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USA

# Implosion: U.S. Politics since the J6 Riot

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**The January 6, 2021 Trump riot at the U.S. capitol should have blown the right wing out of the water. A year later, it's quite the opposite: U.S. politics are in a visible process of implosion — its status as an “advanced democracy” rapidly declining in measurements relative to other such nations — and it's important to figure out why.**

Liberal and mainstream media are filled with exposures of the riot and how voter suppression, gerrymandering and the crippling Senate filibuster are likely to carry the Republicans to Congressional majorities in the coming November midterms and potentially to victory — or a successful “coup” in the 2024 presidential contest.

Many of these analyses are accurate and useful, often shocking in the details being revealed, but it's necessary to penetrate somewhat deeper into the causes of the depraved dysfunction that U.S. politics have become.

The Riot in Retrospect

After all, by the rules and customs that are supposed to govern the two-party system of bourgeois politics in this country, Trump's fraudulent “stolen election” claim alone should have fractured the Republican Party and ended the political lives of those who pushed it.

That's even before the January 6 abortive putsch, about which we're learning more and more every day: that it was prepared and enabled in the inner circles of the Trump White House, by high-level personnel changes at the Justice Department and the Pentagon, and by active encouragement of the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and assorted white-supremacist and neo-Nazi elements to mobilize on the day.

These forces were evidently intended to play a role as external street-level auxiliaries to a concerted inside plan to tie Congress in procedural knots over the certification of state electoral votes. That was supposed to lead (or force) Trump's vice-president Mike Pence to halt the count and create a pretext for throwing the election into the House of Representatives, or a presidential “emergency” declaration, or god knows what. The House Select Committee investigation may or may not ultimately get to the bottom of it.

By some credible emerging accounts the Capitol break-in may even have prematurely aborted the strategic plan, by forcing Congress to recess and go into hiding for the crucial hours until the place was cleared. By that time, the shock waves resulting from the publicly murderous intent of the mob had forestalled any (small) possibility of a constitutional “coup,” let alone the fantasy of an extra-constitutional one entertained by lunatics like Gen. Mike Flynn.

But the same Republican politicians who touted the Big Lie of the stolen election have continued to rake in their corporate finance contributions, as if nothing untoward had occurred. And any who dare to refute the Big Lie are likely to be “primaried” from the far right in the run-up to the midterms.

The question is posed: Why have the political and (so far) legal consequences for the plotters and the Trump crime syndicate been so meager? By comparison, the much smaller crimes of Richard Nixon's Watergate produced a Republican wipeout in the 1974 midterms and what looked to become a long Democratic ascendancy (soon to be squandered in the wretched Jimmy Carter presidency, but that's another story).

False Celebration

In the wake of January 6, we received glowing lectures that the sacred “institutions of our democracy” had held firm

against “the greatest threat since the Civil War,” if not the British torching the White House in the War of 1812.

The public was supposed to breathe a sigh of relief, secure in the assurance that the right-on-schedule inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris meant the return to “normal governance” after the Trumpian chaos. As we know, the succeeding year has been anything but — and not only because of resurgent COVID, the Afghanistan debacle and the Build Back Better stalemate.

We’ve explored some dynamics of the looming crisis of legitimacy in the recent *Against the Current* editorial *The Long J6 Riot*, and among the many dissections of the Biden presidency we can recommend Eric Toussaint’s article *One year after*.

I won’t repeat those discussions here, but rather look a bit further at the deeper roots of dysfunction. Three in particular deserve closer attention.

### Racism

The first is so obvious to the naked eye that it’s widely recognized in “mainstream” discourse: the unleashing of raw racism. Like the infamous Charlottesville, Virginia “Unite the Right” march, the January 6 riot was fueled by the Great Replacement myth of “White Christian America” and its civilization being overrun by Black, brown, Muslim and assorted immigrant people brought in by conspiratorial elites.

This is accompanied by the demonization of Black Lives Matter, the 1619 Project, Critical Race Theory, prison and police reform, “cancel culture” and whatever other imagined horrors that Tucker Carlson, Fox News and post-Limbaugh talk radio can conjure up in their reality-free parallel universe.

It should go without saying that racism is what fuels the paranoid delusion of the “stolen election” — stolen of course by the fact that nonwhite people voted — which over half of Republican voters claim to believe. And of course the cynical manipulation of that delusion underlies the tsunami of voter-suppression state laws aiming to make sure that “those people” never vote in those numbers again.

But if racism is the most visible factor in the implosion, it hardly ever stands alone. Race is so powerful an element in U.S. politics precisely because it intersects and synergizes with others, two of which are particularly salient in the current crisis.

### Crumbling Institutions

Those vaunted institutions supposedly protecting political “stability” from shocks and ruptures have been turned into agents of rightwing disruption and potential takeover. The past year has shown that the U.S. political system that appeared so solid and unshakeable is, in fact, fragile and vulnerable.

The rot was setting in years before the January 6 riot, including when the Supreme Court wiped out a century of campaign finance laws and effectively wiped out the Voting Rights Act — in each case, going against both majority public opinion and the clear will of Congress.

In the wake of the November 2020 election, when Trump was infuriated that “my Supreme Court” wouldn’t back his efforts to overthrow the result, many people were heartened by the Court’s commitment to preserving the “peaceful transfer of power” at the heart of the electoral system.

But that was illusory. Of course, even this reactionary Court wasn’t going to stupidly sacrifice its own legitimacy as a

burnt offering to Donald Trump. Rather, in throwing out Trump's absurd lawsuits, the Court cited states' authority to conduct their own elections — thereby getting ready to uphold the subsequent voter suppression and intimidation laws sweeping through Republican legislatures.

At the same time, the ideologically packed Court is getting ready to overthrow *Roe v. Wade* either in one outrageous ruling or in steps — in defiance of the clear majority of public opinion, something that by custom and tradition it's generally avoided.

There are signs that Chief Justice Roberts is (rightly) fearful that the monster he's helped create might destroy the Court's public stature. But unless Senate Democrats are prepared to break the filibuster in order to restore voting and abortion rights — or there's massive pressure on Biden to enlarge the Court as Franklin D. Roosevelt once threatened — this vicious and cynical Court majority is likely to move full speed ahead on these, and possibly other explosive questions.

The decentralization of governmental power in the U.S. system, with so much authority held at the state level, was supposed to help insulate the system from shocks and severe fluctuations. The two-capitalist-party setup and their alternation in power was to serve the same purpose, and it certainly has kept the U.S. working class politically enchained.

What's changed is the mutation of the Republican GOP ("Grand Old Party") into a kind of political Gangster Operations Party. Although similar in important ways to the far-right, anti-immigrant, virulently anti-Muslim Le Pen "Rally" (former National Front) party in France, or AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in Germany, the critical differences are that (1) those parties are excluded by elite consensus from holding national power in the leading European countries (although Poland and Hungary are ruled by such parties), and (2) a substantial part of the Republican base in the United States is heavily armed.

Compound all this with the entrenched absurdities of the Electoral College and the U.S. Senate's tilt toward the small states, and you have a recipe for true disaster, and not just in one or another electoral cycle.

In short, much of the institutional setup that preserved the stable strength of the U.S. bourgeois political system has morphed into factors toward its destabilization and potential destruction. It's not as if the U.S. ruling class plotted or necessarily desired this outcome — in fact, the tearing of the United States' political fabric puts it in a much weaker global position, especially in the escalating rivalry with China — but our corporate capitalist masters have been too happily getting super-rich to worry about it.

Of course the obscene inequalities that have enriched capital in the neoliberal era are a big part of what's caused the political rot to begin with. That's been widely recognized as a factor in the rise of Trump, so I won't dwell on it here.

But if racism is the most obvious factor in the political implosion, and the crisis of "the institutions of our democracy" are belatedly coming into clearer focus, there's a third element that mainstream discourse is barely willing to discuss — one that I think may be the most important of all.

Imperialism

In case anyone may have forgotten, both the rise of the criminal Trump and the progressive insurgency of Bernie Sanders were substantially fueled by popular disgust over endless debilitating U.S. wars and interventions — as bipartisan as they've been disastrous.

In fact, if there's one essential book to read about the mess we're in, I'd suggest that it's Spencer Ackerman's *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*. Ackerman goes through the excruciating story of the culture of lies, torture, endless claims of victories and self-deception that marked the Forever Wars in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

It's not a new lesson: In the Vietnam war, the U.S. government's crimes, coverups and lies to the world, the U.S. public, and to itself meant that the truth had to be kept secret. That's what led after all to Daniel Ellsberg's revelation of the Pentagon Papers as well as Nixon's "Plumbers" unit, the Watergate break-in, and everything that followed.

In the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, seeing the atrocities committed by the U.S. military would lead two ordinary individuals, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, to become extraordinary heroes simply because they hadn't left their morals behind when they entered the military and national security machines.

But for the wider U.S. population disgust with being lied to, and seeing all the sacrifices in the name of patriotism go for nothing, produced a range of responses from antiwar activism to rightwing backlash. When Biden ultimately and inevitably pulled out of Afghanistan last year, the chaos accompanying the withdrawal has further accelerated the United States' own political implosion.

Ackerman nails not only neocons, but the bipartisan nature of the long post-9/11 debacle: "In Democratic politics and much self-identifying liberal journalism, there remained a fundamental allergy to leftist critiques of the War on Terror." And "Obama, the locus of much antiwar hope, entrenched the War on Terror..." (Ackerman, 187)

Again, not a surprise in historical perspective: Vietnam was the Kennedy-Humphrey Cold War liberals' war before it became Nixon's.

Interestingly, Ackerman cites a statement by James Madison that the "malignant element in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war... No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare."

To be sure, progressive folks, let alone revolutionary socialists, don't worship at the shrine of the American Founders and Constitutional Framers. They had issues — slavery, genocide, extreme patriarchy. But in their own time, they understood some things.

They knew, for example, that a crook and swindler like Donald Trump could become President. That's why they wrote into the Constitution an emoluments clause and an impeachment process (although I don't think they imagined an entire political party and a mass media network lined up behind the crook).

Yes, they also had frankly imperial ambitions with their eyes on Cuba and Haiti — especially the slaveowners among them — and on Canada too. Yet they understood that what we now call Forever Wars will inevitably toxify domestic "republicanism." They knew that from Roman history if nothing else, and I suspect they wouldn't be terribly surprised by what's happening to us.

The potential of rightwing domination of federal and state legislatures, of the judiciary, and after 2024 possibly the White House, is truly appalling and terrifying with its implications for everything from white supremacy to climate apocalypse. To resist this threat requires understanding its roots, and above all, building an alternative politics that doesn't depend on a failing Biden presidency to rescue us.

## Implosion: U.S. Politics since the J6 Riot

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How to accomplish that enormous task is a question beyond the scope of this article, something that all of us on the left need to confront, hopefully together.

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