

Marching Towards Uncivil War in America

(and what we can do about it)

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Conspiracy theories and doomsday scenarios are now the political if not also the social air we breathe. Amid and largely because of this, the American political gyroscope, like that of our planet's environment, seems so wobbly and overheated that it's hard to know what will happen next. Political instability is increasingly fueled by Trump's incendiary racism, sexism, and xenophobia, his misinformation and self-contradictions, and his simple denial of reality – as so glaringly evident in his wild statements and lack of policy concerning COVID-19. And yet, the polarized instability that all this produces is perhaps Trump's most powerful engine. Just how far will this instability go? As Trump doubles down more deeply, the risk of large-scale disorder and deep civil strife is something that we cannot avoid considering any longer -- intellectually or strategically, much less politically. The risks are too high. This is because Trump's increasing goal is not to *win* the election, but to *ruin* it completely.

As Joe Biden's lead in the polls swells in the swing states, Trump gets yet harsher and more aggressive. He pressures schools to reopen in COVID-hotbed areas; appoints alt-Right hacks and conspiracy theorists as judges and high officials (including now the third highest leader in the Pentagon); disseminates wild conspiracy theories associated with QAnon; unprecedentedly sends ununiformed federal troops in unmarked cars to "quell violence" in major American cities - when they are not needed and not asked for; and pardons cronies in high office convicted of egregious crimes. And on and on. On the electoral front, Trump rages against the negligible problem of voter fraud in mail-in ballots and relentlessly lambastes the US Postal Service -- even as he appoints henchmen to de-fund the postal service, reduce its service hours, eliminate its overtime pay, and cut back use of automated machinery -- forcing more mail to be processed by hand. The evisceration of the postal service along with Trump's claims that heavy balloting by mail is untenable and will compromise the election – which he will then contest – is a grave development that risks becoming a very real self-fulfilled prophecy. Trump has already called for a re-run of elections in New York that he debunks as a "total disaster" and is suing the state of Nevada for sending mail-in ballots to its citizens. *The New Yorker* jokes that Trump will simply "cancel November" as a "rigged month." The conflicting laws and restrictions concerning mail-in voting are also a major concern. Such rules are quite different on a state-to-state level – making them vulnerable to selective application and potential corruption.

What larger pattern is at work here, and how might it end? How do the various pieces of this horrible puzzle fit together, and what larger calamity do they portend? Having worked in countries across the global South such as the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Guinea, Burundi, Mongolia, Myanmar, and Papua New Guinea, I have experience with the regimes and tactics of corrupt elections in poor country dictatorships. What I now see in the US makes me worried, moreso than I have ever been about my country. Below I spell out these similarities, provide outcome scenarios, and consider the best, most practical, and most crucial thing that each of us can do.

Electing Tin-pot Dictators

The biggest commonality across corrupted elections is this: when an incumbent autocrat is seriously contested in an election, social unrest is stoked and then used to justify crackdown by the government itself – followed by contesting any outcome that would result in a shift of power. Electoral tallies are questioned, delayed, rejigged, “confirmed,” and then officially approved by autocrat-appointed judges and courts.

Often if not typically in the run-up to the election, the incumbent dictator de-legitimizes opposition leaders by fabricating charges and imprisoning or threatening to imprison them. In the present case, this includes Trump’s refrain, “Lock her up!” against Hillary Clinton as the supposedly most corrupt politician ever. To this is added Trump’s illegitimizing of just about everything that Obama did and stood for – including Obama’s very birth as a US citizen. Then there’s Trump’s conspiracy theory insistence that Joe Biden and his son were in cahoots with Ukrainian corruption. He is completely intractable and unrepentant in these regards notwithstanding being impeached for withholding massively needed military aid from Ukraine as a quid pro quo for their “finding” (fabricating) evidence of corruption against Biden.

Outside the country, dictators in poorer countries often turn to foreign powers, typically against the interests of their own people, to influence elections in their favor. Often this comes in the form of laundered money or military support and is repaid with contraband wealth or privileged access to valuable resources, as in the case of the Congo (DRC) in relation to Rwanda. In Trump’s case, beyond even his corrupt attempt to enlist Ukraine, he has obviously cultivated not just a close but a collisional relationship with Vladimir Putin in Russia, America’s largest and more formidable enemy for the past 70 years. Trump has clearly courted and received major Russian interference in the US election on his behalf, refused to have this seriously investigated or addressed, fired or blackballed those who have conducted the Russia investigation (while ramping up his own “investigation of the investigation”), and enabled lucrative ties with Russia that benefit him personally – with little if any benefit to the United States.

Along with de-legitimizing and neutralizing opponents, and seeking international help through corrupt means, autocrats in poorer countries frequently create an atmosphere of tension and fear in their own country running up to the election. This includes especially the use or threatened use of troops to quell disturbances and maintain order. One can easily imagine civil unrest provoked and inflamed in the US on election day – say in Detroit. Trump could then authorize

draconian crackdown by federal troops and contest the outcome of Michigan's election as illegitimate. If the election is close, all it takes is disruption in one key state to skew the outcome, as we know from Florida in 2000.

In autocratic developing countries, people get frightened if elections are closely contended. They are scared to come out and vote, especially in opposition, worrying that the election or its outcome will result in violence. This is especially true if they are known opposition members or live in an area where opposition is strong. Social tensions around such elections run very high. In a poignant election in Liberia in 1997, the notorious warlord Charles Taylor was elected with 75% of the vote – and the vote was certified as legitimate by The Carter Center. Taylor's victory was epitomized by his campaign slogan: "He killed my pa. He killed my ma. He gets my vote!" The cost of contravening a feared and brutal leader who had already killed so very many of his own people, including the parents of voters, was simply too great, too risky, for Liberians who opposed him to show up and vote against him. With raw explicitness and admitted exaggeration, Trump's equivalent of this in racist terms – his emphasis on law and order and "Blue Lives Matter" -- ends up as practically tantamount to, "The police killed Breona Taylor. The police killed George Floyd. The police killed Rayshard Brooks. The police kill blacks and maintain our order. So vote for me . . . and your vote won't count if you disagree!" Already in the US, one in thirteen otherwise eligible African Americans is barred from voting.

In tamer times, social tensions in autocratic developing countries are exacerbated by tactics of voter suppression, especially in districts of known political opposition. These include a sudden shortage of ballots or their disappearance, restriction of polling hours, outright closing of selected polling places for one or another reason, and tight control over the process of providing electoral results – and delaying any electoral announcement until "anomalies" have been "resolved." Trump is clearly paving the way for such a scenario, claiming the electoral results are undependable and cannot be known until well after the election. The gerrymandering of polling place availability, the questioning of mail-in ballots, and the forcing of people to vote in person under threatening COVID-19 conditions has already happened in the Wisconsin primary. All these means can be used to suppress opposition turnout this coming November, and to throw the election in doubt more generally. In terms of suppressing mail-in ballots, Trump tweeted the following concerning the close 2018 mid-term elections in Florida: "The Florida Election should be called in favor of Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis [Republicans] in that large numbers of new ballots showed up out of nowhere, and many ballots are missing or forged. An honest count is no longer possible – ballots massively infected. Must go with Election Night!"

Perhaps the starkest result of electoral malfeasance that I know of occurred in the Papua New Guinea elections of 2017, which tellingly illustrate the diversity of social responses to a corrupted election. In this case, meticulous locally-compiled registration rolls by trained recorders went completely unconsulted in favor of government attempts to weed out fraudulent names on voter registration lists. In my village of primary residence, only six of 98 adult citizens were on the electoral roll and allowed to vote -- and one of these was a dead person whose child voted in her stead. Similar denuding of the electorate occurred in village after village. But as the government was powerful, and local people at risk and dependent on the largess of its services, there was no effective opposition. Only in one distant village where locals took the electoral team hostage and

threatened to kill them at knife point did the government need to act. Against this, what was particularly striking otherwise was the obsessive protocol of formally sealing and officially protecting the completed ballot boxes, vouchsafing them from fraud so the proclaimed legitimacy of the election could be validated “definitively.” In other more populous parts of Papua New Guinea, however, massive fighting over registration rolls and contested results ensued. In one region, this produced a civil war that shut down the entire province. Inter-clan warfare was inflamed, government offices and commercial buildings were looted and burned, and commerce and services ground to a halt.

These divergent outcomes illustrate that the response to a compromised or stolen election can be highly variable. Do people simply accept the result (think of Al Gore in 2000)? Or do they fight to the teeth to defend their position? If one decries violence but feels compelled to take action, what does one do?

After the polls are closed, it is not conspiracy theory to think that contesting and skewing a close election could happen in the US, especially in states with a Republican state legislatures, governors, and/or secretaries of state. Control over the courts is often key to returning autocrats to power. In the US, the 2000 election was effectively decided in the Republican-majority Supreme Court following the suppression of electoral reconsideration by Katherine Harris, the Republican Secretary of State in Florida. Republican-appointed Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor reportedly said privately at the time that the highest court must do everything humanly possible to make sure Al Gore did not become President. At present, if liberal Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who is now gravely ill, dies or cannot continue on the SCOTUS, Republicans will rush through another alt-Right replacement. This will seal yet tighter their control over electoral issues they appeal to the nation’s highest court. Many other important federal and appellate courts are now stacked with Trump hacks. As such, the check and balance that the judiciary supplies against abuses of power is now tenuous in the US. And Trump repeatedly uses his power of pardon to immunize and reward those who have been convicted of high crimes.

Opposition become Annihilation

Political scientists such as Alan Abramowitz have documented empirically that political polarization in the US is now higher than it has been for many decades, practically since the Civil War. This fuels and then reflects negative partisanship – the tendency to viscerally and aggressively oppose those on the political “other side” even when one might otherwise agree with them. This is true across Red and Blue polarities but is especially pronounced among Republicans. As a neutralizing term, however, “negative partisanship” encodes as well as obscures the hate speech, racism, and recourse to violence that Trump and the alt-Right incite. Negative partisanship in this current and deeper sense sews not only political division but social discord, strife, and civil unrest if not actual violence -- stoked by the government itself through the use or threat of repressive force. Consider video footage of how police actions in US cities have incited protestor actions that are then used as an excuse to use yet more force. As we move toward a November election in less than one hundred days, Trump strives to reverse his outsized polling

deficit by stoking the fires of negative partisanship higher and higher – setting himself up to claim that civil disorder and voting problems will invalidate the election.

The obvious antidote and solution is for Joe Biden to win an overwhelming victory – so very large that it cannot be effectively contested, even by Trump. Given the Republican gerrymandering of electoral districts, voter suppression, and fear of COVID-19, Biden may well have to win the popular vote by more than 5-7 percentage points, a very large margin, in order to gain the White House. And given the numerical bias toward conservative rural states in the US Senate, his coat tails will have to be yet longer to change the majority in the upper house of Congress. The will of the majority of Americans is clearly against Trump. But this does not mean he will not become President. The most important thing that anyone can do is firstly to vote, but secondly to be active in getting others to the polls and donating all the money and time you can, including and even especially if it “seems” that Biden will win. Even if he does, the margin of victory will be of paramount importance. The will of the American people needs to be established and validated *overwhelmingly*.

Even if Biden wins decisively enough that the result is upheld, the alt-Right conspiracy mill is poised to launch into higher gear. Sean Hannity and other prominent alt-Right instigators have been very literally and forcefully inciting listeners to purchase, train with, and use guns. This especially so people can “defend themselves” against unwanted federal intrusion by the so-called Deep State Democrats. Hannity has said explicitly on air that Democrats are out to shoot Trump supporters. Substantial problems of violence and civil unrest are thus plausible if Biden wins, especially if Trump urges his supporters to resist the outcome. In defeat, Trump could become an even larger and more resistant alt-Right cult hero. Those who live in cities and other Blue areas of the US are often insufficiently aware of this threat and risk. In autocratic developing countries, disgruntled electoral losers often form para-military militia or guerilla forces that resist control and foment civil strife. Getting renegade factions and resistant forces peacefully back into society, much less into the political mainstream, has been the biggest and most daunting challenge that UN peacekeepers face in post-conflict countries such as Congo (DRC) and Liberia.

Too many factors and uncertainties are in play to know what scenario will result in the US, and with what severity. This makes it all the more important to hope for and facilitate conditions for a fair and decisive victory – so large as to forestall the worst of the above scenarios. What a caged animal will do, much less a caged politician such as Trump, is hard to predict. His consistent tendency is to double down against any and all opposition. As such, it now seems evident that the clouds of disrupted democracy and civil discord are on the horizon. How severe the storm will be is hard to tell. Even if the chances of severe and violent unrest are “only” twenty or twenty-five percent, this is still a startling risk. Hillary Clinton was an 8-to-10 favorite to win the Presidency on election night 2016. She won the popular vote, as Al Gore had also done. But like him, she lost the Electoral College. We need to begin considering the possibility of major social as well as political discord in the US. More importantly, we need to consider what we are prepared to do about this. And most important of all, we need to consider what we can do to help forestall deeper strife to begin with.

Civil and uncivil warriors

Raising the specter of heightened unrest is a flaming double-edged sword. On the one hand, it easily plays into the hands of Trumpism -- courtesy of negative partisanship. Fox News host Laura Ingraham on her show, "The Ingraham Angle" has already suggested darkly that opposition to Trump during and after the election may result in violence. The turning of progressive resistance into an excuse for "law and order" is already evident in how anti-fascist resisters have been branded as "antifa" (read "intifada") -- and taken as legitimate targets of rightist violence under the guise of restoring order by escalated force.

All this puts liberal and progressive activism in a double bind. If one takes seriously the possibility of coming unrest, does mentioning this provide fodder for acerbic alt-Right reaction and ostensibly legitimate "responses" to such "threats" -- an incitement to "war"? This is exactly how escalating polarization through negative partisanship works! The alt-Right is more than primed to seize any whiff of socially progressive antagonism much less violence and blow it out of all proportion in Trumpist media. Tensions and actions often if not typically escalate during political strife. But non-violence remains key. *Discussing the realistic possibility and entailments of social unrest is absolutely not, in any way whatsoever, to promote or condone the use of violence itself, including as a means of resistance or opposition.* Violence in all forms is and must be completely rejected and refused. At the same time, to demur from voicing realistic concerns about the compromising of the election and the fomenting of unrest by Trump and his minions is to potentially let the election and the country itself be stolen without reasoned consideration and strategic foresight. Do we just sit back and play patsy to the bluster and bludgeon of alt-Right intimidation and force?

Is it overblown to suggest near-term civil discord in the US could actually become a "civil war"? Yes. The chances of pitched-battle blood-letting on a large scale seems remote -- apart, that is, from core areas of major multicultural cities. On the other hand, the whole notion of what "war" is has changed, and this is important, as it relates directly to the white male prowess that Trump both incites and feeds on. To see how fomenting conflict "works" for Trump and his supporters, we need to understand how "victory" through "combat" is central in the Trumpist imaginary.

Most of those reading this article are well aware of the enormous past and present of America's military capitalism and its capitalist militarism -- it's distinct form of international imperialism. But in Trump's MAGA imaginary, the vaunted prowess of American male privilege harkens back at least to the Second World War. The privilege and acclaim of America's conquering white male heroes in WWII (black ones were neglected) did much to sustain masculine confidence in the post-war decades. Since then, however, the valiant fighting courage of American masculinity has been mightily sapped. The Korean war was highly equivocal and the Vietnam war a full national disgrace. More recently we have had disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. America's "heroic fighting days" are probably over. War itself is changing. National conflict through IT and cyber-space and drone-based war are now more likely than valiant soldiers risking death on a battlefield, aircraft carrier, or fighter jet. Like manufacturing

jobs, the physical work of risk and courage in war are increasingly specialized; it is no longer a mass-masculine endeavor. Trump understands this. He is not an expansionist fascist aiming to conquer foreign lands; he is not like Mussolini or Hitler in this regard. Rather, he implodes conflict (as Hitler did to the n^{th} -degree in the Holocaust) by building up racial white privilege and by castigating and incarcerating immigrants, Blacks, and Others within the nation itself. In the process, he feeds on rather than shirks from oppositions such as Black Lives Matter -- using this as a provocation instead for "Blue (police) Lives Matter."

It is the psychic, cultural, and demographic erosion of American white male privilege -- along with the structural changes in economic and social life that have accompanied this erosion -- that have enabled and reflected Trump's racism, sexism, and xenophobia. In this context, alt-Right men under siege are now warriors armed to the teeth. It would not be unexpected if a Biden victory, especially a close or a "contested" one, portends strife in areas traditionally considered America's heartland.

Given what has already happened and what is plausible, it is not a conspiracy theory to say that we need to be vigilant in tracking the severity of upcoming events. We should seriously consider what we will do -- individually, collectively, and institutionally -- if forthcoming developments spin out of control, as would be consistent with the many failed attempts to constrain Trump during the past four years. Social movements of opposition as previously conceived remain vital but face new constraints, including if not especially in a COVID-distanced social world. On the one hand, we are increasingly in a digital iGen era. On the other, discordantly, we are also in an older post-rust belt world, in suburbs shading into rural areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In 2016, massive parts of these areas felt utterly left behind by upper middle-class bourgeois "progress" -- on the complete other side of the digital divide. Across such divisions are added so many other divides that now crisscross America, all stoked by negative partisanship and polarization.

The hugest, more blaring, and most ultimate of these American divisions is race. Political scientists have definitively shown that racism was by far and away the biggest single factor leading to Trump's election in 2016. Sexism was also very important, but it was decidedly second. Since he needs women voters, do you think Trump won't be playing the race card harder and harder in coming weeks? Racism both reflects and stokes his incendiary political virus of polarization. His is the political pandemic of negative partisanship, inflected especially through racial hatred. The kinds and degree of electoral unrest, and the COVID-influenced psychology of uncertainty that this will interact with, are hard to foresee. But amid these possibilities are also new forms of opposition, resistance, and progressivist counterpunch. Teenagers on TikTok really did help deflate the big Trump rally in Tulsa -- the one in which Herman Cain, the previous presidential contender, plausibly caught the COVID-19 virus that then killed him. (You wonder why Trump hates TikTok?)

We should all stay not just tuned but ready to act in our own decisive ways when needed. This non-violently, but with all-the-firmer resolve to not simply stand down. If the virus -- the Coronavirus -- continues to rage, how much will we risk of ourselves and our loved ones to attend mass protests, armed only with a mask and maybe an umbrella? If you go out to a protest, or

even to vote, will your partner go with you – or be willing to hug you when you return? If humanly possible, we need to do it anyway. What 21st-century means and modes or resistance or opposition are in the offing – on either side? And what legitimacy will these be afforded, and at what risk, amid the negative partisanship, the racism, the hatred, the sexism, the xenophobia, of Trump’s machine? We don’t know. But we may have to be prepared to reach deep and decide what we will do.

What will or would it look like, the most developed and historically democratic country in the world becoming a true second-term tin-pot dictatorship? A tin-pot dictator is “An autocratic ruler with little political credibility and who typically has delusions of grandeur.” In this sense, however, the emergence of Trump is not a one-off nightmare; it is part of the equalization of politics across the entire world, increasingly now in the global North as well as across the global South. This is part of much larger and longer cycles of inequality and strife in late modern human political development if not evolution, beyond our scope here. But these issues will not tell us what social unrest in America might look like in a few weeks or months. Our questions are more practical. How much will we risk with our time, our careers, our money -- including in our campaign donations and fund-raising efforts – and even our health in resisting dictatorship, as opposed to being passive or complicit? How and in what ways will we keep compassion at a deeper level for those we vehemently disagree with – lest we infect ourselves and our networks and potentially even our families with the virus of negative partisanship? Will capitalist America simply stand by, becoming yet richer in digital technology investments while the rest of the country disintegrates? At what point will the ostensible neutrality of not just FaceBook or Twitter but our very way of life in a so-called democracy be thrown in the fire?

Each of us is different; there are no easy answers. But in upcoming weeks, we should be poised to think and to act beyond our normal sense of acceptance and constraint. We must go beyond our commitment to vote. We need a practical and firm commitment to promote and enable the absolutely fullest electoral participation by all of our fellow citizens, black, white, and brown, young and old, women and men. *We need to work individually as well as collectively to get out the vote. We need to do this in the strongest, fairest, most well-funded, and most urgent way that each of us can given our respective skills, roles, and resources.* We cannot do otherwise. The stakes are too high.