

Trump is gone. But to repair US democracy, he needs to be held accountable.



While Donald Trump's presidency is now in the rear-view mirror, his legacy of insurrection and the rejection of the rule of law remains. US democracy remains vulnerable writes [Effie G. H. Pedaliu](#), and Trump will need to be made accountable for his actions to deter future anti-democratic insurgents.

The 2021 US Presidential inauguration contained many amazing firsts. The oldest man (at 78) to become President, President Joseph R. Biden Jr and the first woman and also woman of colour to become Vice President, Kamala Harris, were sworn in. If one was to look solely at the event, ageism, sexism and racism appeared to be on the wane.

Yet, an eerily quiet DC and former President Donald J. Trump's failure to attend the inauguration of his successor were reflections of the challenges facing the US and the Biden administration – a raging COVID-19 health crisis, a profound economic crisis, national disunity and diminished international standing.

Trump's 'morbid symptoms'

Trump's handling of the transition of power and his pursuit of his 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) and 'America First' agendas, have harmed his country's sociopolitical fabric and its standing. Transitioning from Trump to Biden was one of those moments in history that were aptly described by Antonio Gramsci when he [wrote](#) '... in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. Trump led to the manifestation of the most gruesome of morbid societal symptoms, namely the violent invasion of the US Capitol on 6 January by a mob of his supporters carrying the Swastika and the Confederate flag alongside the Stars and Stripes rampaging through the Capitol Rotunda where the slain President Abraham Lincoln had lain in state in 1865. It would have been absurd had it not been so deadly and consequential. US federal prosecutors have [called](#) these events a 'violent insurrection that attempted to overthrow the US Government'.

In his determination to hold on to power by any means, Trump contested the legitimacy of the electoral result of November 2020. His insistence that the Democrats had 'stolen the election' with fraudulent votes in those urban areas where African Americans reside, has reignited racial tensions. In '[booby trapping](#)' the presidency of his successor he has destroyed his own legacy. His actions have succeeded in securing him an indelible place in American history as the first US President to be impeached twice and the only US President since the birth of the Republic to be [impeached](#) for inciting insurrection. His disdain for the rule of law and his attraction to 'alternative facts' have exposed America's dark side and convinced [30 percent](#) of the US electorate that the election was 'stolen'.

Trump's appeal to emotions, his courting of conspiracy theories, falsehoods and his deft use of social media platforms combined with his cavalier approach to democratic norms enabled him to turn his name into an '[ism](#)'. His opportunistic embrace of the Republican Party and his equivocations over issues of race helped to normalize ideas considered to be beyond the pale and gave opportunity to white supremacists to endear themselves with 'the base' and expand recruitment. Trumpism hijacked a party that was and is fearful of its prospects in a rapidly changing America. Ever since President Lyndon B. Johnson lost the American South by implementing the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the Republican Party has been moving inexorably and uncritically towards accommodating ultra-right-wing ideologies in seeking electoral advantage. In 2016, Trump harnessed domestic woes, insecurities, prejudices and paranoia to drive an insidious culture war enabling him to galvanize his 'base' into an election winning force for the Republicans.

By shifting ever southwards, literally and metaphorically, the Republicans entered into a Faustian pact with Trump thinking that they could control and moderate him, committing the same mistake German and Italian conservatives made with Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s. Once more, it backfired badly, and today the party bears little resemblance to the GOP which once accommodated both liberals and conservatives. Now, few traditional Republicans remain. The majority of Republican lawmakers seem not to know that their party had its roots in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and that its rallying call in 1856 had been its opposition to Democrat attempts 'to nationalise slavery'.

The fight for the soul of the Republican Party has begun, but the MAGA cult seems to have a hold over the actions of many Republican legislators. For now, the party is still hostage to Trump. A purge of its extremists by party leaders seems unlikely, as they appear to have prioritized their political careers above the well-being of their party. Splits in the past did not serve the Republicans well. The 1912 schism lost them Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive wing for good.

The importance of US institutions

Since 17 September 1787, the American Constitution has enabled the US, despite the experience of a Civil War, to build admirably resilient democratic institutions. Success has rested on US Presidents honouring their oath and guaranteeing a peaceful and orderly transfer of power to their successors. Respect for constitutionality is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. President Richard M. Nixon recognised this during Watergate and although he contemplated the abyss, he chose to do his duty and resigned. Trump instead chose to condemn American democracy to 'the beasts' of intolerance, domestic terrorism and discord.

Yet, if there is any country that is adequately equipped to overcome such direct threats to its democracy, it is the US. Its democratic system and institutions are robust, and they continued to function seamlessly and effectively despite President Trump's manoeuvres to undermine them. The judiciary, even Republican leaning federal and Supreme Court judges appointed by President Trump, adjudged the elections to have been fair and valid. As soon as the Capitol was made safe, both the Senate and the House [reconvened](#) to validate the election result and usher in normality. Many Republicans who had aimed to challenge the result changed their minds after the insurrection. The FBI's fears that the events of 6 January could have been a mere dress rehearsal for coordinated insurrectionary activity against state capitals as well as in DC in the run up to the Biden inauguration, thankfully did not materialize. In view, however, of the delayed deployment of the National Guard on 6 January the debate has [reopened](#) on how much longer DC can continue to be denied statehood and therefore the ability to defend the city and its inhabitants.



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"President Trump Travels to Texas" by Trump White House Archived is Public Domain.

For many Americans, it has not been easy to process the quasi-apocalyptic events of 6 January. They have been accustomed to thinking that such things take place only in far-away countries. They will have to learn, now, to defend their democracy. Democracy cannot be taken for granted, not because it is fragile, but because it requires constant preparedness to prevent opportunistic autocratic demagogues from usurping it either by force or the ballot box. Trump will have to be held accountable and made an example of so that his punishment serves as a deterrent to any similarly minded Presidents in the future and to send a clear message to potential insurgents that such behaviour will not be tolerated. History shows that lasting national unity cannot be achieved without accountability for infractions against democracy.

What's next for American democracy?

The uncertainties hanging over America will persist. It will take time to repair the damage done to its democracy by the flood of disinformation and a pandemic that has helped abet radicalization. Domestic terrorism can easily go underground beyond the reach of re-education and de-radicalization programs. Still, an African American pastor and a Jewish man won the Georgia Senate run-off elections. These landmark victories suggest that American democracy can withstand the long-term effects of Trump's ambush and fears of change and the new.

What happens to the US resonates immediately around the world. Any diminution of American moral authority correlates with a decreased capacity to protect human rights and democracy. Trump has wounded democracy worldwide. Democracy's enemies, autocratic regimes with scant regard for human rights, have grown stronger by [capitalizing](#) on Trumpian isolationism and emulating his methods. Such regimes have gleefully looked upon America's difficulties while America's European allies were left reeling as they recognised the risk to something they had long taken for granted.

Trump's direct challenge to democracy came at a time when COVID-19 is testing the resilience of democratic societies and the rule of law. It has exposed new vulnerabilities. The sedition handbook has been re-written for the social media age. The 'strategy of tension' has been revamped. The 'Bastille-storming mob' has displaced the need to infiltrate security forces and thus makes charges of conspiracy more difficult to prove. An alarmed Josep Borrell Fontelles, the EU's top diplomat, [called](#) the assault on the Capitol 'a wake up call for all democracy advocates'.

The Biden Presidency brings hope that competence, decency, predictability, and cooperation will return. Rather than dwelling on the enormous difficulties he has inherited, President Biden has [offered](#) a way out of polarisation. 'Politics, he said, 'doesn't have to be a raging fire destroying everything in its path. Every disagreement doesn't have to be a cause for total war'.

The significance of his message cannot be overstated. The Biden administration understands that it needs to tackle the pandemic and unite the nation in order to re-establish America's moral authority and to restore its international standing. A rewind is not possible, so until healing has occurred, democracy remains vulnerable not only in the US, but everywhere.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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