

## STEPPING BACK FROM THE BRINK?

ROBERT S. TAYLOR\*

The attack on the Capitol has revealed for the entire world to see that our democracy is fragile, and its survival is not ensured. Donald Trump is no longer President, but the poison he tirelessly pumped into the body politic is still coursing through our veins.

The violence on January 6 resulted in five deaths, but its threat to our country cannot be gauged by these numbers. With a little more coordination among the attackers, with less individual heroics by such Capitol Police as Officer Eugene Goodman, and with less good luck, members of the House and Senate, and even the Vice President, could have been “arrested” or killed, and the final step in the constitutional process for certification of the election of the president perverted.

We have heard from across the political spectrum condemnations of the violence, including (very belatedly and tepidly) from Mr. Trump. These words of condemnation are helpful, and maybe we have witnessed a turning away from the corrosive disinformation assault that Trump employed in his birther attacks on President Obama, throughout his campaign for the presidency, and continuing to the bitter end of his term. The assault on the Capitol forced at least some of Trump’s enablers to see what the constant stream of lies has done to our society, to see the ugliness and the danger.

With the inauguration of President Biden, and the drastic change of tone coming from the White House, this is a time for hopefulness, but it is also a time for a persistent effort to put our political culture back in order. The tentative turning away from corrosive disinformation we have witnessed since January 6 must be bolstered and expanded, and not be allowed to slip away. There are still loud voices of corrosive disinformation – here’s looking at you Fox “News” and your Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and so many others.

Many in the Republican Party have much to answer for. But those who have begun to recognize the harm that fealty to a habitual liar and skillful stoker of resentment and hate has done to our democracy, and who wish to walk back from the precipice of societal destruction, should be embraced and encouraged. The forceful message delivered by Senator Mitt Romney during the certification proceedings on January 6 that elected officials owe their constituents the truth seems to have been heard by no less a figure than Senator Mitch McConnell. Democrats need to find ways to encourage Republicans to repudiate lies and those who put the pursuit of power over integrity and the national interest.

The conviction of Mr. Trump by the Senate could be an enormous step toward rebuilding the health of our democracy, but smaller steps should be welcomed as well. A majority vote to convict, even if short of the required two-thirds for conviction, would help send a message of repudiation. Republicans opposing conviction should be given the opportunity to repudiate Mr. Trump, his lies, and his assault on democracy through a vote on censure. Given that Trump is out of office, it is more important to come together to condemn him and his lies as part of a

persistent effort to wean a sizable segment of our population that still believes the corrosive disinformation he has relentlessly promoted, than it is to formally convict him on the articles of impeachment. Unity is an important goal, but it must be a constructive unity, and not a unity of capitulation to the forces that would destroy our democracy.

The continuing voices of corrosive disinformation among Republicans, such as the Republican Party of Arizona, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, among others, must be confronted by the Party itself. If the Republican Party refuses or is unable to enforce responsibility, then the prospect for finding constructive unity will be especially difficult. The narrow self-interest of members of the House and Senate seeking to protect against primary challenges from their reactionary flanks will mean that opportunities to work together with Democrats and the Administration will not be seized. That would be a tragedy, and would fan the flames of disunity and disintegration.

There are areas where the political parties could come together to achieve important advances for the Nation. One such area is election integrity – the very issue that purportedly served as the rationale for the insurrection at the Capitol. Electoral integrity need not be a partisan issue. Both parties should be intent on bolstering public confidence. At the same time, ensuring electoral integrity should not be a cover for efforts at voter suppression, as seems to be happening in Republican-controlled legislatures around the country. Indeed, voter suppression is a betrayal of the very concept of democracy.

Although the 2020 election “was the most secure in American history” according to the Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and the Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees, part of the rationale for this statement was the fact that all of the states with close results in the 2020 presidential race had paper records of each vote. There should be paper records of each vote in every state, and there should be routine verification that the machine-recorded results are consistent with the paper records. There should be robust national standards, and the Congress should appropriate the money to allow the states to meet those robust standards.

Another area where there is a potential for constructive unity is the reconstruction of the Nation’s infrastructure. Building back, and building back better, need not be a partisan issue. The United States has many enormous advantages in global competition, but our advantages are disintegrating along with our infrastructure, with enormous implications for both our economic security and our national security. Bringing economic opportunity to all quarters of the Nation through a bold infrastructure reconstruction effort would benefit “red” states and “blue” states alike, and would demonstrate that government can work for all – which is critical to our stability.

*\* Robert S. Taylor served as Principal Deputy General Counsel, DoD, during the Obama Administration. He is currently the General Counsel of a charitable entity providing social impact capital in the developing world.*