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Did the FBI just re-elect Donald Trump?

Most likely, the FBI had legitimate reasons for its search at Mar-a-Lago. But it may also have unintentionally improved Trump's re-election chances

Why is Donald Trump so powerful? How did he come to dominate one of the two major parties and get himself elected president? Is it his hair? His waistline? No, it's his narratives. Trump tells powerful stories that ring true to tens of millions of Americans.

The main one is that America is being ruined by corrupt coastal elites. According to this narrative, there is an interlocking network of highly educated Americans who make up what the Trumpians have come to call the Regime: Washington power players, liberal media, big foundations, elite universities, woke corporations. These people are corrupt, condescending and immoral and are looking out only for themselves. They are out to get Trump because Trump is the person who stands up to them. They are not only out to get Trump; they are out to get you.

This narrative has a core of truth to it. Highly educated metropolitan elites have become something of a self-enclosed Brahmin class. But the Trumpian propaganda turns what is an unfortunate social chasm into venomous conspiracy theory. It simply assumes, against a lot of evidence, that the leading institutions of society are inherently corrupt, malevolent, and partisan – and are acting in bad faith.

It simply assumes that the proof of people's virtue is that they're getting attacked by the Regime. Trump's political career has been kept afloat by elite scorn. The more elites scorn him, the more Republicans love him. The key criterion for leadership in the Republican Party today is having the right enemies.

Here comes the FBI

Into this situation walks the FBI. There's a lot we don't know about the

search at Mar-a-Lago. But we do know how the Republican Party reacted. The right side of my Twitter feed was ecstatic. See! We really are persecuted! Essays began to appear with titles like 'The Regime Wants Its Revenge.' Ron DeSantis tweeted, 'The raid of MAL is another escalation in the weaponization of federal agencies against the Regime's political opponents.' As usual, the tone was apocalyptic. 'This is the worst attack on this Republic in modern history,' Fox News host Mark Levin exclaimed.

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The investigation into Trump was seen purely as a heinous Regime plot. At least for now, the search has shaken the Republican political landscape. Several weeks ago, about half of Republican voters were ready to move on from Trump, according to a New York Times/Siena College poll. This week the entire party seemed to rally behind him. Republican strategists advising Trump's potential primary opponents had reason to be despondent. 'Completely handed him a lifeline,' one such strategist told Politico. 'Unbelievable … It put everybody in the wagon for Trump again. It's just taken the wind out of everybody's sails.'

According to a Trafalgar Group/Convention of States Action survey, 83 per cent of likely Republican voters said the FBI search made them more motivated to vote in the 2022 elections. More than 75 per cent of likely Republican voters believed Trump's political enemies were behind the search rather than the impartial justice system, as did 48 per cent of likely general election voters overall.

In a normal society, when politicians get investigated or charged, it hurts them politically. But that no longer applies to the GOP. The judicial system may be colliding with the political system in an unprecedented way.

What if Trump is persecuted?

What happens if a prosecutor charges Trump and he is convicted just as he is cruising to the GOP nomination or maybe even the presidency? What happens if the legal system, using its criteria, decides Trump should go to prison at the very moment that the electoral system, using its criteria, decides he should go to the White House?

I presume in those circumstances Trump would be arrested and

imprisoned. I also presume we would see widespread political violence from incensed Trump voters who would conclude that the Regime has stolen the country. In my view, this is the most likely path to a complete democratic breakdown.

In theory, justice is blind, and obviously no person can be above the law. But as Damon Linker wrote in a Substack post, 'This is a polity, not a graduate seminar in Kantian ethics.' We live in a specific real-world situation, and we all have to take responsibility for the real-world effects of our actions.

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America absolutely needs to punish those who commit crimes. On the other hand, America absolutely needs to make sure that Trump does not get another term as president. What do we do if the former makes the latter more likely? I have no clue how to get out of this potential conflict between our legal and political realities.

We're living in a crisis of legitimacy, during which distrust of established power is so virulent that actions by elite actors tend to backfire, no matter how well founded they are.

My impression is that the FBI had legitimate reasons to do what it did. My guess is it will find some damning documents that will do nothing to weaken Trump's support. I'm also convinced that, at least for now, it has unintentionally improved Trump's re-election chances. It has unintentionally made life harder for Trump's potential primary challengers and motivated his base.

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