

Ryan Brockhaus: The Capitol Protests and the Future of the US

On the 6th of January, tens of thousands of Trump supporters gathered at the Capitol Mall in Washington DC to protest the official confirmation in Congress of Joe Biden's victory in the November presidential election. To many of these Trump supporters, numerous instances of fraud and mail-in ballot harvesting (many of them unsubstantiated and debunked after further investigation) had occurred to swing the November 3rd election in favor Biden and thus depriving Donald Trump of reelection. This gathering, dubbed "Save America Rally" was headlined by the appearance of President Trump who demanded his supporters continue fighting to stop the steal of the election, which he claims had won in a landslide. What resulted after the nearly 70-minute speech was the storming of the US Capitol by hundreds of attendees who simply overran security personnel tasked with protecting the grounds. Multiple windows were smashed and the ensuing siege forced government officials to flee to underground bunkers in fear for their safety. The ensuing melee resulted in five people dead (one directly from the violence inside the capitol), dozens hurt including multiple capitol police and security officers, and a nation left bewildered and confused about what they were witnessing on live television.

The behavior and rhetoric by Trump since the election will forever tarnish his tenure as president and cast a dark cloud over many of the would-be positive policies of his tenure. Milestones in tax reform, Middle East peace negotiations, and the record-low unemployment rate leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic will be dwarfed by his handling of the election loss and his hand in fueling the fire that led to the January 6th insurrection. Internationally, the siege on Capitol Hill delivers a heavy blow to the traditional leadership role the US has enjoyed for over a century and may diminish America's projection of exemplifying a stable democratic republic in the world. As the dust clears from Trump's exit, a clearer picture will appear for us in the coming weeks and months to analyze the extent of damage to this reputation.

Despite this, the events that transpired on Capitol Hill show us less about the Trump legacy or the MAGA phenomena in politics and more about the overall socio-cultural state of the nation. Much like the events of the 1960s, current divisions in America have widened over the last decade. Differences on issues like abortion, the second amendment, freedom of speech, and the role of the federal government have always been present among the American body politic. But add the availability and use of social media and the contention can devolve into toxic hostility.

Additionally, mainstream news media in America have taken a much more partisan tone and appear heavily favored to one political ideology. Recently, several mainstream polling agencies have confirmed just that; the media in the US slants heavily toward liberal or left-wing talking points, thus alienating and disenfranchising nearly half of the population. Politically charged rhetoric typically reserved for pundits on Fox News and MSNBC are now used regularly in mainstream networks like CBS and ABC, which has driven many to unreliable alternative news outlet for their daily consumption. The result leads to a further distortion of facts meant to cater to one's specific ideology and further polarization of society.

Yet, the real issue in America goes beyond these differences and, to be certain, such divisiveness did not start with Donald Trump. It was not long ago that many conservatives levied accusations of President Obama being un-American or a communist in disguise after passing the Affordable Care Act (otherwise known as Obamacare) or his insensitive comments following the shootings of numerous young African American men. No, the real issue is that the socio-cultural cleavage at the heart of the United States is growing so rapidly that it is increasingly hard to bridge the divide. This is plainly evident in the vast political, economic, and social differences between the coastal regions of the east and west and the rest of the country. For reasons that cannot be explained in a short op-ed, regions like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are becoming more international, more secular, more tech-centered, and more disconnected from the rest of the country. Again, this is not a new phenomenon and America is certainly not the only case in this kind of disparity. However, it feels to many that the institutions set in place to bring each region in the country together, regardless of political affiliations are eroding from political gamesmanship and self-righteousness. As a result, many in the country feel that their concerns for unity and their core values, regardless of political ideology are being trampled on by an increasingly insensitive elite. Again, such sentiments have only grown with the Trump presidency.

By recognizing the various forces at play which drove the events of January 6th, three things must happen to begin the healing process in the United States. And although they sound like simplistic directives, they nonetheless must happen to prevent the country from tearing itself apart. First, President Biden must make a conscious effort in bringing the rhetorical temperature down. Although Trump was not the most political polarizing president, he was certainly one of the most combative and incendiary we have ever had. Speaking more softly to both your supporters and

detractors may seem like an elementary task, but it is one that is very important and has been increasingly difficult to find in Washington.

Second, the American media must realize that it bears a large portion of responsibility for the current lack of civil discourse in the country. Even as the events on Capitol Hill unfolded on live TV, CNN host Anderson Cooper went out of his way to label those attending the event as the type of people who go to Olive Garden to eat dinner and stay at the Holiday Inn when they travel. To be clear, criticism of the unfolding events was indeed warranted, but the denigrating insinuation that people present at the rally are simpletons who eat and sleep at low-cost chain establishments is far beneath journalistic integrity and only further fuels the flame of resentment of those on the other side of the political aisle. This is also not made to single out CNN for their coverage. Other, more conservative pundits are just as guilty of similar comments made to portray citizens protesting police brutality. Nevertheless, the mainstream media has historically been the arbiters of delivering news to the masses. A conscious effort must be made to moderate their tone and reconnect with the rest of America. If not, continue to see increases in both content and viewership from hyper-partisan alternative news sources which are not held to the same standards of ethics.

Third and finally, a concerted effort by Congress to ensure the freedom of speech on social media platforms needs to take place. To be clear, threats to one's life or livelihood should not be tolerated and those in violation should be removed from such services. However, rigid algorithms by large social media companies like Facebook and Twitter often leave unnecessary collateral damage through de-platforming. It is confounding to hear that those who incited the siege on Capitol Hill were summarily (and rightfully) removed from nearly every social media platform within hours, but many responsible for inciting the riots and violence throughout America's cities over the summer, which led to the destruction of property and death still have full access accounts on social media. Such double standards have even caught the eyes of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Mexican President Lopez Obrador, and Vladimir Putin critic Alexei Navalny, who have stated that removing a sitting president from all social media could set a confusing and dangerous precedent. Enshrinement of freedom of speech into law is what sets the United States apart from many other countries and makes her so appealing to many around the world. Because of this, an in-depth public discussion on the legal bounds social media companies have regarding speech must

take place. Without this, arbitrary purges and double standards will continue to breed resentment on both sides.

Although these recommendations seem very broad and out of reach of practicality, they thus need to happen to bring both healing and unity within the country. The great American experiment did not die on January 6th, but it is under threat from the toxic polarization within. Ultimately, Americans must realize that “we the people” are the ones to blame for the current situation; and it is only “we the people” who are able to fix it. Its citizens’ must rid themselves from self-righteousness and utilize their unique ability for self-reflection. Supporters of democracy around the world should have faith that the country will navigate through these troubled waters and end up on the other side, both united and rejuvenated. However, each American must realize that they have their own part to play in restoring her ideals.