“A Date that will live in Infamy”: A View from Away

William Leiss (November 26, 2020)

Those are the words spoken in the first line of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s address to the nation on December 8, 1941, referring to the previous day’s attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor. November 21, 2020 may well come to be recognized as another such day, a day on which the nation’s Commander-in-Chief left his office to go golfing just at the time when the world leaders of the G20, meeting in a virtual conference, were discussing the global pandemic, a day on which the coronavirus death toll ravaging his own country approached the number of Americans killed at Pearl Harbor.

The golfing man in the red jacket (appropriately enough), playing on his own course in Virginia, had spent his morning, as usual, tweeting about his election victory and the blizzard of lawsuits being filed to confirm it. More recently, he had been putting pressure on local officials to have Republican-controlled state legislatures halt certifications of Joe Biden’s vote totals and instead certify electors who would vote for Trump on December 14 in a number of states where he had lost the popular vote. The strategy was meant to deny Biden enough votes to reduce his Electoral College count below 270, thus throwing the choice for president into the House of Representatives, where each state delegation has one vote, in a context where Republicans control the governorship and legislatures in a majority of states.

Let us not mince words: Should this strategy succeed, this would be a *coup d’état.* So far as I know, no prominent commentator has used this phrase to describe what this nation’s sitting President has been seeking to do since November 3. But if such a scenario were unfolding anywhere else, it would be called by its name, a *coup d’état.*

Many media commentators have stated recently that Trump’s actions were violating a fundamental norm in democratic societies, namely, the guarantee of a “peaceful transition of power” from one regime to another. This is not quite correct, since there are such peaceful transitions in both monarchies and dictatorships as well. The important norm now being violated is the dictum that transitions from one regime to another can *only* occur as a result of a “free and fair election.” And in this regard the United States of America rightfully holds a badge of honor, since it is almost certainly the only major nation to hold a free and fair election in the midst of a savage, protracted and bloody civil war, in 1864.

That civil war had occurred because the nation itself had been founded on a deep and reprehensible division within its inhabitants: the one between slaves and free persons. That division was maintained long after the Civil War, in the form of Jim Crow laws, and its legacy persists down to the present day in institutional racism and systematic economic inequality. Now another deep divide within the population of the United States – one which appears to be solidifying in place – has reared its head.

Take a close look at the Blue/Red color-coded maps of the recent U. S. election results. The one for the presidential election shows that there are basically three different nations in North America, two smaller Blue ones and a large Red one in between. But the one for the House of Representatives results is even more telling, revealing as it does a vast interior field of Red, with two solid chunks of Blue along East and West coasts (a notably narrow swath of Blue in the West); and, otherwise, a bank of Red in between those two coasts and along the South, with urban pockets of Blue scattered here and there.

The maps reflect the fact that almost *74 million* Americans voted for Donald Trump, and just a little fewer voted for Republican members of the House. Trump garnered *11 million more* votes in 2020 than he did in 2016, which must be taken as a clear sign of approval, even enthusiasm, for the policies and authoritarian modes of governance he has pursued for the past four years. Among them is the politicization of the judiciary, which is known from the recent histories of Hungary and Poland to be one of those modes. At present more than half of his supporters appear to believe that Trump won an election that was stolen from him by fraud and are prepared to vote for him in 2024.

I spent the first twenty-eight years of my life in the United States before relocating permanently to Canada in 1968. I have three brothers in the U.S., who have families with children and grandchildren there. I fear for their future. Assuming that Trump’s attempted *coup d’état* fails now, and that he leaves office in January, he will certainly maintain his tight grip, for the foreseeable future, on his followers and the Republican Party. He will continue to “energize his base,” throwing nails on the road behind him (as one recent commentator put it) in an effort to hobble the Biden regime.

He will call out his followers during the 2022 interim elections under a quite plausible scenario in which Republicans maintain or regain control of the Senate and the House is flipped to their control (not at all unlikely in view of what happened in 2020 and in view of the traditional result of midterm elections). The result will be to replicate for Biden the frustrations and lack of policy freedom that bedeviled Obama for the last six years of his two-term mandate. There may be a *battle royale* for the presidency again in 2024: Even if Trump himself does not run, any other Republican candidate might be compelled to follow his example. As noted in the Postscript below, a shift of just 22,000 popular votes in three key states, out of a total of ~158 million cast (.00028%) in 2020, could have given an Electoral College victory to Trump, negating a majority of over 6 million for Biden. Many lessons of the past tell us that these types of social divisions, once entrenched, do not disappear again magically of their own accord.

Based on recent trends, and fueled by Trump’s ongoing polarizing influence, the new deep division in the nation may well intensify uninterrupted over the coming years. More worrisome still, the set of underlying authoritarian impulses among his devoted followers may deepen and harden during that time. They have been armed to the teeth for some time already, and FBI data shows that the pandemic has spawned a new generation of first-time gun owners. As of now it is woefully uncertain how this will all end.

As of this date President Trump’s attempted *coup d’état* in 2020 appears to be failing; nevertheless, some lessons may have been learned during this year for a future venture of this type. Should Trump or a Trumpist surrogate retake the presidency in 2024, and should Republicans control both the House and Senate too, having an accommodating senior federal judiciary to boot, the November 2024 exercise might turn out to be the last “free and fair election” in the United States of America for some time to come. In which case, by 2028 the nation may very well be on the cusp of another civil war, whereupon one of the operative optimistic scenarios would imagine its armed forces acting to pull their country back from the brink. The alternative is too awful to contemplate.

Postscript

The 2020 Presidential Election Victory Margin

(“Battleground States” won by Biden)

State Margin % Votes 3rd Party Vote [EC Trump?]

1. Arizona 10,457 2.4% 51,465 (2.3%) +11
2. Georgia 12,670 0.2% 62,138 (1.2%) +16
3. Wisconsin (N.1) 20,608 0.7% 48,893 (1.6%) +10

SUBTOTAL **43,735** 162,496 (N.2) +37 (269: N.3)

1. Nevada (N.4) 33,956 2.4% 32,000 (2.3%) 6 (275: N.3)
2. Pennsylvania 81,660 1.2% 79,387 (1.1%) 20

AVERAGE Margin 1.4% 1.7%

Note 1: AZ, GA, PA: libertarian only; WI, three right-wing parties.

Note 2: The third-party votes were nearly four times the margin of victory for Biden.

Note 3: In the Subtotal, flipping just these three states in terms of the popular vote (assuming a switch of just 22,000 votes from Biden to Trump, distributed in the same proportions) would have brought Trump to the threshold of Electoral College victory; adding Nevada would have given him the victory. *But the switch of 22,000 would have likely been enough,* because a 269-269 tie would have thrown the election into the House of Representatives, where (as noted) each state delegation has one vote, in a context where Republicans control the governorship and legislatures in a majority of states.

Note 4: NV, 2 right-wing parties, 17,921; votes for “None of these candidates,” 14,079.

Comparison 2016/2020

1. In 2020, by retaining his hold on just four of the five states he won in 2016 (Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin and Nevada), by the same margin as he actually lost, Trump could have prevailed in the Electoral College, with a total margin of victory over Biden, in the popular vote in those four states, of **77,691** (e.g., 39,000 voters switching).
2. Trump’s comparable winning margin in the popular vote in 2016 was **79,646** in the three states (PA, MI, and WI) which gave him the Electoral College victory (.00058% of all votes cast).
3. Thus, assuming the hypothetical case (point A), the margin of victory in those two elections would have differed by a mere **1,955 votes**, where the total popular votes cast were: 2016, 137 million; 2020, ~158 million (expected, pending final count).

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