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## The Fight Ahead

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# The Fight Ahead

The Republican Party has become a white nationalist party. If old fashioned politics can't change that, we must consider alternatives.

**Bernard E. Harcourt**

Democracy, Politics, Race, Trump



January 7, 2021

The sitting president of the United States, squarely defeated in the 2020 election and denied a second term, staged a **counterrevolution** on January 6, 2021—the day Congress was scheduled to confirm the results of the Electoral College. It was an unprecedented sight. A mob stormed the Capitol, overtook the House and Senate chambers, and ransacked the Speaker's office. Instigated by the president, the insurrection was enabled by the leaders of the Republican Party who, for months, refused to recognize the election results.

This counterrevolution was long in the making. Its eruption fully exposed the deep rift in this country.

Americans have rarely disagreed so deeply, not since Reconstruction. The parallel is not anodyne. Back then, the disagreement turned on the moral truth of white supremacy. Today, it is more oblique and better disguised, but race relations remain at the heart of the disagreement. It should not come as a surprise that 1876 was the last time a presidential transition was so contested—a time when “abolition democracy,” as W.E.B. Du Bois called it, hung in the balance and ultimately perished alongside Reconstruction.

**The political conflict today is permeated by race. Over the past four years, Donald Trump captured the soul of the Republican Party and imbued it with his white nationalism.**

As in 1876, the political conflict today is permeated by race. Over the past four years, during the 2020 campaign, and in its aftermath, Donald Trump captured the soul of the Republican Party and imbued it with his white nationalism. The racial dimension could hardly be more obvious now, with Republicans' blatant efforts to disenfranchise the votes of African Americans in Georgia and in cities such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. But this antagonism has been many years in the making.

From the first day of his presidency, Trump boasted white nationalism and **fueled** the white supremacist right. Recall that just days after his inauguration in 2017, Trump signed the **Muslim ban**, an executive order shutting the U.S. borders to seven predominantly Muslim countries and indefinitely suspending the entry of Syrian refugees. He **ordered** the Mexican border closed to Latin American asylum-seekers so they couldn't reach U.S. soil. Because that was not enough, he **separated** immigrant parents from their children at the border and placed the kids in cages. Later, he **called** the neo-Nazis assembled at Charlottesville "very fine people" and defended monuments to the Confederacy. He **referred** to Haiti and African nations as "shithole" countries. He **sicced** federal agents and the military on #BlackLivesMatter protesters and **racially baited** Black leaders such as Representative Elijah Cummings and the Squad. And rather than implementing policy that could have prevented massive human loss, he **called** COVID-19 the "Kung Flu," then **lied** about the virus as it plunged people into poverty and **continues to kill thousands** of Americans each day, disproportionately persons of color.

Although President-elect Joseph Biden captured the popular vote comfortably—receiving about **7 million votes** more than Trump—Biden's margin was thin in the key **battleground states** of Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Nevada. In other words, despite all Trump's racist and xenophobic acts, his constituency remained loyal and even grew by more than **10 million votes**. With his white supremacy and xenophobia on full display, Trump received more than 74 million votes in 2020 and totally captured the Republican Party. This was not *in spite* of his actions, but *because* of them. Donald Trump effectively reinvigorated a white nationalism in U.S. politics and, as his supporters have made clear, it is unlikely to wane anytime soon.

White supremacy, of course, is not new. It has driven U.S. politics since the country's inception—from the slavery compromise at the constitutional founding, to the Southern secession and the demise of Reconstruction, to the violent resistance to the civil rights movement, to President Nixon's War on Drugs, and all the way through to the ensuing decades of racialized mass incarceration. Its long legacy haunts our present, as chattel slavery seamlessly metamorphosed into a system of **convict leasing, plantation prisons, and widespread lynchings** before eventually transforming into the horror of today's jails and prisons.

Though white supremacy is nothing new, Trump's incitement of it is unprecedented in recent politics. Trump has been a master at reactivating this historical force, tapping directly into the nerve of white nationalism. He did so back in 2016 to gain popularity—**circulating** **"birther" falsehoods** and fictitiously claiming that Barack Obama was Muslim to stoke resistance to the first Black president. And that

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was before he sprang to action as president. During the 2020 campaign, Trump openly declared himself a white nationalist to anyone gave white nationalism his powerful pulpit. willing to listen. In the first presidential debate, when invited to repudiate white supremacy, he espoused it instead. On national television, in front of more than 73 million viewers, Trump told the Proud Boys—the most extreme, right-wing, neo-fascist, male-only militia—to **"stand by,"** speaking to them as if he was literally their commander. At a campaign rally in Minnesota, Trump **evoked** the "racehorse theory" from the eugenics movement and told the crowd that Minnesotans, who are majority white, have "good genes."

Throughout the campaign, Trump stoked the fire of white supremacy. He spoke out against the removal of Confederate statues around the nation and simultaneously called Blacks Lives Matter a **"symbol of hate"**—turning anti-racism into racism, one of the key moves of white supremacists around the world. Trump embraced the black-and-white, thin-blue-line U.S. flag, now a symbol of the police state and of the white privilege associated with the "Blue Lives Matter" retort. He campaigned before a phalanx of those alt-right flags at a **rally in Wisconsin** in late October 2020. Among the wave of lies he spreads on twitter, Trump also **retweeted** the video of the white couple in St. Louis standing outside of their mansion pointing guns at Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters, tacitly endorsing their behavior.

Trump called BLM protesters in Minnesota "thugs" and **warned** that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." When he traveled to Kenosha in the wake of the police shooting of Jacob Blake, he **said** that the officers who shot Mr. Blake must have "choked." In stark contrast, when seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, a Trump supporter, shot and killed two people and injured another at a BLM protest following the shooting, Trump **justified** Rittenhouse's actions, claiming that he was acting in self-defense. Trump **attacked** the *New York Times's* 1619 Project and issued an executive order intended to ban critical race theory. And as the COVID-19 pandemic killed hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens, disproportionately harming communities of color, Trump dug in and continued to repeatedly call the pandemic the **"Chinese virus."**

To anyone listening, Trump campaigned as a white nationalist. Anyone unwilling to hear this was simply exercising their privilege—mostly

their white privilege. Through his constant, nerve-wracking provocations, throwing fuel on the fire of white supremacy, Trump succeeded in activating and energizing what has now become an insurrectional political force.

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There are certain forces in politics that awake passions—fear and hatred, for instance. Trump leveraged those political passions, concocting them with deep racism and xenophobia, and tied them to another great political force: nostalgia. Trump tied racism to the hope of returning the United States to its former grandeur, of “making America great again”—an expression itself steeped in the racial segregation of the 1950s.

And in the process, Donald Trump transformed the Republican Party into a white nationalist faction entranced by his popularity at the polls and success at fundraising. The fallout is evident, as Republican leaders and the rank and file bent over backwards to defend Trump’s attempted coup throughout November and December—and, for the most part, still do today.

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It is too easy to dismiss Donald Trump’s grip on his 74 million voters as the product of lies and bullying. It’s too simple to chalk our current polarization to a supposed “post-truth” society.

One need only listen to Fox News for a minute to realize that they, too, claim the truth. This is nowhere more evident than in Tucker Carlson’s recent editorial on election fraud, which he ended in this telling manner: “Why are we telling you this? We’re telling you this because it’s true, and in the end, that’s all that matters. The truth is our only hope and our best defense. It’s how we’re different from them: We care what’s true and we know you care, too.” Everybody stakes a claim to truth because truth is the most powerful political weapon that we have.

But even more fundamentally, there are different kinds of truths at play in this counterrevolutionary moment. Some involve factual matters, but others are more complex and implicate political world views. They go to broader political truths about liberty and an ordered society. Trump has managed to capture one of those world views and to tie it to his unique blend of racism and xenophobia—his white nationalism—and in the process, has pushed the country apart.

In her essay in the *New Yorker*, “Truth and Politics,” Hannah Arendt distinguished between what she called “factual truths” and “rational truths.” The latter, she argued, consist of philosophical or political theories, mathematical axioms, or scientific discoveries. Factual truths, by contrast, are events that take place in the

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world. By factual truths, Arendt had in mind hard facts, like the fact that Germany invaded Belgium on the night of August 4, 1914—or perhaps, today, the fact that 74,223,744 Americans voted for Donald Trump and 81,283,485 for Joseph Biden (as of January 7, 2021).

Arendt argued that factual truths are more fragile than rational truths, because once the former disappear, they have little hope of reemerging. Factual truths can be inalterably changed, Arendt warned.

But that is not the only danger, nor perhaps the greatest danger today. Even if we agreed on a set of factual truths, it's their interpretation that drives us apart. It's the political truths we hold that matter—and most of us tend to pick and choose the factual truths that support our political views. Psychological studies have demonstrated the tendency people have to **conform** their beliefs, including factual beliefs, to the deeper values that define their cultural and political identities.

Beneath the disagreements over factual truths, then, there lies a deeper gulf between political visions.

At one end lies the political view that prizes liberty, understood as freedom from government interference and regulation, and privileges self-reliance, often understood as the right to bear arms. On this view, government is seen as corrupt, and government interference as evil—whether it takes the form of socialism, communism, a welfare state, or any other form of government redistribution to the poor. From this perspective, factual truths—even uncontested truths—are construed in a very different light. The *New York Times* **revelations**, for instance, that Trump only paid \$750 in federal income taxes in 2017 are not viewed as corrupt, but as evidence of Trump's business acumen and his righteous success in shielding his income from a redistributive government. In the eyes of his constituency, his taxes turned him into a folk hero.

At the other end of the political spectrum lies the belief in a well-ordered state that ensures the health, safety, and well-being of all of its residents, provides a social net for the more vulnerable, promotes equal opportunity, and cooperates with allies at the international level. On this view, the government is not an enemy, but instead, when well-managed, a guardian of social security, public health, and equal opportunity. A nationwide mask mandate is no infringement on ordered liberty, no more than wearing a seat belt or requiring fishing licenses are. Liberty is tempered by the common good. From this perspective, government intervention is now desperately needed to implement policies to address today's twin crises: COVID-19 and the injustice this country has long made habit of exacting on people of color.

It's these disparate political visions, more so than the factual disagreements, that divide the

country today. Trump managed to wed liberty to white nationalism and, in the process, has become a cult political figure who brought throngs of Republicans to the polls and mobs to Capitol Hill. Trump exploited a chasm that predated his term and burst it apart further.

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And it is these political truths that are warring today. These world views are held as truths that are self-evident, as our forefathers declared. Liberty on the one side, brandishing American flags and banners plastered with Trump's name. Orderly government and equal citizenship on the other, with Biden's promise to return politics to normal.

America is warring over the truth of liberty, white nationalist style.

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Though U.S. democracy may still survive the January counterrevolution, this resurgence of white nationalism, and the Republican leadership's assault on democratic elections, a specter threatens this country more than ever. Trump has reawakened a force that, even if it is in a slight minority in terms of the popular count, can easily retain its power.

Even with President-elect Biden in the White House on January 20, 2021, Trump is unlikely to recede as most presidents usually do. He will rally his base for the midterms and for 2024. This is a deeply troubling prospect, given that his supporters believe that he won the election, are convinced that he should be president, and have shown that they are willing to insurrect. In this political context, the competing visions of the world push dangerously far apart.

One way forward is to use every means necessary to persuade others of our political truths. Barbara Ransby argues that we need radical social transformation, and that the only way we will achieve it is by intervening in the public sphere:

We must roll up our sleeves, get over our aversions and walk into places of worship, community centers, college campuses, unemployment offices, state fairs, internet chat rooms and onto street corners. We need to talk, listen, debate, build trust and win people to a process of vision-building and freedom making. We cannot pretend to have all the answers, but we do have some of the answers. And we have to offer people an entry point into a radically democratic process of social transformation grounded in process and principles. The other path is not a dead end, but a deadly precipice.

In this view, we need to bring more Trump supporters to our side. That is, of course, what we

do in politics—we convince others of the truth of our world view, of the truth of our interpretation of the facts.

Sometimes this occurs through argument and persuasion, sometimes through charisma, sometimes through fear—and sometimes through utter domination.

At the extreme, politics means beating opponents at the polls—and beating them as much, as hard, and as often as possible. One could call that war by other means. It is what progressives did in the 2020 election—by 7 million votes in the presidential election and securing a Senate majority. And with a multicultural demographic horizon favoring the progressive side, it is likely to keep on happening.

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But there have also been times when the clash of political truths has proven too deep to overcome. That was the case with the white supremacism of the Antebellum South. It was true as well of Nazi ideology in Germany in the 1930s. It was true in Vichy France. During these times, there are only a limited number of ways forward. We can engage in politics by other means, meaning outright war, or we can splinter across irreconcilable ideological divides.

The latter, secession, should not be dismissed so lightly anymore. Underscored by the way that Trump's mob was allowed to storm the Capitol yesterday—just imagine, by contrast, what would have happened to them if they had been Black Lives Matter protestors—it is not difficult to imagine a time when divisions become too profound to reconcile. Any further growth of white nationalism in this country could trigger that tipping point—as hard as it may be to believe.

What that might mean is hard to fathom, but in the best-case scenario it might involve a consensual separation, with citizens throughout the country sorting themselves into two or more sovereign states. The borders could be along red and blue divisions, or urban and rural lines. The current national debt would have to be divided; so would social security obligations. There could be an American Union, like the European Union, with no tariffs; there could be an American Treaty Organization to assure the common defense. All the details could be worked out at a constitutional convention, peacefully. But at some point, if this white nationalism continues to grow, there may come a time when secession is not so far-fetched.

One might even imagine “digital secession.” Given today's technology, it may be possible to imagine two virtual political sovereigns—one progressive, one white nationalist—and every



American could opt into either. Universal single-payer health care for some; no health care coverage for others. Free higher education for some; crushing student loan debt for others. No free riders, though. Residents would lock-in for life or switch with full repayment of back dues. Everyone would be identifiable based on their digital imprint. This may sound fanciful—but so did Twitter and Facebook thirty years ago.

**If this white nationalism continues to grow, there may come a time when secession is not so far-fetched, when we are forced to splinter across irreconcilable ideological divides.**

The point is, if we are not able to beat or contain this white nationalism, other means will be necessary.

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Now, there is room for optimism. The forces of white nationalism have been defeated in this country before. The slaveholding South was vanquished in the Civil War. Resurrected, it was beaten again during the Civil Rights movement.

But there has never been a proper reckoning. There has never been sincere acknowledgement and genuine reconciliation. Too many Americans continued to fly the Confederate battle flag with impunity, or now the thin-blue-line, black-and-white American flag—as they just did in the Capitol building. And this has repressed those histories, turned them into the festering sores that Trump ignites. Some, such as the [New York Times's 1619 Project](#) or the brilliant team at the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) in Montgomery, Alabama, are addressing this absence and helping the country to reckon with its past; but those efforts now go headwind against Donald Trump's army of more than 74 million voters.

W.E.B. Du Bois [demonstrated](#) in *Black Reconstruction in America* how the ambition of abolition democracy was crushed following the end of the Civil War and, with its demise and the violent end of Reconstruction, how the nation ushered in a new form of racial despotism. Unless we fully recognize that we face, once again, the power of white nationalism and what those more than 74 million votes stand for, we are doomed to continue down that path.

**The most urgent, pressing task for American democracy today is to lift the white hood off the Trump vote.**

The most urgent, pressing task for American democracy today is to lift the white hood off the Trump vote and recognize what the 2020 election and counterrevolution shows us: the power and threat of white nationalism.

The next most pressing task is to persuade Trump voters that their view of liberty, white

nationalist style, is morally reprehensible and doomed. That is old-fashioned politics, war by other means, but if that won't work, then it is time to reconsider the alternatives.

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With the resurgence of white nationalism in mainstream politics and the counterrevolution in full view, I have been feeling at times like a stranger in my own country. My father came here in 1940, when he was thirteen years old, a Jewish refugee fleeing the Nazis as they swept through France. He was fortunate; not everyone in our family made it out. The son of not one, but two immigrant parents who became more American than their neighbors, I was born in New York City and grew up here. This is my home.

But at times like these, watching acts of white nationalist insurrection incited by our country's highest leader, I look back at my family's history and remember that one does not owe an absolute duty to land or sovereignty. One owes an absolute duty to life and to one's values—in my case, solidarity, social justice, equality, and autonomy. I also remember that one should never die for these values, but fight for them.

**One does not owe an absolute duty to land or sovereignty. One owes an absolute duty to life and to one's values.**

Whether this means old-fashioned politics, politics by other means, or even imagining mutual secession, it is time to redouble the fight, once again, against hate and prejudice. As we all know, regardless of the color of our skin, the struggle against white nationalism is a struggle for our lives.

## **Bernard E. Harcourt**

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