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Trump's Carnage: Testing America's "Democracy"



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Benjamin Franklin, the most democratic of the Founding Fathers, was walking out of Independence Hall after the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when a woman shouted, "Doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?" Franklin replied, "A republic if you can keep it."

Alexander Hamilton, one of the least democratic members among the Founding Fathers, nevertheless made the case in the "Federalist Papers" for establishing restraints in the government in order to deal with the possibility of a corrupt president and the abuse of power. He favored a "complicated system for choosing a president; a Congress to restrain him; and impeachment to remove him."

Donald Trump is the poster child for the corrupt president that Hamilton feared. For the past four years, Trump has been at war with the tenets of our democracy—particularly the rule of law, and our elections. His war against the Department of Justice and the justice system itself, as well as his abuse of the pardon power, have undermined the foundations of our rule of law. His war against the intelligence community has politicized intelligence and

compromised our national security. His war against the military culminated last month with an unprecedented purge of senior leaders of the Department of Defense. Worst of all, his war against science and reason has contributed to unnecessary deaths; the United States is the global leader in cases and deaths attributed to the pandemic. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to Trump in 2015, when he used a campaign appearance in Iowa to proclaim, “I’ve had a lot of wars of my own. I’m really good at war. I love war....”

Since last month’s election, Trump has been taking advantage of the “complicated system” that the Founding Fathers created. He has been waging a war against President-elect Joe Biden, the election itself, and the presidential succession. Unfortunately, the Founding Fathers created pressure points in the Constitution for the election of a president, and Trump has taken advantage of all of them. Trump has tried to stymie the transition; several days ago, the acting Secretary of Defense announced that the department would stop providing briefings to the president-elect’s team. This announcement took place as we learned that the Russians successfully hacked into many of our major agencies, including the Department of Energy’s nuclear divisions, over nine months ago. This points to a serious and potentially disastrous national security problem. True to form and true to his baffling defense of Russia and Vladimir Putin, Trump falsely asserted China may have conducted the attack.

Trump and his minions have filed more than fifty groundless lawsuits to block Biden’s victory; tried to disenfranchise voters in key battleground states; and maneuvered unsuccessfully to have state legislatures appoint their own electors who would be beholden to the current president. Sadly and frighteningly, the Republican Party and the Republican leaders in the Congress have participated in Trump’s efforts to reject certification of the election results. Trump’s goal has been to delay certification, to ensure state officials miss deadlines, and to appoint pro-Trump slates to the Electoral College. There is little solace in the fact that these techniques have failed miserably.

Trump still has one more bite out of the apple on January 6, 2021 when Congress will meet to finalize last week’s vote of the Electoral College. According to the Constitution’s Article II, Section I, “The president of the Senate [Vice President Mike Pence] shall open all the certificates, and the votes shall then be counted. Following the controversial election of 1876, the Electoral Count Act of 1877 stipulated that any member of the House or Senate could submit objections to the vote of an individual state; this would force lawmakers to debate the legitimacy of the electoral votes of the state in question. Trump’s allies already have recruited a member of the House to challenge several states.

Never before have we had a president so willing to block the transition, keep information from the incoming administration, and delegitimize the results of an election. Trump’s senior adviser, Steven Miller, is currently organizing a floor challenge to Biden’s victory on January 6. Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) has volunteered to carry out the assignment despite the absence of any improprieties. Any democracy is based on trust, and Trump and the Republican

leadership is doing its best to undermine trust and to create a level of cynicism that does not augur well for Biden's presidency.

The United States has had weak and ill-equipped presidents in its history, but Trump stands alone as the most ignorant, most cynical, most dishonest, and most unstable. He will occupy a special standing in the pantheon of U.S. presidents because of his misogyny, crassness, and self-absorption. No previous president has broken the emoluments clauses of the Constitution, and personally profited from official business. His hotels and resorts have drawn politicians and businessmen who hope to insinuate themselves with the Trump administration. The Secret Service and other government departments have paid several million dollars for rooms and services at Trump's properties. The Founding Fathers wanted presidents to live off their federal income.

For the first time, we have a president who refuses to release his income tax returns, and surrounds himself with grifters who have been indicted. Some of the grifters have already received pardons such as General Michael Flynn or commutations such as Roger Stone. Ethics issues forced the resignation of several cabinet members, including the Secretary of Health and Human Services; the Secretary of the Interior; and the director of the Environmental Protection Agency. Trump has been shamed at home and scorned abroad.

Trump's inauguration speech in January 2017 was bizarre, particularly the reference to "American Carnage," which was designed to be descriptive, but turned out to be predictive. Trump has been America's most shameless president, politicizing the military and intelligence communities; corrupting the legal and judicial communities; and weaponizing various departments and agencies to do his bidding. The institutions of American governance have received their sternest tests since the Civil War. Fortunately Republican judges and state officials have blocked many of Trump's machinations, but America's democracy has been sorely bent. Clearly, Trump and his sycophants are willing to break our democracy in the wake of their defeat.

Next week, in Part II, I will address the reforms that are needed to prevent a future corrupt president, one not as indolent and undisciplined as the current one, from being more successful than Donald Trump.

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