

U.S. Nears a Dangerous Historical Moment

By Don Sutherland

Last week, both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump essentially locked up their respective parties' nominations for President. A surreal general election campaign lies ahead.

Trump poses a gathering menace to the U.S. constitutional framework. Despite his self-coup attempt on January 6, 2021, he has taken a big step toward regaining the White House. He has reached that position from the combination of a cultlike following and an increasingly feeble U.S. legal system.

Should Trump prevail, he will likely govern ineffectively and chaotically, but he could do far worse. He would be positioned to free the January 6 insurrectionists, impose restrictions on news organizations, exact vengeance on his political rivals, and even extend his term in Office.

Counterarguments that the Constitution bars such acts or that the courts would block him would be theoretically correct but defective. The impotence of the legal system to hold him accountable for the events of January 6 highlights the practical limits of those arguments. Without willing people and institutions capable of enforcing the Constitution's terms, the Constitution becomes little more than a piece of paper stripped of its vitality and substance.

Donald Trump is a charismatic demagogue. He is skilled in building and sustaining a fanatical following. Despite a fragmented and disjointed speaking style, he mesmerizes his crowds, transports them to an alternate reality, and nurtures among them an intense thirst for power and a burning craving for vengeance. He persuades them that he, alone, is both national prophet and national savior.

They believe him. They embrace him. They love him. They are willing to do just about anything for him. They are his "army" in a nation awash in firearms.

American author Sinclair Lewis understood the nature of such charismatic figures. His novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, featured the charismatic Berzilius "Buzz" Windrip who played the part Donald Trump does today.

Something in the intensity with which Windrip looked at his audience, looked at all of them, his glance slowly taking them in from the highest-perched seat to the nearest, convinced them that he was talking to each individual, directly and solely; that he wanted to take each of them into his heart; that he was telling them the truths, the imperious and dangerous facts, that had been hidden from them...

Windrip prevailed in the 1936 election in Lewis' novel. Shortly thereafter, American democracy was lost.

In his two years of dictatorship, Berzilius Windrip daily became more a miser of power. He continued to tell himself that his main ambition was to make all citizens healthy, in purse and

mind, and that if he was brutal it was only toward fools and reactionaries who wanted the old clumsy systems.

Worse, there was no happy conclusion to Lewis' novel. The American Republic was not reborn. Windrip was not defeated in a subsequent election. Instead, he was overthrown. Dictatorship continued.

With diminishing prospects that the U.S. legal system possesses the vigor necessary to hold Trump accountable for his earlier acts, the electorate could be the last "check" to block his return to the Presidency. Even electoral defeat might not be sufficient to deter him from rejecting the outcome, much less to discourage his followers from attempting to restore him to power. Indeed, he has warned of a "bloodbath" should he be defeated.

A Trump victory almost certainly would have damaging consequences for an American democratic system that already has been weakened by years of constitutional retrogression and dealt a severe shock by Trump's 2021 self-coup attempt. A Trump win could bring about the sudden collapse of the U.S. system of government that was crafted in 1787 and has continued since then.

For now, Americans have not yet become helpless bystanders capable only of witnessing the passing of U.S. history. They still retain the ability to shape the course of events. With courage and foresight, they can still ensure that the American Republic will survive its latest challenge.