O

n the anniversary
of Donald Trump’s
inauguration, PRA
Executive Director
Tarso Luís Ramos talks about
some of what’s changed in the
past year, and what progres-
sives should be alert to going
forward.

PE: What should we make of
this anniversary?
As relentless a year as it’s
been, the Trump camp accom-
complished less of its agenda than
they might have. They’ve not
been able to fully convert on
GOP control of both chambers
of Congress and it took them
a full year to win a major—if
devastating—legislative victo-
ry in the form of the tax heist.
The widespread and fierce re-
sistance to the Trump agenda
from the Women’s March on
ward compelled congressional Demo-
crats to take a harder line of resistance
than they could have, and deep divisions
on the Right scuttled repeal and replace-
ment of the Affordable Care Act and oth-
er administration initiatives. Trump has
had to rely disproportionately on execu-
tive power, and by all accounts his is not
a tight ship. This is all to say that things
could be—and may yet become—much
worse.

Of course, tremendous damage can
and has been done through executive ac-
tion and the full implications of changes
at the various federal departments have
not been fully felt. Yet looking back on
what PRA anticipated from a Trump presi-
dency, a lot of things that have come to
pass were predictable in their broad out-
lines, if not always in the details.

PRA warned that White nationalists
would make a show of force; that the
Christian Right would be rewarded with
things like judicial appointments and
pushback against LGBTQ communities.
It was clear that Trump was going to en-
gage in eliminationist policies, directed
at Muslims, refugees, and immigrants,
and expanded targeting of Black com-
munities.

We also warned that Trump would not
make good on his promises of economic
populism and argued that it would be
the job of progressives to reveal Trump's
betrayals as quickly as possible. That
nobody, including Trump voters, would
deserve what was coming. Even we,
who may have a reputation for gloomy
forecasts, thought Trump would lead
with the “carrot” of infrastructure (if in
a privatizing, crony capitalist way) before the “sticks” of Mus-
lim and trans military service bans and so on.

Given the hollowness of his
economic populism, it seemed
inventable that the regime
would have to deliver tangi-
ble non-economic benefits to
Trump’s electoral base. And I
think we’ve seen that: No stu-
dent loan relief, but the revo-
cation of guidelines for redress
around sexual assault on cam-
pus, as well as challenges to
higher ed access for Black and
Brown students. No policies
to revive manufacturing, but
a crackdown on “Black iden-
tity extremism.” No reining in
of Wall Street excesses—peo-
ple forget that was part of his
stump speech, before the Gold-
man Sachs appointees—but
Muslim bans and a steady drip
of antisemitism.

Yet after the election came a chorus of
liberal critics calling on progressives to
reject identity politics—by which they
meant appeals to gender or racial jus-
tice—in favor of the supposed universal-
ism of economic populism. We at PRA
heard this as a call to a different sort of
identity politics: White identity politics.
The Trump campaign combined White
racial grievance with toxic masculinity
and economic populism. It linked, espe-
cially, race and the economy, blaming
people of color and immigrants for the
decaying economic fortunes of White
people. Trump campaigned on the lie
that bigotry can bring prosperity. The
challenge for progressives is not to shut
up about race, gender, and sexuality,
but to do a better job of addressing them
in relation to widespread economic inequality.

**Is any of this similar to dynamics under the last Bush administration?**

There are parallels, such as tax cuts for the rich, the crackdown on immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, the "clash of civilizations" framework, and endorsement of torture in pursuit of national security goals. We’ll see whether Trump also leads the country into major military engagements.

But quite a bit is different from the George W. Bush period, including the more open-throated expression of an exclusionary, White definition of American identity. Many have noted that we’ve left behind the dog whistles for straightforward racial and ethnic appeals. Also, where Bush was an heir to the Republican establishment, Trump ran a hostile takeover of the GOP from the outside. And while they each won support from the Christian Right, with Pence the doomsayers appear to have even more influence in Trump’s government. Of course there’s also Trump himself—a demagogue and racist campaigner from a very different mold.

Another difference is the vast scale of political real estate captured by the GOP in 2016—the executive branch, both chambers of Congress, and the lion’s share of the states. With that has come an opportunity to do deep, generational damage to the economy, as well as to any broadly felt experience of American democracy—something long denied to African Americans, Indigenous communities, and others, and that may now be denied to an expanding number. Trump’s attacks on the institutional pillars of democracy—the judiciary, the vote, independent media—signal a potential descent into oligarchy or authoritarianism.

So there are continuities from the Bush era, as well as real ruptures that could make what’s coming unrecognizable to large swaths of the population.

Given the increase in violence grounded in bigotry, how should we think about “hate crimes” and “hate groups”? There’s been a real surge in reported bias crimes—from desecration of Jewish cemeteries to physical assaults against African Americans, Latinx immigrants, and people perceived to be Muslim. Both the Trump camp and organized bigoted groups are successfully stoking hatreds based on race, religion, gender, sexual identity, and so on. Their relentless demonization of targeted communities inevitably encourages individuals to act on their bigotries. Yet defining the problem in terms of “hate” and “hate groups” can obscure both the root issues and the appropriate responses.

Organized bigots, like the White nationalist groups who mobilized to murderous effect in Charlottesville last August, have social and political goals beyond any simple notion of hatred. Richard Spencer and his ilk seek a racially cleansed White authoritarian state. Naturally, they are thrilled to see their agenda of ethnic cleansing reflected in Trump’s push for a southern border wall, Muslim ban and registry, crackdown on Black dissent, and an aggressive immigrant detention and deportation program. For these White nationalists, mobilizing racial resentment—and, yes, fostering hatred of other groups—is critical to movement building. But it’s not an end unto itself any more than “hate” sums up the agenda of the German Nazi Party.

If we misunderstand the problem as being limited to a small—if growing—number of violent militants, we’ll tend to use the wrong yardstick to measure White nationalists’ influence. Of concern is not only the number of militants they can mobilize, but how broadly influential their ideas have become. The president of the United States champions their eliminationist policies and provided political cover for overt White nationalists even after Charlottesville. Yet the “hate frame,” as PRA contributor Kay Whitlock calls it, relies mostly on legal and law enforcement responses to so-called extremists and avoids dealing with structural racism and other systems of domination. As the Black Lives Matter and trans justice movements regularly remind us, police agencies are among the principal sources of bigoted violence. We should be wary of positioning law enforcement as the solution, particularly in a moment of “blue lives matter” backlash and a national security doctrine of counter-terrorism.

**Is Trump’s engagement with White nationalists unprecedented in the presidency?**

Yes and no. People don’t know or forget that the Reagan administration cultivated European fascist émigrés who came to the U.S. after World War II—a story PRA published decades ago. Pat Buchanan, a White supremacist, served in more than one administration. So there’s some precedent on the staffing. With Trump, it’s not just Bannon, Gorka, and Stephen...
Miller; the administration has pulled in personnel from national anti-immigrant groups founded by White nationalist John Tanton to serve at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Trump’s amplification of neonazi Twitter and his defense of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally are extraordinary developments indeed. The White nationalists and fascists who marched in Charlottesville are part of a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow the current political order. Even racist politicians who defend the current system of White dominance generally reject insurrectionists as treasonous. Trump has broken with that tradition.

How much of what we’re seeing now are things that many people weren’t paying attention to before?

Trump’s campaign and election has been a wake-up call for many people. In a way Trump represents the fruition of the economic and social initiatives of the Hard Right in the 1960s and ‘70s that led to the election of Reagan and have continued ever since.

One way to think about this moment is to acknowledge that we have been in an extended social and economic crisis in the U.S., and now that emergency is being felt by a much broader segment of society. Suddenly, there is open and widespread discussion in mainstream media about whether the president is a proto-fascist and whether the U.S. is drifting toward autocracy. These are valid questions. Yet conditions were already quasi-authoritarian if you lived in a low-income African American community—in terms of things like policing, denial of due process, regulation of the body and family, deprivation of social services, and denial of education and economic opportunities. To get an idea of what a more authoritarian U.S. could look like, we should look not only at other nation’s histories, but also more deeply into the American experience.

So there’s both deep continuity and rupture in this moment. We believe there’s a danger of descent into something more authoritarian but it’s in no way inevitable. Some find the possibility novel and shocking while others view it as an extension of current conditions. Holding those different perspectives simultaneously can be a challenge but is necessary to the project of building a mass movement—not only for resistance, but for transformative change.

What are your concerns about the normalization of Trumpism?

We can’t allow what’s happening under this regime to become normalized, but neither can we behave as if resistance to oppressive governance began in November 2016.

There’s a gift in this moment: Tens of thousands of people are newly aware of themselves as historical actors and are forming (or reforming) their sense of purpose in this extended moment of crisis. There is tremendous opportunity for deep transformation there. There’s also tension with movements that have long been in the struggle for transformational change. We are at an inflection point in the social, cultural, and political life of this country, in which simply having a well-formed opinion is insufficient.

Non-normalization involves grounding ourselves in shared values. In general, we have to practice deep solidarity: if the regime comes for any of us, they will have to come through all of us.

Is this a fight we can win?

People define the fight differently. For some, success might be getting back to what existed under Obama or Clinton. For others, including PRA, the levels of economic and social inequality; the violent, unprecedented deportation program; the military adventurism and reliance on drone warfare; the decimation of economic opportunities for the working and middle classes; the ongoing attacks on reproductive justice and LGBTQ rights; the system of mass incarceration—these were all unacceptable conditions even before Trump. For us, Trump represents an escalation of the local and global crisis of liberal democracies. The answer cannot be, as in France, defeating the Far Right at the ballot box with a supposed liberal whose austerity programs will worsen economic inequality and possibly strengthen opportunities for the Right down the road.

There should be no going backwards to unjust economic and social arrangements, however worse present circumstances have become. Russian meddling aside, the crisis of our political and economic systems facilitated Trump’s rise to power. His explanation of the causes and remedies for our crises were and remain horrifyingly wrong, but he got a hearing in part because he connected his bigotry to an insistence that the economy is fundamentally broken for everyday people. Any victory over Trump that’s worth fighting for should advance a more fundamental restructuring of our social, political, and economic lives.

Do I think it’s possible? Yes, but there are many challenges, and a desperation for anything but Trumpism could lead to setting our sights too low. It took decades for the Right to consolidate this much power, and it will take more than one or two political cycles to produce transformational alternatives. We need to shore up institutional pillars of democracy, like the judiciary, that, however inadequate, are critical bulwarks against the worst excesses of the Right. At the same time, it’s a moment to be bold about the need for fundamental changes, because the brokenness of our social and economic systems require more than a little tinkering.

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