

Is Trump Planning a Coup d'État?

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Sasha Abramsky, *The Nation*, September 8, 2020

Many observers—including Republicans—worry that he is. They're organizing now to stop him.



This summer, shortly after scores of camo-wearing, heavily armed federal agents descended on Portland, Ore., to attack protesters, Charles Fried, Ronald Reagan's solicitor general, pondered the implications of what he was seeing on the streets. What he saw scared him; he remembered the use of paramilitaries by fascist leaders in 1930s Europe, where he was born, and he feared he was now witnessing a slide into paramilitarism in the United States. (His family fled the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia.) Fried felt that President Trump was using the Department of Homeland Security and other government agencies in a way that was "very menacing. You might as well put brown shirts on them. It's a very bad thing."

A Harvard Law School professor who still counts himself as a Republican and a board member of groups such as the Campaign Legal Center, Checks and Balances, and Republicans for the Rule of Law, Fried has grown increasingly worried in recent months about Trump's willingness to stir chaos and violence as an electoral strategy in the run-up to November's vote and about the willingness of his attorney general, William Barr, to burn the country's democratic institutions to the ground to preserve this administration's hold on power. Like earlier authoritarians, Trump could, Fried fears, utilize "agents provocateurs, getting right-wing people to infiltrate left-oriented and by-and-large peaceful demonstrations to turn them violent to thereby justify intervention."

Fried, a student of history who chooses his words carefully, has concluded that Trump and his team are "certainly racist, contemptuous of ordinary democratic and constitutional norms, and they believe their cause, their interests, are really the interests of the nation and therefore anything that keeps them in power is in the national interest. Does that make you a fascist? It kind of looks that way, doesn't it?"

Michael Steele, a former chair of the Republican National Committee, has come to share Fried's conviction that Trump is a threat to the Republic, although Steele believes the Trump cult is more about naked political opportunism than any grand fascist ideology.

Steele bitterly resents Trump's takeover of the GOP.

He feels that Trump and his acolytes are trying to drive genuine Republicans out of their political home. As Steele piquantly puts it, "I come into your house and shit on the carpet. I tear down your drapes, write on your walls, offend the people who live in the house. Do you leave or kick my ass out? I don't know anyone who leaves their house without a fight. What kind of America, what kind of country do you want? What kind of leader do you want?"

Like Fried, Steele in recent months concluded that Trump, aided and abetted by the GOP's congressional leaders, is willing to "open up a Pandora's box of mischief" to remain ensconced in the White House, Steele says. "He's laying down the predicate—taking shots at vote by mail and saying he already knows there's fraud— and therefore it's likely he won't accept the results of the election." For Steele, Trump is "the P.T. Barnum of the 21st century, on steroids," a man with a mastery of the art of manipulation. "He doesn't give a shit about the people of Portland. He doesn't give a

crap about Chicago,” Steele avers. “This is not complicated. I don’t know why people keep overthinking this man. His goal is to protect himself. He uses the system against itself.”



Heimat security: The president sent federal officers to counter protests in Portland, Ore., this summer. (Noah Berger / AP Photo)

This summer, Fried, Steele, and other devotees of traditional conservatism began coordinating with fellow anti-Trump conservatives around the country, as well as with progressive organizations, to strategize responses should Trump attempt to maintain power despite rejection at the polls. Some participants formed the Transition Integrity Project, which includes campaign experts such as Michigan Democratic ex-governor Jennifer Granholm and Democratic Party consultant Donna Brazile, along with Steele and other old-guard GOP stalwarts. They fear that if mail-in votes are still being tabulated weeks after the election and—as seems increasingly likely—barrages of lawsuits are filed by the candidates’ campaigns, conditions could be ripe for Trump to create maximum mayhem.

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In their sobering 22-page report, they write of the potential for “escalating violence” if Trump loses and refuses to bow out gracefully. Given the administration’s record of embracing “numerous corrupt and authoritarian practices,” huge numbers of Americans must be ready to take to the streets should Trump and his henchmen try to illegally curtail the counting of mail-in ballots. The administration could deploy federalized National Guard troops to stop vote counts. Indeed, on the day Joe Biden accepted the Democratic presidential nomination, Trump

suggested on Fox News that he could order federal agents, even local sheriffs, into polling stations ostensibly to monitor fraud. Trump and his allies could also challenge the results in numerous states simultaneously, send federal forces into Democratic-controlled cities, and through social media accounts and speeches, activate right-wing paramilitary groups.

The report warns that a desperate Trump could push the American republic to the breaking point. The authors even envision scenarios in which Trump wins the Electoral College but loses the popular vote and exploits the ensuing unrest, goading Western states into attempting to secede from the Union.

Increasingly, election observers point to the possibility of Trump using the courts to contest so many states’ ballot tallies that the Supreme Court ends up as the ultimate arbiter, as happened in the 2000 election. In some scenarios he loses, but his campaign refuses to accept state results, aiming to tie up the process so that states can’t certify their results in time for the January inauguration. In others he dispenses with the legal niceties and simply refuses to cede power, banking on enough backing from quasi-military agencies supportive of his agenda, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection as well as law enforcement agencies at the local level and militia groups, that it would take a military intervention to bounce



him from the White House. Something like this scenario was outlined in an open letter to Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by two Iraq War veterans, John Nagl and Paul Yingling, in mid-August. “If Donald Trump refuses to leave office at the expiration of his constitutional term, the United States military must remove him by force, and you must give that order,” they wrote.

But relying on a conservative-dominated Supreme Court or a military that has been conditioned—for good reason—never to intervene in domestic political disputes is hardly a surefire path to protecting the country from Trump’s dictatorial ambitions. Which brings us back to people power.

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Two of the main organizations that have begun planning mass mobilization are the Indivisible Project and Stand Up America. Between them, they have brought together dozens of organizations and movements—from Public Citizen, MoveOn, and the End Citizens United Action Fund on the left to Republicans for the Rule of Law and Stand Up Republic on the right—inspired by nonpartisan groups such as the National Task Force on Election Crises. The goal is to build a grassroots legal and political infrastructure capable of pushing back against efforts to undermine the electoral process. As Trump’s attacks on it have intensified, additional groups have joined this nascent pro-democracy movement, including the Service Employees International Union and the Sunrise Movement.



Ezra Levin: Indivisible Project.

“We’re putting a lot of energy into this,” says Ezra Levin, a cofounder of the Indivisible Project and one of the organizers of Protect the Results (a joint project of Indivisible and Stand Up America). “Indivisible brings to the table people power. We started in December 2016 in response to Trump. Three and a half years later, we have thousands of locally led Indivisible groups around the country. We’re teaming up with other groups, including Stand Up America.”

Levin is well aware that what they are planning isn’t a run-of-the-mill protest; rather, they will have to coordinate a national campaign capable of bringing millions of people into the streets—and not just for a day but for weeks and potentially months. They are going to have to develop a durable movement that could operate like the democracy movement in Hong Kong or the movements that peacefully brought down Communist rule in Eastern Europe a generation ago.

Levin argues that Trump “can try to cling to power and use extraconstitutional means,” but “the tool we have is people at the local level. That’s how a democracy works. The one tool in our toolbox is participation. We need mass participation in that moment.”

Indivisible points to its demonstrated ability to mobilize huge numbers of people to protest family separation early in the Trump presidency and to activate the networks

that marched in the streets calling for impeachment in 2019. Those actions—along with the Women’s Marches, mobilizations around the climate crisis, and of course, recent outpourings of support for racial justice—have shown that people power can shape events even in the Trump era. “There is no referee in the sky who’s going to evaluate the evidence and give [the presidency] to the pro-democracy forces,” says Levin. “That’s not how this works. It is not a question in my mind whether we’ll be able to get people to show up. The question is ‘Where do you take people?’” Sean Eldridge of Stand Up America agrees. “We’re going to need all hands on deck,” he argues. “There’s a lot of scenario planning and coalition building still to do.”



Vanita Gupta: Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

Some of this groundwork involves getting millions of people in all 50 states to sign up for SMS alerts. Some of it involves getting lawyers to volunteer to help with election-related issues in the weeks surrounding the vote. Some involves grassroots education campaigns—for example, publicizing efforts by the administration to undermine the Postal Service. Some is about talking with labor organizations about the prospect of going on strike and gridlocking the economy if Trump attempts to steal the election.

“There’s going to be litigation, mass mobilization, policy options by governors, state attorneys general, members of Congress,” says Vanita Gupta, the president of the D.C.-based Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.



Rahna Epting: MoveOn.

Protecting the elections, says Rahna Epting, the executive director of MoveOn, “will take multiple different tactics. People are starting to connect the dots—and all the work that movements have done across the generations. People are starting to come out. People will be inspired and motivated to protect their country. Will we be successful? We’re going to fight like hell to make sure we are.”



People power: Thousands gathered in New York City's Battery Park to protest Trump's Muslim travel ban, January 29, 2017.

“I wrote an op-ed during the campaign of '16 pointing out all the similarities between Adolf Hitler and Donald Trump,” recalls Tom Coleman, a former Republican representative for the Sixth Congressional District of Missouri and now a member of the National Task Force on Election Crises. (The op-ed was never published.) But to his frustration, even as Trump's actions as president seemed to validate Coleman's warning, his erstwhile colleagues in the GOP didn't distance themselves from the tycoon-cum-politician. Even today, Trump's attacks on the electoral system and his promotion of civil conflict are met largely with silence from the GOP's grandees.

“A concern is what we are seeing right now: federal law enforcement in major cities engaged in actions with protesters that generates civil unrest and battles in the streets,” says Trevor Potter, ex-chairman of the Federal Election Commission and currently president of the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center. “To me, it was a far-fetched, hypothetical idea till we saw it in Portland. It could lead to sufficient civil unrest [such] that it is, in fact, difficult to conduct an election in those cities.” Potter worries that Trump could declare a form of martial law in Democratic-□controlled cities or pressure GOP governors to issue stay-at-home orders in their bigger, more liberal cities. Some observers have mused about the possibility of Republican governors deploying the National Guard in the weeks surrounding the election. “On the election side, is there a remedy when parts of the state cannot vote on Election Day for reasons beyond their control?” Potter asks.

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Trump has talked vaguely about the extraordinary powers he could seize during a

putative national emergency. He has demanded—and largely won—increasingly politicized enforcement actions from the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security and other key agencies. And in recent weeks he’s leaned on legal advice from people such as John Yoo, an author of the infamous torture memos used by the George W. Bush administration, who advocates the use of executive orders to exert virtually unfettered presidential power.

Coleman worries that, under the pretext of protecting federal courthouses and other property, Trump is using federal agents “to chill turnout in the election. People are going to be scared. And where? In the major cities. And it’s to prepare his base to use these forces, so if he contests the election [result], these forces could be seen as an asset to be utilized.”

Stuart Gerson, who served as acting attorney general under President George H.W. Bush, says this moment increasingly reminds him of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy, which was about a “society based on predictive behavior, and then along comes a character called the Mule, who upsets the democratic applecart. Trump is the Mule. He throws norms into a cocked hat. He is an egomaniac. The sun travels around him. He thinks he’s Louis XIV.”



Black Lives Matter: Demonstrators near the White House protest police brutality and the murder of George Floyd, June 3. (Drew Angerer / Getty Images)

Democracies survive when all major players respect the ground rules. They crumble when significant players start to flout those rules—and get away with it. Gerson has

concluded that Trump is only too willing to circumvent Supreme Court decisions, is perfectly capable of issuing illegal orders to the military to attack domestic political opponents, and would likely show no compunction in ignoring an election result that doesn't go his way. Each time he's gotten away with crashing through a democratic constraint, his ambitions have escalated. During the impeachment hearings, Trump's lawyers argued that as president, he was above and outside the law. Postimpeachment, he has sought to implement this theory of governance.

Organizers fear that Trump is prepping the ground for a de facto coup. But they also hope that he can be headed off by a massive wave of aroused and empowered opposition. There is, after all, a growing public awareness of the existential threat to the country's democracy, with a drumbeat of warnings from Biden, Barack Obama, Colin Powell, and other senior political figures. Levin, Fried, and the others involved in Protect the Results are hoping that this will generate an unstoppable electoral wave, resulting in such a thorough, incontestable rejection of all that Trump stands for that his ability to challenge the results will be chopped off at the knees.

"The more Trump turns up the temperature, [the more] he is angering the public. They're tired of the chaos, tired of his mismanagement," argues Epting. "We have to do everything we can to make sure it is a landslide victory, to make it less likely he can fight it."

Trump will, Gerson believes, "ultimately lose. Either because he spins the wheel and can find a face-saving way to move out into history or [because] the wheel is spun for him. This is in our hands, and there are democratic means to accomplish this peacefully. And it is the public's responsibility to act."