

Reflections on January 6th
by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

The horror of the assault on the Capitol Building still haunts many of us. Like Pearl Harbor or Nine/Eleven, it's a day that "will live in infamy." The first two events, however, were caused by foreign enemies and terrorists, while the attack on the Capitol was the product of President Trump's willful encouragement and the actions of domestic terrorists. This fact makes the events of January 6th even more chilling and worrisome for the future of the United States.

Thorough investigations will be necessary to discover and evaluate all the ramifications of this assault. Who planned this mob attack, and what groups took part and were responsible for the events of that afternoon? What were the causes of what appears to be a major failure in preparing for and preventing this dangerous effort to stop the House of Representatives and the Senate from certifying the Electoral College Votes of the fifty States? Finally, these investigations must lead to measures that will attempt to insure that an afternoon like January 6th will not happen again.



Beyond sorting out the complexities of how this assault on representative democracy happened, certain factors seem quite obvious. For one thing, the actual attack and the events leading up to it show that even in the United States democracy is fragile and cannot be taken for granted. We in this country have been prone to look on government coups or violence directed at democratic regimes in other countries as actions that can't happen here. We have often been a bit self righteous about the weaknesses of representative governments in other lands.

Now as other countries view and read about what happened here on January 6th, we can readily examine some of the evidence that led up to the assault on the Capitol. A first clue that all was not well with the political and governmental processes of "the land of the free" was the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016.

This loud mouthed product of failed businesses and "Reality TV" gained notoriety in 2015 by spouting lies about Obama's birthplace. He based his campaign on attacking immigrants, building a wall, and "making America great again," with the implication that he was talking about a white America. He easily defeated establishment Republicans like Jeb Bush in the primaries, and a review of his base-vote shows he amassed votes in small town rural America and working-class bastions like Youngstown, Ohio, where once high paying industrial jobs had disappeared years ago.

What Trump's success revealed was that many average Americans had given up on traditional politicians and a system that bailed out banks but did little to make life better for a declining working class. This election of a political outsider who offered scapegoats and easy answers really showed the need for repairing our political and governmental systems with reforms designed to restore public confidence in representative democracy. Reforms aimed at reducing

the influence of "big money" on the elected officials of both parties would constitute steps in the right direction.

Once Trump occupied the White House, his words and actions over a four year period really built a path toward what transpired on January 6th. Even in victory, he declared that Clinton's greater number of votes was due to fraud. Voter fraud became one his mantras for the rest of his term. In the 2020 campaign, he kept repeating at his rallies that fraudulent voting was the only way he could possibly lose to Joe Biden, and that voting by mail could easily be manipulated to bring about a rigged election. Then in the two month period after his loss to the former Vice President, he embarked on a daily campaign to overturn what he continually called "a stolen election." This campaign included both legal challenges in a series of court cases and dubious behind the scenes efforts to persuade Republican officials to somehow change the results in their states.

Trump's predilection for autocracy was evident from the beginning of his Presidency. In foreign affairs, he showed an affinity for dictators like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, and he never accepted the facts that he worked for the American people and that the Constitution provided restraints on his powers. Further, he expected Cabinet members and other federal officials to be his lackeys, and he fired them when they wouldn't play that role.

Two aspects of Trump's approach to governing must be addressed, because they reveal ways to nurture cult leadership, autocracy, and the establishment of an alternative reality. They are his daily lies about events, ideas and people, and his use of Twitter and other social media tools to directly speak to his base of supporters. Unfortunately there evolved a tendency even among his foes and the news media to fail to take seriously his constant lies and daily Tweets. In hindsight, however, the linking of the two allowed Trump to nurture his base, while not having to be accountable to a reality based on real facts.

From the beginning of his term, Trump trashed as "fake news" any news story, no matter how factual, that appeared to be critical of him or his policies. These repeated attacks on the press created an assumption among his base and Republican voters that they could dismiss as untrue any unfavorable reporting about the President or his Administration. By discrediting the news media among his supporters, Trump then could use his Twitter account plus his rallies to communicate his version of reality directly to his base.



Having a direct way to communicate repetitive lies to a large group of people provided the President with an effective way to create an alternative reality. The mob assault on the Capitol offers an example of how this alternative reality can be used to manipulate thousands of people to be outraged by "a stolen election" that in actual fact was fair and ably administered. Even after the tragic events of January 6th, a national poll recorded that forty-five percent of Republicans who were questioned blamed Joe Biden for the Capitol invasion.

Many of our public leaders throughout our history have recognized democracy's need for a free and healthy press or news media that keeps citizens informed about the actions of their elected representatives. In recent years, however, the press is in decline with many defunct newspapers, and an emerging social media has created a situation where people communicate their views without the benefit of the facts supplied by an accepted and healthy news media. We have just experienced how a would-be autocrat has taken advantage of this situation to promote a coup based on a steady diet of lies that led to the horrors of January 6th.



As this piece is written, the U.S. House of Representative is in the process of impeaching Donald Trump for the second time. By the time this article is published, Trump will be gone and Joe Biden will reside in the White House. As comforting as this fact is, it still leaves the problem of how to restore one reality with one set of facts. How do we revive and restore public confidence in the press and the news media in general. Adequately responding to these questions is a necessity for both decreasing our polarization and for the renewal of democracy in this country, but no simple solutions appear to be at hand. Nevertheless, diverse citizens of good will and brain power must be supported to come together to work on

these thorny communications issues. In a nation confronting huge and complex economic, social, and political problems, our current environment is still ripe for the emergence of another would-be autocrat with simple answers. Could it happen here? I think January 6th gave us the grim answer to that question.