

What will happen in the United States in November 2024? (Canadians too should worry)

William Leiss (6 January 2022)

In a *Washington Post* op-ed on 17 December 2021 three retired U. S. Army generals, Paul Eaton, Antonio Taguba, and Steven Anderson, warned of a "potential for a total breakdown of the [military] chain of command along partisan lines" and civil war should there be a repeat of the January 6 insurrection in 2024. They observed that 10% of those charged in that event had a military service record and added: "The idea of rogue units organizing among themselves to support the 'rightful' commander in chief cannot be dismissed."

This follows Barton Gellman's remarkable essay in *The Atlantic* magazine dated 6 December 2021, "Trump's Next Coup has already begun," which concludes: "Against Biden or another Democratic nominee, Donald Trump may be capable of winning a fair election in 2024. He does not intend to take that chance." Considering what Trump himself and his minions tried to do over the course of three months after the November 2021 election, this is a fair expectation. More to the point, we ought to say: *We know what's coming* just three years down the line. This does appear to be an ominous prospect, except for the fact that few in Washington (apart from Liz Cheney) seem to be taking it all that seriously. Perhaps with some justification most view the out-of-office Mr. Drumpf as a bit of a buffoon whose future role in politics is likely to amount to little more than generating hot air and endless lawsuits.

If so, they are making a bad – and possibly fatal – mistake. Because what is very likely to happen in November 2024 no longer *necessarily* has anything to do with what Donald Trump says or does. He is a distraction. He may or may not be the Republican candidate for President in that election (for example, his health may fail or his personal legal troubles may preclude it). It doesn't matter. His most important work is already completed: He showed the Republican Party that it could unleash its demons and move

from simple partisanship to the violation of all of the established norms of political discourse and action – while maintaining the loyalty of a substantial minority in the electorate. Quite possibly, only a political outsider could have done this. The Party’s acceptance of what happened on January 6 sealed his victory. Thereafter the Party and its voters have become deeply morally compromised through rationalizing the use of violence to secure a political aim. It means that they have crossed a vital threshold and that there is no turning back. They will have to try to complete the project, putting a long-term authoritarian solution in place, in order to obscure through more decorous legalisms the reality that in legitimizing what happened on January 6 the Party colluded in the destruction of American democracy.

In short, the mortal threat of a successful *coup d’état* that brings American democracy to the brink of destruction does not depend on whether or not Trump leads the charge. Canadians as well as Americans need to understand this point or they will be blindsided by events. To understand it, look not at the Leader but at his followers, in this case Republican voters and politicians.

Republicans intend to secure complete power in all branches of government in Washington, D.C. as of November 2024 no matter what the popular vote totals happen to turn out to be in that election. Moreover, they do not intend to surrender that complete power in any future elections. The means by which they intend to do this are already now pretty much in place and will be further solidified over the coming three years. It was the perverse genius of Donald Trump which showed them this could actually be contemplated, simply by exploiting the established peculiarities of the U. S. Constitution. In other words, the already-planned *coup d’état* will unfold in a “perfectly legal” manner. Republican voters think that they are entitled to carry out this plan because, as an overwhelming majority among them still profess to believe, the 2020 election was “stolen” from them under the traditional electoral rules then in force.

The legal mechanism for accomplishing this objective is the expansive role of state governments in controlling voting in both state and national elections. The Brennan Center for Justice has been keeping tabs on all developments in this arena since the beginning of 2021. Here are just a few examples: (1) “As of July 14, legislators have introduced more than 400 bills with restrictive [voting] provisions in 49 states”; (2) “state legislatures across the nation have taken steps to strip election officials of the power to run, count, and certify elections”; (3) “... between January 1 and December 10 of this year ... legislators in at least 35 states introduced at least 153 bills that would have politicized or undermined the independence of state courts.” There is a special provision in the U. S. Constitution which allows state legislatures to control the “manner” of selecting electors who will cast votes in the Electoral College.

Finally, as Barton Gellman has pointed out, a legal basis for confirming the unrestricted state control over elections has already been prepared, in an *amicus* brief filed before the Supreme Court in October 2020 on behalf of the so-called “Honest Elections Project,” which asserts that “state legislatures are vested with plenary authority that cannot be divested by state constitution to determine the times, places, and manner of presidential and congressional elections.” Republicans expect to control a sufficient number of state legislatures in 2024 to ensure victory in the Electoral College, irrespective of the popular vote, as well as in the certification process on January 6 through control over both houses of Congress. *All the stages needed for this plan to succeed have been identified and many are already in place.*

Some of these mechanisms will be deployed and assessed after voting is finished in the 2022 Congressional elections, and there will be two years left during which time they can be fine-tuned, and hardened if required, leading up to 2024. What will follow? There are historical precedents which teach us that in a transition to authoritarianism the victors do not rest on their laurels. Because they have triumphed by violating important norms, they are compelled to solidify their success by moving quickly to delegitimize the expected residual opposition by both legal and extralegal means. The most effective way of doing so

is by moving from death threats to a widespread burst of violence, using private armed militias to supplement the efforts of the police and the courts. Here the underlying, long-established strength of democratic institutions in the United States will, paradoxically, increase the risk that the subsequent attempts to subvert them permanently will require severe and protracted efforts.

The initial instigators of such events will then confront another stark truth: They will be unable to pull back the demons unleashed by them so as to fracture the limits of normal politics. The rippling circles of violence and disorder will cascade willy-nilly through many zones of social and institutional life, their impacts mutually reinforcing each other. There is no telling where and when all of it will finally abate. This is why the three retired army generals warned of the possibility that the ranks of the U. S. military might split along partisan lines and enter the fray – a truly ghastly prospect.

There was a mild foretaste of this scenario in early June 2020, when National Guard troops from five states and Washington, D.C. (60% of whose members are people of color) were called out to confront a Black Lives Matter protest march in the capitol. Also at that time, brigades of the U. S. Army's legendary 82nd Airborne Division, having been summoned from their base in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, were waiting just outside the city limits. Some of the Guard troops who are Black voiced their objections to being ordered to use violence against the peaceful protestors. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, apologized for taking part in the photo-op organized by President Trump while these events were taking place: "My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics." (See "Links," *The New York Times*, 10 & 11 June 2020.)

It is possible that the window of opportunity to head off the authoritarian project will close with the elections of November 2022. If the current federal government does not succeed in authorizing both the *For The People Act* and the *John Lewis Voting Rights Amendment Act* before that time, the rest of us will know what to expect.

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