

January 6: First as Farce, Next Time as Tragedy?

What If We Knew We Would Face Another Coup?

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What if we knew that we would face the same situation that occurred on January 6 again, but with Trump and his supporters better prepared for it? How would we prepare?

The year 2021 opened with the farcical culmination of the reactionary momentum that had been building throughout the second half of 2020: a bungled coup attempt intended to keep Donald Trump in office by brute force—or at least to normalize such stunts for the future. As with Trump's election, we had noted the signs that this was on the way, but it still took us by surprise when it occurred. It was hard to believe Trump would burn all his political capital on such a long-shot attempt to stay in power.

In retrospect, once Trump was no longer going to get to remain president, he had no incentive not to try to carry out a coup, as far-fetched as his scheme was without a critical mass of government officials on board. In the year since, he has regained much of the ground it seemed that he had permanently lost, consolidating the majority of the Republican party around an agreement that what happened on January 6 was no big deal.

The Democrats have fallen into the same error that Trump has lured them into time and again: they have been trying to investigate him. A year of small revelations about January 6, dribbling out one at a time, has served to kill the story by overexposure. Over the past four years, Trump has survived countless such revelations about his conduct. There's no delegitimizing him with his base—the worse he is, the better, as far as they are concerned.

We had already identified this phenomenon in 2018:

There's no need for new revelations about Trump's overt racism, perpetration of sexual assault, or illicit dealings with other authoritarians. All of these are already flagrantly obvious. The focus on investigating him serves above all to re-legitimize the same FBI and justice system that are already being used against anyone who honestly sets out to interrupt the harm that both Trump and his centrist rivals are perpetuating through the institutions of the state.

As we pointed out in 2019, all the investigating in the world will be worse than useless if the balance of power within the state remains such that it is impossible to impose consequences on Trump:

Rank-and-file Democrats still don't understand how power works. Crime is not the violation of the rules, but the stigma attached to those who break rules without the power to make them. (As they say, steal \$25, go to jail; steal \$25 million, go to Congress.) At the height of Genghis Khan's reign, it would have been pointless to accuse the famous tyrant of breaking the laws of the Mongol Empire; as long as Trump has enough of Washington behind him, the same goes for him. Laws don't exist in some transcendent realm. They are simply the product of power struggles among the elite—not to mention the passivity of the governed—and they are enforced according to the prevailing balance of power. To fetishize the law is to accept that might makes right.

Lacking the political will to take action, the Democrats and their mouthpieces in the corporate media have settled for trying their case in the court of public opinion. Again, this

is a profound failure to understand the situation. By their own account, their adversaries are rallying adherents to an explicitly anti-democratic program—and the Democrats' only response is to attempt to use this talking point to gain an advantage in the next election.

Let's be very clear about this: if you believe that the Republicans are plotting to take power via undemocratic means, then limiting yourself to trying to outvote them is explicitly self-defeating. If the things that liberals are saying about January 6 are true—and there is reason to believe that they are—then it stands to reason that everyone who is concerned about this should be learning about direct action and anti-fascist means of community defense.

Instead, in a variety of ways, centrists have used the events of January 6 to direct people away from precisely the measures they should be taking, to delegitimize those measures and discredit the people with whom they might take them.

What's Good for the Center Is Good for the Right (and Vice Versa)

The events of January 6 and the ensuing backlash and repression set the template for 2021, a dramatic lull following one of the largest waves of protest in United States history. Democrats took advantage of the opportunity to restore the battered prestige of law enforcement, depicting police officers as beleaguered guardians of democracy, and valorized snitching and surveillance as tactics via which ordinary citizens could join them in defending democracy. At the same time, they took steps to discredit direct action by associating it with pro-Trump “lawlessness.”

When police murdered George Floyd, public trust and respect for law enforcement plummeted to unprecedented depths. Demands to defund or even abolish the police migrated from the extreme political margins to become serious proposals that were widely debated in the mainstream. Fox News and its imitators continued their racially charged crime alarmism, but with diminishing returns; efforts by police unions, PR firms, and liberal corporate media outlets to feature stories of cops doing good made little headway against the widespread suspicion that had taken hold from the left all the way to the center.

In this environment, the failed coup of January 6 was a godsend to the state. Police could pose as both victims and heroes again, the National Guard as saviors and bulwarks against chaos; even the Federal Bureau of Investigation was doing its part to protect democracy from right-wing thugs. Liberals and mainstream media outlets seized upon these interpretations and ran with them, with extraordinary success. The conviction of Derek Chauvin sidestepped one of the only circumstances that would have immediately catalyzed a new round of rioting while bringing courts and prosecutors into the circle of institutions that grateful liberals praised for holding the line. Pretty soon, ex-cop Eric Adams was on track to be the next mayor of New York City—and the new face of an aggressively amnesiac Democratic Party.

All the while, police continued to murder people, again and again and again—protected not only by qualified immunity, but also by the discrediting of militant protest and the restoration of officers to the roles of martyrs and heroes.

At the same time, government officials were carrying out a massive campaign—complete with billboards and bus stop advertisements—to crowdsource information with which to identify participants in the storming of the Capitol building, drawing the enthusiastic participation of thousands. This establishes a new precedent for sharing out the work of policing across the entire online population. Because the campaign is directed against right-wing extremists, it draws buy-in from the center and the left—considerably more so than the same approach did when it was directed against Muslims and other “suspicious” persons in the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Those with long memories will recognize that these volunteer online forensics squads are descended from earlier groups that set out to identify members of the black bloc at various G20 summits, often in response to groundless conspiracy theories to the effect that the anarchists were actually police infiltrators seeking to discredit “legitimate” (read: legalistic) movements. The more normalized this kind of crowdsourcing becomes, the more we will see it used against us the next time we participate in protest activity that stands a chance to change the world.

Corporate media outlets, including those with a liberal slant, also expanded the range of intrusive technologies that they were willing to utilize in their coverage of January 6, mainstreaming the merging of doxxing and reporting that increasingly characterizes journalism today.

All this occurred alongside the continued authorization of both state and right-wing vigilante violence against social movements, exemplified by Florida’s draconian anti-protest laws and Kyle Rittenhouse’s acquittal and subsequent elevation to Republican stardom. The embrace of Rittenhouse indicates that even if insurrections and coups are still too much for some Republicans to stomach, there is widespread support for lethal violence against any social movement that is perceived as a threat to law and order.

Across party lines, the political class has sought to re-establish their monopoly over politics while suppressing grassroots mobilization and protest. For all their aggressive performance of partisan division, Republicans and Democrats are both relieved to see the locus of politics shift back from the streets to the well-defended halls of power. So long as the current state of affairs prevails, both parties benefit from the repression of protest across the board—be it protest from armed militias, anti-vaxxers, and Trump loyalists or Black Lives Matter advocates, water protectors, anti-fascists, and anarchists.

Should this state of affairs come to an end, the Republicans now have a plan B. The centrist Democrats, not so much.

And what about us? How should we navigate this situation, which is much less conducive to grassroots organizing than 2020 was? And how can we prepare for a possible future in which the locus of power shifts back to street action, but on the terms of the likes of Trump and his supporters?

Refining the Far-Right Program

The centrists are currently ascendant, while the wings of the extreme right that are most connected to the storming of the Capitol—the Proud Boys and their compatriots—remain under intense scrutiny and in disarray, more or less discredited. However, they may not be the ones who will pose the chief risk to us in the next round.

The evolution of right-wing politics in Greece over the past decade offers an instructive example for our situation in the US. Despite our anxieties a few years ago, the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party ultimately failed to gain electoral ground in Greece. The other political parties all united against them, portraying them as the illegitimate ones—the supposed opposite numbers of the uncontrollable anarchists. This enabled the old-fashioned conservative New Democracy party to snap up many Golden Dawn voters and win the next election running on a platform borrowed in part from Golden Dawn. New Democracy went on to implement many of Golden Dawn's policy proposals—with grievous consequences for anarchists, immigrants, and others—without provoking any of the pushback that Golden Dawn would have received from the European Union and various elements of Greek “civil society” if it had won.

Similarly, though the Proud Boys are in disarray, perhaps the chief risk is that their fascistic program will filter out into the Republican Party at large. If the reversals of January 6 enable the Republicans to weed out their lunatic fringe while radicalizing to the right as a whole—the same process via which the Nazi skinheads of the 1980s gave way to Richard Spencer—we could find ourselves in a dangerous situation indeed.

Bracing for What Comes Next

Biden's grandfatherly normalcy has calmed the center and the left, elements of which took advantage of social movement exhaustion to rationalize going back to brunch. Anti-Biden outrage on the right, while extensive, has not reached anything like the vehemence directed against Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. Yet the Biden administration's unsurprising lack of success delivering on its promises has demoralized the center, paving the way for a Republican resurgence. Combined with the downturn in radical social movement activity, the situation appears similar to the second year of Obama's presidency, when the lack of a substantive radical opposition was one of the factors contributing to the rise of the Tea Party and an emboldened grassroots right wing.

This year will see the first election since Trump introduced the “stolen election” narrative into United States politics along with the revanchist program it implies. There will be considerable attention focused on voting procedures and further experiments to see if the “big lie” model can be used to undermine Democratic victories. At the same time, we can anticipate much lower voter turnouts and a great deal of indifference, without the fear of Trump or radical street action to goad either of the rival bases.

In this context, there are many questions we should ask ourselves about what the next generation of street protests ought to look like. For the purposes of this reflection, though, we'll end with a single one.

What if we knew that we would face the same situation that occurred on January 6 again, but with Trump and his supporters better prepared for it? How would we prepare?

Let's go back to the afternoon of January 6, 2021. Anarchists were completely exhausted by the beginning of that January; a few tried to mobilize against the Trump rally scheduled in Washington, DC, but ultimately nothing came together. Liberals were arguing strenuously that it was better not to counter-protest the Trump rally, describing it as a trap. Consequently, thousands of Trump supporters showed up in DC, while the streets were virtually empty of anyone else.

Unless Trump was trying to reverse-psychologize us, this appears to have been exactly what he wanted:



In the end, things worked out well enough for anarchists and anti-fascists. Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake, as the saying goes. Trump and his supporters overplayed their hand and suddenly found the rest of the political spectrum completely united against them.

But what if Trump had been in a stronger position? What if he had been able to pull off a coup?

Some liberals have argued that it was essential that anti-fascists and anarchists and other participants in the Movement for Black Lives were not there on January 6, or else the National Guard would have focused on us and would never have gotten to the Capitol. According to the liberals, Trump was counting on us to be there, and it was our absence that sabotaged his plans.

It's possible that the liberals are correct here. We can't rule it out—though it's worth noting that liberals tend to glorify inaction just as aggressively as anarchists celebrate action, and

usually having given less thought to the matter. In any case, counting on the state to hold the threat of fascism at bay leaves us in an extremely vulnerable position. It's not unthinkable that at some point, a far-right coup will succeed, at least in some parts of the country, and we—not just anti-fascists, but all people of good conscience—will find that our concerted action is the only thing that stands between us and the establishment of an even more authoritarian society. That is precisely what happened in Spain in 1936.

This is not just a hypothetical question about the past or the future. It's chiefly a question about how we should be organizing today, what we should be preparing to be able to do.

The embarrassing defeat of Trump's supporters on January 6, despite all their tactical gear and ferocity, is a strong argument against a merely militaristic answer to this question.¹

In the future, we'll explore alternatives to the kind of ineffectual show of force that Trump and his supporters engaged in that day.

For now, we leave you to confront this question, yourself—for it is the question facing all of us.

¹ On some level, the participants in the storming of the Capitol seem to have believed that they were doing what they thought "antifa" had been permitted to do, only more efficiently and effectively. To quote another analysis, "Years of obsessing about a cartoon caricature of 'antifa' led Trump's most hardcore supporters to act out precisely the fantasy they were most afraid of others enacting. We should take care not to trade places with them."

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