



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

The (un)United States: *The centre cannot hold (again)*

As the news of numbers in the US election rolled in from across the Atlantic, I could hear (on videos online) and imagine the sighs and tears of relief at the prospect of retiring an unsuitable president. But the sighs and tears are mostly those of only a bit more (about five and a half million) than half the American voting population. There are about 70 million who want the anti-truth, anti-science narcissist to continue for a second term, showing how little the pursuit of truth and evidence-based decision-making mean to them. And they refuse to accept the outcome of a legitimate election. Rejecting the results of a democratic election is usually associated with the 'third world' phenomenon... False news, already at work for about six years, has multiplied exponentially, drowning out any facts, such as that the American voting machine ran as smoothly (or more so) as ever.

In the past four years, there has been no shortage of analysis, online and in all media, and piles of books have been written on the phenomenon that is Trumpism. For me, the best explanation is that America is after all, not exempt from problematic situations that have occurred throughout history in all parts of the world. No constitution, it seems, can prevent these types of situations.

As NSTF chairperson, Prof Ali Dhansay says of South Africa: "There is a need for trusted and moral leadership, with a return to basic and foundational values and integrity a non-negotiable prerequisite." These words are applicable to the US too, and Biden has been asserting this need for values.

W.B. Yeats understood one hundred years ago

The quote of William Butler Yeats above is from the poem *The Second Coming**, (see the poem at the end of the article) which was published one hundred years ago (in 1920) and has been gratefully quoted ever since. Apparently, lines from the poem have been quoted more often during the first seven months of 2016 than ever before (as shown by an analysis by research company [Factiva](#) in 2017). I am sure that the lines have been increasingly quoted in the past four years as well, and are being quoted in several parts of the world as you are reading this article. What makes the poem especially apt is the context in which it was written: the 2018-2019 Spanish Flu from which Yeats's pregnant wife almost died, as well as the aftermath of World War I, and the Irish War of Independence which was starting at that time.

The 2016 context in which Yeats's famous lines are remarkably applicable, included the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and increased terror attacks in Europe. Now, in the context of political turmoil that has continued and arguably has intensified, since 2016, the poem resonates ever more loudly, not only in the US, but around the world.

Values and technological innovation

Seventy-five years ago, the Second World War ended. The Americans helped to end it in Europe but simultaneously were developing the most destructive weapon that the world had seen up to then, and decided to use it against the Japanese even as the war was ending. This was a disastrous case of poor decision-making, devoid of respect for humanity or ethics. Albert Einstein's important and ground-breaking work in physics was applied by politicians for decimating civilian populations. It is not true that innovation is always a good thing.

What did Einstein himself think of the atom bomb? Rebecca Rosen, in an [article](#) called *'I've Created a Monster! On the Regrets of Inventors*, in 2011, writes that Einstein initially co-wrote a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, pleading for support for physics research into the explosive chain reaction generated through nuclear fission. He was convinced that the Germans would develop the atom bomb, and was anxious for America to know about it and perhaps prevent the Germans from using it. Years later, he deeply regretted that letter to the president, saying that he would not have done it if he had known that the Germans would not succeed in making the bomb.

Einstein played no direct role in developing the bomb, although he realised the potential of a disastrous application by the Germans in the ongoing world war. He was a pacifist and likely never agreed to the manufacture of the atomic bomb.

Even before the bomb was tested, about 70 scientists working on the Manhattan project (the secret project of developing and manufacturing the bomb) signed a petition saying that the bomb should not be deployed. After two of the bombs were dropped on Japan, many of these scientists regretted their part in its development. Einstein's friend, whose letter he signed and sent to Roosevelt, Leo Szilard, gave up on his beloved field of study – physics. He had conceived the nuclear chain reaction already in 1933.

Nations united to create peace

Another momentous thing that happened 75 years ago, as a direct reaction to the World War, was the establishment of the United Nations (UN). The intention was and is to ensure that nothing like the World Wars would ever happen again. The UN was to strengthen international cooperation and promote world peace. "Einstein sought to control nuclear weapons and to develop institutions such as the UN that he believed could lead to peace". The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was formed to promote the aims of the UN through multilateral collaboration on various fields of education, science and culture.

Unsurprisingly, the UN has not been able to ensure peace over the years in many hotspots around the world – nor could it have been expected to. However, the UN has kept countries talking and collaborating with one another for 75 years. A multilateral body like the UN has only as many teeth as the member countries will give it. Trump was responsible for withdrawing the US's support for the UN, rendering it even weaker than before. We can only hope that President-elect Joe Biden will get his country to re-commit to the UN and UNESCO, as well as the World Health Organisation (WHO) – following on this significant year of the UN's 75th anniversary and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ethical issues that were raised by the two world wars are myriad. They changed the world irrevocably in so many ways. Ongoing efforts and successes at nuclear disarmament have their origin there. The establishment of the International Court in The Hague also resulted from the Second World War. International prosecution of perpetrators of Crimes Against Humanity, including the Holocaust and other genocides, was a direct result and a good legacy that continues to call the world's attention to atrocities – albeit that there are limits to what can be achieved.

The UN, UNESCO, WHO and the International Court are multilateral institutions that are essential to support and maintain, precisely because they belong to the world as a whole.

Values and technology

One of the key issues evident from the two world wars, is that of the ethics around the uses of technology. In a certain sense both wars and their major battles were driven by technological developments. Interesting as this subject is, one cannot miss the fact that during the wars, (and since) 'improved' technology meant increased casualties – be it from mustard gas, tanks, and primitive airplanes, to submarines and nuclear weapons. The design and manufacture of ever more 'efficient' weapons have continued unabated since the end of World War II – including the further development of nuclear weapons, poisons, drones and biological warfare. The incentives are clear, both for countries to develop, purchase and sell weapons, and for the manufacturers. For the engineers that design the weapons and guide their manufacture, it is a job – an exciting, creative job. There is room

for innovation that will make weapons quieter, faster, less visible, more cost-effective, more efficient, and deadlier.

South Africa is still making money from its sales of military hardware designed and made under the Apartheid government, and even sales of torture equipment! See [Defence Web](#).

Is it possible to curb the manufacture and trade in weapons? How successful are we as the world, at limiting the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction? Is it even possible to limit civilian casualties (so-called 'collateral damage') during a modern war? The UN and other international bodies are trying to limit some of the damage of war, and that is the best we have – the hope of making the destruction of war a bit less, and to make it slightly more 'humane'.

The numbers of refugees are swelling every day – refugees from starvation, but often from conflict (i.e. war). The numbers are becoming so overwhelming that refugee camps become many refugees' permanent home.

What values are appropriate for our times? Are they different values from what has gone before? Can the world agree on the set of values that everyone will (strive to) abide by?

World values

Returning to current America, what is happening with values espoused by that nation?

[Ronald Inglehart](#) explains that "Trump won the 2016 election on a major clash of values. He represents those who are uncomfortable with modern values." This might explain the fervour with which Trump is followed, and the intense hatred of the non-followers.

But why such an about-turn for the country where so much ground has been broken for modern values?

Inglehart explains that the past 75 years have been unusual in world history. There have been no wars as major as the two world wars. In some (Western) countries, peace and prosperity have meant, "you take survival for granted, embrace freedom, [and] then democracy is likely to flourish." In addition, tolerance is then possible – for women in leadership, for foreign nationals, for people who look different, and for people with disabilities, for example. The tolerance of homosexuals (and other people with non-mainstream sexualities) is only a recent phenomenon, perhaps making it the most vulnerable of the 'modern values'?

Inglehart is the Founding Director of the World Values Survey. This survey regularly monitors values over time, of various populations across the world. The [World Values Survey](#) is a global network of social scientists who have carried out representative national surveys of the publics of over 100 societies on all six inhabited continents. The first wave of surveys for this project was carried out in 1981 and the latest wave was completed in 2019.

In an [interview](#) on 23 April 2017, called *Values in transition?*, Inglehart says that democracy thrives almost exclusively in peaceful and relatively prosperous conditions, where a population does not experience existential insecurity (in other words, where people's survival is not constantly threatened).

"We're in a period of regression," says Inglehart. In the US and across the world, survival can no longer be taken for granted and when people are insecure, they fight.

He says that every government needs a mythology to legitimate it. Examples include Marxism for Russia and Socialism for China. Religion in various forms also provide mythologies. The mythology of the Knowledge Society is a recent one – this is all about "thinking for yourself"! The latter has never occurred to me as a myth, because I am a firm 'believer'. But on reflection, any narrative that is absolute, and unqualified, is a myth. Reality is complex and rarely conforms to the models, the ideals, or societal characterisations with which we make sense of the world.

For the US, the old myths no longer hold. The US is meant to be "the land of the free, and the home of the brave" (quoting the US national anthem). The mythology also includes, I think, the concept of the American dream, or the 'rags to riches' dream, that supposedly, absolutely anyone can use their

freedom to work themselves up to become a rich and prosperous person, with a fortune of money and possessions. This has never been possible for the majority of Americans, strive as they may to make money, 'achieve' the possessions that are advertised incessantly by the media, and attain the 'promised land' of riches and beauty. The American people have woken up to the unrealistic nature of these dreams, and the two halves of the population have two different sets of 'solutions' to fixing the appalling state that America is in.

There are of course mythologies around Donald Trump too, and the believers are very vocal about their beliefs. One is that he is the leader chosen by God to rule America. This is not the first time that God is forced into political debates, street fights, and popular discourse (read: tweets). For many of his 70 million supporters this seems to be a mythology that 'trumps' (excuse the pun) the dream of democratic government as stated in the American constitution. America, it turns out, is no different from the many countries that America has regarded as undemocratic – in Africa and South America, for example.

Is Trump a fascist?

This question has been asked since early in Trump's presidential campaign in 2016. It was discussed last month by Dylan Matthews of Vox, with eight experts. '[Is Trump a fascist? 8 experts weigh in - Call him a kleptocrat, an oligarch, a xenophobe, a racist, even an authoritarian. But he doesn't quite fit the definition of a fascist.](#)' (23 October 2020) (I quote selectively from four of the experts who were interviewed by Matthews.

Jason Stanley, a Yale philosopher and author of *How Fascism Works*, says that "you could legitimately call Trumpism a fascist social and political movement" and that Trump is "using fascist political tactics," but that Trump is not necessarily a fascist, nor is he leading a fascist government. A fascist government would not have held these recent presidential elections. The US electoral system is still thoroughly democratic.

Roger Griffin, emeritus professor in modern history, Oxford Brookes University, has an interesting take on Trump: "He is an exploiter, he's a freeloader. He's a wheeler and dealer. And that is not the same as an ideologue. So he's absolutely not a fascist." What he is, quite consistently, is "an illiberal democrat".

"He doesn't care about the rules, but the core system he doesn't want to change, because he's somebody who's profited by that system."

Griffin goes on to point out that the question of whether Trump is a fascist is a red herring. We should rather be using our energies for example, to: "... avert the climate crisis, which is going to engulf us all, if we're not careful."

There is much about Trump that falls into the category of 'red herrings' – his very misbehaviour and lying are major distractions from policy issues. His dangerous advice on the Covid-19 pandemic and how individuals could treat themselves, also distracts attention from the real problems and the need for a collaborative, concerted effort to fight the pandemic.

Griffin again: instead of belonging in the company of fascists of the world, "we see him in a different rogues' gallery ... made up of a whole load of dictators throughout history, including Putin and Erdogan and Orbán and Assad today, who have abused constitutionalism and democracy to rationalize their abuse of power and their crimes against humanity."

Sheri Berman, professor of political science, Barnard College, Columbia University, says that "national socialism or, more broadly, fascism was a totalitarian ideology and political regime that wanted to do away not only with liberalism and democracy but to revolutionize society, economy, and politics."

"Indeed, I almost think calling Trump 'fascist' gives him too much credit — he isn't strategic enough, ideological enough, or ambitious enough. And as bad as things are today, we are still not in 1930s Germany.

“That Trump maintains his support by engaging in explicitly divisive appeals designed to pit groups against each other — particularly but not exclusively ethnic groups — also, of course, bears some similarity to what fascists did.”

“I think Trump often engages in what the political science literature refers to as ‘ethnic outbidding.’ Even more fitting, in my view, is the term ‘negative integration’ — a strategy of unifying a coalition by whipping up fear/hatred of purported enemies. Bismarck was the classic practitioner of the negative integration strategy.”

Come to think of it – The Nationalist Apartheid government also did such “ethnic outbidding” and “negative integration”. Their strategy was called “divide and rule”. For the US government to find itself in the historical company of the Apartheid government is not an honourable position to be in!

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, professor of Italian and history, New York University says: “Trump certainly uses fascist tactics, from holding rallies to refresh the leader-follower bond to creating a “tribe” (MAGA hats, rituals like chanting ‘lock them up’, etc.) to unleashing a volume of propaganda without precedent by an American president.” (MAGA stands for Make America Great Again – Trump’s slogan).

The tactic of creating a “tribe” is clearly evident in current events as Trump refuses to accept the result of the elections. On 14 November, Trump’s tribe of supporters took to the streets *en masse* in Washington DC, to claim that he had won the election and assert his rules with violence and threats to non-Trump supporters or Democrats. It has been shown to be a powerful tactic historically and all over the world.

Ben-Ghiat: “In the 21st century, fascist takeovers have been replaced by rulers who come to power through elections and then, over time, extinguish freedom.”

Democracy and Covid-19

The handling of the Covid-19 pandemic across the world, too, raises tough ethical questions. Dr Joleen Steyn Kotze, Senior Research Specialist: Democracy and Citizenship Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), looked at levels of freedom and democracy during the pandemic in: *Viral (un)freedom in the era of Covid-19: It is all about openness and rapid response*.

She says “Globally, democracy is in crisis.” And that there is a “mass wave of autocratization” across the world. The Covid-19 pandemic, which requires unusual measures to be taken by government, has further undermined whatever level of freedom that citizens are used to.

In conclusion

There was once the hope that the pursuit of truth through science and the use of innovative technology would make the world a better place for all humankind. That hope faltered during the two world wars in particular, and has faltered at various times ever since, leading to scepticism and even strong opposition against science and technological development amongst the public. Such hope in science and technology is labelled positivism by those who are disillusioned – the myth that science and technology will automatically improve the world. (A recent example is the opposition to the 5G towers enabling technology that will improve internet connection speed and efficiency exponentially). However, the hope invested in science and technology is still alive, and our national policies on science and innovation are a case in point. These policies have been formulated with the unwritten assumption of goodwill and sensible decision-making. That kind of hope should come with disclaimers – its realisation relies on good governance, and ethical decision making by the powers that be. About five years ago I would have said it also relies on a democratic state. Now I am not so sure. Democracy failed the US (and hopefully has now recued it again, although it remains to be seen). The realisation of hope requires people of integrity in key positions. We are painfully aware of this in South Africa too, as people with a dire shortage of integrity continue to file past the Zondo Commission.

Every time that large numbers of people come together in the interests of peace and justice, such as the #blacklivesmatter movement, one becomes hopeful that “Now, at last, humanity will see the light

and be forever changed!" Repeatedly, humanity proves otherwise. It does not take many cycles of the earth around the sun before the shadow-side of humanity is once again on top.

In Mandy Weiner's recent book, *The Whistle Blowers*, one of the whistle blowers on corruption who was victimised, Michelle Mitchley, relates how she became suicidal. She recorded a message to her young daughter, saying that she was not leaving her any material inheritance, but she was leaving a legacy of integrity for her, which is more precious than anything. On the brink of shooting herself, she stopped, realising that she would have lost the battle against corruption if she killed herself. I agree with her - there is nothing more valuable than the inheritance of integrity.

*The poem by W.B. Yeats:

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming_\(poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming_(poem))

The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Ms Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.