Mexico” and, by threatening to leave NATO, had frightened Europe into paying more for its defense.

Other Republican presidential candidates might run on the same policies, but only one man could “bring order out of chaos,” said Graham. “There are no Trump policies without the man, Donald Trump.”

As the 2024 race geared up, Trump returned to the campaign trail with a stark message: If he were to regain power, he would resume the despotic ambitions of his first term. And he would go further.

There would be no apology for his coup attempt. In speeches and social media statements, he declared that the January 6th insurrectionists were the country’s true patriots. He demanded the release of many who had been convicted or charged and jailed. He collaborated with them to produce a song, which he proudly promoted (“It’s Donald Trump and the J6 prisoners,” he told Hannity) and played at a campaign rally. He said the members of the House January 6th Committee should be prosecuted for treason.

Trump claimed dictatorial powers. He ruled out any attempt to hold him legally accountable for January 6th, asserting that “as President, I have Complete and Total Immunity.” He dismissed legal constraints on the president’s authority to send the National Guard into cities. “The next time, I’m not waiting” for state or local approval, he said. As to the classified documents he had taken to Mar-a-Lago when he left office, he insisted that he couldn’t be prosecuted because “as president, I have the right to declassify documents, and the process is automatic if I take them with me.”

To his followers, Trump promised vengeance and one-man rule. In a speech to CPAC on March 4, he told them: “I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your

retribution.” Three weeks later, at a rally in Waco, Texas, he alluded again to domestic enemies: “I am your retribution. We will take care of them.” He pledged to “cast out the Communists and Marxists,” and he outlined a “plan to dismantle the Deep State.” It would begin with “restoring the President’s authority to remove rogue bureaucrats,” he said. “And I will wield that power very aggressively.”

In foreign policy, Trump called for pure extortion. He said he would extract “preferential treatment” for American products by threatening to withdraw U.S. troops from allied countries. He also suggested that the United States should use military deployments and security aid to gain an ownership stake in these countries. “In business, you put up money, seed money,” he explained. “You end up owning the country.”

In 2015, Graham had viewed such threats—the lawlessness, the despotism, the demands for war crimes—as a menace to the republic. But now he saw only the advantages of having a strongman in power.

On April 5, at a press conference in South Carolina, a reporter asked Graham why Trump should be president again, especially after January 6th. Graham pointed again to the fear Trump inspired. “I had a front-row seat to his presidency,” said Graham. “Nobody could have done what he did. I was there. China was afraid of him.” Mexico was afraid, too, because “they saw what he did to China,” the senator added.

With Trump back in the White House, the world would cower. “I’m tired of being afraid of Iran,” said Graham. “I would like Iran to be afraid of *us*.”

Sometimes I wonder whether the Graham of 2015 is still there, hidden inside the Graham of 2023. Does he know, somewhere in his mind, that he lost his way? Is it possible to reach through his layers of self-deception and connect, even briefly, with the man he used to be?

I never got a chance to try, because he declined to be interviewed for this story. But one of Graham’s former colleagues did get that chance.

On March 20, Graham sat down with former Sen. Al Franken on the *Daily Show*. Franken asked Graham whether Trump had lost the 2020 election. Graham conceded that he had. Franken pointed out that

Trump had corruptly pardoned Flynn, Stone, and Manafort. He reminded Graham that Trump had been told repeatedly by advisers, prior to January 6th, that he had lost the election. He asked Graham how he could support the restoration of a president “who allowed us to go through this violent insurrection.”

Graham didn’t defend the lies, the pardons, or the insurrection. He sidestepped those points. He argued that Trump had done what Graham wanted “on the things that I care the most about: national security.” And he posed his own query to Franken, premised on the crimes and abuses liberals attributed to Trump.

“Here’s the question for you and maybe others,” said Graham. “Trump’s trying to come back. I think he’s got a better than good chance of winning the primary and a 50-50 chance of being president again. And you’ve got to ask yourself . . . how can that be?”

After seven years of defending and abetting Trump—seven years of transforming the Republican party into a vehicle for one man’s power—Graham thought that was a question for somebody else.

Epilogue

Lessons

I set out to research the story of Graham's relationship with Trump because I wanted to understand how authoritarianism arose in the United States. I wanted to see how the poison worked: the corruption, the rationalizations, the vulnerabilities in the system. I wanted to learn how democracies could detect such threats and counteract them.

Here are some of the lessons I learned.

1. Emerging authoritarianism doesn't look like an ideology.

It appears in the form of a demagogue. It's easy to support him while laughing off the idea that you're embracing authoritarianism.

2. Celebration of fear is a warning sign. When a demagogue brags about intimidating his enemies, and when voters and politicians flock to him for that reason, look out. Maybe he knows who the real villains are. Or maybe he's the sort of person who attacks anyone in his way.

3. Authoritarian voters are the underlying threat. In every country, there are people who want a leader to break institutions and rule with an iron fist. These voters form a constituency that can lure politicians to embrace such a leader. At a minimum, they can deter politicians from opposing that leader. And if he loses power, the next authoritarian can exploit the same constituency.

4. *Political parties are footholds for authoritarians.* An aspiring strongman doesn't have to gain power all at once. He can start by capturing a party and becoming its flagship candidate. This gives everyone in the party a reason to help him.

5. *Politicians are blinded by their arrogance.* They think they can manipulate an emerging authoritarian by collaborating with him. They underestimate the extent to which what they see as an alliance—but is really subservience—will corrupt and constrain them.

6. *Politicians are misled by personal contact with the authoritarian.* He may seem charming or manageable, but that's because he's among friends and flatterers. These situations don't reflect how he'll treat people who get in his way.

7. *Cowardice is enough to empower an authoritarian.* He doesn't need a phalanx of wicked accomplices. He just needs weak-willed politicians and aides who will go along with whatever he does. Every country has plenty of those.

8. *Authoritarianism is a trait.* Politicians can always find reasons why this or that corrupt act by an authoritarian isn't prosecutable or impeachable. These excuses gloss over the underlying problem: his personality. If he gets away with one abuse of power, he'll move on to the next.

9. *Democracy becomes a rationale to serve the authoritarian.* Once he wins a nomination or an election, politicians can exalt him as the people's choice. They can use this mandate to dismiss criticism of his conduct and to reject any attempt to remove him from office.

10. *Power becomes a rationale to serve the authoritarian.* Once he's in office, politicians can tell themselves that by defending him,

they're earning his trust, gaining influence over him, and steering him away from his worst impulses.

11. Rationalization becomes a skill and a habit. The first time you excuse an authoritarian act, it feels like a one-time concession. But each time you bend, you become more flexible. The authoritarian keeps pushing, and you keep adjusting.

12. Ad hoc legal defenses become authoritarianism. Each time the leader abuses his power, apologists claim he has the authority to do so. Over time, as he commits more abuses, these piecemeal assertions of authority add up to a defense of anything the leader chooses to do.

13. Normalization and polarization are enough to create a mass authoritarian movement. People get used to a strong-willed leader, and their partisan reflexes kick in. If the leader is in your party, you may feel an urge to attack anyone who goes after him. You become part of his political army.

14. Exposure of the authoritarian's crimes galvanizes his base. His supporters turn against the media, the legislature, law enforcement, and any other institution that investigates him. They view his accumulating scandals as more evidence that the true villains are out to get him.

15. Demonization of the opposition paves the way to tyranny. It lowers the moral threshold for supporting the leader. You must defend him, no matter what he does, because his enemies are worse.

16. A party detached from its principles becomes a cult. Once the party begins to shed prior beliefs in deference to a leader, it loses independent standards by which to judge him. The party becomes the man, and dissent from him becomes heresy.

17. *Democracy's culture of compromise is a weakness.* Over time, an authoritarian's will to gain and wield power grinds down politicians who are content to negotiate among competing interests. As he relentlessly imposes his will, they find reasons and ways to accommodate him.

18. *Civil servants are easily smeared and purged.* Some of them might investigate, expose, or refuse the leader's corrupt orders, since they weren't appointed by him or elected on his ticket. But that independence makes them easy to attack as "Deep State" conspirators who are subverting the people's will.

19. *It's easy to provoke and exploit violence without endorsing it.* You just say the election was stolen, and the president's followers take it from there. Then, after their rampage, you warn that any punishment of him might drive them to violence again.

20. *It's easy to rationalize ethnic or religious persecution.* Demagogues tend to use any division in society—ethnic, sexual, religious—as a wedge against their enemies. A skilled politician can excuse this behavior on the grounds that bigotry is only the method, not the motive.

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And to those of you who are just learning about *The Bulwark*: This is the kind of work we do. We're here to preserve the republic. Join us.



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