

United States Continues on Dangerous Course

By Don Sutherland

History is scarred from failures to act decisively or sufficiently in the face of rising peril. Weak or insufficient action has arisen from factors that include bad leadership, inability to learn from the past, and institutional decay. Today, the United States remains locked on a course that could lead to national tragedy from its failure to respond to the opening acts of American Revolution 2.0.

If anything, American Revolution 2.0 is gaining force. The January 6, 2021 insurrection that was at the heart of defeated President Donald Trump's self-coup attempt was its "Lexington" and "Concord." Following the violent assault on the Capitol that almost overturned the nation's constitutional republic, right-wing Talk Radio—the "pamphlets" of American Revolution 2.0—continued to relentlessly push an intolerant message, malicious propaganda, and disinformation aimed at dividing the nation's people. All of that has furthered this ongoing illiberal revolution.

More than two years later, in large part due to the combination of an increasingly supine Republican Party electorate and a legal system that appears insufficiently robust to hold President Trump accountable for his actions, Donald Trump is sailing toward the Republican Presidential nomination. In practical terms, that race is all but over.

Even a late-year conviction, if it ever arrives, could be unable to thwart his electoral ambitions. It could even embolden his supporters to turn out at the polls producing American Revolution 2.0's "Saratoga." In other words, Election 2024 could become the turning point that puts the illiberal elements seeking to seize the nation's political soul and redefine its constitutional order in a position to triumph.

In the early stages of Campaign 2024, the contrast between Donald Trump's wild posturing aimed at demonstrating strength and the almost feeble effort to counteract the significance of the threat he poses is shocking. A robust and energetic campaign with an unrelenting message about what is truly at stake has not been attempted, much less materialized.

President Biden's bitter protests about the nature of passing media coverage related to his past handling of classified documents is a dangerous detour from the challenge at hand. His implicit faith that a weakened legal system will contain the mortal threat posed by the Trump candidacy is risky complacency. Neither approach is an act of leadership. Both approaches undermine leadership credibility and reinforce the Trump campaign's growing narrative that the Biden Presidency is a failed Presidency.

That the opposite is true is irrelevant. Voter perceptions will determine the election outcome. Already, polls show that those perceptions diverge widely from reality in cases. One notable example concerns the state of the economy. Job growth remains robust and the nation remains at or near full employment. Meanwhile, polls suggest Americans believe the economy is not doing well. A recent NBC News Poll showed 55% of Americans favoring Trump (the first President since Hoover to preside over a net loss of jobs) and 33% favoring Biden on the economy. Even on the issue of preserving democracy, Biden held a razor thin 43%-41% edge. Should those

perceptions harden, as often happens late in the campaign season, the opportunity to overcome the Trump threat could be lost.

The questions raised back in January 2021 reverberate with even more urgency today. 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?

To date, the emerging answers are not encouraging. The measures taken in response to the failed coup have fallen far short of what is needed. Those failures, if not corrected, will have a great impact on the nation's trajectory in the years ahead.

Saturday, February 10, 2024 furnished a fresh reminder of the stakes involved. *The Washington Post* reported:

Former president Donald Trump ramped up his attacks on NATO on Saturday, claiming he suggested to a foreign leader that he would encourage Russia to do "whatever the hell they want" to member countries he views as not spending enough on their own defense.

A day after Trump's comments, the White House had little to say. There was no national Presidential address despite the gravity of the threat and its profound significance. There was no attempt to warn the nation that Trump's menace is not limited to foreign policy and, if not turned aside, could topple the nation's entire constitutional framework. Instead, the U.S continued to sleepwalk toward potential national catastrophe.

Back on December 1, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln declared:

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history... The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation... We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.

Today, that catastrophe is still avoidable. With vigorous leadership—fortified with the spirit Lincoln described—that catastrophe can still be averted. But somewhere down the road, there may well lie a tipping point from which recovery may no longer be possible. Election Day 2024 could be that tipping point.