

An Insurrection at the Capitol

by Ben Ginsberg

Most Americans were shocked when hundreds of people inspired by former President Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 election had been stolen from him forced their way into the U.S. Capitol on January 6, just two weeks before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden. For several hours, the legislative body of the United States was under siege by a mob of insurrectionists. They moved relatively unrestricted throughout the building, breaking into the Senate chamber, going through paperwork in representatives' offices, and posing for selfies in Statuary Hall (which later aided authorities in identifying the perpetrators via social media). The members of this mob committing illegal actions did not all share the same goal: some were there to intimidate Congress and prevent it from certifying Biden's victory in the Electoral College; some, carrying weapons and zip tie restraints, seemed to have more violent motives. By the end of the following day, five individuals, including a Capitol police officer, had died as a result of the violent turmoil.

What brought the country to this unprecedented moment? Clearly, Donald Trump is to blame for much of this mayhem. Throughout his term, Trump courted the support of White nationalists and of conspiracy theorists who saw politics in terms of good versus evil—a binary opposition that, in their minds, justified acts of violence. Trump's lies about a fraudulent election and words of incitement to his angry followers earlier that day at a nearby rally directly prompted the storming of the Capitol. While the phenomenon of Trump offers interesting perspectives on the growing power of the presidency, if we look past him as a single political actor, we can identify several growing trends in American politics that paved the way for the

events of January 6, 2021. These include party polarization, the increasingly segmented influence of the media, the decline of bipartisanship, and swelling conflicts over civil rights.

Party Polarization and the Media

Contemporary American politics has often been characterized as “polarized,” but this term hardly seems to capture the extent to which competing forces on the political left and right have come to regard one another with fear and loathing. The summer and fall before the 2020 election were filled with protests and political violence, including Black Lives Matter demonstrations against police brutality, some looting and rioting, and even a plot by right-wing extremists to kidnap and murder the governor of Michigan because of her response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These acts were not specifically related to the coming presidential contest, but the election was not far in the background as protestors on the left decried what they saw as Trump’s racism while White nationalists voiced their support for Trump (who, in turn, had nothing but praise for them).

Analysts have pointed to a number of factors that contribute to America’s political polarization. One of these has to do with the fracturing of mass media into many different platforms. As recently as the 1990s, news programming was dominated by three major networks that competed for the same mass audience and offered similar—and by default, mainstream—interpretations of current events and public affairs. Today, a host of electronic news outlets appeal to niche audiences by offering ideologically distinctive and highly partisan programming. Liberals can watch MSNBC for news shows with a liberal perspective while conservatives can get their news from Fox, OAN, and Newsmax or follow the discussions on Parler, a social media platform

avored by Donald Trump's supporters.

At the same time, party activists have sorted themselves ideologically, with almost all liberal activists identifying with the Democratic party and nearly all conservative activists finding their home in the Republican Party. In the not so distant past, each of the major parties boasted liberal and conservative wings, forcing each party to articulate more moderate positions. This prompted some critics to complain that there was little overall difference between the two. Today, each party is ideologically more homogeneous and the parties are accordingly more polarized.

America's political polarization has also been focused and intensified, as if through a lens, by the growth of presidential power and the "presidentialization" of American politics. To put the matter simply, as the importance of the presidency has increased, Americans, particularly party activists, have become more and more concerned with the results of presidential contests. This phenomenon was already evident during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations but was heightened by Trump's combative and incendiary rhetoric. Founding father Alexander Hamilton feared that because of the importance of the presidency relative to the power of the other branches, presidential elections would be marked by "tumult and disorder." As what historian Arthur Schlesinger once called an "imperial presidency" has further evolved, overshadowing our other institutions of governance, Hamilton's fear has been validated: tumult and disorder in and around campaigns and elections have been growing as partisans have come to view defeat of their chosen candidate as unthinkable.

Built upon a foundation of polarization, a tendency toward what might be called "rejectionism" has also become part of our presidential politics. In 2008, many Republicans

rejected Barack Obama's victory. Nearly half of self-identified Republicans, including Donald Trump, became "birthers," professing to believe the falsehood that Obama had been born in Kenya and was thus ineligible for the presidency. In 2016 many Democrats rejected the idea that Trump had won the election, and searched for evidence that he had conspired with the Russians to seize the presidency. In 2020 Trump continued to challenge the election's outcome even when it was clear he had lost. Trump charged that Biden had won because of widespread voter fraud; he launched unsuccessful legal challenges in several states and led a series of "Stop the Steal" rallies across the country. Most Republican politicians knew Trump's quest to overturn the result was futile. They also knew, however, that Trump's claims were believed by tens of millions of Republican voters and so went along with Trump's allegations of election fraud. Rejectionism had become too powerful a force to be challenged.

Partisan Rancor in Congress

Political polarization is evident from the character of recent partisan debate in Washington, D.C. In April 2019, Republican Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, testifying before the House Committee on Financial Services, chaired by Democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters, advised Waters that the essence of her job was to "take the gavel and bang it." Waters, of course, famously called Trump a bully and an egotistical maniac and characterized his advisers as a "bunch of scumbags" two years prior. Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren declared that if she ever became president, criminal investigations would be launched into the activities of many Trump administration officials who might well be found guilty of serious offenses. These exchanges of insults and threats from both sides typify the new partisanship in

Washington.

This dynamic was on full display during President Trump's 2020 State of the Union address, delivered on the eve of his expected acquittal by the Senate after his first impeachment. The president refused to follow custom by shaking Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's hand. Pelosi failed to make the customary ceremonial announcement welcoming the president. Instead, when Trump concluded, the Speaker created a new ceremony by slowly and deliberately tearing her copy of his speech into pieces. Rather than question the Speaker's lack of civility, some Democrats said she should have used a shredder.

When an occasional bit of old-fashioned bipartisanship or even a friendly gesture across the aisle surfaces in Washington these days, it is immediately condemned as treasonous. Take the brouhaha that arose in October 2020 when Democratic Senator Diane Feinstein publicly hugged her longtime friend Lindsay Graham, a Republican senator. Graham chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee, of which Feinstein was the ranking member at the time, and Feinstein had the temerity to praise Graham's handling—though not the outcome—of the Committee's hearings on Amy Coney Barrett's Supreme Court nomination. Democratic activists quickly castigated Feinstein for her gesture, condemned her for "thanking Republicans," and demanded that she be ousted from her leadership position. Ever since he exchanged hugs with Feinstein and subsequently criticized Trump, Graham has been accosted in public spaces by Trump supporters who scream that he is a traitor.

Two other events that took place during Donald Trump's term that demonstrate this growing lack of bipartisanship were his impeachments. Trump is the only American president to have been impeached twice. The first impeachment came during the third year of his

administration, when Trump was charged with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. By this point in time, the majority of congressional Democrats, particularly those in the party's powerful Progressive wing, had decided that Trump must be removed from office as soon as possible. Many did not want to wait until 2020 and risk the chance that the electorate might fail to oust Trump from office. House Intelligence Committee Chairman and impeachment manager Adam Schiff, a Democratic representative, declared that Trump's impeachment was essential because the nation could not be certain of a fair election (that is, a Trump defeat) in 2020. Most progressive pundits, of course, had long been calling for the president's removal.

Speaker Pelosi initially said that she opposed impeachment, but instead wanted to see Trump defeated in 2020 and then sent to prison. Eventually, though, with Democratic members of Congress fearing 2020 primary challenges from angry Progressives, Pelosi gave into the pressure within her party and allowed the impeachment process to move forward. To Trump's supporters, she thus became a symbol of the alleged conspiracy to cheat Trump out of the presidency. Some of the rioters who stormed the Capitol on January 6 broke into Pelosi's office intending to do her harm.

Trump, for his part, showed nothing but contempt for his enemies in Congress, labeling impeachment a witch hunt and castigating the Democrats for making a case "loaded with lies and misrepresentations." Trump dubbed Speaker Pelosi "Nervous Nancy," tweeting that she was a "nasty, vindictive, horrible person." In similar tweets he also gave Representative Schiff the monikers "Shifty Schiff" and "Schiff T. Coyote," presumably to evoke the cartoon character with a similar name. In February 2020, the Republican-controlled Senate, of course, declined to convict Trump on the impeachment charges brought by the Democratic-controlled House.

Following the events of January 6, 2021, the House voted to impeach Trump again, this time for inciting insurrection. Ten Republicans voted with the Democrats to remove Trump from office, even though his term was to end in a few days. The Senate did not plan to take up the matter with a trial until after Trump was already a private citizen once more. Though end-of-term impeachment might seem moot, Democrats and some Republicans hope to make certain that Donald Trump can never run for the presidency again, something that requires his impeachment and conviction followed by a congressional vote to bar him from future governmental office.

Following the insurrection, Democrats were united in their hatred for Trump and a number of Republicans would shed no tears if he were blocked from launching a 2024 presidential bid. In the meantime, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook closed Trump's accounts while Amazon and Apple moved to shut down Parler. These actions raise First Amendment issues and will be debated in the courts for years to come, but as Judge Richard Posner has written, the Constitution is not a suicide pact. Perhaps these actions were necessary to prevent Trump's followers from communicating with one another and planning more mayhem.

Conflicts Over Civil Rights and the Rise of White Nationalism

Political polarization is also reflected and reinforced by the rise of White nationalism. During his four years in office, Trump encouraged White nationalists to believe that he approved of their ideas, causing a number of armed racist groups to emerge from the shadows and make themselves known on the American political stage. In August 2017, White nationalists demonstrated in Charlottesville, Virginia to "unite the right" and engaged in violent and deadly clashes with counterprotestors. When asked about the event, President Trump said that there had

been “very fine people on both sides” during these confrontations. White nationalists saw the president’s remarks as an indication of his support and stepped up their recruitment and organizational efforts, particularly targeting disaffected young people and those with military and law enforcement backgrounds. These efforts make ethno-nationalism a particular threat to public order and safety. White nationalists view America through the lens of race and regard those whom they define as non-White as foreigners or interlopers rather than real Americans.

White nationalists also mobilized furiously in opposition to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. From their perspective, Black Americans are being encouraged to challenge America’s cultural symbols and, more importantly, to attack the White racial hegemony that has characterized America from its colonial beginnings. In a related vein, White nationalists saw President Trump’s immigration restrictions and desired wall on the border with Mexico as an indication that he was a kindred spirit in the highest office in the land. They viewed various electoral reforms in 2020, including expanded absentee voting designed to encourage participation (particularly during a pandemic), as efforts by Trump’s enemies to mobilize non-Americans to steal the election. White nationalists supported Trump’s claim of election fraud not because they had evidence that votes had been cast improperly, but because they saw the fact that millions of non-White citizens were casting ballots as a theft of power from White people. Subsequently, White nationalists viewed the incoming Biden administration, in which African Americans, Latinos, and Jews are prominent, as a betrayal of America.

During the storming of the Capitol in 2021, racist and anti-Semitic imagery were quite prominent among the crowds. White nationalists declared that Trump was their president and vowed to keep him in office. What they meant was that Trump spoke for an America ruled by

White people whose hegemony was now threatened. This idea is epitomized by the White nationalist slogan, “You will not replace us!”

Looking Forward: The Future of American Politics

Americans like happy endings but the ending of this story remains in doubt. Donald Trump and the forces he unleashed will not go away soon. The factors promoting America’s political polarization will not disappear quickly. The dangerous growth of presidential power and the Hamiltonian tumult and disorder it inspires will continue.

Will America’s political leadership step back from the brink and find a bipartisan path forward? What lessons will future presidents draw from the events of January 6, 2021? Will they learn that disorder and violence does not work or will another of the narcissists often attracted to the presidency review Trump’s conduct in January 2021 and decide simply that better planning had been needed?