

OUR COLUMNISTS

# THE BITTER FRUITS OF TRUMP'S WHITE-POWER PRESIDENCY



By Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

January 12, 2021



*The events of January 6th, including a noose and makeshift gallows on the lawn, make clear a growing unity between the Republican Party and white supremacists. Photograph by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP / Getty*

The spectacular violence in the Capitol on January 6th was the outcome of Donald Trump's yearslong dalliance with the white-supremacist right. Trump all but promised an attack of some kind as he called for his followers to descend on Washington, D.C., for a "wild" protest to stop the certification of Joe Biden's Electoral College victory. In a speech inciting his supporters to lay siege to the Capitol, he told them, "We will never give up. We will never concede." He encouraged them to "fight

like hell,” saying that otherwise they would lose their country, and dispatched them to the Capitol. He promised that he would be with them. But, like a lazy coward, Trump went home to watch the show on TV.

The white right-wing assault on the Capitol, with a Confederate flag in the building and gallows on the lawn, was alarming yet wholly predictable as Trump’s frantic efforts to hold on to power faltered. Not only did Trump clearly incite violence with his speech, but his Administration also paved the way for the violence through its deliberate neglect of the rising threat of white extremism. The Center for Strategic and International Studies found that attacks by far-right perpetrators more than quadrupled between 2016 and 2017. Yet even as the threat of white-supremacist violence grew, it commanded little interest or acknowledgment from the Trump Administration. The Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, which was restructured and renamed in 2019, is dedicated to investigating extremism and domestic terrorism. Between 2017 and 2019, its operating budget was cut from twenty-one million dollars to less than three million, and the number of its full-time employees dwindled from forty to fewer than ten.

Instead of investigating white supremacists, the Trump Administration has surveilled the Black Lives Matter movement and other minority activists. According to New York University Law School’s Brennan Center for Justice, eighty-five percent of “countering violent extremism” grants under Trump have targeted marginalized and oppressed minority groups. In April of 2019, the F.B.I. announced a reduction in the number of categories used to catalogue acts of racially motivated violence, eliminating the specific category for white supremacists and introducing a vague one called “racially motivated extremism.”

Not only have white supremacists largely averted being disrupted or even investigated, but they also have had the comfort of seeing their racial fantasies expounded through the bully pulpit of Donald Trump and the wider mouthpiece of the Republican Party. Trump’s election clearly activated the white-racist fringe, sparking record numbers of hate crimes in 2017. A month after Trump was inaugurated, an Indian engineer named Srinivas Kuchibhotla was killed in a bar in Olathe, Kansas, by a white man who shouted racial epithets. On May 20, 2017, Richard Collins III, a twenty-three-year-old Black man, was stabbed to death in College Park, Maryland, by a white man who was a member of a Facebook group called Alt-Reich: Nation. This initial wave of violence peaked with the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017, which brought white-racist thugs from around the country to stop the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue and resulted in the murder of the activist Heather Heyer.

Every step of the way, Trump and the Republican Party have either ignored the threat of racism and violence from the hard right or egged it on. Consider how the G.O.P. rallied around Kyle Rittenhouse, who took a semi-automatic rifle to anti-police-brutality demonstrations in Kenosha, Wisconsin, last summer and killed two people. He was celebrated not only by the fringe right, which applauds violence in hopes of sparking a race war, but also by members of Congress. Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin and the chair of the homeland-security committee, refused to condemn Rittenhouse and spoke about the importance of “citizen soldiers.” In a surreal scene, Trump defended the seventeen-year-old killer from a lectern adorned with the Presidential seal, lending legitimacy to white vigilantes attacking B.L.M. protests. The misrepresentation of B.L.M. as an insurgency as opposed to a social movement has also validated the militarized response of radicalized police officers and the intrusion of white “citizen soldiers” like Rittenhouse to defend “their” America from anti-racist activists.

The convergences between the Republican Party, white supremacists, and white militias grew more numerous and more threatening the closer we came to Election Day. Republican officials evinced a growing proclivity for authoritarianism, actively trying to suppress African-American access to the ballot and insisting that their Party was the legitimate victor in the recent

elections. It is only a short hop from one form of political hostility to another, including the threat of political violence. Last December, Representative Madison Cawthorn, who has used white-nationalist symbols and rhetoric, told conservatives to “call your congressman and feel free—you can lightly threaten them.” Representative Mo Brooks introduced Trump at the rally that incited the riot. “Today is the day American patriots start taking down names and kicking some ass,” Brooks said. “Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for America?”

Such acts reflect the growing unity between establishment Republican Party and white supremacists, as well as between those groups and the police. In the past two elections, the Fraternal Order of Police, which claims to represent three hundred and fifty-five thousand police officers, has endorsed Trump. Last week, John Catanzara, the president of Chicago’s Fraternal Order of Police lodge, said that he believed that the election had been stolen and defended the rampage at the Capitol, saying that “there was no arson, there was no burning of anything, there was no looting, there was very little destruction of property.” He said that Wednesday’s events were “very different than what happened all across this country all summer long in Democratic-ran cities and nobody had a problem with that.”

Catanzara later apologized and said that his statement was “poorly worded.” But these are not fringe politics. They emanate from the center of the Republican Party. We have grown used to Trump’s racist banter, but the rhetoric of others has been even more revealing. In June of 2017, Representative Clay Higgins, of Louisiana, posted on Facebook: “The free world . . . all of Christendom . . . is at war with Islamic horror. Not a single radicalized Islamic suspect should be granted any measure of quarter. Their intended entry to the American homeland should be summarily denied. Every conceivable measure should be engaged to hunt them down. Hunt them, identify them, and kill them. Kill them all.” Former Iowa Representative Steve King, who spent eighteen years in Congress, was notoriously racist. In March of 2017, he captured the essence of his xenophobia, saying, “You cannot rebuild your civilization with somebody else’s babies. You’ve got to keep your birth rate up, and that you need to teach your children your values.”

This symmetry between the core politics of the Republican Party and the right is not a new development. Voting rights for African-Americans in the South meant that the openly racist invective of popular Southern Democrats was no longer politically prudent. And as those Southern racists migrated to the Republican Party, they traded in racist rhetoric for coded racism. As the Republican strategist Lee Atwater infamously put it: “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, ‘forced busing,’ ‘states’ rights,’ and all that stuff, and you’re getting so abstract. Now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things, and a by-product of them is Blacks get hurt worse than whites.”

Trump’s election upended these lessons, representing a return to racial politics not seen in the White House since Woodrow Wilson. When Trump has espoused his most vile racism—from telling four nonwhite members of Congress to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” to describing Baltimore as a “disgusting rat and rodent infested mess” where “no human being would want to live”—Republicans have claimed to be unaware of the comments or played down their significance. Not only has this provided Trump the latitude to escalate his verbal assaults, but it has also allowed the right-wing fringe to see its ideas entertained and ultimately accepted by the Party that controls two-thirds of the U.S. government.

**T**rumph’s Presidency has hastened the Republican Party’s drift toward the political fringe, but that doesn’t mean, as some have claimed, that the Party is about to implode. The demise of the Party was also predicted in 2015, when it became apparent

not only that Trump was a viable candidate but also that he was on the verge of being the Party's nominee for the Presidency. The Republicans were laughingstocks until they had the last laugh, in November, 2016. Some portion of House Republicans will likely continue to embrace the politics of the violent right wing, while those in the Senate try to revert to a more respectable brand of Republicanism, in which they champion the same mean-spirited policies but with decorum and civility. If the Trump brand proves to be more trouble than it's worth, as evidenced by the Republicans' hemorrhaging of suburban voters in 2016 and 2020, then expect a layer of the Party to become more vociferous in its opposition to Trump. But we can also expect Republicans to follow whichever way the wind is blowing to gather votes and hold power.

The most obvious consequence of this past week is that the right will be emboldened to return to Washington or state capitols. But there are other consequences to the violence, racism, and political hypocrisy that have been unleashed. Many expect the worst from politics, and the riot confirmed that. From Trump's inciting his followers to sack the Capitol to Republicans' standing aside or actively participating in the radical turn within the Party, the participation of police officers in the riot, and the disturbing failure by the Pentagon and the Capitol Police to defend the building, the notion that government officials represent or act on anything other than self-interest continues to be stretched thin.

For African-Americans, in particular, the riot at the Capitol affirmed the intractable racism and corruption of American police. For months, B.L.M. activists have been derided, by Democrats and Republicans, for initiating the demand to "defund the police." But, by the end of the siege on the Capitol, a mere thirteen people had been arrested. Meanwhile, millions watched this past summer not only as the police approached anti-racist activists with aggression and anger but also as many activists were beaten by police and then charged with felonies by police-friendly prosecutors. Surely there will be investigations into whether police support explains how right-wing protesters could have so easily penetrated the security perimeter of the Capitol. Some Capitol police were attacked by demonstrators, including Officer Brian D. Sicknick, who died from his injuries. Another officer who was at the Capitol, Howard Liebengood, appears to have died by suicide days later. But others may have been complicit in the siege. According to Representative Tim Ryan, two Capitol Police officers have been suspended, and between ten and fifteen other officers are under investigation for their potential roles in assisting rioters. Police officers from across the country who were off duty during the siege are being investigated for having participated.

Beyond the involvement of individual officers, there is a multitude of unanswered questions about why the Capitol was so lightly guarded even as the most powerful elected officials in the United States government met in a joint session of Congress. The former head of the Capitol Police, Steven Sund, who resigned in the aftermath, has said that his efforts to prepare for and then respond to the crisis were thwarted by officials in the House and the Senate and by the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense denied Sund's claims and released a timeline of its security planning for January 6th. Meanwhile, there has yet to be a single press briefing or any public commentary on the security debacle from the Department of Homeland Security or the White House.

For those who are too often either targeted or neglected by the state, federal authorities and the institutions that they represent have been further discredited. When the government seems to work for some while failing others, the prescribed methods of change, whether voting or other formal channels for reform, seem irrelevant or inconsequential. Certainly, when Republicans challenge the legitimacy of a vote because of robust Black turnout, it disempowers Black communities. When this political assault is combined with the government's failure to stem the COVID-19 crisis in Black communities and abandonment of poor and

working-class people as their jobs have disappeared, an uprising of the likes we saw this summer seems justified, if not inevitable, as a way to secure basic rights. There are wide and rippling impacts to the criminal malfeasance of the Republican Party.

The Democrats have offered very little as an alternative, as was demonstrated by the odd November election, in which Biden won at the top of the ticket, but the Party largely failed to meet its own expectations of making significant gains in Congress and in statehouses. With a concerted national focus on the stakes in the Georgia runoffs, once again voting-rights activists, led by Stacey Abrams, overcame the organized obstacles to voting and unbelievably flipped both seats, giving Democrats control of the U.S. Senate.

With control of both houses of Congress, the Democrats should be able to deliver on Biden's late-developing promises to provide stimulus checks of two thousand dollars, a well-financed and well-orchestrated plan to distribute and dispense COVID-19 vaccines, money to cities and states to help create safe conditions for the return to public schools, and vast reform of our broken electoral system. And this should just be the beginning. Democrats now have the votes to demonstrate the power of government to repair and provide in a time of crisis. If they bungle this effort with continued overtures to the disgraced Republican Party, even as its leaders persist in appealing to the worst of right-wing extremists, not only will the galvanizing efforts of Black activists in Georgia have been wasted, but an even-grimmer future will wait on the horizon. A failure of the Democratic Party to deliver during a time of unprecedented need would further validate the sense that electoral participation does not matter. Grassroots activists and other ordinary people will have to continue to push and cajole the Party establishment to think big and act boldly. We have to seize the time.

## READ MORE ABOUT THE ATTACK ON THE CAPITOL

- Donald Trump, the Inciter-in-Chief.
- He must be held accountable.
- An Air Force combat veteran was part of the mob in the Senate.
- The invaders enjoyed the privilege of not being taken seriously.
- The crisis of the Republican Party has only begun.
- A Pelosi staffer recounts the breach.
- Sign up for our daily newsletter for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.



*Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor is a contributing writer at The New Yorker. She is an assistant professor of African American Studies at Princeton University and the author of several books, including "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership," which was a 2020 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for history.*

