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Trump and a Republic That We Could not Keep



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Donald Trump refuses to concede and claims the 2020 election was rife with fraud. American democracy is in peril. Then the GSA will fund the Biden presidential transition. His lawsuits are coming to an end. The electoral college will soon cast its ballots. And Donald Trump will no longer be president of the US. The crisis of the American republic has been averted. So goes the script of commentators on American politics. If only it were that simple. The problems with American democracy are deeper than simply a president refusing to concede an election and claim fraud, yet they will again be glossed over with a return to normalcy with the Biden Administration.

Since election day pundits and many academics have bemoaned Trump's disparaging of the integrity of the elections. They note how his false accusations of election fraud will do

lasting damage to American democracy, instilling in many who voted for him a distrust of our democracy. Political science research tells us that democracies are held together both by institutions and cultural values, with both requiring a degree of buy-in from political elites and the public. Yet there has been a hysterical and misplaced emphasis on Trump's comments when it comes to the stability of American democracy.

Nearly 50 years ago a nation divided by Vietnam and Watergate wondered how it would survive. It did. The irony was that the "system" worked. The US exited the war, Nixon was forced out, many of his co-conspirators convicted of crimes, and America healed with reforms.

The same will happen again. Trump will be gone soon and America will move beyond him. Except Trump is not the problem. He was always the personification of many underlying problems with American democracy that produced him and his Trumpistas that will endure unless serious change occurs.

Part of what produced Trump is the underlying economic inequality in America that is at its greatest level since the 1920s. Social mobility has ground to a near halt. People are segregated into concentrated poverty. Many who once could make a good living working in a factory without a college degree are losers in the economy and they are anxious about their future. Trump provided an answer in blaming it on globalization and appeals to xenophobia.

Trump also appealed to racial anxiety at a time when the US is rapidly moving to become a nation that is majority-minority—White Caucasians who are Christian soon will be a minority for the first time in our history. For some this change in the American identity is scary, and Trump used the race card to attack immigrants and Black Lives Matter.

But as we saw with the death of George Floyd, racism is a fundamental problem of our society. America was born of race and slavery, the Constitution is a compromise over it, and the problem of race is not just a problem of the twentieth century as W.E.B. DeBois proclaimed in 1900, but it is woven into the fabric of the US affecting where we live, the health care and education we receive, and how we interact with the government and law authorities.

Politically, we have a constitutional infrastructure designed in a horse and buggy pre-industrial era. The problems of the Covid pandemic are only partially a doing of a president in denial about its reality, but it is rooted in a federalism that devolves much power to states that makes concerted national action impossible. Federalism less now represents the laboratories of democracy that Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once praised, but instead impedes solving some of the most basic crises and problems in our society. States, no matter how well meaning, cannot address global problems, or confront the power of the Googles and Amazons of the world that wield immense corporate power and control over our

lives. There is also the unprecedented impact of the social media undermining a faith in science and facts.

Our electoral system was broken before Trump. We have all but given up on regulating the distorting impact of money in politics. Voting rights for many are suppressed. Partisan gerrymandering is a problem. The two major political parties have polarized America against itself to create what Abraham Lincoln feared—a house divided.

There are many other challenges facing America. They predated Trump. They all made Trumpism possible. His demeaning of the integrity of the elections is bad, but it pales in comparison to the other problems the United States is confronting. America will recover from Trump himself, but not from the forces that have placed Americans into a position where they are receptive to the disparagement of our elections. Trump spoke to the anxiety many felt, or failed to speak to those who feel that American democracy has not worked for them.

American myth has it that when asked of Benjamin Franklin as he exited the constitutional convention of 1787 what type of government we had. He replied “A republic, if you can keep it.” Trump’s presidency did little to further the republic, his departure may help, but it is not clear that we had the republic we thought we had even before he became president.

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