

Opinion: Our constitutional crisis is already here



Opinion by [Robert Kagan](#)

Contributing columnist

September 23, 2021 at 3:32 p.m. EDT

    5840

“Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation.”

— **James Madison**

The United States is heading into its greatest political and constitutional crisis since the Civil War, with a reasonable chance over the next three to four years of incidents of mass violence, a breakdown of federal authority, and the division of the country into warring red and blue enclaves. The warning signs may be obscured by the distractions of politics, the pandemic, the economy and global crises, and by wishful thinking and denial. But about these things there should be no doubt:

First, Donald Trump will be the Republican candidate for president in 2024. The hope and expectation that he would fade in visibility and influence have been delusional. He enjoys mammoth leads in the polls; he is building a massive campaign war chest; and at this moment the Democratic ticket looks vulnerable. Barring health problems, he is running.

Second, Trump and his Republican allies are actively preparing to ensure his victory by whatever means necessary. Trump’s charges of fraud in the 2020 election are now primarily aimed at establishing the predicate to challenge future election results that do not go his way. Some Republican candidates have already begun preparing to declare fraud in 2022, just as Larry Elder tried meekly to do in the California recall contest.

Meanwhile, the amateurish “stop the steal” efforts of 2020 have given way to an organized nationwide campaign to ensure that Trump and his supporters will have the control over state and local election officials that they lacked in 2020. Those recalcitrant Republican state officials who effectively saved the country from calamity by refusing to falsely declare fraud or to “find” more votes for Trump are being systematically removed or hounded from office. Republican legislatures are giving themselves greater control over the election certification process. As of this spring, Republicans have proposed or passed measures in at least 16 states that would shift certain election authorities from the purview of the governor, secretary of state or other executive-branch officers to the legislature. An [Arizona bill](#) flatly states that the legislature may “revoke the secretary of state’s issuance or certification of a presidential elector’s certificate of election” by a simple majority vote. Some state legislatures seek to impose criminal penalties on local election officials alleged to have committed “[technical infractions](#),” including [obstructing the view of poll watchers](#).

The stage is thus being set for chaos. Imagine weeks of competing mass protests across multiple states as lawmakers from both parties claim victory and charge the other with unconstitutional efforts to take power. Partisans on both sides are likely to be better armed and more willing to inflict harm than they were in 2020. Would governors call out the National Guard? Would President Biden nationalize the Guard and place it under his control, invoke the Insurrection Act, and send troops into Pennsylvania or Texas or Wisconsin to quell violent protests? Deploying federal power in the states would be decried as tyranny. Biden would find himself where other presidents have been — where Andrew Jackson was during the nullification crisis, or where Abraham Lincoln was after the South seceded — navigating without rules or precedents, making his own judgments about what constitutional powers he does and doesn’t have.

Today’s arguments over the filibuster will seem quaint in three years if the American political system enters a crisis for which the Constitution offers no remedy.

Most Americans — and all but a handful of politicians — have refused to take this possibility seriously enough to try to prevent it. As has so often been the case in other countries where fascist leaders arise, their would-be opponents are paralyzed in confusion and amazement at this charismatic authoritarian. They have followed the standard model of appeasement, which always begins with underestimation. The political and intellectual establishments in both parties have been underestimating Trump since he emerged on the scene in 2015. They underestimated the extent of his popularity and the strength of his hold on his followers; they underestimated his ability to take control of the Republican Party; and then they underestimated how far he was willing to go to retain power. The fact that he failed to overturn the 2020 election has reassured many that the American system remains secure, though it easily could have gone the other way — if Biden had not been safely ahead in all four states where the vote was close; if Trump had been more competent and more in control of the decision-makers in his administration, Congress and the states. As it was, Trump came close to bringing off a coup earlier this year. All that prevented it was a handful of state officials with notable courage and integrity, and the reluctance of two attorneys general and a vice president to obey orders they deemed inappropriate.

These were not the checks and balances the Framers had in mind when they designed the Constitution, of course, but Trump has exposed the inadequacy of those protections. The Founders did not foresee the Trump phenomenon, in part because they did not foresee national parties. They anticipated the threat of a demagogue, but not of a national cult of personality. They assumed that the new republic's vast expanse and the historic divisions among the 13 fiercely independent states would pose insuperable barriers to national movements based on party or personality. "Petty" demagogues might sway their own states, where they were known and had influence, but not the whole nation with its diverse populations and divergent interests.

Such checks and balances as the Framers put in place, therefore, depended on the separation of the three branches of government, each of which, they believed, would zealously guard its own power and prerogatives. The Framers did not establish safeguards against the possibility that national-party solidarity would transcend state boundaries because they did not imagine such a thing was possible. Nor did they foresee that members of Congress, and perhaps members of the judicial branch, too, would refuse to check the power of a president from their own party.

In recent decades, however, party loyalty has superseded branch loyalty, and never more so than in the Trump era. As the two Trump impeachments showed, if members of Congress are willing to defend or ignore the president's actions simply because he is their party leader, then conviction and removal become all but impossible. In such circumstances, the Framers left no other check against usurpation by the executive — except (small-r) republican virtue.

Critics and supporters alike have consistently failed to recognize what a unique figure Trump is in American history. Because his followers share fundamentally conservative views, many see Trump as merely the continuation, and perhaps the logical culmination, of the Reagan Revolution. This is a mistake: Although most Trump supporters are or have become Republicans, they hold a set of beliefs that were not necessarily shared by all Republicans. Some Trump supporters are former Democrats and independents. In fact, the passions that animate the Trump movement are as old as the republic and have found a home in both parties at one time or another.

Suspicion of and hostility toward the federal government; racial hatred and fear; a concern that modern, secular society undermines religion and traditional morality; economic anxiety in an age of rapid technological change; class tensions, with subtle condescension on one side and resentment on the other; distrust of the broader world, especially Europe, and its insidious influence in subverting American freedom — such views and attitudes have been part of the fabric of U.S. politics since the anti-Federalists, the Whiskey Rebellion and Thomas Jefferson. The Democratic Party was the home of white supremacists until they jumped to George Wallace in 1968 and later to the Republicans. Liberals and Democrats in particular need to distinguish between their ongoing battle with Republican policies and the challenge posed by Trump and his followers. One can be fought through the processes of the constitutional system; the other is an assault on the Constitution itself.

What makes the Trump movement historically unique is not its passions and paranoias. It is the fact that for millions of Americans, Trump himself is the response to their fears and resentments. This is a stronger bond between leader and followers than anything seen before in U.S. political movements. Although the Founders feared the rise of a king or a Caesar, for two centuries Americans proved relatively immune to unwavering hero-worship of politicians. Their men on horseback — Theodore Roosevelt, Grant, even Washington — were not regarded as infallible. This was true of great populist leaders as well. William Jennings Bryan a century ago was venerated because he advanced certain ideas and policies, but he did not enjoy unquestioning loyalty from his followers. Even Reagan was criticized by conservatives for selling out conservative principles, for deficit spending, for his equivocal stance on abortion, for being “soft” on the Soviet Union.

Trump is different, which is one reason the political system has struggled to understand, much less contain, him. The American liberal worldview tends to search for material and economic explanations for everything, and no doubt a good number of Trump supporters have grounds to complain about their lot in life. But their bond with Trump has little to do with economics or other material concerns. They believe the U.S. government and society have been captured by socialists, minority groups and sexual deviants. They see the Republican Party establishment as corrupt and weak — “losers,” to use Trump’s word, unable to challenge the reigning liberal hegemony. They view Trump as strong and defiant, willing to take on the establishment, Democrats, RINOs, liberal media, antifa, the Squad, Big Tech and the “Mitch McConnell Republicans.” His charismatic leadership has given millions of Americans a feeling of purpose and empowerment, a new sense of identity. While Trump’s critics see him as too narcissistic to be any kind of leader, his supporters admire his unapologetic, militant selfishness. Unlike establishment Republicans, Trump speaks without embarrassment on behalf of an aggrieved segment of Americans, not exclusively White, who feel they have been taking it on the chin for too long. And that is all he needs to do.

There was a time when political analysts wondered what would happen when Trump failed to “deliver” for his constituents. But the most important thing Trump delivers is himself. His egomania is part of his appeal. In his professed victimization by the media and the “elites,” his followers see their own victimization. That is why attacks on Trump by the elites only strengthen his bond with his followers. That is why millions of Trump supporters have even been willing to risk death as part of their show of solidarity: When Trump’s enemies cited his mishandling of the pandemic to discredit him, their answer was to reject the pandemic. One Trump supporter didn’t go to the hospital after developing covid-19 symptoms because he didn’t want to contribute to the liberal case against Trump. “I’m not going to add to the numbers,” he told a reporter.

Because the Trump movement is less about policies than about Trump himself, it has undermined the normal role of American political parties, which is to absorb new political and ideological movements into the mainstream. Bryan never became president, but some of his populist policies were adopted by both political parties. Sen. Bernie Sanders's supporters might not have wanted Biden for president, but having lost the nomination battle they could work on getting Biden to pursue their agenda. Liberal democracy requires acceptance of adverse electoral results, a willingness to countenance the temporary rule of those with whom we disagree. As historian Richard Hofstadter observed, it requires that people "endure error in the interest of social peace." Part of that willingness stems from the belief that the democratic system makes it possible to work, even in opposition, to correct the ruling party's errors and overreach. Movements based on ideas and policies can also quickly shift their allegiances. Today, the progressives' flag-bearer might be Sanders, but tomorrow it could be Sen. Elizabeth Warren or Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or someone else.

For a movement built around a cult of personality, these adjustments are not possible. For Trump supporters, the "error" is that Trump was cheated out of reelection by what he has told them is an oppressive, communist, Democrat regime. While the defeat of a sitting president normally leads to a struggle to claim the party's mantle, so far no Republican has been able to challenge Trump's grip on Republican voters: not Sen. Josh Hawley, not Sen. Tom Cotton, not Tucker Carlson, not Gov. Ron DeSantis. It is still all about Trump. The fact that he is not in office means that the United States is "a territory controlled by enemy tribes," writes one conservative intellectual. The government, as one Trump supporter put it, "is monopolized by a Regime that believes [Trump voters] are beneath representation, and will observe no limits to keep them [from] getting it." If so, the intellectual posits, what choice do they have but to view the government as the enemy and to become "united and armed to take care of themselves as they think best"?

The Trump movement might not have begun as an insurrection, but it became one after its leader claimed he had been cheated out of reelection. For Trump supporters, the events of Jan. 6 were not an embarrassing debacle but a patriotic effort to save the nation, by violent action if necessary. As one 56-year-old Michigan woman explained: "We weren't there to steal things. We weren't there to do damage. We were just there to overthrow the government."

The banal normalcy of the great majority of Trump's supporters, including those who went to the Capitol on Jan. 6, has befuddled many observers. Although private militia groups and white supremacists played a part in the attack, 90 percent of those arrested or charged had no ties to such groups. The majority were middle-class and middle-aged; 40 percent were business owners or white-collar workers. They came mostly from purple, not red, counties.

Most Trump supporters are good parents, good neighbors and solid members of their communities. Their bigotry, for the most part, is typical white American bigotry, perhaps with an added measure of resentment and a less filtered mode of expression since Trump arrived on the scene. But these are normal people in the sense that they think and act as people have for centuries. They put their trust in family, tribe, religion and race. Although jealous in defense of their own rights and freedoms, they are less concerned about the rights and freedoms of those who are not like them. That, too, is not unusual. What is unnatural is to value the rights of others who are unlike you as much as you value your own.

As it happens, however, that is what the American experiment in republican democracy requires. It is what the Framers meant by "republican virtue," a love of freedom not only for oneself but also as an abstract, universal good; a love of self-government as an ideal; a commitment to abide by the laws passed by legitimate democratic processes; and a healthy fear of and vigilance against tyranny of any kind. Even James Madison, who framed the Constitution on the assumption that people would always pursue their selfish interests, nevertheless argued that it was "chimerical" to believe that any form of government could "secure liberty and happiness without any virtue in the people." Al Gore and his supporters displayed republican virtue when they abided by the Supreme Court's judgment in 2000 despite the partisan nature of the justices' decision. (Whether the court itself displayed republican virtue is another question.)

The events of Jan. 6, on the other hand, proved that Trump and his most die-hard supporters are prepared to defy constitutional and democratic norms, just as revolutionary movements have in the past. While it might be shocking to learn that normal, decent Americans can support a violent assault on the Capitol, it shows that Americans as a people are not as exceptional as their founding principles and institutions. Europeans who joined fascist movements in the 1920s and 1930s were also from the middle classes. No doubt many of them were good parents and neighbors, too. People do things as part of a mass movement that they would not do as individuals, especially if they are convinced that others are out to destroy their way of life.

It would be foolish to imagine that the violence of Jan. 6 was an aberration that will not be repeated. Because Trump supporters see those events as a patriotic defense of the nation, there is every reason to expect more such episodes. Trump has returned to the explosive rhetoric of that day, insisting that he won in a “landslide,” that the “radical left Democrat communist party” stole the presidency in the “most corrupt, dishonest, and unfair election in the history of our country” and that they have to give it back. He has targeted for defeat those Republicans who voted for his impeachment — or criticized him for his role in the riot. Already, there have been threats to bomb polling sites, kidnap officials and attack state capitols. “You and your family will be killed very slowly,” the wife of Georgia’s top election official was texted earlier this year. Nor can one assume that the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers would again play a subordinate role when the next riot unfolds. Veterans who assaulted the Capitol told police officers that they had fought for their country before and were fighting for it again. Looking ahead to 2022 and 2024, Trump insists “there is no way they win elections without cheating. There’s no way.” So, if the results come in showing another Democratic victory, Trump’s supporters will know what to do. Just as “generations of patriots” gave “their sweat, their blood and even their very lives” to build America, Trump tells them, so today “we have no choice. We have to fight” to restore “our American birthright.”

Where does the Republican Party stand in all this? The party gave birth to and nurtured this movement; it bears full responsibility for establishing the conditions in which Trump could capture the loyalty of 90 percent of Republican voters. Republican leaders were more than happy to ride Trump’s coattails if it meant getting paid off with hundreds of conservative court appointments, including three Supreme Court justices; tax cuts; immigration restrictions; and deep reductions in regulations on business. Yet Trump’s triumph also had elements of a hostile takeover. The movement’s passion was for Trump, not the party. GOP primary voters chose Trump over the various flavors of establishment Republicanism (Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio), and after Trump’s election they continued to regard establishment Republicans as enemies. Longtime party heroes like Paul Ryan were cast into oblivion for disparaging Trump. Even staunch supporters such as Jeff Sessions eventually became villains when they would not do as Trump demanded. Those who survived had a difficult balancing act: to use Trump’s appeal to pass the Republican agenda while also controlling Trump’s excesses, which they worried could ultimately threaten the party’s interests.

That plan seemed plausible in 2017. Unlike other insurgent leaders, Trump had not spent time in the political wilderness building a party and surrounding himself with loyalists. He had to choose from an existing pool of Republican officials, who varied in their willingness to do his bidding. The GOP establishment hoped that the presence of “adults” would restrain him, protecting their traditional agenda and, in their view, the country’s interests, from his worst instincts.

This was a miscalculation. Trump’s grip on his supporters left no room for an alternative power center in the party. One by one, the “adults” resigned or were run off. The dissent and contrary opinions that exist in every party — the Northeast moderate Republicans in Reagan’s day; the progressives in today’s Democratic Party — disappeared from Trump’s Republican Party. The only real issue was Trump himself, and on that there could be no dissent. Those who disapproved of Trump could either keep silent or leave.

The takeover extended beyond the level of political leadership. Modern political parties are an ecosystem of interest groups, lobby organizations, job seekers, campaign donors and intellectuals. All have a stake in the party's viability; all ultimately depend on being roughly aligned with wherever the party is at a given moment; and so all had to make their peace with Trump, too. Conservative publications that once opposed him as unfit for the presidency had to reverse course or lose readership and funding. Pundits had to adjust to the demands of their pro-Trump audiences — and were rewarded handsomely when they did. Donors who had opposed Trump during the primaries fell into line, if only to preserve some influence on the issues that mattered to them. Advocacy organizations that had previously seen their role as holding the Republican Party to certain principles, and thus often dissented from the party leadership, either became advocates for Trump or lost clout.

It was no surprise that elected officials feared taking on the Trump movement and that Republican job seekers either kept silent about their views or made show-trial-like apologies for past criticism. Ambition is a powerful antidote to moral qualms. More revealing was the behavior of Republican elder statesmen, former secretaries of state in their 80s or 90s who had no further ambitions for high office and seemingly nothing to lose by speaking out. Despite their known abhorrence of everything Trump stood for, these old lions refused to criticize him. They were unwilling to come out against a Republican Party to which they had devoted their professional lives, even when the party was led by someone they detested. Whatever they thought about Trump, moreover, Republican elders disliked Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and the Democrats more. Again, this is not so unusual. German conservatives accommodated Adolf Hitler in large part because they opposed the socialists more than they opposed the Nazis, who, after all, shared many of their basic prejudices. As for conservative intellectuals, even those who had spent years arguing that Woodrow Wilson was a tyrant because he created the Federal Reserve and supported child labor laws seemed to have no concerns about whether Trump was a would-be despot. They not only came to Trump's defense but fashioned political doctrines to justify his rule, filling in the wide gaps of his nonexistent ideology with an appeal to "conservative nationalism" and conservative populism. Perhaps American conservatism was never comfortable with the American experiment in liberal democracy, but certainly since Trump took over their party, many conservatives have revealed a hostility to core American beliefs.

All this has left few dissenting voices within the Republican ecosystem. The Republican Party today is a zombie party. Its leaders go through the motions of governing in pursuit of traditional Republican goals, wrestling over infrastructure spending and foreign policy, even as real power in the party has leached away to Trump. From the uneasy and sometimes contentious partnership during Trump's four years in office, the party's main if not sole purpose today is as the willing enabler of Trump's efforts to game the electoral system to ensure his return to power.

With the party firmly under his thumb, Trump is now fighting the Biden administration on separate fronts. One is normal, legitimate political competition, where Republicans criticize Biden's policies, feed and fight the culture wars, and in general behave like a typical hostile opposition.

The other front is outside the bounds of constitutional and democratic competition and into the realm of illegal or extralegal efforts to undermine the electoral process. The two are intimately related, because the Republican Party has used its institutional power in the political sphere to shield Trump and his followers from the consequences of their illegal and extralegal activities in the lead-up to Jan. 6. Thus, Reps. Kevin McCarthy and Elise Stefanik, in their roles as party leaders, run interference for the Trump movement in the sphere of legitimate politics, while Republicans in lesser positions cheer on the Jan. 6 perpetrators, turning them into martyrs and heroes, and encouraging illegal acts in the future.

This pincer assault has several advantages. Republican politicians and would-be policymakers can play the role of the legitimate opposition. They can rediscover their hawkish internationalist foreign policy (suspended during the Trump years) and their deficit-minded economics (also suspended during the Trump years). They can go on the mainstream Sunday shows and critique the Biden administration on issues such as Afghanistan. They can pretend that Trump is no longer part of the equation. Biden is the president, after all, and his administration is not exactly without faults.

Yet whatever the legitimacy of Republican critiques of Biden, there is a fundamental disingenuousness to it all. It is a dodge. Republicans focus on China and critical race theory and avoid any mention of Trump, even as the party works to fix the next election in his favor. The left hand professes to know nothing of what the right hand is doing.

Even Trump opponents play along. Republicans such as Sens. Mitt Romney and Ben Sasse have condemned the events of Jan. 6, criticized Trump and even voted for his impeachment, but in other respects they continue to act as good Republicans and conservatives. On issues such as the filibuster, Romney and others insist on preserving “regular order” and conducting political and legislative business as usual, even though they know that Trump’s lieutenants in their party are working to subvert the next presidential election.

The result is that even these anti-Trump Republicans are enabling the insurrection. Revolutionary movements usually operate outside a society’s power structures. But the Trump movement also enjoys unprecedented influence within those structures. It dominates the coverage on several cable news networks, numerous conservative magazines, hundreds of talk radio stations and all kinds of online platforms. It has access to financing from rich individuals and the Republican National Committee’s donor pool. And, not least, it controls one of the country’s two national parties. All that is reason enough to expect another challenge, for what movement would fail to take advantage of such favorable circumstances to make a play for power?

Today, we are in a time of hope and illusion. The same people who said that Trump wouldn’t try to overturn the last election now say we have nothing to worry about with the next one. Republicans have been playing this game for five years, first pooh-poohing concerns about Trump’s intentions, or about the likelihood of their being realized, and then going silent, or worse, when what they insisted was improbable came to pass. These days, even the anti-Trump media constantly looks for signs that Trump’s influence might be fading and that drastic measures might not be necessary.

The world will look very different in 14 months if, as seems likely, the Republican zombie party wins control of the House. At that point, with the political winds clearly blowing in his favor, Trump is all but certain to announce his candidacy, and social media constraints on his speech are likely to be lifted, since Facebook and Twitter would have a hard time justifying censoring his campaign. With his megaphone back, Trump would once again dominate news coverage, as outlets prove unable to resist covering him around the clock if only for financial reasons.

But this time, Trump would have advantages that he lacked in 2016 and 2020, including more loyal officials in state and local governments; the Republicans in Congress; and the backing of GOP donors, think tanks and journals of opinion. And he will have the Trump movement, including many who are armed and ready to be activated, again. Who is going to stop him then? On its current trajectory, the 2024 Republican Party will make the 2020 Republican Party seem positively defiant.

Those who criticize Biden and the Democrats for not doing enough to prevent this disaster are not being fair. There is not much they can do without Republican cooperation, especially if they lose control of either chamber in 2022. It has become fashionable to write off any possibility that a handful of Republicans might rise up to save the day. This preemptive capitulation has certainly served well those Republicans who might otherwise be held to account for their cowardice. How nice for them that everyone has decided to focus fire on Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin.

Yet it is largely upon these Republicans that the fate of the republic rests.

Seven Republican senators voted to convict Trump for inciting an insurrection and attempting to overturn a free and fair election: Richard Burr, Bill Cassidy, Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, Romney, Sasse and Patrick J. Toomey. It was a brave vote, a display of republican virtue, especially for the five who are not retiring in 2022. All have faced angry backlashes — Romney was booed and called a traitor at the Utah Republican convention; Burr and Cassidy were unanimously censured by their state parties. Yet as much credit as they deserve for taking this stand, it was almost entirely symbolic. When it comes to concrete action that might prevent a debacle in 2024, they have balked.

Specifically, they have refused to work with Democrats to pass legislation limiting state legislatures' ability to overturn the results of future elections, to ensure that the federal government continues to have some say when states try to limit voting rights, to provide federal protection to state and local election workers who face threats, and in general to make clear to the nation that a bipartisan majority in the Senate opposes the subversion of the popular will. Why?

It can't be because they think they have a future in a Trump-dominated party. Even if they manage to get reelected, what kind of government would they be serving in? They can't be under any illusion about what a second Trump term would mean. Trump's disdain for the rule of law is clear. His exoneration from the charges leveled in his impeachment trials — the only official, legal response to his actions — practically ensures that he would wield power even more aggressively. His experience with unreliable subordinates in his first term is likely to guide personnel decisions in a second. Only total loyalists would serve at the head of the Justice Department, FBI, CIA, National Security Agency and the Pentagon. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs will not be someone likely to place his or her own judgment above that of their civilian commander in chief. Nor would a Republican Senate fail to confirm Trump loyalists. In such a world, with Trump and his lieutenants in charge of all the levers of state power, including its growing capacity for surveillance, opposing Trump would become increasingly risky for Republicans and Democrats alike. A Trump victory is likely to mean at least the temporary suspension of American democracy as we have known it.

We are already in a constitutional crisis. The destruction of democracy might not come until November 2024, but critical steps in that direction are happening now. In a little more than a year, it may become impossible to pass legislation to protect the electoral process in 2024. Now it is impossible only because anti-Trump Republicans, and even some Democrats, refuse to tinker with the filibuster. It is impossible because, despite all that has happened, some people still wish to be good Republicans even as they oppose Trump. These decisions will not wear well as the nation tumbles into full-blown crisis.

It is not impossible for politicians to make such a leap. The Republican Party itself was formed in the 1850s by politicians who abandoned their previous party — former Whigs, former Democrats and former members of the Liberty and Free Soil parties. While Whig and Democratic party stalwarts such as Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas juggled and compromised, doing their best to ensure that the issue of slavery did not destroy their great parties, others decided that the parties had become an obstacle to justice and a threat to the nation's continued viability.

Romney & Co. don't have to abandon their party. They can fashion themselves as Constitutional Republicans who, in the present emergency, are willing to form a national unity coalition in the Senate for the sole purpose of saving the republic. Their cooperation with Democrats could be strictly limited to matters relating to the Constitution and elections. Or they might strive for a temporary governing consensus on a host of critical issues: government spending, defense, immigration and even the persistent covid-19 pandemic, effectively setting aside the usual battles to focus on the more vital and immediate need to preserve the United States.

It takes two, of course, to form a national unity coalition, and Democrats can make it harder or easier for anti-Trump Republicans to join. Some profess to see no distinction between the threat posed by Trump and the threat posed by the GOP. They prefer to use Trump as a weapon in the ongoing political battle, and not only as a way of discrediting and defeating today's Republican Party but to paint all GOP policies for the past 30 years as nothing more than precursors to Trumpism. Although today's Trump-controlled Republican Party does need to be fought and defeated, this kind of opportunistic partisanship and conspiracy-mongering, in addition to being bad history, is no cure for what ails the nation.

Senate Democrats were wise to cut down their once-massive voting rights wish list and get behind the smaller compromise measure unveiled last week by Manchin and Sen. Amy Klobuchar. But they have yet to attract any votes from their Republican colleagues for the measure. Heading into the next election, it is vital to protect election workers, same-day registration and early voting. It will also still be necessary to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which directly addresses the state legislatures' electoral power grab. Other battles — such as making Election Day a federal holiday and banning partisan gerrymandering — might better be postponed. Efforts to prevent a debacle in 2024 cannot. Democrats need to give anti-Trump Republicans a chance to do the right thing.

One wonders whether modern American politicians, in either party, have it in them to make such bold moves, whether they have the insight to see where events are going and the courage to do whatever is necessary to save the democratic system. If that means political suicide for this handful of Republicans, wouldn't it be better to go out fighting for democracy than to slink off quietly into the night?

Updated June 3, 2021

The Opinions Essay

Read more in our Opinions long-form series

Sign up for the Opinions Essay newsletter to get the next essay in your inbox when it's published.

Robert Kagan: Our constitutional crisis is already here

George F. Will: The pursuit of happiness is happiness

Robert Kagan: It wasn't hubris that drove America into Afghanistan. It was fear.

Megan McArdle: America forgot how to make proper pie. Can we remember before it's too late?

Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh: In Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's clerics have groomed and promoted their ruthless enforcer

Michele L. Norris: Germany faced its horrible past. Can we do the same?

Karen Tumulty: How Nancy Reagan helped end the Cold War

Josh Rogin: How covid hastened the decline and fall of the U.S.-China relationship

Mike Abramowitz and Nate Schenkkan: The reach of authoritarian repression is growing. Now, not even exile is safe.

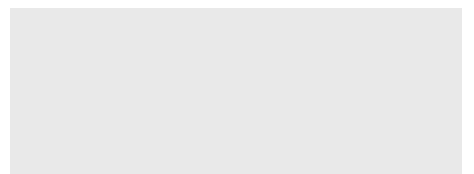
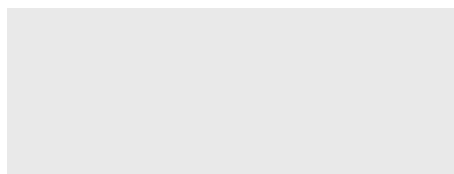
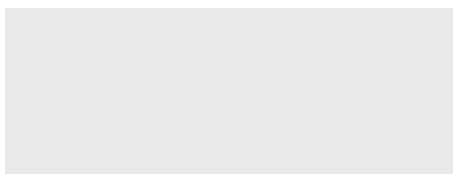
George T. Conway III: Trump's new reality: Ex-president, private citizen and, perhaps, criminal defendant

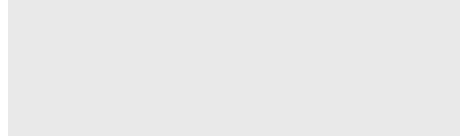
Fareed Zakaria: The pandemic upended the present. But it's given us a chance to remake the future.

Read other Opinions Essays and see other Opinions special features.

MORE FROM OPINIONS

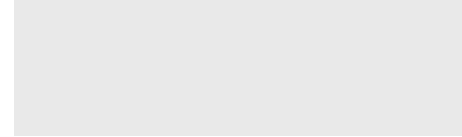
 **HAND CURATED**





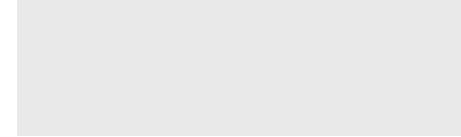
Melvin Van Peebles wrote the do-it-yourself playbook for Black filmmakers

September 24, 2021



Sally Rooney's surprising read of the shifting millennial zeitgeist

September 23, 2021



Our constitutional crisis is already here

September 23, 2021

View 3 more stories 