

Decisive Action Must Follow the Failed Coup Attempt

By Don Sutherland

In early September 1787, the Constitution Convention was nearing a conclusion. On September 5, the Philadelphia *American News* reported, “We hear that the Convention propose to adjourn next week, after laying America under such obligations to them, for their long, painful and disinterested labors to establish her liberty upon a permanent basis, as no time can ever cancel.” Distanced by time from those early days in the American Republic, a charged mob attempted to overturn a free election and “cancel” that liberty.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, some Republicans who have now distanced themselves from President Trump remain in denial of what just took place. Senator Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania asserted on Sunday that no one could have anticipated what happened. Former Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney who resigned as Special Envoy for Northern Ireland offered a similar defense arguing that those who foresaw the events were making judgments through a negative “media filter.”

Reality is different. In April 2020, President Trump called for mobs to “liberate” numerous states from their elected governments after those governments put in place curbs aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19. In October, the FBI revealed a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Although no direct link to President Trump’s tweets calling for ‘liberation’ were disclosed, the nature of the tweets demonstrated Trump’s willingness to overturn legitimate elected government. The plot revealed latent dangers were one to engage in incitement. The defense that no one could have anticipated the events of January 6 or that one could only reach such conclusions from a “media filter” does not withstand the scrutiny of evidence.

Going forward, false appeals for unity aimed at heading off the urgent and necessary effort to hold people—President Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani, Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley, among many others—fully accountable for the failed coup attempt need to be rejected. Safeguarding the constitutional framework takes precedence over all other political considerations. It is that framework that makes policy and politics possible within the context of elected self-government.

Similarly, false appeals to “election integrity” need to be knocked down. Calls for bodies or commissions to examine the election need to be rejected outright. The overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates unequivocally that the 2020 election was free, fair, and transparent. The creation of such bodies would only provide misplaced legitimacy to the “Big Lie” of a “stolen election” around which the coup attempt was organized.

More broadly, the Trumpist movement needs to be discredited, disgraced, and delegitimized. Without decisive and sustained efforts to hold those accountable for inciting or abetting the failed coup and discrediting the broader movement that made it possible, the nation’s democratic government and institutions would remain in danger.

The lessons of history are clear about the dangers of acting weakly or insufficiently. In a cable to the U.S. State Department dated September 17, 1930, the American Chargé d’Affaires to Germany wrote of dramatic electoral gains of the Nazi Party:

The most unfortunate feature thereof, in my opinion, is the grounds—or rather lack of grounds—on which this party was able to make a successful appeal to such an enormous number of citizens... [T]here is no doubt that last Sunday’s [September 14] vote was... a body-blow to the republican form of government, and it is a clear indication of the... dangerous mentality at present possessed by a large proportion of the population.

The events during Spring 2020 and then following the 2020 election, which culminated in a failed coup attempt, were a series of body blows to the American Republic. How the nation responds could be critical to how things will evolve in the months and years ahead.

Gordon presciently continued:

The body-blow is not necessarily a knock-out blow, but the fact remains that some thirteen odd million Germans have by their votes declared their hostility to the present republican form of government. The danger is clearly there, and cannot lightly be overlooked or explained away as some elements—including certain official circles—seem to be evincing a not unnatural tendency to do; but yet a way remains open for all sincere supporters of the Republic to make common cause against this danger. If at such a juncture as this they fail to sink their personal and doctrinal differences, then indeed a serious situation will present itself.

Will the nation’s democratic framework and institutions recover fully from the terrible events of January 6? Will that framework face additional challenges that weaken it further until it collapses? The measures taken in response to the failed coup will have great influence on the nation’s trajectory in the years ahead.