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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Rendezvous with Infamy

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“Wednesday, January the sixth two thousand and twenty-one—a date which will live in infamy—the United States Capitol was suddenly and deliberately attacked by a mob incited by President Donald Trump”---with just a few words substituted, this sentence repeats what President Franklin Roosevelt said when he asked for a declaration of war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.¹ “Infamy” perfectly characterizes this deliberately provoked assault on one of the most hallowed sites and institutions of American democracy.

This was far worse than initiating this mob to commit criminal vandalism; it was intended to prevent the houses of Congress from discharging their constitutional duty to certify the outcome of the presidential election. Similarly, Trump had earlier tried to intimidate Georgia’s secretary of state into finagling the state’s votes to make him the winner there, and he had toyed with suborning the Department of Justice in a scheme to overturn the election. “Betrayal” likewise characterizes Trump’s actions---he was betraying his sworn oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution. “Treason” also characterizes what he did. That word may seem problematic because it is fraught with legal interpretations and court decisions, but Trump’s course of action fits the lay, ordinary meaning of the term, as defined in Webster’s dictionary: “the offense of attempting by overt acts to overthrow the government of the state to which the offender owes allegiance.”²

Why did this happen? What led to these horrendous events? Trying to answer those questions requires delving into two areas: first, the mind and character of Donald Trump; second, the political and social forces that led to this assault on American democracy.

As for Trump himself, it is best to echo Shakespeare and say, “Nothing in his presidency became him like the leaving it.”³ Nothing so egregiously exposed his cold-hearted selfishness like this goading of a mob of overwrought, often armed supporters to engage in an assault on the very basis of American democracy--- which he watched on television from a safe distance. His behavior invites comparison with those foulest souls who are consigned to the lowest circle of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*. This is not a fanciful comparison. In his “rendezvous with destiny” speech, Roosevelt declared, “But the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales.”⁴ Earlier, Trump freely admitted to the journalist Bob Woodward that at the beginning of

¹ Roosevelt’s exact words were, “Yesterday, December the seventh nineteen hundred and forty-one---a date which will live in infamy---the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” Quoted in Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 506. Roosevelt inserted “infamy” in a last-minute handwritten change in the reading copy of the speech.

² *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh edition (Springfield: Merriam Webster, 2008), p. 1332. For the legal context see *Black’s Law Dictionary: Definitions of Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*, revised fourth edition (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1968), 1672.

³ *Macbeth*, Act. 1, Scene 4. In fact, Shakespeare means the opposite of this judgment on Trump. This is a description of the unwonted nobility with which the traitorous Thane of Cawdor met his execution.

⁴ Roosevelt speech, June 27, 1936, quoted in Smith, *FDR*, 368.

2020 he knew about the impending danger of the Covid-19 pandemic and deliberately chose to minimize the threat, and then he lied repeatedly about what needed to be done.⁵ Besides “infamy” and “betrayal,” “damnation” describes what he did.

Probing the sources of Trump’s conduct may prove easier than some people fear. Jill Lepore recently sounded a warning in the *New Yorker* about the destruction of records, and the American Historical Association and other organizations have brought suits to preserve documents.⁶ These efforts to forestall destroying records and whitewashing questionable acts deserve applause and support, but there is reason to be less worried about what those records may contain. Starting at the top, Trump’s administration has shown itself allergic to paper trails of any kind, which raises the question of what records there may be to destroy. The usual method of scholars of diplomacy and politics—close examination of documentary records—is not likely to be of great use. Besides, powerful counterattacks against efforts at concealment are already underway in a plethora of legal proceedings, which are sure to multiply, and in future congressional investigations, especially in the wake of January 6.

Nor does time need to pass to gain perspective on Trump’s conduct as president. Measured by the two main criteria for judging presidents, what did they do and what did they bring and give to the office, he has shown himself to be a miserable failure. The first criterion is by far the more important: how well or badly does a president meet challenges and opportunities? Those who rank highest have succeeded in the most demanding times. Thus, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Roosevelt stand on the pinnacle of all rankings of presidents. They oversaw the founding of the Republic, won the Civil War, and dealt with the Great Depression and won World War II. Conversely, James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson fall to the bottom because they botched the beginning and ending of the Civil War.

For a time, it looked as if Trump might not fare all that badly judged by this criterion because he had not faced any truly significant challenges and had not fallen on his face. Then came 2020 and COVID-19, which still poses the greatest threat to the United States and the world in many decades, rivaling the nuclear menace of the Cold War. It presented Trump with the greatest challenge and opportunity of his presidency. He could have rallied the country to high purpose and common cause and thereby enjoyed what might be called his “Churchillian moment.” Instead, he looked the other way and misled the public. Hidden from view until his brazen admissions to Woodward, this was his first rendezvous with infamy and betrayal. He may not yet have committed treason, but multitudes of Americans died because he put self before country.

The damnation of Trump does not stop there. The second criterion for judging presidents looks at the qualities of mind and spirit they bring to the office and the legacies they leave behind. Some presidents, such as Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt, rank higher according to this criterion than because of what they did, the Louisiana Purchase and Panama Canal notwithstanding. Conversely, some rank low according to this criterion, such as Warren Harding and, here, too, Andrew Johnson. Likewise, Harry Truman once suffered from disdain due to his allegedly crude manner and the poor quality of some of his appointments, not all of whom were of the caliber of George Marshall and Dean Acheson. No additional perspective seems needed to relegate Trump to the bottom along this scale. Even before he took the oath of office, he was lying, behaving boorishly, traducing respected persons, such as Senator John McCain, and flouting elementary rules of decency.

6 January 2021 sealed Trump’s fate as the worst president in American history judged by both criteria. That makes him an important subject to study, but this does not promise to be an appetizing endeavor. In approaching the man himself, the likely vacuous nature of what may be found is not inviting. A bent toward detective work may lend zest to the pursuit of various quarries, including his efforts to pressure foreign leaders, his mysterious affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin, and his unremitting use of public funds and facilities for personal and business profit. This may make for juicy reading, but expeditions into the inner recesses of Trump’s psyche will almost certainly yield arid discoveries whose chief interest lies in their grotesquerie.

A more worthy intellectual challenge lies in delving into the forces and events that enabled this presidency to come to pass. How did such a repulsive, blatantly unfit person of profoundly defective character not only rise to the highest office in the land but also transform a major and venerable political party into a cult of personality? It is already accepted that the Trump phenomenon is much bigger than Trump himself, just as earlier McCarthyism was far larger than Senator Joseph McCarthy. Trump could not have gotten to where he did without others having cleared the path and seeded the soil for him. How and when did the party of Lincoln---the party of the Union,

⁵ See Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020). On radio and television Woodward played recordings of Trump saying that he knew the gravity of the threat and chose not to act.

⁶ Jill Lepore, “The Trump Papers,” *New Yorker* (November 23, 2020), 20-26.

strong central government, racial emancipation, and high-toned politics---become the party of Trump----the party of provocation to violence, lowbrow nativism, xenophobia, racism, and antipathy to government?

The roots of this transformation stretch back over a century. Before World War I, in the progressive era, party conservatives were casting doubt about what government could and should do, along lines previously laid down and espoused by Grover Cleveland's Democrats.⁷ Even earlier, Republican presidents had begun to shun their Black supporters, court white southern votes, and introduce segregation into the federal government. The party continued to woo the white South in the 1920s, with some promising results in the 1928 election, only to be set back by the Depression.⁸ In the 1930s and '40s, Republican conservatives kept up a drumfire of anti-government rhetoric, while many southern whites grew restive at even the mildest gestures toward Black civil rights, as evidenced in the "Dixiecrat" bolt of 1948.⁹

Those earlier leanings and moves laid the groundwork for what most interpreters agree was the decisive rightward pivot of the Republicans---the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president in 1964.¹⁰ Just before that nomination, Senator Strom Thurmond, who had been the Dixiecrats' presidential nominee in 1948, joined the GOP, and Goldwater joined him in casting two of the six Republican votes in the Senate against the 1964 civil rights bill.¹¹ Those moves paid off immediately when, despite Goldwater's landslide loss in the election, he carried four Deep South states by wide margins. George Wallace's third candidacy temporarily impeded this realignment, but with Richard Nixon in the White House, the "southern strategy" ploughed ahead. By the century's end, Republicans were winning the entire South and the white vote nationwide. Race plainly lay at the heart of this Republican conquest of the South and rise to dominance among whites, but it was neither the origin nor the whole story.

The results of the 2020 election raised two profoundly disturbing and related questions. First, why did so many people around the country vote for Trump despite his manifest defects? Second, why did even more people vote for Republican candidates despite their near unanimous embrace of Trump? Deep currents of popular sentiment were clearly at work. Many analysts have stressed economic grievances arising from the loss of industrial jobs that drove working class votes toward Trumpian Republicanism---against which Biden's "Scranton Joe" origins and image evidently did not make much headway. Other analysts have looked to deep cultural alienation from elites, moral relativism, intellectual sophistication, and gender and racial diversity, which have spawned what some have called "political sectarianism."¹²

Such zealous sectarianism has long been brewing among Republicans. As early as the middle of the last century, much of the party's right-wing leadership and following displayed a willingness to use any means to beat their opponents, as evidenced by the widespread embrace of McCarthyism. Conservative ascendancy under President Ronald Reagan tempered this tendency, but only for a while. Less than four years after Reagan left office, his successor, the first Bush, found himself challenged for re-nomination by Pat Buchanan, who declared a

⁷ On this early Republican conservative retreat from big government, see John Milton Cooper, Jr., "From Promoting to Ending Big Government: 1912 and the Progressives' Century," in Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman, eds., *The Progressives' Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 157-173.

⁸ There is a long literature about the Republicans' pursuit of the white South, starting with C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston: Little Brown, 1951). For an excellent recent contribution, see Edward O. Frantz, *The Door of Hope: Republican Presidents and the First Southern Strategy, 1877-1933* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011).

⁹ On the Dixiecrats, see Karl Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁰ On Goldwater, see Robert A. Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). On the Republican rightward shift, see Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Of 33 Republican senators, 27 voted for the civil rights bill. Of Democrats, 46 voted for the bill, and 21, all southerners, voted against it. On Thurmond, see Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, *Strom: The Complicated Personal and Political Life of Strom Thurmond* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs, 2006).

¹² For an overview of writings about "political sectarianism," see Thomas B. Edsall, "America, We Have a Problem," *New York Times* (online edition), December 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/16/opinion/trump-political-sectarianism.html>.

“culture war.”¹³ Simultaneously on Capitol Hill, firebrands led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich rendered any lingering vestiges of civility across the aisles anathema and converted the halls of Congress into a partisan battleground.¹⁴ At the century’s end, the party’s presidential campaign shamelessly resorted to chicanery and sometimes mob tactics to prevail in dubious circumstances.¹⁵

The root of this win-at-all-costs sectarianism lies in the conviction of many, if not most Republicans, that theirs is the sole party of legitimacy. Two corollaries immediately follow: first, that the other party, and even some within their own fold (“Republicans in Name Only,” RINOs), are not legitimate; second, any means are therefore permissible to defeat them. This mindset leads to the fundamental but unheeded contradiction that any actions, no matter how illegitimate in other contexts, are permissible in pursuit of this self-proclaimed legitimacy. From there, the road runs straight and clear to Trump’s outrageous challenges to legally certified results in the 2020 election and the willingness of a large majority of House Republicans and a phalanx of their Senate colleagues to support those mendacious claims. The infamy of January 6 began with the invitation of hordes of supporters to gather for the express purpose of intimidating Congress to overturn the election. The attack on the Capitol came as an egregious but logical finale to this truly treasonous offensive.

The overweening question that remains is whether the insurrection of January 6 and Trump’s ensuing impeachment and trial will alter this strife-plagued environment. The earlier “date which will live in infamy” did that. It rang down the curtain on the fierce debate between isolationists and internationalists and ushered in both a temporary partisan truce and a longer period of foreign policy bipartisanship. Sadly, a similar sea change does not seem likely now. This time, it is not a matter of uniting against a foreign foe. The adversaries are fellow citizens who cling to delusions of their exclusive legitimacy, and the prospects for ideological self-reformation do not look bright. Continued sectarian strife seems to be the order of the day. At least, after January 6, no one can deny the depth of the stakes in this strife.

In these circumstances, it is wise to look to the distant past for guidance. In 1808, near the end of his presidency, Thomas Jefferson offered this advice: “In the fevered state of our country no good can ever come from any attempt to set one of these fiery zealots to rights, either in fact or principle. They are determined as to the facts they will believe, and the opinions on which they will act. Get by them, therefore, as you would by an angry bull.”¹⁶ As for Trump, the words Oliver Cromwell hurled at the Long Parliament in 1653 still ring true: “Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!”¹⁷

John Milton Cooper, Jr. has written on World War I, the progressive era, and Woodrow Wilson. He has dealt most extensively with the elder Henry Cabot Lodge in *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001). He is currently collaborating with Trygve Throntveit on a one-volume edition of Woodrow Wilson for Princeton University Press.

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¹³ Buchanan speech, August 15, 1992, C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?31255-1/pat-buchanan-1992-republican-convention-address>.

¹⁴ On Gingrich’s ascendancy, see Julian E. Zellizer, *Bring Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker and the Rise of a New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin-Random House, 2020).

¹⁵ On that mindset and those tactics in 2000, see John Milton Cooper, Jr., “The Leaving It: The Election of 2000 before the Bar of History,” in Jack Rakove, ed., *The Unfinished Election of 2000* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3-28. On its more recent development, see Geoffrey Kabaservice, “The Forever Grievance,” *Washington Post*, December 4, 2020. He will expand on his insights and observations in his forthcoming book, *American Conservatism and the Republican Party: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁶ Jefferson to T. J. Randolph, Nov. 24, 1800, quoted in Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, Library of America, 1986), p.1022.

¹⁷ *Oxford Essential Quotations*, Fifth Edition (current online version, Oxford, 2017).