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BY JOHN FEFFER

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## America and the Mob

The United States began as a glint in the eyes of an English mob of oddballs, dissenters, and criminals let loose on what they considered virgin territory. Once secure in their new digs, they administered rough justice to the original Americans and any colonist who fell afoul of community rules. Eventually, casting aside their imperial British overlords, the rabble achieved a measure of respectability by creating an independent state.

Even as the United States fashioned an army, a constabulary, and an evolving rule of law, the mob continued to define what it meant to be an American. It policed the slave economy. It helped push the borders westward. It formed the shock troops that rolled back Reconstruction. A twentieth-century version of this mob rampaged during the long Red Summer violence that stretched from 1917 to 1923. It mobilized against the civil rights movement. And during the Trump era, it has reared its ugly head in Charlottesville, Portland, and last week on Capitol Hill.

America is motherhood, apple pie...and the mob.

Last week, many a politician decried the mob violence at the U.S. Capitol as “un-American.” Consider, for instance, the words of Kevin McCarthy, House Minority Leader:

This is so un-American. I condemn any of this violence. I could not be sadder or more disappointed with the way our country looks right now. People are getting hurt. Anyone involved in this, if you’re hearing me, hear me loud and clear: This is not the American way.

McCarthy was not on the same podium with Donald Trump earlier in the day urging on the mob. But he and the president were on the same page between November 3 and January 6. Two days after the election, the California Republican announced that Trump had won. Later, he supported the outlandish Texas lawsuit to overturn the election results, refused to acknowledge Biden’s win well into 2021, and stood up in the House last week even after the mob retreated to challenge the Electoral College results.

After January 6, McCarthy has tried to put some distance between himself and the rabble. He has been willing to consider an official censure of the president and has also indicated that he won't try to enforce party unity against an impeachment vote. No doubt McCarthy has shifted his stance because he feared for his own life when the insurrectionists stormed the barricades and invaded his sanctum. Trump, enjoying the images on TV, [refused](#) McCarthy's plea to issue a statement calling off his attack dogs. It's enough to make even the most loyal lapdog bark a different tune.

None of this detracts from the fact that McCarthy, since the election, was the elected representative not of his California district but of the mob. He was their cheerleader, their mouthpiece on the Hill, one of the many suits over the ages who have translated the "will of the people" into official-sounding acts and bills that attempt to preserve the privileges of white people at the expense of everyone else. For that is the beating heart of Trumpism: the Confederate flag, the noose, the closed polling booth, the knee on the neck of non-white America.

The word "mob" makes it sound as though the violence was perpetrated by a group of mindless rowdies. But there has always been a method to the madness of this particular crowd. Let's take a closer look at what the latest incarnation of the American mob wants, how it connects to like-minded groups overseas, and what to expect over the next weeks, months, and years.

### **Against the Globalists**

At first glance, the people who descended upon Washington to disrupt Congress on January 6 are almost obsessively focused on domestic issues. They're not so much America First as Trump First. They have turned against anyone in the Republican Party who has abandoned the soon-to-be-ex-president, and that includes the vice president. They are nationalist and parochial. They are also anti-globalist.

But that doesn't mean that they aren't global in their strategizing, their connections, and their aspirations.

One of the core components of the Stop the Steal coalition is QAnon, an amorphous global network that believes that another amorphous global network—of Satanic child molesters—somehow controls the levers of international power. What started out as a conspiracy theory centered on Donald Trump as a St. George figure battling a devilish dragon went global in 2020, attracting adherents [in 71 countries by August](#). One German QAnon group counts 120,000 members in its Telegram account.

Another key member of the coalition is a bloc of white nationalists and militia members that encompasses accelerationists like the Boogaloo Bois, who want to spur a race war to bring down the liberal status quo, and organizations that emphasize male supremacy like the Proud Boys. These groups have [forged global links](#) over the last decade in Canada, Europe, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and others.

Prior to COVID-19's outbreak, these chauvinists united around a "Great Replacement" narrative according to which immigrants and people of color are determined to "replace" white people through migration, higher birthrates, or sheer pushiness. When the border closures around the pandemic reduced the salience of the immigration issue, the Great Replacement became a less useful organizing tool. It was into this vacuum that QAnon became the conspiracy theory *de jour*. Meanwhile, the far right shifted its discourse on "globalists" to challenge their approach to COVID-19, their deference to the Chinese, and their proposed "reset" of the global economy: anything to deflect attention from the obvious failures of the nationalist populists who headed up the countries with the highest number of infections and deaths: the United States, Brazil, India, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Although they often disagree about particulars, this array of groups is united by an animus against government. They supported Trump not as the head of government but as someone *opposed* to government. And they adored him because he didn't just hate the U.S. government—and the elites that staff it—but global governance as well. The "deep state" was always a canard. The far right despised the liberal state, full stop. Trump attracted an even wider following by squaring off against the expert class: the uppity journalists and fact-bound scientists and Hollywood liberals and hand-wringing academics. Burn it all down, Trump's followers demanded.

Trump in government, however, represented a certain check on the most ambitious impulses of the far right. True, during his reign, extremists have come out into the streets to protest economic shutdowns, masking ordinances, and #BlackLivesMatter mobilizations. Some extremists planned more violent interventions, like kidnapping the governor of Michigan. But with the administration on its side, with the Senate in Republican hands, with Republicans controlling the vast majority of state legislatures, the far right focused its wrath selectively. It played the ultimate inside-outside game.

After the November election, with Trump on his way out of power, the far right no longer has to place any caveats on its anti-government impulses. First has come an attack on Congress, not coincidentally on the very day that the Republicans lost their Senate majority. Next, the far right is planning an armed march on Washington and all 50 state capitols on January 17. To cap it off, a Million Militia March is planned for Inauguration Day. What happened on January 6 was, despite some prior planning, a disorganized coup effort. What comes next may well be more precisely planned, which may result in a focus on the weakest links rather than the most potent symbols, just as the Oregon extremists chose the easily occupied Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in January 2016 rather than the heavily guarded state capitol building.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol, meanwhile, has proven to be a great winnower. The fainthearted, like Kevin McCarthy, have proven to be chaff, as has a number of previously ardent Trump supporters. According to [polling conducted after the attack](#), "a quarter of

Trump voters agree that actions should be taken to immediately remove him from office. Further, 41% of Trump voters believe he has ‘betrayed the values and interests of the Republican Party.’” This is an extraordinarily rapid fissure in what had hitherto been an impregnable base of support for Trump.

What remains is a revolutionary core. They won’t muster enough force to make a difference over the next two weeks, not against the [15,000 National Guard](#) likely to be deployed to Washington, DC for the inauguration. After the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, the far right couldn’t handle the avalanche of criticism and could barely muster a couple dozen extremists for a rally one year later in Washington, DC. But it has since altered its messaging and its strategy. Expect even more adaptation over the next months and years.

### **What Comes Next**

The idea that the Civil War was a “war of Northern aggression” has survived 150 years of civic, political, and media education to the contrary. A large section of white southerners, and even a few folks outside the region, cling to their “lost cause” much as Serbian nationalists mourn their defeat on the plain of Kosovo in 1389, Hungarians rail against the loss of territory after the Trianon Treaty of 1920, and the Japanese and German far right has bridled at the “outside interference” that robbed their nations of a measure of sovereignty after World War II.

Prepare for the “stolen election” narrative to serve a similar function for the ForeverTrumpers. This narrative of an unfair political system ties together many of the far right’s themes: liberal institutions are fundamentally broken and corrupted, the mainstream media is compliant in tilting the playing field, and the globalists will do anything to regain power from “the people.” Note, too, how these messages can appeal to a left also angry at the status quo, and you can understand why so many people who voted for Bernie Sanders switched to Trump and why European far right parties have harvested votes from previous bastions of the Communist Party.

Such appeals to fairness – a stolen election is above all unfair – conceal the racist, sexist, and otherwise exclusionary content of the far right’s agenda. An explicitly fascist platform has considerably less broad-based appeal than a cry to right a wrong. Over the next four years, the far right will beat this drum of political illegitimacy. It will claim that nothing the Biden administration does will be legal or constitutional because of its original sin of ascension via a stolen election.

The fallout from January 6 will continue to divide the Republican Party. But the opportunity to brand the Democrats as illegitimate will prove just too addictive to be ignored. Consider the attacks on Obamacare or the successful effort to block Merrick Garland’s nomination to the Supreme Court. Even in the face of overwhelming counterevidence, the Republicans hammered on the illegitimacy of the Democratic initiatives. A “stolen election” caucus,

composed of the congressional members who survive a corporate and fundraiser boycott, will attempt to pull the Republican Party further to the right, just as the Tea Party did during the Obama era.

The international ramifications of this strategy are equally worrisome. The far right attacks governments not only because they are liberal in the sense of providing government “handouts” but because they follow liberal principles of governance (checks and balances, free press, rights to gather and express dissent). Trump’s attacks on January 6 were not just seditious. They were designed to transform his position and that of his party into something resembling United Russia and Putin’s leadership for life. Trump has always wanted to build a Moscow or a Budapest or an Ankara or a Managua on the Potomac: iron-fisted leadership, no serious political opposition, a cowering press, a cult of personality. He thought he saw his opportunity on January 6.

This is also the ultimate goal of the mob. It doesn’t want anarchy, except as an interim strategy. It wants a strong hand on the tiller, as if Trump were the Great Helmsman guiding the country in a Great Leap Forward (or Backward, given that a mob’s sense of direction is never very precise).

Trump’s hands, however, are being wrenched from the tiller. Even better he is being abandoned by leading members of his party, his social media enablers, his financial backers, and his corporate sponsors. His ambition having overleapt itself, Trump has stumbled, irrevocably. The mob is taking note, even as it falls back to protect its wounded leader.

For the next four years, prepare for the mob and its political representatives to rely on street power to identify, campaign for, and put into office their next Great White Hope.

What’s more quintessentially American than that?

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*John Feffer is the director of [Foreign Policy In Focus](#), where this article originally appeared.*