The Dementing Republic

Political Disreality, Epistemic Allostatic Load, and the Aging American Brain

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A hypothesis-driven interdisciplinary study of political disreality, chronic stress, and cognitive aging

Preface

This book begins with a simple question: what happens to a population when reality itself becomes chronically unstable? Americans have always argued about politics and have always encountered propaganda, exaggeration, rumor, partisan journalism, war narratives, and competing interpretations of public events. None of that is new. What may be new is the density, persistence, speed, and physiological intimacy of the modern information environment. Political contradiction no longer arrives periodically through a newspaper or an evening broadcast. It arrives continuously, carried in the pocket, displayed beside the bed, pushed through algorithmic feeds, repeated by political leaders, contradicted within minutes, and replaced by another crisis before the nervous system has returned to baseline.

Donald Trump did not create this environment, but his political era has become one of its most concentrated American expressions. Supporters and opponents interpret his conduct in radically different ways, yet both groups can experience politics as a field of permanent emergency. Supporters may believe corrupt institutions, hostile bureaucracies, election systems, media organizations, or foreign actors are deceiving the public. Opponents may believe the presidency itself has normalized lying, corruption, norm destruction, cruelty, and the erosion of a shared factual world. The contents of those beliefs differ. The structural experience can nevertheless resemble the same problem: reality seems consequential, unstable, and difficult to settle.

This book asks whether prolonged exposure to such conditions produces more than polarization. It asks whether an environment of persistent contradiction, uncertainty, moral conflict, attention capture, and distrust may contribute to what I call epistemic allostatic load: the cumulative biological cost of repeatedly attempting to maintain a coherent model of reality under conditions in which the informational environment continually destabilizes that model. The phrase extends the established concept of allostatic load, the wear associated with repeated biological adaptation to stress. Here the proposed stressor is not merely a dangerous event but the repeated cognitive labor of deciding what is real, which sources can be trusted, whether the rules still apply, and how quickly today's explanation may be replaced tomorrow.

The argument is deliberately modest in one respect and ambitious in another. It does not claim that Donald Trump causes dementia. Dementia is heterogeneous and multifactorial, influenced by age, genetics, cardiovascular health, education, metabolic disease, exercise, social connection, sleep, depression, environmental exposure, and many other variables. The ambitious proposition is that political disreality may constitute an environmental exposure capable of recruiting known pathways of chronic stress and thereby contributing, at population scale, to conditions associated with cognitive decline. That proposition should be tested, challenged, refined, or rejected on empirical grounds.

Russia and NATO, Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, nuclear confrontation, social media, and institutional distrust appear in these pages as case studies in contested reality. They are not presented as occasions for the reader to accept one compressed geopolitical narrative. Their value here is that each demonstrates how high-stakes events can be narrated through incompatible histories, legal categories, moral vocabularies, intelligence claims, images, and propaganda. The psychological object of interest is the collision among those accounts and the persistent demand that ordinary citizens decide among them while possessing limited direct access to the underlying events.

The central thesis can therefore be stated simply: a society that chronically destabilizes its citizens' models of reality may eventually impose a measurable biological cost on the brains required to inhabit it. A scientific idea becomes useful only when it risks being wrong. The final sections of the book therefore ask how epistemic allostatic load might be measured, how political bias and confounding could be controlled, how longitudinal cohorts might be designed, and what findings would falsify the hypothesis. This is not a declaration that America has already acquired a dementia epidemic caused by politics. It is an argument that the information environment deserves to be studied as part of the environment in which brains age.

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Part I - The Brain in an Unstable World

The first task is conceptual. Before discussing presidents, wars, platforms, or propaganda, we need a model of the mind as an organism that must continually infer its world. The chapters in this part distinguish ordinary disagreement from unresolved epistemic instability and then connect that instability to the language of stress, adaptation, attention, and recovery.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

1. The Cost of Knowing What Is Real

A stable social world lets most assumptions remain tacit. An unstable one repeatedly forces the observer to spend attention deciding which signals matter, which sources deserve trust, and which account of events should guide action. This is the starting point for understanding the cost of knowing what is real. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is persistent model updating. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: the burden of uncertainty. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination,

nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that healthy skepticism can be stimulating rather than harmful. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: measure perceived instability, rumination, and recovery rather than political belief alone. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the cost of knowing what is real is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

2. Stress, Allostasis, and the Aging Brain

Allostasis is the organism's capacity to preserve viability through change. Stress responses are adaptive when they are proportionate and temporary, but repeated activation can create cumulative burden. This is the starting point for understanding stress, allostasis, and the aging brain. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is endocrine, autonomic, immune, vascular, and behavioral adaptation. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A

message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: aging changes the reserve available for recovery. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that stress is only one factor among many in dementia risk. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize

relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: track stress physiology alongside sleep, vascular health, and cognition. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of stress, allostasis, and the aging brain is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

3. From Allostatic Load to Epistemic Allostatic Load

Epistemic allostatic load is a proposed name for the cumulative burden of adapting to persistent uncertainty about what is true, who can be trusted, whether rules still apply, and whether the explanatory frame will change again. This is the starting point for understanding from allostatic load to epistemic allostatic load. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is cognitive vigilance and unresolved prediction error. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: the construct must be distinct from generic anxiety. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that a new label is useless if it merely redescribes distress. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic

disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: validate a scale across political groups and against physiological measures. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political

engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of from allostatic load to epistemic allostatic load is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

4. Why Contradiction Is Not Just Information

Contradictory high-stakes claims create a decision problem, not simply a larger amount of information. The observer must rank sources, reconstruct context, estimate motives, and often defend a conclusion socially. This is the starting point for understanding why contradiction is not just information. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is decision conflict and identity-protective cognition. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: moral identity can make updating socially costly. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in

different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that contradiction can also improve reasoning when institutions resolve it. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may

be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: compare resolved disagreement with chronic unresolved contradiction. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of why contradiction is not just information is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

5. Attention Without Resolution

Modern media is unusually good at initiating attention and unusually poor at terminating it. Alerts, live feeds, algorithmic recirculation, and perpetual commentary keep controversies cognitively open. This is the starting point for understanding attention without resolution. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is sustained vigilance and reduced recovery time. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: not all heavy news use is pathological. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that informed citizenship requires attention. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

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The research implication is clear: measure the afterlife of exposure after screens are closed. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of attention without resolution is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part II - The Architecture of Disreality

The second task is historical and structural. Disreality is not simply a collection of false statements. It emerges from the interaction of propaganda, platforms, political incentives, collapsing trust, semantic conflict, and institutions that no longer settle disputes for large portions of the public. This part examines that architecture.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

6. Propaganda Before the Smartphone

Propaganda is ancient, but the smartphone changes its delivery by making political messaging portable, personalized, interactive, and continuous. This is the starting point for understanding propaganda before the smartphone. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is continuous multisource persuasion. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: the loss of a shared hierarchy of authority. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process

variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that earlier propaganda systems could be more centralized and coercive. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: compare episodic broadcast exposure with individualized continuous feeds. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs

pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of propaganda before the smartphone is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

7. The Algorithmic Nervous System

Recommendation systems convert collective behavior into individualized streams of salience. They need not hold political beliefs to amplify emotionally activating material. This is the starting point for understanding the algorithmic nervous system. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is engagement feedback loops. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing,

avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: attention can make the world appear saturated with the threats that most mobilize the observer. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that algorithms can also surface useful information and community. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: link consent-based digital traces to stress and sleep outcomes. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the algorithmic nervous system is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

8. Donald Trump and Permanent Ontological Conflict

Trump's significance for this inquiry lies less in any single false statement than in recurring public conflict over what happened, who can verify it, whether records matter, and whether

institutions are legitimate. This is the starting point for understanding donald trump and permanent ontological conflict. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is continuous contest over the status of events. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: supporters often locate deception in institutions rather than in Trump. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that a partisan explanation would invalidate the broader construct. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals,

war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: treat the Trump era as a natural laboratory for high-stakes epistemic conflict. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible

science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of donald trump and permanent ontological conflict is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

9. Lying, Noise, Reversal, and Exhaustion

A lie can be cognitively simple; noise is harder. An environment saturated with claims of uneven reliability forces sorting, comparison, memory, and repeated reevaluation. This is the starting point for understanding lying, noise, reversal, and exhaustion. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is information overload and fatigue. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: reversal makes memory itself politically salient. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process

variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that people may adapt by disengaging rather than becoming hypervigilant. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: separate persuasion effects from exhaustion and avoidance. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological.

They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of lying, noise, reversal, and exhaustion is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

10. When Institutions Stop Settling Reality

Courts, universities, journalism, science, churches, and government agencies have historically served as imperfect mechanisms for provisional factual settlement. When their legitimacy collapses, every conclusion inherits an additional layer of uncertainty. This is the starting point for understanding when institutions stop settling reality. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is outsourced verification fails and returns to the individual. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of

checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: institutional skepticism can be justified. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that trust without accountability can enable abuse. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: study whether procedural transparency reduces perceived epistemic burden. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of when institutions stop settling reality is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

11. The Collapse of Semantic Stability

Terms such as war, invasion, genocide, terrorism, democracy, coup, censorship, peace, and security carry legal and moral implications. When communities cannot stabilize their meanings, disagreement becomes partly semantic. This is the starting point for understanding the collapse of semantic stability. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is language ceases to compress shared judgments efficiently. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: contested words can reveal real moral complexity. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that semantic plurality is not itself pathological. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word

may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: measure whether semantic conflict predicts uncertainty beyond factual disagreement. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political

engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the collapse of semantic stability is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part III - War as an Epistemic Stressor

War combines secrecy, propaganda, moral urgency, graphic imagery, and limited public access to primary evidence. It is therefore an unusually strong generator of epistemic stress. The cases below are not offered as interchangeable conflicts; they are used to illustrate recurring structures of unverifiability, competing historical frames, and permanent emergency.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

12. NATO, Russia, and Competing Histories

The Russia-NATO conflict is narrated through incompatible histories: sovereign choice and protection from aggression on one side, alliance expansion and security dilemma on another. This is the starting point for understanding nato, russia, and competing histories. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is competing causal stories built from overlapping facts. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: citizens rarely possess direct access to the diplomatic record in real time. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source

comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that multiple narratives can each contain partial truths. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: test whether exposure to incompatible historical framing increases uncertainty and rumination. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of nato, russia, and competing histories is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

13. Ukraine and the Problem of Unverifiable War

Digital war offers unprecedented visual access while preserving deep uncertainty about battlefield facts, casualty estimates, context, intelligence, and propaganda. This is the starting point for understanding ukraine and the problem of unverifiable war. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is intimacy without verification. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer

appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: graphic evidence can feel decisive even when context is incomplete. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that open-source investigation can improve verification. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the

dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: compare raw war imagery, verified reporting, and commentary as distinct exposures. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of ukraine and the problem of unverifiable war is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

14. Gaza and the Politics of Visibility

Gaza presents enormous quantities of visible suffering alongside intense dispute over responsibility, legality, proportionality, intent, and the moral meaning of what is seen. This is the starting point for understanding gaza and the politics of visibility. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is collision between images and interpretive frames. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: observers may perceive a gap between visible evidence and permitted language. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that images can also be selectively framed or stripped of context. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: study moral distress separately from uncertainty and political identity. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or

generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of gaza and the politics of visibility is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

15. Genocide, Language, and Moral Contradiction

The word genocide is simultaneously a moral accusation, historical category, and legal term. Public discourse often demands a judgment before legal or historical processes are complete. This is the starting point for understanding genocide, language, and moral contradiction. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is moral urgency under conditions of legal uncertainty. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: naming can be experienced as recognition or as prejudgment. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source

comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that careful terminology can be mistaken for indifference, and passionate terminology for bias. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: measure the stress created by conflicts between moral conviction and institutional language. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of genocide, language, and moral contradiction is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

16. Iran and the Permanent Imminent Threat

Iran has occupied American security discourse for decades through recurring claims about nuclear capability, terrorism, sanctions, regional war, Israel, and possible military action. This is the starting point for understanding iran and the permanent imminent threat. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is repeated imminence without durable resolution. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is

encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: the language of thresholds compresses decision time. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that some threats are genuinely urgent and cannot be normalized away. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize

relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: study the psychological effects of repeated high-stakes warnings across long periods. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of iran and the permanent imminent threat is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

17. Nuclear Anxiety and the Return of Existential Politics

Nuclear weapons transform geopolitical uncertainty into species-scale imagination. Citizens understand the irreversibility of error while lacking access to command systems, targeting doctrine, or intelligence quality. This is the starting point for understanding nuclear anxiety and the return of existential politics. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is high consequence combined with low personal control. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: existential risk can be normalized socially while remaining physiologically salient. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that deterrence may reduce rather than increase perceived danger for some populations. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from

ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: compare periods of high and low nuclear salience using longitudinal stress measures. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political

engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of nuclear anxiety and the return of existential politics is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part IV - The Physiological Price

If epistemic instability matters biologically, it must operate through mechanisms that can be measured. This part examines plausible pathways without pretending that any one of them establishes causation. The scientific burden is to connect information exposure to intermediate physiology and only then to long-term cognition.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

18. Rumination

Political rumination is the persistence of political thought after useful problem solving has ended: replaying arguments, anticipating catastrophe, rehearsing rebuttals, and compulsively checking for updates. This is the starting point for understanding rumination. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is cognitive loops that prolong arousal beyond the original exposure. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: concern can motivate constructive action. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process

variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that rumination is not unique to politics. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: measure intrusion duration and recovery rather than mere news consumption. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs

pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of rumination is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

19. Sleep

Sleep is a plausible bridge between political stress and cognitive health because late-night checking, emotional arousal, irregular schedules, and unresolved worry can all interfere with restoration. This is the starting point for understanding sleep. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is sleep duration, continuity, and circadian disruption. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of

checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: poor sleep may increase political reactivity as well as result from it. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that many nonpolitical factors affect sleep. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: use wearables and repeated diaries to establish temporal ordering. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of sleep is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

20. Cortisol and the HPA Axis

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis coordinates a major component of the stress response. Cortisol is essential, but chronic dysregulation may signal repeated adaptation

without full recovery. This is the starting point for understanding cortisol and the hpa axis. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is anticipatory stress triggered by symbolic threat. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: single cortisol samples are noisy and easily overinterpreted. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that political information may not be strong enough to alter physiology for everyone. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different

temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: use repeated diurnal measures linked to ecological momentary assessment. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of cortisol and the hpa axis is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

21. Cardiovascular Stress

Anger, fear, uncertainty, and social threat can alter heart rate, vascular tone, and autonomic balance even when the threat is mediated through language or images. This is the starting point for understanding cardiovascular stress. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is repeated cardiovascular mobilization. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: baseline health and medication strongly modify response. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that political engagement can also support social connection and purpose. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: model cardiovascular risk as mediator and moderator rather than assumed outcome. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health,

socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of cardiovascular stress is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

22. Inflammation

Inflammatory signaling is one possible bridge between chronic psychosocial stress and disease, interacting with sleep, metabolism, infection, mood, and vascular health. This is the starting point for understanding inflammation. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is stress-immune interaction. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be

asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: political exposure should not be casually described as inflammatory disease. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that biomarkers are influenced by many confounders. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: test preregistered associations using repeated inflammatory markers. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of inflammation is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

23. Depression, Isolation, and Cognitive Reserve

Political disreality can fracture families, churches, friendships, and workplaces. Withdrawal or despair may reduce social engagement and the richness of daily cognitive life. This is the starting point for understanding depression, isolation, and cognitive reserve. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature

political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is loss of social buffering and reduced cognitive reserve. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: political communities can also provide belonging and purpose. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that social isolation may precede heavy media use. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at

noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: track network change, mood, activity diversity, and cognition together. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of depression, isolation, and cognitive reserve is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether

the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

24. From Chronic Stress to Cognitive Decline

The book's medical argument is cumulative rather than monocausal. Sleep, vascular health, mood, inflammation, stress regulation, and social engagement interact across years. This is the starting point for understanding from chronic stress to cognitive decline. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is multiple small pathways converging on cognitive aging. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: resilience and individual differences will be substantial. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that association does not establish a direct dementia mechanism. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of

engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: use mediation models and repeated cognitive measures before clinical endpoints. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-

time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of from chronic stress to cognitive decline is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part V - A Dementing Republic?

The phrase dementing republic is intentionally provocative, but it is not a diagnosis of a nation or its citizens. It names the possibility that a political ecology can keep large populations in unresolved defensive attention. This part asks what such a signal would look like and who might be most vulnerable.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

25. Political Identity as Continuous Threat Detection

When political identity fuses with personal or moral identity, public events can acquire the emotional force of direct threats to self, family, faith, nation, or community. This is the starting point for understanding political identity as continuous threat detection. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is identity-linked threat monitoring. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: political commitment can also support meaning and collective efficacy. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are

potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that not every strong identity is pathological. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: measure threat appraisal and physiological recovery across identities. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They

would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of political identity as continuous threat detection is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

26. MAGA Stress and Anti-Trump Stress

A symmetric theory must allow Trump supporters and Trump opponents to experience different narratives while sharing a common structure of vigilance, distrust, anger, and perceived existential stakes. This is the starting point for understanding maga stress and anti-trump stress. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is different content with similar stress architecture. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can

occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: symmetry of physiology does not imply symmetry of factual claims. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that researchers may unconsciously pathologize only the opposing camp. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: design instruments that do not encode partisan conclusions into the questions. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of maga stress and anti-trump stress is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

27. Moral Injury in Civilian Populations

Civilians may experience moral injury-like distress when they believe they are witnessing profound wrongdoing committed, funded, excused, or normalized by institutions with which they identify. This is the starting point for understanding moral injury in civilian populations. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is helplessness combined with perceived complicity. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: moral distress can arise from accurate knowledge, not only disinformation. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that the clinical concept of moral injury should not be stretched carelessly. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: distinguish moral injury, uncertainty, grief, and political anger empirically. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or

generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of moral injury in civilian populations is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

28. The Elderly in the Attention Economy

Older adults combine increasing baseline dementia risk with rapidly changing media environments, retirement patterns, possible isolation, and new forms of synthetic or algorithmic information. This is the starting point for understanding the elderly in the attention economy. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is age-related vulnerability interacting with media ecology. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: older adults are not inherently more gullible than younger adults. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source

comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that cohort effects can masquerade as aging effects. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: prospectively study media patterns, sleep, social activity, and cognition in older cohorts. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the elderly in the attention economy is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

29. The Dementia-Latency Problem

Dementia unfolds across long periods. A political exposure cannot be linked credibly to diagnoses one year later without accounting for preclinical disease and decades of prior risk. This is the starting point for understanding the dementia-latency problem. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is long latency and temporal ambiguity. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer

appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: early cognitive change can itself alter media use. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that political environments change faster than dementia biology. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the

dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: focus first on intermediate outcomes and repeated cognition before diagnoses. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the dementia-latency problem is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

30. What Would an Epidemiological Signal Look Like?

A genuine population signal would likely be subtle: steeper decline among people with sustained high epistemic-stress exposure, especially when combined with poor sleep, vascular risk, depression, or isolation. This is the starting point for understanding what would an epidemiological signal look like?. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is small individual effects accumulating across large populations. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: geographic and media-market comparisons are heavily confounded. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that null results are plausible and scientifically valuable. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic

disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: seek dose-response, temporal ordering, replication, and specificity. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive

vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of what would an epidemiological signal look like? is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part VI - Testing the Hypothesis

The concept now has to leave rhetoric and enter measurement. If epistemic allostatic load cannot be operationalized independently of ideology, anxiety, or general screen time, it should be abandoned. The chapters in this part sketch a research program designed to make failure possible.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

31. Measuring Epistemic Allostatic Load

A useful instrument would ask how often people encounter incompatible high-stakes claims, how difficult they find source evaluation, how often political uncertainty intrudes into unrelated activity, and whether they feel compelled to seek resolution. This is the starting point for understanding measuring epistemic allostatic load. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is separating exposure, appraisal, and response. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: the same feed can burden one person and energize another. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source

comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that self-report is vulnerable to political interpretation. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: validate across groups using behavioral and physiological correlates. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of measuring epistemic allostatic load is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

32. Building an Epistemic Stress Index

An index could combine self-report with environmental and behavioral features such as alert frequency, contradiction among sources, nighttime checking, topic volatility, and perceived unverifiability. This is the starting point for understanding building an epistemic stress index. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is multidimensional dose estimation. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention

narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: high media use may reflect professional duty or curiosity. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that opaque scoring would reproduce the distrust under study. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: preregister weights and test measurement invariance. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of building an epistemic stress index is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

33. Media Exposure as a Dose

Dose has dimensions of duration, intensity, novelty, repetition, emotional arousal, personal relevance, and timing. Ten minutes of graphic footage is not equivalent to an hour of calm

analysis. This is the starting point for understanding media exposure as a dose. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is multidimensional exposure characterization. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: platform logs do not reveal subjective meaning. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that privacy risks are substantial. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different

temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: collect minimal consent-based features rather than intimate browsing histories. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of media exposure as a dose is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

34. Natural Experiments

Elections, wars, assassinations, court decisions, platform outages, scandals, and sudden policy reversals can create abrupt exposure changes that support quasi-experimental analysis. This is the starting point for understanding natural experiments. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is unexpected shocks and comparison groups. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: history cannot be randomized. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that event selection can become cherry-picking. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: predefine events and exploit existing pre-event measurements. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health,

socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of natural experiments is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

35. Longitudinal Cohorts

Longitudinal cohorts are essential because both cognitive aging and media habits evolve. Repeated measures can establish whether changes in epistemic stress precede changes in sleep, physiology, and cognition. This is the starting point for understanding longitudinal cohorts. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is temporal ordering. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the

cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: attrition and cohort aging complicate inference. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that existing cohorts may lack historical digital-exposure measures. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: add prospective modules and harmonize across studies. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of longitudinal cohorts is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

36. Biomarkers and Digital Phenotyping

Wearables and smartphones can provide repeated measures of sleep timing, activity, heart rate, and behavioral rhythms, while carefully selected biomarkers can index stress-related physiology. This is the starting point for understanding biomarkers and digital phenotyping. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult

information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is high-frequency measurement of intermediate pathways. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: surveillance could destroy participant trust. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that digital features can be misinterpreted without context. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of

any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: use transparent, minimal, inspectable data collection. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of biomarkers and digital phenotyping is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because

populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

37. Confounders, Reverse Causality, and Political Bias

People who consume more political media differ in age, education, health, personality, employment, ideology, anxiety, and social circumstances. Cognitive change itself may alter media habits. This is the starting point for understanding confounders, reverse causality, and political bias. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is causal ambiguity. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: researcher ideology can contaminate construct design. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that no statistical adjustment can rescue a badly framed study. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and

procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: use preregistration, negative controls, sensitivity analyses, and politically diverse teams. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of confounders, reverse causality, and political bias is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

38. How the Hypothesis Could Fail

Epistemic allostatic load should be weakened if it cannot be distinguished from general anxiety, if exposure has no prospective physiological association, or if cognitive effects disappear under careful adjustment. This is the starting point for understanding how the hypothesis could fail. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is explicit falsifiability. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: effects may be nonlinear, beneficial for some, or confined to vulnerable subgroups. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those

appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that failure would not imply that disinformation is socially harmless. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may

be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: publish null results and revise the construct rather than protecting it. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of how the hypothesis could fail is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Part VII - After Disreality

The final task is normative but still practical. If chronic informational instability proves biologically consequential, the answer cannot be simply to tell citizens to stop paying attention. Democracies require information. The problem becomes how to preserve disagreement and vigilance without converting public life into permanent alarm.

The argument in this part should be read as a sequence of linked hypotheses rather than a chain of settled facts. Where the evidence is strong, the text says so; where the connection remains conjectural, the uncertainty is part of the argument. The objective is to build a framework that can be interrogated empirically rather than protected rhetorically.

39. Information Hygiene Is Not Enough

Individual advice to consume less news may help, but a democracy cannot require ignorance as the price of psychological health. This is the starting point for understanding information hygiene is not enough. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is personal boundaries within structural exposure. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: some people benefit from deliberate media limits. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process

variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that individual responsibility can become a way of excusing harmful systems. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: study both individual coping and institutional design. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would

characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of information hygiene is not enough is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

40. Institutions as Cognitive Infrastructure

Institutions that authenticate records, adjudicate disputes, preserve archives, conduct science, and correct errors perform a form of cognitive infrastructure for society. This is the starting point for understanding institutions as cognitive infrastructure. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is outsourcing verification to transparent procedures. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can

occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: institutions can fail, lie, or become captured. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that trust must be earned rather than demanded. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back

into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: evaluate whether procedural transparency reduces uncertainty and rumor. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of institutions as cognitive infrastructure is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

41. The Right Not to Be Continuously Alarmed

Modern platforms and political organizations often convert urgency into attention, revenue, or mobilization. A nervous system continuously recruited by emergency messaging has little opportunity for recovery. This is the starting point for understanding the right not to be continuously alarmed. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is commercialized and politicized alarm. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: genuine emergencies require rapid communication. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that a right to recovery is not a right to censorship or comfort. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: design alert systems that distinguish urgency from engagement bait. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or

generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of the right not to be continuously alarmed is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

42. Rebuilding a Common World

A common world does not require agreement on every fact or value. It requires shared procedures for checking claims, preserving records, acknowledging correction, and marking uncertainty honestly. This is the starting point for understanding rebuilding a common world. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is procedural commonality amid pluralism. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: a single authorized narrative can itself become disreality. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive

rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that trust is path-dependent and slow to rebuild. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: invest in corrigible institutions and visible evidentiary standards. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of rebuilding a common world is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

43. Democracy as a Public-Health Environment

Democracy is usually evaluated through rights, representation, accountability, prosperity, and stability. This book adds a possible dimension: the cognitive ecology created by democratic practice. This is the starting point for understanding democracy as a public-health environment. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is governance as part of the psychosocial environment. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is

registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: politics can also provide meaning, agency, and solidarity. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that public-health framing must not medicalize dissent. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

The distinction between acute and chronic exposure also matters. A single shocking event may produce intense but temporary stress. A decade of repeated alerts, reversals, scandals, war imagery, institutional conflict, and predictions of catastrophe creates a different temporal structure. In chronic exposure the nervous system may stop receiving clear end points. The person can wake to yesterday's unresolved controversy, encounter a new one at noon, and carry both into sleep. Over time the relevant variable may be less the magnitude of any one episode than the ratio between mobilization and recovery. That ratio is familiar in stress biology and may prove equally useful in studying political information.

The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the

dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

For an aging population, the timing of exposure becomes especially important. Later life often brings changes in sleep, cardiovascular reserve, sensory processing, employment structure, social networks, and baseline risk for cognitive impairment. None of those changes makes older adults uniquely incapable of judgment. They do, however, alter the physiological context in which continuous political activation occurs. If epistemic allostatic load exists, its effects are unlikely to be uniform across the lifespan. The same information environment may be experienced differently at forty, sixty-five, and eighty, and it may interact differently with vascular disease, depression, isolation, or preclinical neurodegeneration.

The research implication is clear: test whether resolvable conflict is less physiologically burdensome than permanent conflict. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

A useful result would also identify boundaries. Perhaps the effect appears only among people with high perceived helplessness. Perhaps social support buffers it. Perhaps political engagement is protective when it produces agency but harmful when it produces compulsive vigilance without action. Perhaps the entire construct collapses into sleep disturbance or generalized anxiety and adds nothing explanatory. Each possibility is informative. A credible science of disreality must be willing to discover that the mechanism is smaller, more conditional, or different from the one proposed here.

The broader significance of democracy as a public-health environment is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

44. Epilogue: Reality as a Biological Necessity

Human beings can tolerate uncertainty; science depends on it and democracy institutionalizes disagreement. The danger is an environment in which uncertainty is continuously weaponized, amplified, and denied resolution. This is the starting point for understanding epilogue: reality as a biological necessity. The issue is not that citizens should be protected from difficult facts or vigorous disagreement. Mature political life requires both. The concern is what happens when difficult information no longer arrives as a bounded problem that can be investigated and provisionally settled, but as a continuously renewing field of unresolved threat. In that setting, cognition becomes part of the exposure. The observer is repeatedly recruited to judge credibility, reconstruct context, remember prior claims, anticipate reversal, and decide whether another update must be checked before attention can safely move elsewhere.

The proposed mechanism is the brain must still build a workable world. That mechanism should be understood as a chain rather than a slogan. A message is encountered; the observer appraises its stakes and trustworthiness; uncertainty or threat is registered; attention narrows; emotion and physiology shift; behavior follows in the form of checking, arguing, avoidance, or seeking reassurance. If the problem resolves, recovery can occur. If it does not resolve, or if another high-stakes contradiction immediately replaces it, the organism may be asked to repeat the cycle before the previous cycle is complete. Epistemic allostatic load is the hypothesis that the cumulative cost of those cycles may become measurable.

There is an important complication: uncertainty itself is not the enemy. This prevents the concept from being reduced to a partisan diagnosis. The same event can produce different appraisals in different observers, and those appraisals may be grounded in different experiences, identities, sources, and histories. A scientifically useful framework must therefore distinguish what a person believes from what the belief environment requires the person to do cognitively. Constant monitoring, repeated source comparison, intrusive rumination, nighttime checking, and inability to achieve closure are potential process variables. They can in principle be measured without first deciding which political tribe has the superior interpretation of every contested event.

A second complication is that too much certainty can support authoritarianism and dogma. This matters because a theory of political stress can become unfalsifiable if every kind of engagement is treated as harmful. News can educate. Debate can sharpen judgment. Shared political work can create friendship, meaning, efficacy, and moral purpose. Exposure to contradiction can improve reasoning when institutions provide time, evidence, and procedures for resolution. The claim of this book is therefore narrower: chronic, high-stakes, low-control, poorly resolved contradiction may be different from ordinary democratic

disagreement. The word may in that sentence is essential. It keeps the argument in the domain of hypothesis rather than diagnosis.

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The social dimension deepens the problem. Political reality is rarely inferred alone. People compare interpretations with spouses, friends, congregations, coworkers, online communities, and trusted commentators. When those networks divide, the cost of updating can include embarrassment, betrayal, loss of belonging, or moral conflict. A person may therefore continue defending an interpretation partly because changing it would destabilize relationships, while another person may become isolated precisely because refusing the dominant interpretation feels morally necessary. These social consequences can feed back into sleep, mood, stress, and cognitive reserve. Epistemic environments are interpersonal environments as well as informational ones.

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The research implication is clear: measure exposure, measure stress, follow people over time, and try to disprove the mechanism. The strongest studies would not begin by labeling certain beliefs pathological. They would characterize exposure and response prospectively, establish temporal ordering, and test whether the relationship survives adjustment for health, socioeconomic position, personality, baseline cognition, and ordinary screen use. Repeated measures are especially important because both politics and physiology fluctuate. A one-time survey taken after a dramatic event can reveal distress, but it cannot tell us whether a person remains mobilized for months or whether repeated mobilization predicts later cognitive change.

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The broader significance of epilogue: reality as a biological necessity is therefore not that it supplies another reason to condemn a political opponent. It supplies a way to ask whether the architecture of public reality has biological consequences. Democracies routinely regulate environmental toxins, workplace hazards, food safety, and infectious risk because populations can be harmed by conditions that no single individual chose. Information environments are different and must remain compatible with freedom of thought and speech. Yet freedom does not make physiology disappear. If certain patterns of unresolved alarm repeatedly recruit stress systems, then those patterns deserve investigation with the same seriousness given to other features of the human environment.

Conclusion: The Hypothesis and Its Limits

The hypothesis developed in this book is intentionally larger than Donald Trump and narrower than a theory of civilizational collapse. It proposes that persistent political disreality can be studied as an environmental stressor. Trump is historically important because his era concentrates many of the relevant features: contradiction, distrust, reversal, alarm, institutional conflict, moral intensity, and continuous attention. But a theory that works only when one particular politician is named is not yet a scientific theory. The proposed exposure must be identifiable across leaders, countries, media systems, and political affiliations.

Epistemic allostatic load is offered as a provisional construct, not a diagnosis. It should survive only if investigators can distinguish it from generalized anxiety, ordinary screen time, depression, political interest, and personality. It should predict something independently useful: perhaps sleep disruption, physiological stress, impaired recovery, steeper longitudinal cognitive decline, or an interaction with vascular and social risk. If it does not, the term should disappear. The point of naming a phenomenon is to make measurement easier, not to create another rhetorical weapon.

The medical claim must remain proportional to the evidence. Chronic stress, disturbed sleep, cardiovascular disease, depression, isolation, and related pathways are relevant to cognitive aging, but that does not establish a direct causal path from any presidency, war, platform, or propaganda system to dementia. A population-level effect could be small. It could be limited to vulnerable groups. It could be mediated almost entirely by sleep or social isolation. It could be absent. A serious research program must make room for each of these outcomes.

The political claim also requires restraint. It is possible to believe that some public claims are false, some wars are unjust, some institutions are corrupt, and some leaders are unusually destructive without converting disagreement into psychiatric diagnosis. Indeed, the entire framework depends on preserving that distinction. People may be distressed because their beliefs are wrong, because their beliefs are right, or because they are trapped in an environment that makes adjudication unusually costly. Physiology does not settle the political argument; it only tells us that the argument may have a biological price.

If future longitudinal research finds no independent relationship between epistemic instability and health, the concept should be revised or abandoned. If it finds a relationship, information quality will have to be considered not only a democratic good but a public-health variable. That would not justify censorship or an official ministry of truth. It would instead increase the value of transparent institutions, visible correction, stable records, honest uncertainty, slower escalation of unverified claims, and media designs that do not convert every ambiguity into an emergency.

The deepest proposition of The Dementing Republic is therefore not that citizens need certainty. Human beings can tolerate uncertainty; science depends on it, faith often lives with

it, and democracy institutionalizes disagreement. What minds may not tolerate indefinitely is uncertainty without trustworthy procedure, alarm without recovery, contradiction without closure, and moral consequence without agency. A society that continually recruits its citizens' threat systems while depriving them of resolution may discover that disreality is not merely a political condition. It is part of the biological environment in which people live and age.

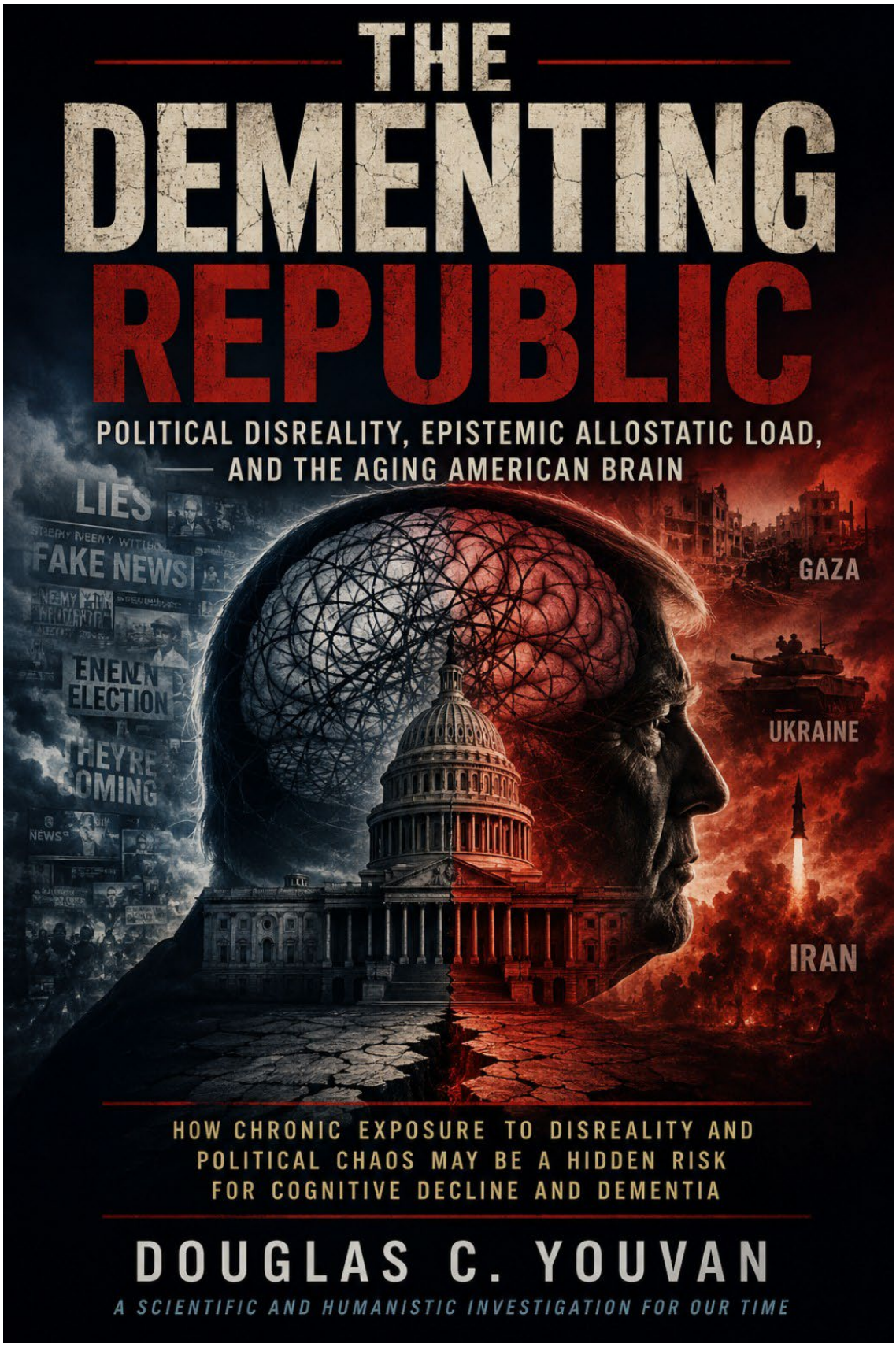
That possibility is now testable. Measure the information environment. Measure the subjective burden. Measure sleep, cardiovascular function, stress physiology, social connection, and cognition. Follow people over time. Compare groups that differ in exposure. Publish negative findings. Replicate positive ones. Keep political commitments visible and methodological commitments stronger. If the hypothesis survives those demands, the phrase epistemic allostatic load may name something real. If it fails, we will still have learned something important about the limits of political stress as an explanation for cognitive aging.

Perhaps the most consequential pollution of the twenty-first century will not be chemical. Perhaps it will be disreality. Or perhaps that sentence will prove too dramatic. Science gives us a way to find out.

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- Smith, K. B. (2022). Politics is making us sick: research on the health burden associated with political engagement during the Trump era.
- Selected writings by Douglas C. Youvan on NATO and Russia, Gaza, Iran, propaganda, moral legitimacy, epistemic control, and political disreality, used as conceptual background for the case-study chapters.

Note on evidence: This book advances a hypothesis that combines established findings from stress and cognitive-aging research with a proposed new exposure construct. A publication edition intended for scholarly citation should expand the bibliography and provide chapter-level source notes for every empirical claim.


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