

Lessons of the 2020 American Election, January 6th, and Beyond

Bob Altemeyer - October 20, 2021

'Twer a Near Thing

You know how a pitch in the dirt in a baseball game can bounce up and hit the catcher in a certain place that makes all the men watching the game bend over and groan? Well, that summed up my state of mind on November 3, 2020 as I collapsed into bed for my worst night's sleep in four years. Just as happened in 2016, I had been certain Donald Trump would lose the presidential election. Yet here he was again looking every inch like an unstoppable force of nature, showing everyone that HE lived in the real world and his opponents were the ones deluding themselves with alternate realities. Despite all the investigations, all the research findings, and all the awful things Trump had done, everything was again turning out wrong. If a sudden tragedy in your life—like losing a loved one, or your job, or your good name—has ever crushed you the way Trump's apparent re-election left me in pain and bewildered that night, you know how I writhed into and out of the fetal position in my bed like a baseball player who had just caught one in the stones.

My hubris had led me astray but so did the polls, which again got it significantly wrong. Nate Silver's average of the national polls on election day saw Joe Biden ahead by over 8%, which shouted LANDSLIDE and Blue Wave and control of both the Senate and the House, and flipping state legislatures from Maine to Texas. But the land did not slide very much. Biden won the popular vote by about 4%. Hillary had won it by about 2%.^[1]

Thankfully, when all the votes were counted the Democrats won a decisive victory in the Electoral College, as 2016's razor-thin losses became 2020's razor-thin victories. But did you hear the bullet flying at American democracy that "just missed" in November, 2020? Most people still don't appreciate how close we came to losing it all, I suspect. But as Trump's final acts in office become known, it is clear that he really did try to overthrow the government of the United States. He was, predictably, ineffective, but he did try. And even more to the point I make *ad nauseum*, I fear, most of his supporters wanted it, and still do.

Trump Got Over 11 Million More Votes in 2020 Than He Did in 2016!

I expected Donald Trump to get, at best, the same number of votes in 2020 that he had gotten in 2016: 63 odd million. But probably fewer. Some Democrats and many Independents, it was argued, held their noses and voted for him rather than Hilary Clinton in 2016. They would return to voting Democratic for a more popular candidate, it was thought. Furthermore, the polls showed Trump became an unpopular president almost immediately after he took office, and his net likeability scores remained in the red thereafter. Every week, sometimes every day, sometimes two or three times in a day, he gave fresh reasons to want him gone. I knew his base would not see it this way: He was constantly playing to his supporters, and they knew it. Various religious leaders began chiming in that he was God's holy agent, and the base demonstrated a

Drink-the-Kool-Aid level of loyalty as they defiantly marched unmasked into the COVID valley of death. But I did not think his following was getting any bigger.

But he got over 74 million votes! How? A county-by-county analysis of the returns by the *New York Times*[2] found that Trump made notable gains in Hispanic communities in Dade County, Florida and elsewhere in the nation. But mostly he increased his totals in counties that had voted for him in 2016, especially in the rural Midwest and the rust belt in industrial states. The energetic four-year registration campaign Trump launched the day he moved into the White House paid off big time. The Republicans skillfully recruited more white evangelical Christians who had not voted for Trump, or at all, in 2016, who were living in out-loud, sign-waving pro-Trump communities. By one very reputable poll, Trump increased his support from 77% to 84% among the evangelicals, a large and energetic voting block.[3] But the Democrats were signing up new supporters too and lighting fires within old ones in their constituencies, notably Black women and young voters. And they won the pivotal battle for the suburban voter. In the end Joe Biden was chosen on over 81 million ballots, a decisive victory in the popular vote matched by the outcome in the Electoral College.

Trump's Reaction to Losing the Election

John Dean and I wrote in *Authoritarian Nightmare* that Donald Trump probably would not leave office peacefully if he were defeated in 2020. You did not have to be the least bit insightful to say, as we did, that “if Trump loses in November he will probably claim it was a ‘rigged’ election, and he will try to get it overturned... Trump would claim there was colossal fraud, and the election should not count. ‘It was a hoax,’ he claims for the umpteenth time. ‘It has to be fair!’ he says, and his base takes to the street shouting support for Trump. No one would be surprised if Trump loses and refuses to leave” (pp. 276-277).[4]

Even though Trump’s senior pollster warned him that he would have to “draw an inside straight flush” to win, he believed he could not possibly lose to someone like “Sleepy Joe” Biden, and spent the last week of the campaign holding rallies in all the swing states. The huge crowds could barely control their devotion to the man they ranked as the best president the United States had ever had, who totally deserved a second term. Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker of the *Washington Post* wrote in *I Alone Can Fix It*—a clever title given that “fix” has several meanings—Trump’s supporters raised his spirits so much he became convinced he would win. The “followers” really did lift and carry their leader forward.

Trump’s campaign had also warned him that the GOP emphasis on voting in person on November 3rd would create an early but evaporating impression that he had won. However, Trump quickly asserted that he had triumphed. The Democrats were gaining on him because they were cheating, he told White House guests at 2 AM on November 4th. He became desperately fixated on that conclusion. The next day he tweeted that the vote count had to be stopped, and thereafter he passed on wild and crazy (and ultimately disproven) stories of how the Democrats had stuffed the ballot boxes and rigged the voting machines.

Trump was absolutely unaffected by the explanations that splattered his accusations like insects on a windshield. It was as if he never heard them. He was still insisting on January 6th that more votes had been cast in Pennsylvania than there were voters—even though it had been quickly established that he was confusing the presidential election results with primary totals. He immersed himself in conspiracy theories and, to his staff's dismay, invited the craziest of the crazies to the Oval Office to help him fight off the anguished truth that he had been beaten. Bob Woodward and Robert Costa present accounts in their book, *Peril*, of how Trump's close allies, Attorney General William Barr and Senator Lindsey Graham told him the election had been fair. But Trump simply would not listen to them.

Was (Is) this all an act? It could be. His mentor, Roy Cohn, told him decades earlier, "If you lose, say you won," and Trump did precisely that after all his enormous business failures. But I think Donald Trump not only howls to shore up his supporters' belief that he won the election, he really believes it. He long ago found he could only be magnificent in a fact-free world. He cannot afford to acknowledge he lost the election because all his life (he has to believe) he has always won. He has spent considerable time over the decades creating myths about his accomplishments to make himself as grand as he wished he was. As concluded in *Authoritarian Nightmare*, Trump now believes his myths. He is a master of Big Lies, and his ultimate triumph as a Big Liar is he has played the Big Con on himself. His response to Barr, Graham, and any other advisor who confronted his fantasies with facts was to brand them "traitors." He told Barr, "You must hate Trump, you must really hate Trump," and he became furious when Barr referred to a "Biden administration." "If a human being can have flames come out of his ears, this was it," Barr reported afterwards (Woodward and Costa, p. 170, 172). Trump had gone off the deep end and was beyond reason.[5]

Trump's Desperate Efforts to Overturn the Election

Losing in Court. After the networks and major newspapers declared Biden the winner, Trump tried to get federal attorneys in various states to contest the results in court. Barr launched investigations but found no evidence of widespread fraud, and so refused to send his attorneys into court on suicide missions. So Trump turned to the lawyers under contract to the Republican campaign, whereupon prestigious law firms passed on big bucks and resigned rather than make fools of themselves. But Rudy Giuliani constantly belted out the Top 40 conspiracy theories, and Trump put him in charge of finding some court, any court, that would delay the electoral process. Trump's desperate choice proved desperate indeed, as Giuliani put the final touches on the destruction of his credibility by disgracing himself in one judicial proceeding after another. By the end some 80 federal and state judges had observed that all he had produced in court were Trump's howls, and yammering is not evidence. There simply was no evidence that Biden won by cheating. Someone *has* tried to perpetrate a massive fraud in the 2020 election, but it is Donald Trump.

Working the Court of Public Opinion. Trump continued to roar that his victory had been stolen, and as his court losses mounted he asserted more and more that "everybody knows we won." He chanted out a Rosary of Accusations based on conspiracy theories about hidden ballot boxes, mysterious trucks, and broken water pipes, apparently thinking that saying something

repeatedly makes it true. He had been screwed over, he insisted, he was the biggest victim in history—a preposterous claim that nevertheless likely bonded his followers yet more tightly to him, since many of them feel life is screwing them too. Trump’s ceaseless repetition of his lament, with right-wing media joining in and his followers echoing his accusations among themselves, has led to the firmest belief, truth-resistant to the deepest depths, that “Everybody who knows the facts knows Trump won.”

Sliding sycophants into place. Soon after the election was decided Trump began inserting proven loyalists into key positions in government. He fired the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, on November 9th, naming Chris Miller acting secretary. A few days later he fired Chris Krebs, head of Homeland Security’s cyber section that had unforgivably stated the election had been the most secure in American history. Trump suggested Kash Patel, Miller’s chief of staff, would make a fine deputy chief of the FBI, whose head, Chris Wray, he was trying to fire. But Barr said no. So then Gina Haspel, the head of the CIA, was instructed to fire her deputy and put Patel in the position. She said she would resign first, and the White House backed down. Trump made nine attempts to have the Department of Justice declare the election invalid by forcing resignations and replacing career civil servants with True Believers who would nullify various states’ results. He also contacted Republican officials in states he narrowly lost begging them to “find” enough votes for him to win.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, expected to be fired soon after he gave a Veterans Day speech in which he said, “We do not take an oath to a king, or a queen, to a tyrant or a dictator...We take an oath to the Constitution...Each of us will protect and defend that document, regardless of personal price.” By the second week in November he, Wray, Haspel, Barr, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo communicated regularly and anxiously about what the president was doing. Most of them had decided Trump was mentally unstable, was preparing a coup to stay in power, and wanted his agents in control of all the guns, as Milley put it. “Milley saw Trump as the classic authoritarian leader...he (Milley) kept having this stomach-churning feeling that some of the worrisome early stages of twentieth-century fascism in Germany were replaying in twenty-first century America. He saw parallels between Trump’s rhetoric of election fraud and Adolf Hitler’s insistence to his followers at the Nuremberg rallies that he was both a victim and their savior. ‘This is a Reichstag moment,’ Milley told aides” (Leonnig and Rucker, p. 437). “The moment” would most likely come on January 6th, Milley figured, the day Congress was scheduled to certify Biden’s victory in the Electoral College.

January 6th and the campaign against Mike Pence. Trump had called for his supporters to assemble in Washington that day to “stop the steal.” At the same time he put enormous pressure, publicly and privately, on Vice-President Mike Pence to keep Congress from certifying the Electoral College votes. The Vice-President’s role in that process is succinctly given in the Twelfth Amendment, passed in 1803 and followed ever since:

The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted.

There is no provision for the V-P, who is the President of the Senate, to judge the electoral votes in any way. He just has to open the certificates provided by each state and tote up the numbers. But a professor at Chapman Law School, John Eastman, told Trump there were several ways Pence could lawfully intervene in the process.[6] Specifically, seven states were supposedly asking for a second chance to re-certify their electoral votes, and Pence could allegedly use this to make Trump president for four more years.

Utah's conservative Senator Mike Lee contacted officials in the seven named states to see how earnestly they were seeking to change their votes. None of them was trying at all, and even Republican officials said they never would (Woodward and Costa, p. 227). The whole thing was a tissue of lies, but Trump bombarded Pence with demands that he have the "courage" to intervene. When Pence said he simply could not because of the Constitution, Trump told him (as though they were in a school yard) "I don't want to be your friend anymore if you don't do this" (Ibid.) He then issued a statement late on January 5th falsely saying that Pence was in total agreement that he (Pence) had the power to do what the President wanted. Trump was trying to box in his vice-president, viciously spreading a deliberate lie to bring intense pressure on a man who had been so steadfastly loyal to him.

Trump piled yet another heap of coercion on Pence when he addressed a large crowd of supporters on the Ellipse at noon on the sixth, making sure his supporters knew who was standing in their way. He urged them to march to the Capitol building to protest. "I'll be there with you," he said. Their mission was to demand that Congress only count the electors who had been "lawfully slated." He said he knew everyone would peacefully and patriotically make their voices heard.

Various right-wing extremists, notably the Proud Boys, were already at the Capitol and they began fighting the Capitol Police detachment trying to protect the halls of Congress (Leonnig and Rucker, p. 461). They broke into the buildings and ran amok. Many of them tried to find Pence, whose fate would have run from being kidnapped to being hanged if the rioters had their way. All the while the crowd that had moved from the Ellipse cheered the attackers on as they fulfilled Trump's promise that "It's going to be wild."

President Trump did not march with the protestors, but instead returned to the White House as soon as he had sent the crowd on its way. He sat for hours watching televised accounts of the unfolding events. Most incriminating, he did next to nothing to stop the attack on the Capitol. Instead, he blamed the riot on the man that a mob was tearing the Capitol apart trying to find, tweeting out to his followers, "Mike Pence did not have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution" (Leonnig and Rucker, p. 466). When the Republican House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, reached Trump by phone and said Trump had to forcefully call off the attack, Trump told him the rioters were left-wing extremists, Antifa (Ibid., p. 475). His daughter Ivanka, his Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows, and other officials in the White House repeatedly begged Trump to tell the rioters to leave the building, but all he did was send out two tweets telling them to be peaceful because the police were their friends.

Finally at 4:17, by which time the police had gotten the upper hand, Trump tweeted a video telling the rioters to go home. His staff did three “takes” and released the least self-damaging version they could get from him. Even so, it was full of self-aggravation and justification for the insurrection. Far from condemning the mob that had invaded the halls of Congress and tried to stop the nation’s lawmakers from fulfilling their Constitutional duty, Trump said, “We love you. You’re very special.” (So much for the Antifa cover story.)

Did Donald Trump Attempt a Coup d’Etat?

I believe Trump did nothing for so long on January 6th because he wanted to see if the horde that attacked the Capitol could stop the certification process. If the mob had captured Pence, Trump could claim that any counting without the Vice-President would not be legal. In fact, the votes from the states could not even be opened, he could say. There was a real danger that Trump would declare martial law (and stay in power) until “things settled down” on any pretext he could find if the Constitutional process was not completed. General Milley’s “Reichstag moment” had indeed materialized, complete with blaming the crisis on left-wingers. But both Republican and Democratic leaders in the House and Senate, along with the guy Trump had made the mob’s target, Mike Pence, knew Trump was trying to stop the certification. To show their determination to complete the Constitutional process of electing a president, they set about counting the votes as soon as the Capitol was cleared and finished in the wee hours of January 7th.

I think Trump failed to pull off his coup because of three enduring weaknesses in his character. First, many high school students know more about how the American government works than he does. He particularly does not understand the way the Constitution’s division of powers, even after all the growth in executive power over the decades, still can check an overreaching president. Thus he seems to have assumed that Republican judges would agree the election had been rigged simply because they were Republicans, when actually they were foremost judges in an independent judiciary bound by precedent, by a duty to see that justice is done, and by a demand for evidence. Similarly, Congress has many ties to executive agencies such as the FBI and the Department of Defense, especially the ties that bind with purse strings, that give it considerable influence in these agencies.

Second, organizing something as complicated as a coup d’etat takes some serious cognitive chops, and by 2020 Donald Trump had trouble “staying on topic” for even a minute. If he were huddling with a conspirator over, say, control of the U.S. Marshalls during a takeover, he would soon be talking about how windmills kill eagles or the steam catapults on aircraft carriers. His thinking processes were too chaotic to orchestrate a coup.

Third, even though Donald Trump convinced millions that he was a self-assured, super-confident, take-charge individualist, he has long lacked resolve. He always had the courage of his convictions, which meant he had almost none. He frequently changed positions on important issues, notoriously being swayed by whoever spoke to him last, and his decision-making could be fairly characterized as “Charge ahead impulsively, then quickly retreat.” For example, two days after the networks declared Joe Biden had won the election,

Trump signed an executive order commanding the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and elsewhere by inauguration day. This surprised everyone at the Pentagon, whose officials immediately pointed out the dangers of precipitate withdrawals. Trump almost never went toe-to-toe with advisors who stood up to him. Instead he just sulked and complained about having “too many lawyers.” Like the executive order Trump signed curtailing military aid to South Korea that an aide simply took off his desk and deep-sixed, the order about Afghanistan was ignored.

Harry Truman famously said, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen,” and he had a sign on his desk that read, “The buck stops here.” Trump can’t stand the heat, and accordingly he always makes sure the buck stops somewhere else. Like most bullies, he usually gets another person to do his dirty work and face all the danger. The mob who attacked the Capitol on January 6th were the latest version of the throngs who bought Trump’s junk bonds in earlier days, taking all the risks, for his benefit, while he watched.

Trump Since January 6th

Trump spent his last hours as president handing out pardons like lawn care flyers to political allies and friends who had been convicted of serious crimes. Roger Stone, Paul Manafort, Steve Bannon, and some 140 others received Get Out of Jail cards, just as disgraced General Michael Flynn had earlier. Such massive subverting of the justice system strengthened the impression that for all his posturing, Trump had a career criminal’s appreciation of law and order. If you broke the law for Trump and remained loyal, you would not be punished. All the dedicated investigation it took to uncover deeply hidden facts, the careful presentation of evidence in court, the conscientious deliberations of jurors in fulfillment of their civic duty, and the endless appeals of guilty verdicts to higher courts became ultimately pointless because “the fix” was in at the end—provided you never crossed Trump. This amounted to good advertising for the future, should Trump regain power. He might as well have put up “Wanted” signs for criminals in the post office, except they would be recruitment posters promising big job benefits, including a presidential pardon for crimes committed on his behalf.

Anyone who expected Trump to follow tradition and attend his successor’s swearing-in ceremony to help unify the nation did not understand the man who had spent four years splitting the country in two. But Mike Pence did attend, and President Biden privately thanked Pence when their paths crossed after the ceremony for honoring his oath to the Constitution on that fateful day two weeks earlier. Former president Bill Clinton and General Milley also personally acknowledged to Pence how much the nation owed him.

Recharging, Reloading, and Revenge

Trump has spent the months since leaving the White House holding court at Mar-a-Lago in Florida. Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker interviewed him there at the end of March and noted how surrounded he was by adoring fans and a king’s contingent of obsequious courtiers. Immersing himself in media outlets which compete with one another to earn his favor, he probably does not hear a discouraging word for days on end. He raises piles of cash just by

asking his followers for donations, plays a lot of golf, and makes it emphatically clear that he is still King of the Republican Party. He has not, in the least, stopped trying to “Pull Off the Steal.” He only leaves his Land of Make Believe for periodic forays to rallies where he hammers GOP officials who have displeased him. The crowds cry out, “Trump won! Trump won!” the way earlier crowds chanted, “Build the Wall” and “Lock Her Up.”

Trump likely spends a lot of time brooding. He has to reconcile two unreconcilable facts that have probably been cranking out cognitive dissonance as madly as a moonshiner boils off hooch on the Third of July: 1) he had been humiliated by losing his job when 2) he was the most powerful person in the world (and, in his own mind, the most wonderful). He almost certainly would have handled the angst the way he always did when he failed, by blaming other people, crushing them with an explosion of revenge best served hot.

Trump has always been vengeful, promising that anyone who attacked or betrayed him would suffer much worse in return. Now, forever aggrieved, he has a long list of people he wants to get even with. He is determined to “primary” off the ballot any Republican who voted for his impeachment, and he is making strenuous efforts to control the Republican tickets for the 2022 midterms so the GOP caucuses in Congress will be chock-full of Trump loyalists. He even told supporters in Georgia he wished they had elected the Democrat running for governor last time rather than the present GOP governor. So unless Donald Trump has undergone a transforming change of personality, one suspects that when he is not playing golf and stuffing checks into his pocket he fantasizes about all the revenge he is going to wreak if he regains the presidency. You can expect a blood bath, starting within the GOP because dictators always “clean house” first. Ex-presidents usually fade into the background, especially if they were voted out, but Trump is fully engaged in his party’s future. I shall be very surprised if he does not run in 2024. He has no control over his needs for dominance and vengeance, and he *has* to show the world and himself that he is a winner.

Trump’s Base after January 6th

So what are his chances? The Pew Research Center, a highly reputable polling organization, conducted a survey on January 8th -12th of about 4,500 members of its American Trends Panel. This is a group of people recruited to form a representative sample of the American public who answer various surveys over time. Unlike the usual polls which compare “snapshots” of public opinion taken from time to time among different folks, a well-run panel lets you gauge actual changes in the same people.

Nearly all the respondents had given their opinions of Trump in late July-early August, 2020 when the presidential campaigns were in full swing.[7] But Pew found that Trump had lost a quarter of his supporters after January 6th – a disastrous setback for any political movement. Not surprisingly, most of the people who had soured on Trump had not been all that enthusiastic about him before the election. But still, they had approved of his performance in the summer and now was the winter of their discontent. The Disenchanted almost certainly included most of the previously inactive and sporadic voters who swelled Trump’s vote count in November 2020.

Rebound? Trump has probably lost some of these former supporters permanently, but most of them will still be embedded in the same churches, communities and workplaces where they were in 2020, and subject to the same appeals to rejoin the movement which had persuaded them before. To help them re-up in Trump's Army, Republican apologists have spun the events of January 6th like a runaway merry-go-round to distort their importance, and especially minimize Trump's role in them.[8] While most Americans believe what they saw, others live in a world where believing is seeing rather than the other way around. So indeed, some of those who divorced themselves from Trump after January 6th have made the same old mistake again. A Pew poll conducted in September 2021 found that the number of Republicans in its panel who wanted Trump to remain a major figure in politics had risen from 57% in January to 67%. Most of them wanted Trump to run for president in 2024.

We can take heart that a third of the Republicans polled wanted Trump to exit stage right and never come near the theater again. Many Trump supporters have proven less loyal than he predicted when he bragged that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose a vote. "You can't try to kill the country and get away with it with everybody," Lincoln might have said. But tens of millions of his 2020 backers either want a dictator or still have not figured out that Donald Trump is conning them six ways to Sunday. They have ignored or rationalized away an incredible four years of bungling ineptitude, nonstop lying, wall-to-wall malfeasance, and outright lawlessness, culminating in his undeniable efforts to overthrow the U.S. Constitution and our most basic principle of governance. If you can find any comfort in so many Americans being that malevolent, or that massively mistaken, you place among the most cockeyed optimists in history.

Republicans in Congress have failed the country more than anyone else. They had several opportunities to rid us and themselves of Trump, but nearly all of them instead crowded together to squeeze into the group photo of Trump's Blind Mice. John McCain, Mitt Romney, Liz Cheney, Adam Kinzinger, and a few others have stood up to him, but most have publicly backed him 100 percent. I doubt they do this happily. Most of the GOP candidates who would kiss Trump on both cheeks on the county court house steps on a Saturday afternoon next spring to get his endorsement in the primaries probably wish he would drop dead. He is the biggest RINO of all, having no allegiance to conservative traditions and values unless they served his personal interest. Since 2015 he has spewed as much venom and assassinated as many characters in the Republican ranks as in the Democrats'. Eventually everyone gets attacked, including Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and Trump's own vice-president. That's why Republican politicians should disown him, and it's also why they don't. Some GOP officials want Trump to become the all-powerful king that the framers of the Constitution went to such lengths to prevent, but whether they do or not, almost all of them are scared (insert a vivid gastro-intestinal metaphor here) of the big bully.

Donald Trump threatens the very existence of the Republican Party because if it denies him the 2024 nomination he will draw-and-quarter it in the blink of an eye by taking his followers into the Third-Party Wilderness of American politics. But if he remains its leader it could cost the GOP its chance to control Congress in 2022 and the White House in 2024 because so many people dislike him now. The bloom of his endorsements is off the rose, but the thorns remain. His

backing of Roy Moore, Kelly Loeffler, and David Perdue did not keep the GOP from losing crucial Senate seats in Alabama and Georgia, of all places.

The Real Problem.

Republicans fear the wrath of Trump so much because he owns the GOP base. Always ready to emphasize the obvious, I have said many times that without a crowd of ardent supporters, a wannabe dictator in a democracy is just a clown on a soap box. The crowd is now well-assembled in America. Indeed it was brought together by Republican strategists for their own ends, with only a few like Barry Goldwater anticipating the newcomers would turn the “big tent” into a tabernacle and drive out all the non-believers. Having sown the seeds of its own destruction, the GOP is now reaping the whirlwind.

We understand quite well who Trump’s followers are. The October 2019 Monmouth Poll reported in *Authoritarian Nightmare* found they are the most prejudiced people in America. Their prejudices and many other shortcomings are rooted in authoritarianism, and studies show that authoritarian followers have many emotional and cognitive weaknesses which explain why they are longing for a strong leader who will take their side against the “others” they find threatening. They are highly fearful, ethnocentric, and have uncritically copied the ideas of the authorities in their lives. Their beliefs are highly compartmentalized, even contradictory; they use many double-standards in their judgments; they have lots of trouble distinguishing good from bad evidence; they are highly defensive and dogmatic; they have little self-insight, and a host of other imperfections. Demographically, the two pillars of Trump’s base are white Christian evangelicals and white male blue-collar workers. Both groups score highly on a measure of submission to authority named the RWA Scale. [9]

American authoritarian followers formed strong emotional bonds to Donald Trump in 2015 because he shouted their grievances and screamed out their fears, giving voice to things they were thinking but keeping bottled up within themselves. (They still think “He says it like it is,” when he was undoubtedly the biggest liar in the history of the presidency.) Trump supporters, being highly ethnocentric, have also formed strong bonds with each other and provide the widely noted “echo chamber” for each other that reinforces their own opinions. They believe strongly in group solidarity, and their desire to be a good member of the In-Group helps explain their enduring loyalty to him no matter what he does. In many respects, Trump’s followers have built a fence around themselves and formed a cult.

Whatever hesitations they ever had, Trump’s base had clearly gone all-in with him by March 2020 when, after spending weeks telling Americans that the COVID-19 virus was unimportant, totally under control, and even a hoax, he announced that he had known all along that the virus was going to cause a pandemic, it would spread rapidly, and everybody had to take precautions to protect themselves or risk death. So, by his own admission, he had either been lying about this all along, or was an ignoramus who hadn’t know what he was talking about when he was regurgitating the stupidity coming from Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. Believing him in January and February, 2020 could have gotten you personally killed, and no doubt did for some unhappy souls.

However, Trump soon began recanting his admission, fighting with his science advisors and advancing untested and absurd medical treatments. You would think his followers would have learned their lesson in March about trusting him on this subject, especially when he then got the disease himself. But after receiving the fastest and best treatment imaginable from all the king's horses and all the king's men, which I am sure did not involve bleach injections, he showed his appreciation of the knowledge that had saved his life by dramatically ripping off his mask when re-entering the White House (and spreading the disease around the place some more). A great mass of Trump supporters followed their leader, betting their lives that he knew more about disease than the vast majority of doctors and scientists.

Thanks largely to Trump the United States, a rich, medically advanced country with top-notch disease control experts and hospitals, quickly became the most COVID-infected nation on earth. Some 44 million Americans have caught the disease!—nearly three times the rate found among Canadians, for example. The tens of millions of “extra” infected Americans have poxed up among those who refuse to wear masks, maintain social distance, and even be vaccinated. They resolutely spread the disease to their loved ones, to fellow-believers, and to people who work with them or simply go to the same stores because In Trump They Trust, and in their preferred news sources, and in each other. The *New York Times* found the death rate from COVID in counties which Trump won handily in November 2020 was nearly five times as high as the rate in counties where he ran poorly.[10] And even those who thus far have remained unaffected are unwittingly developing a mini-herd immunity to herd immunity, creating a residue of targets for the disease that mass inoculations cannot protect. Yet they support and even adore the person who has caused their suffering more than anyone else, Donald Trump. He has led many of his supporters to their graves and crippled others for life, and they love him anyway. That's loyalty.

It is also deep and abiding authoritarianism. Trump's core supporters have plighted their troth to him whole hog. They have crossed over into his reality and become anti-matter to the truth. You cannot reach them with facts, studies, or logic. If you try to have a rational conversation with them about Trump, immigrants, COVID, the election, capitalism versus socialism versus communism, whatever, the righter you are, the more they will cling to their beliefs. No matter what Trump does, they will believe his account of it. No matter what he asks them to do, they will trust his reason for doing it. They are ready to risk death rather than doubt. So, many, many of them are doomed.

The Road Ahead

For all this madness, the most amazing thing about Trump's supporters has to be that there are so many of them. Democracy has failed to instill its values and its value into masses of its citizens, who deeply believe they are freedom's greatest champions when they are actually among its deadliest foes. But Trump's base, for all its size, faces an uphill battle in its crusade for power. The institutions of American democracy have been severely tested and have proven resilient. They are on Red Alert now because the unthinkable happened on January 6th. An organized attempt to destroy our government rampaged through the very halls of Congress that was only thwarted by the brave holding action of outnumbered Capitol Police and the quick

response of officials dedicated to protecting the lives of our lawmakers. We can see in the aftermath of broken glass, broken doors, and broken faiths that the justice system stood its ground, living true to its name and purpose. The free press has endured years of determined onslaught and remains free and unbending. The military has earned the nation's lasting gratitude for standing by the Constitution as strongly as it has defended America from its foreign enemies. Principled women and men in positions of power have shown themselves so dedicated to democracy they will lose their jobs rather than have us lose the country. And the bottom line: Most Americans want liberty and justice for all, and recognize Donald Trump as a dangerous person who should never hold office again.

Demographically, the odds line up against Trump's reelection. He draws much more support from older voters than he does from younger ones. But really old voters (and this is being written by someone in his 80s) kick the bucket a lot more than fuzzy-cheeked youths. And it turns out people do not inevitably get appreciably more conservative as they get older, but instead seem to carry forward the beliefs they formed in their younger years. Republicans have known for a long time—and that's why they started recruiting politically inactive white evangelicals en masse—that the up-and-coming generations will be clenched-teeth liberal on balance. Generation Z could give an authoritarian leader nightmares. Add to this the fact that Trump supporters are dying faster than necessary from a disease their leader encourages them to catch, and you can see the climb is getting steeper and steeper for Republicans in 2022 and 2024.

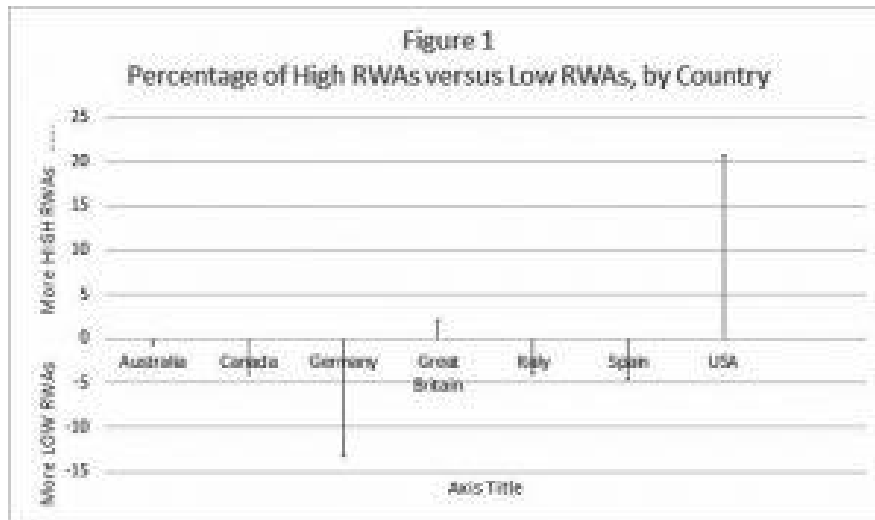
But Trump's loyalist candidates can still win control of Congress in 2022, and he can still become president again in 2024, if enough persons who oppose him do not vote. You can't possibly think that people who are ready to die for him won't bother to show up at the polls, and they'll proselytize like crazy to bring in converts the way they did in 2020. The question is, will his opponents show up too, especially given all the roadblocks Republican legislatures have thrown up to prevent them from voting? The GOP knows this is game-set-match for them personally. They are considerably outnumbered, but by no means defeated. Authoritarians commonly think they will prevail by steely force of will, and sometimes they do. You have to meet their attack with resolve and commitment, or they will win.

Other Democracies Have a Large Stake in This

The RWA Scale gives us a bang-on way to measure the level of authoritarianism in groups, and in April 2021 the Morning Consult Poll administered the test to national samples of 1000 citizens in eight western democracies: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, and the United States. Despite the big cultural differences and translation problems, the test "worked" everywhere except France.[11] The least authoritarian scores came from Germany, while the most authoritarian sample was Made in the USA.

We can get further insight into America's place among these western democracies by pooling the 7000 scores from the nations where the RWA Scale did its job. Let's call the quarter of this big sample who scored lowest on the test "International Low RWAs," and the people who make up the top 25% of the sample "International Highs." The balance of International Lows vs. Highs

in each country will tell us how authoritarian the populations are, compared to other democracies, and this is shown in the figure below.



Germany has such a low overall score because it has many more International Low RWAs than International Highs. The situation is just the opposite in the United States, which is stocked with way, way more International High RWAs than it has Lows.[12] In all of the other countries except Great Britain, Lows outnumber Highs, if usually by small margins. But the contrast between America and Germany gives little support to the theory that Germans are “naturally” authoritarian people. In the September 2021 German national elections the populist, isolationist right-wing party, Alternative for Germany, which strongly opposes immigration, received only 10% of the vote despite Angela Merkel’s having recently accepted a million refugees from the Near East and Africa. In the USA that platform would probably have garnered at least 40% of the vote.

Few Americans can remember when the United States was not the richest and most powerful nation on the planet, and most Americans have similarly considered their country the champion of democracy and the foremost defender of liberty in the world. Now however instead of “making the world safe for democracy,” it may become the arsenal of tyranny that undermines freedom far and wide. For if democracy is overthrown in America, that will embolden authoritarian movements around the world. Every free country has seedlings of authoritarians determined to grow mighty, and nothing would be more encouraging to them than having democracy crumble in the United States. Furthermore, even democracies that were not destabilized would likely find a totalitarian America viewed them with enmity. Our long-standing allies got a preview of the hostility that demagogues feel toward free nations when Donald Trump withdrew from international accords, threatened old alliances, sucked up to Vladimir Putin and “fell in love” with the brutal killer, Kim Jong-Un.

Beyond the danger that a totalitarian takeover in the USA would present to other democracies, an America in the firm grip of authoritarians would threaten every human being, nay most living things, on the planet. Earth’s biosphere deteriorates more and more with each passing day, and

one of the first things Donald Trump did in 2017 was cancel almost every effort the federal government was making to slow climate change and protect the environment. It was all a hoax, he repeatedly said, dismissing a mountain of consensus-forming research with a brainless quip. The concerned nations on the planet are in a sinking canoe baling hard at last to avert disaster, but for four years the United States government sat in the stern scooping water *into* the boat. Give Trump, or anyone else who does not understand the gravity of the planet's situation, another four years to put their own selfish needs and profound ignorance ahead of everything else, and the damage may be irreversible.

These dangers can be parried. The United States has far more authoritarian followers in its midst than democracies usually do, but even so they do not comprise a majority of the nation's population. If they did, Donald Trump would now be enjoying his second term—likely for the rest of his life. High RWAs can be defeated where it counts, at the ballot box, but it will take a lot of work because authoritarians vote more often than Moderates and Lows. Furthermore, various Republican state legislators are doing all they can to keep their opponents from being able to vote at all.

Democracy will probably only survive in America if the non-authoritarians there plow through all the barriers and resolutely cast ballots in elections for the next decade or so. It will take yet more monumental energy and effort like that which carried the day in 2020. But the Americans who rise to defend their country in its hour of need will not only be saving themselves, they will be protecting the blessings of liberty for everyone's posterity around the planet. We are at a crossroad in history, but take heart: You can do something about it. Involve others who do not appreciate the situation. Determine the outcome.

Footnotes

[1] The “best” polls missed almost as badly as the worst ones. In their final national surveys, most of the polling outfits that are rated at least a “B+” by Nate Silver’s “538” site predicted Biden would trounce Trump: by 9% (Siena College/*The New York Times*), 11% (CNBC), 11% (Quinnipiac), 7% (Suffolk), 8% (Angus Reid), 8% (Fox), 10% (NBC/WSJ), and 8% (Survey USA). Monmouth’s last national poll found a 5% difference, but it was taken before the first debate in September. Emerson (4%, based on a 51 to 47 spread) made the best prediction on election eve, and IBD/TIPP (3%, based on a 49 to 46 difference) pulled in close behind. IBD/TIPP had also come closer to predicting the 2016 result than any other major poll, giving it two feathers in its cap when most have none.

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/16/us/politics/election-turnout.html>

[3] <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>

[4] All one had to do in making this prediction was heed the testimony of a man who knows Trump well, his long-time “fixer,” Michael Cohen, who told the House Committee on Oversight and Reform on February 27, 2019, “I fear that if (Trump) loses the election in 2020 that there will never be a peaceful transition of power.”

[5] I am not a psychiatrist and have no training in clinical psychology, but if I had to bet my chance of going to Heaven on the question of why Trump is so screwed up, I would opine that his great fear of failure goes back to childhood experiences with his father and his older brother Freddy. “Be a winner!” was the First Commandment in the Trump household, and Fred Trump Sr. was Yahweh. Freddy did not care that much about winning, and Fred Sr. punished him for it to Freddy’s grave and beyond. Donald became the Designated Winner who would fulfill his father’s drive to found a dynasty. Bui Donald failed too, spectacularly, in the late 1980s. I suspect at some point Fred Sr. told his son, who was over a billion dollars in debt and conniving to use family money to save his neck, that he was the biggest loser he had ever known. Which Donald was. And that’s the voice clawing away at the bricks encasing Trump’s unconscious mind. I wouldn’t be surprised if Fred Sr. had called Donald a “disgrace” then, given how often Trump uses the term now. Watch him.

[6] A Republican, Eastman had been an unsuccessful candidate for various offices in California over the years. In 2020 he wrote an op-ed piece stating Kamala Harris was not an American citizen. Addressing the crowd on the Ellipse on January 6th, he assured it that Mike Pence had the power to stop the certification process if he wanted to. Eastman resigned his position at the Chapman Law School because of the outcry over his interpretation of the Constitution.

[7] See

https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/20/how-we-know-the-drop-in-trumps-approval-rating-in-january-reflected-a-real-shift-in-public-opinion/ft_21-01-19_pollingapproval_new/

[8] I award a Palme d’Or for Obfuscation, not for the first time, to Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa who on October 7, 2021 issued a minority reply to the Senate Judiciary Committee’s report on the events of January 6th. He said that all Trump did was follow the advice of his senior advisors and “The available evidence shows Trump did not use the Justice Department to overturn the election.” In fact, Trump tried over and over to get Justice Department officials to overturn the election. He just failed to pull it off, usually because so many officials in the department and the White House threatened to resign if he pushed ahead with this monstrous attempt to overturn the keystone of American democracy, government “by the people.”

[9] Almost everything you would ever want to know about the RWA Scale can be found elsewhere on this website. The rest is in my books *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (University of Manitoba Press, 1981), *Enemies of Freedom* (Jossey-Bass, 1988) *The Authoritarian Specter* (Harvard University Press, 1996), and *Authoritarian Nightmare* (with John Dean, Melville House, 2020).

[10]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/27/briefing/covid-red-states-vaccinations.html?smid=url-share>

[11] See <https://morningconsult.com/2021/06/28/global-right-wing-authoritarian-test/> The Cronbach alpha coefficients of reliability for the samples were Australia: .892; Canada: .904; France: .743; Germany: .818; Italy: .841; Spain: .840; United Kingdom: .881; and USA: .896.

[12] Forty-one percent of the American sample were International Highs and only 20% were International Lows. So the vertical line above "USA" in Figure 1 is $(41\% - 20\% =) 21\%$ high. America has fewer International Lows in its makeup, percentage-wise, than any of the other countries. Pollsters routinely find far more Americans call themselves conservatives than liberals.