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The next Trump will be even more dangerous

If the US cannot find a way to move past Trumpism, the next populist will take over more than just the Republican party

Joe Biden may have won the presidency for the next four years; however, Donald Trump's influence is here to stay. Four years of divisiveness and the legitimation of anti-intellectual, anti-science, and anti-politically correct rhetoric have firmly established what we now refer to as 'Trumpism.' How did the real estate-mogul-turned-president accomplish this?

First, Trump lied (and continues to lie) more times than one can count: he lied about replacing Obamacare, he lied about the Muslim ban, and most importantly, he lied about Covid-19. Second, he managed to bring the fringes of conservative politics into the mainstream: he has trafficked in baseless conspiracy theories and outright denied scientific evidence – things that used to be the province of radical right-wing talk radio dominated by Alex Jones and his ilk. Third, Trump's unrelenting attacks against the 'mainstream' media have significantly undermined confidence in traditional news sources, while he converted White House press briefings into a personal political reality show. Lastly, Trump has also dangerously weakened our democratic institutions and revealed that many of the unwritten norms that have for long allowed the American government to function on a bipartisan basis are, in fact, transgressible.

Examples abound: he deployed military forces on American streets to disperse peaceful protesters; he flirted with authoritarian leaders such as Russia's Putin, the Philippines' Duterte or North Korea's Kim Jong-Un; and he used the Justice Department for personal legal defense and naked political gain. Ultimately, Trump has allowed our politics (and political institutions) to become hollowed out – he has legitimised, at the highest levels of the US government, the use of mendacities and ignorance as political tools; and he rendered meaningless countless written and unwritten rules that have undergirded the validity of the American experiment in limited constitutional government.

Trump is planning for his time after office

Although candidate Trump ran as an outsider who would 'drain the swamp' of Washington, D.C., after four years as president he is leaving behind a government mired in corruption, self-dealing, nepotism and lack of regard for the rule of law. He has thrived on and multiplied the political and cultural polarisation that largely pre-existed his presidency. His corrosive effect on our politics and our institutions may not have created the swamp, but it certainly expanded it in size and depth.

Throughout his term in office, he fomented a kind of tribalism in which the left and the right are no longer able to communicate with each other, let alone cooperate across the political aisle. As former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich wrote in 2018: 'Trump's America and the post-American society that the anti-Trump coalition represents are incapable of coexisting. One will simply defeat the other. There is no room for compromise. Trump has understood this perfectly since day one.'

By the end of his single term in office, the now-famous statement he made in 2016 that he could 'stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and [not] lose voters,' has become an alarming reality: despite the impeachment, and numerous scandals of impropriety, mismanagement, incompetence and abuse of power, Donald Trump received 11 million more votes in 2020 than he did in 2016.

Trump as a prominent figure and a pathology of our divided national politics is not going away. On the one hand, anticipating his eviction from the White House, the 'lame duck' president has begun investing (his supporters' money) in his political future. As of 1 December, Trump's Official Election Defense Fund has raised more than USD 170 million with the alleged purpose of 'DEFENDING the Election from voter fraud.'

Nevertheless, only a quarter of those funds will be directed toward financing election-related lawsuits, while 75 per cent is funneled to the Save America leadership PAC. According to one campaign finance expert, '[s]mall donors who give to Trump thinking that they are financing an "official election defense fund" are in fact… funding his post-presidential political operation.' Clearly, the 45th president is neither planning to retire nor is he likely to 'leave the country' as he joked at campaign rally in Georgia in October.

The Republicans' complicity

On the other hand, Republicans now understand that Trump and the GOP have become synonymous, that they exist in a sort of mutualistic-symbiotic relationship. Indeed, the erstwhile Grand Old Party did not even produce a platform in 2020, instead it dedicated itself to a singular plank: the foursquare support of Donald J. Trump. While anti-Trump Republican movements such as the Lincoln Project, Republican Voters Against Trump or the 43 Alumni for Biden may have contributed to Biden's edge in the popular vote, in hindsight, their efforts have been literally *trumped* by the fact that traditional Republican values now appear quaint and incoherent with the party that Trump rules unchallenged.

Since Biden emerged as the winner of the election, the president has, true to form, falsely declared victory and claimed that the former vice-president's lead can only be the result of fraud. Sadly, the vast majority of Republicans (with some notable exceptions such as Utah's Junior Senator Mitt Romney) have not stood up to Trump's affronts to American democratic institutions – even those who celebrated victories by holding on to or picking up all-important seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Instead, by portraying Biden's victory as illegitimate, they are effectively handing control of the post-election Republican Party to the candidate who lost to the former vice-president. Senator Lindsey Graham, who eked out a narrow victory in South Carolina, put it bluntly: 'If we don't challenge and change the US election system, there will never be another Republican president elected again. President Trump should not concede.'

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What Trump's reality-TV coup puts in sharp relief, if more evidence was needed, is that the Republican Party has become a veritable cult of personality. And, just as the new GOP is united behind the 45th president, the base remains fired up about issues that are fundamental to Trumpism: the deep state, immigration and a growing fear of the electoral power of a multicultural America committed to racial equality.

Although many on the Democratic side were hoping for a repudiation of Trumpism at the polls, the electoral numbers speak for themselves: more than 74 million Americans voted for Trump – that is more votes than

any candidate has ever received in US history (save of course, Joe Biden, who beat Trump in the popular vote by more nearly 7 million votes). Although we normally hold up high voter turnouts as examples of an engaged electorate, 2020's exceptionally high turnout signifies more than a politically active citizenry. For tens of millions of Americans, the stakes have simply become too high – allowing the other side to win would cause unacceptable damage to their political agenda, their image of America, and their most fundamental notions of right and wrong.

Joe Biden set out on a lofty mission to 'heal the soul of the nation.' It is a noble undertaking and one that would serve my country well. But Donald Trump has also given us something enduring: a mirror that has shown us a society that is perilously divided. If Americans cannot find a way to come together and to move past Trumpism, the next radical populist following in Trump's footsteps will take over more than just the Republican party.



Dorian B. Kantor
Bogota

Dorian B. Kantor is professor of international relations and political science at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.