Like many in academia, I work and interact daily with people in their 20s. Unsurprisingly, they, as a group, are now confronting feelings of fear, uncertainty, anger, and displacement, embarking into a new reality. Long held American values are under vicious attack. Their future is at stake. So what should we counsel?

Whether you believe in American Exceptionalism (that the United States is unique, distinct, or exemplary compared to other nations) or not, it is the case that America has stood as a symbol of enduring democracy and freedom, a beacon of hope, an economic engine, a source of technological marvels, an independent judiciary fueled by the rule of law, and a university system of world renown, in opposition to oppression and authoritarianism. And while we have not always lived up to these ideals, they have illuminated policy and action.

Through USAID and other mechanisms, the US has fought famine and disease throughout the world, funded clean water projects, promoted economic development, lifted destitute out of poverty, battled AIDs and malaria, often supported democracy, improved life for millions. The US has been at the forefront of maintaining an imperfect but relatively peaceful world order through mechanisms like NATO and other alliances. At home, US investment has made incredible progress on fighting disease, including cancer and AIDs. Computers, cell phones, the internet, solar panels, and AI, to name a few, owe their existence to US universities and federal research funding.

All of this to say, America, for decades, has stood for things that are worth fighting for — and I say that as someone who remembers clearly the Vietnam War, Watergate, the civil rights era, Iran Contra, and the lies that led to the Iraq War.

Attacks

Now, the most concerning attack on American values comes not from Putin or Xi or Khomeini or Maduro, but from Trump. In a matter of months, this unfortunate administration has gutted USAID and its efforts to halt disease worldwide, its work on clean water, its basic aid to the most in need; supported Putin and his invasion of Ukraine; personally attacked Zelenskyy and Ramaphosa in the Oval Office; undermined NATO; levied or threatened enormous tariffs on allies; threatened to take over Greenland, Canada, and Panama; drastically cut funding for medical research; undercut support for vaccines for measles; cut off funds for renewable energy; undermined environmental protection; halted over 1000 public service programs; pardoned insurrectionists and rioters; questioned election results;

defunded universities; removed climate change data; precluded law firms from federal buildings; gutted consumer protection and even the National Weather Service; called for impeachment of judges who overturned illegal federal actions; repeatedly and in multiple ways attacked the press and limited press access; withdrawn legal status for Afghan and Venezuelan refugees; deported immigrants without due process; attacked all programs focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion; removed reference to climate change; deployed the military on US soil to suppress protests; and made deals worth billions for the Trump family and Elon Musk; to name just of few.

We know all of this, but just putting it on paper is chilling.

Responses

So, what do we say to young people looking towards their future?

First, it is worth remembering that the America of democratic values, the rule of law, academic freedom, diversity, equality, and justice is still worth fighting for, even if it means fighting against an unjust federal administration and a sycophantic Congress. In fact, it feels obligatory.

Second, in the face of withering attacks on law firms, the judiciary, the press, science and scientists, universities, and pretty much anyone willing to stand up against the onslaught, the role of young people is even more essential. Student protests and actions were central to stopping the Vietnam War, progress on civil rights, early focus on environmental issues, and Black Lives Matter. Students can change the discussion. It's part of why Trump and his allies are spending so much time attacking universities and student protest.

Third, Barack Obama was fond of quoting Martin Luther King, that the "arc of moral history is long but bends towards justice." We must recognize that it is also fractal. In the shorter term, it bends back on itself and even reverses. While it is not easy in the moment, people in their 20s have the luxury of a slightly longer view. The 78-year-old President has three and a half years left to his term, and the 2026 elections are within sight. The arc can bend forward.

The Trump Administration is hell-bent on supporting the oil industry, stopping renewable energy and even energy efficiency as it denies climate change and undercuts the scientific and technological work that provides a pathway to a

sustainable future. But climate change does not care. The impacts are here and growing, resulting in greater economic pain and environmental harm. In 1970, seven of the twelve congressmen labeled as the "dirty dozen" for their anti-environmental votes lost their re-election bids, making the environment a potent political issue. When climate change impacts elections – as soon as 2026 – climate denial will end. Students can make that happen.

Fourth, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her famous book, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, identified the cynical use of antisemitism as a key tool of totalitarian regimes. Jews were particularly susceptible to attack because of long-standing efforts to assimilate, suppressing any Jewish political identity, and thereby limiting their ability to respond in a concerted way. The Trump assault on DEI – diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – carries echoes of the same playbook. By suppressing identify of any sort, those in power reduce the voices of opposition. Students from all backgrounds and identities are essential in responding to the effort to whitewash history and foreclose programs that recognize historical inequities and discrimination. The civil rights movement makes that very clear.

My message to students, to everyone really, is not despair, but action. Vote, protest, petition the government, exercise the rights guaranteed in our Constitution. Embrace American values. Make America a Democracy Again.