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Former President Donald Trump speaks to supporters at the "Rally to Protect Our Elections" hosted by Turning Point Action in Phoenix July 24. (Wikimedia Commons/The Star News Network/Gage Skidmore)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Rarely does an essay in a newspaper make such a remarkable impression as did Robert Kagan's essay in The Washington Post this past weekend titled "Our constitutional crisis is already here." I encourage everyone to read it in its entirety, but these are the three sections that most grabbed my attention.

First, his bracing opening:

> The United States is heading into its greatest political and constitutional crisis since the Civil War, with a reasonable chance over the next three to four years of incidents of mass violence, a breakdown of federal authority, and the division of the country into warring red and blue enclaves. The warning signs may be obscured by the distractions of politics, the pandemic, the economy and global crises, and by wishful thinking and denial.

Why have honest and decent people who happen to be conservative Republicans assented to laws that promise to make elections prone to political manipulation? Why are Democrats bickering among themselves when they need to pass some safeguards for our electoral process? And to make sure that government is seen to work for the people and not just for the plutocrats?

Second, Kagan's frightening historical analogy:

> As has so often been the case in other countries where fascist leaders arise, their would-be opponents are paralyzed in confusion and amazement at this charismatic authoritarian. They have followed the standard model of appeasement, which always begins with underestimation.

We forget that German President Paul von Hindenburg thought he would be able to control Adolph Hitler once he named him chancellor in 1933. We forget that there

was no "March on Rome" by Mussolini's black shirts in 1922: The thugs gathered outside the city and could have been stopped by the army. The fascist leader got to Rome by train and King Victor Emmanuel III invited him to form a government. Later, the myth of the March on Rome was created. The acquiescence of the Western liberal democracies to the rearmament of Germany is too well-known to need repeating and has forever turned an otherwise useful word, appeasement, into a derisive and foul concept.

For those of us who have opposed Donald Trump from the start, the third most important thing Kagan writes has to do with Trump's supporters and true American exceptionalism. He writes:

> Most Trump supporters are good parents, good neighbors and solid members of their communities. Their bigotry, for the most part, is typical white American bigotry, perhaps with an added measure of resentment and a less filtered mode of expression since Trump arrived on the scene. But these are normal people in the sense that they think and act as people have for centuries. They put their trust in family, tribe, religion and race. Although zealous in defense of their own rights and freedoms, they are less concerned about the rights and freedoms of those who are not like them. That, too, is not unusual. What is unnatural is to value the rights of others who are unlike you as much as you value your own.
>
> As it happens, however, that is what the American experiment in republican democracy requires. It is what the Framers meant by "republican virtue," a love of freedom not only for oneself but also as an abstract, universal good; a love of self-government as an ideal; a commitment to abide by the laws passed by legitimate democratic processes; and a healthy fear of and vigilance against tyranny of any kind.

Liberal democracy takes work. The National Education Association published a report in 2017 on the decline in civics education over the years, a decline that has cost us dearly. The professionalization of political campaigns, beginning in the 1970s, has severed elections from governance in a way they were not before, leading to cynicism and accelerating polarization. Neoliberalism sent blue collar jobs overseas, and neither party found the will to do much about it, leaving large swaths

of working poor feeling disconnected from the political process altogether, ripe targets for an authoritarian.

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At a Sept. 27 webinar co-sponsored by Boston University's Global Development Policy Center and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Damon Silvers, policy director at the AFL-CIO, spoke about the neoliberal trade ideology, saying its "fundamental feature was a race to the bottom on wages." He said:

> What the Biden worker-centered approach really is is a return to the philosophy that animated the post-war settlement and the Bretton Woods agreements — the idea that international economic structures and policies must have democratic legitimacy, they must support broad-based global economic growth, and most of all they must support rising real wages.

Then came a warning akin to Kagan's:

> The events of recent years should make it very clear that the alternative to President Biden's approach is not a return to the neoliberal mythology of the 1990s. Plan B is not the 1990s. Plan B is the 1930s — the rise of authoritarianism inside the world's major economies, and strife among them.

The stakes could scarcely be higher, and the principal responsibility for saving the country from a Trumpian future lies with Republican leaders. They have policy differences with President Joe Biden and the Democrats, but American democracy has always allowed for the adjudication of policy differences. This is not about policy, but about the prospect of a fascist takeover and the end of liberal democracy. Kagan writes:

> Yet whatever the legitimacy of Republican critiques of Biden, there is a fundamental disingenuousness to it all. It is a dodge. Republicans focus on China and critical race theory and avoid any mention of Trump, even as the party works to fix the next election in his favor. The left hand professes to know nothing of what the right hand is doing.

They know. They just don't know what to do about it, at least not anything that will not cost them their careers. Profiles in courage are in short supply.

Biden's decision not to assert executive privilege concerning documents and testimony that might shed light on Trump's actions on Jan. 6 is significant because it recognizes that we can't treat Trump and the threat he poses the way we normally confront problems. His threat is altogether different and more dangerous.

Democrats need to exercise self-discipline and come together and pass Biden's two infrastructure bills so that the American people can witness a positive difference in their lives as those child tax credits get deposited, and good construction jobs open up, and day care becomes more affordable for parents and provides better pay for those who work in that field. Proposals for unpopular policies need to wait until we know our democracy is safe from the Trumpian threat, as Michael Lind argued at the Jewish magazine Tablet recently.

Those who run campaigns need to reach beyond the base: If a few thousand votes in a handful of states had been cast differently, Trump would still be in the White House.

Kagan's essay is a warning. It is 1932, he is telling us.