

A Coup Attempt and a Fascist Riot: What Does it Mean for the United States?

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Phil Hearse deepens the analysis of the fascist riot in Washington earlier this week.

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In the immediate aftermath of Trump's electoral defeat, one leading Lexiter took to Facebook to have a condescending swipe at the authors of *Creeping Fascism* – without naming them. [1] The creeping fascism thesis, he said, disorientated socialist activists. The course of events, he declared, is the best judge of theories, and on that basis, we can see how silly the idea of creeping fascism actually is.

Oops! Six weeks later, we can move on from this particular polemical pratfall to some really serious people – the Channel 4 News journalistic team. From the turmoil outside the Capitol, Siobhan Kennedy declared, 'Trump may have gone, but Trumpism is not defeated.' Krishnan Gurfuj-Murthy talked about Trump having 'fascistic tendencies', and his interviewee, Professor Tim Snyder from Harvard, said the mob invading the Capitol were 'obviously' fascists.

The dominant discourse among the US left and liberal sources have been that we should not underestimate the extreme right in the United States [2]. But this is still contested by many, both in the States and elsewhere. So was it fascism? Was it an attempted coup? And is Trumpism an accidental nightmare that can be now dispatched to unpleasant historical memory? Is there really a danger of fascism in the USA?

Who knows what Trump was thinking on 6 January, but what he has been engaged in has been an attempt at a judicial-political coup, not a military coup or mass insurrection. The political-judicial route failed in 62 court hearings and the Pentagon made it clear that it would not support a coup.

So my guess is that last Wednesday was not a planned coup, but something that happened because the Capitol police took no proper precautions (for reasons we can guess at), *and*, once it started, Trump refused to call in the National Guard and allowed it to unfold from the safety of the White House.

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But these are details. The 6 January rioters were a motley crew, but a big one, with tens of thousands of members mainly organised in well-armed militias. These are people from the extreme

right who want to crush bourgeois democracy, are happy to do it through force of arms, and are organised around a deeply reactionary racist, xenophobic, misogynist, and homophobic agenda – in other words, they are fascists.

The reactionary electoral bloc

What is truly significant in the present situation is that, despite Trump's Thursday speech distancing himself from the rioters, 45% of Republicans in the country at large support them. In addition, despite Mike Pence and some other Senators saying that Biden has been duly elected and we need to move on, a large majority of Republican Representatives in the House voted to support repudiating the Pennsylvania vote and sending it back for a 'recount'. In other words, a large majority supported the attempted Trump judicial-political coup. And this was just hours after the pro-Trump rioters had rampaged through the Capitol!

The reason is clear, and it's exactly the same reason that Ted Cruz and others have come out in support of Trump. The Republican politicians are worried about their base and don't want to get dumped by their local parties. Cruz and others who want to be the next Republican presidential candidate know they have to appeal to Trump's base. They all know that, despite everything, Donald J Trump is overwhelmingly the most powerful Republican politician and will continue to be so after he leaves office; that he has massive support among Republicans; that 74 million people voted for him in November 2020.

A key issue here is the relationship between the militia rabble represented by the Capitol rioters and the mass of registered Republicans and Republican voters.

In advancing the idea of creeping fascism, Neil Faulkner and the other authors had in mind a key concept developed in Robert O Paxton's seminal work on fascism [3]:

Fascism in power is a compound, a powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national socialist, and radical right ingredients, bonded together by common enemies and common passions for a regenerated, energised and purified nation, whatever the cost to free institutions and the rule of law. The precise proportions of this mixture are the result of processes: choices, compromises, alliances, rivalries. Fascism in action looks more like a network of relationships than a fixed essence.

Fascism in action

Yes 'fascism in power', but also 'fascism in action'. Let's not forget that the radical right in pre-1933 Germany also encompassed the National Peoples Party (DNPV), closely allied with the *Stahlhelm* paramilitary organisation – both real mass organisations. In 1931 the DNPV joined the Nazis in the Harzburg Front [4] and eventually dissolved itself in June 1933 (into the Nazi Party). The *Stahlhelm* was merged with the SA and eventually dissolved.

So in the United States, the extreme right represents a spectrum, from outlandish and ineffectual Nazis, through a myriad of fascist and fascistic groups, and into the mainstream of the Republican Party itself. Looming over all of them is the figure of Trump himself, with enormous financial resources.

From now on we can expect a permanent campaign against Biden and the Democrats by the Republican and fascist right on a series of fronts at the state level, especially on abortion. They will

be preparing to come back in 2024, perhaps under a more intelligent leader.

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As many people have recognised, the conflictual alliance between the fascist right and the hard-right Republicans (who include near-fascists in their ranks) will go on. As Benjamin McKean puts it:

While Trump supporters apparently planted pipe bombs at both the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee headquarters, the coalition between the radical right and the institutional right will continue. Institutional Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell may deplore yesterday's actions, but it's clear they too would have contested the election results and denied Biden the presidency if the margin was closer. As it stands, two-thirds of House Republicans voted to support rejecting Pennsylvania's electoral votes based on the same conspiracy theories espoused by the rioters who ejected them from their chamber.

Moreover:

This kind of dance between the far right and the electoral right is nothing new. Right-wing political parties can deplore right-wing street violence while using the disorder caused by reactionary mobs as another occasion for extending power, justified by the need to restore order. The Capitol police oscillating between swinging batons at the Trump mob and letting them have their way is an apt symbol of this dynamic.

Creeping fascism and the police state

Which brings us to the question of the state apparatus. Dick Cheney was one of six former Secretaries of Defence mobilised by the Pentagon against the attempt to involve the military in a coup attempt. But the array of US police and border guard forces, numbering hundreds of thousands, are trenchantly pro-Trump and pillars of the racist order. Moreover, it turns out that a large number of National Guard volunteers have a full-time job in one of the increasingly paramilitarised local or national police forces – FBI, state troopers, border guards, DEAS, etc.

In the late 1950s, US President Eisenhower was unable to use the Arkansas National Guard to enforce school desegregation and had to send paratroopers instead. The collaboration between police and fascist militias during Black Lives Matter's high point, and more generally, is well established. Trump has massive support among the police and many in the police sympathise with the fascist militias.

The creeping fascism thesis does not claim that the United States under Trump was fascist, or that he succeeded in bringing every arm of the state apparatus under his control. We talked always about the process and the trends/dangers in the situation that are now on open display.

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The far-right and fascists in France and Italy are waiting in the wings. An Italian government based on the Lega and the Brothers of Italy is a real possibility in the next period. Macron is running scared of Marine Le Pen in France, aping her policies in his attacks on Muslims, while opening up informal channels of discussion via his ministers and her niece.

The question is what we do about it. Anti-racism and anti-fascism is never enough. Whatever the exact tactics, an anti-capitalist programme (i.e. a *de facto* revolutionary programme) has to be popularised society-wide. You can't build a governmental alternative on an 'anti' basis, but only on a positive alternative. As the pandemic engenders economic and social crisis and collapse, huge numbers of the poor and dispossessed will turn to the fascist and extreme right if an alternative is not built.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

- Anticapitalist Resistance. 9 January 2021. Updated 10 January 2021:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/a-coup-attempt-and-a-fascist-riot-what-does-it-mean-for-the-united-states>
 - *Creeping Fascism: What it is and How to Fight* it can be purchased here:
<https://prruk.org/product/creeping-fascism-what-it-is-and-how-to-fight-it/>
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Footnotes

- [1] The authors of the Second Edition were Neil Faulkner, Seema Syeda, Samir Dathi, and myself.
- [2] ESSF (article 56411), [United States: We Underestimate the Far Right at Our Own Peril](#).
- [3] Robert O. Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, Penguin Books, 2005.
- [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harzburg_Front