

Until the former presidency of Donald Trump, we made a number of assumptions about the American system: its protections, its norms of political behavior, and its historic evolution to more and more inclusions. We generally trusted in our legal system, particularly the Supreme Court, to protect our Democracy.

We did not pay much attention to how much damage could be done by an individual with a bad character who could corrupt a cadre of fellow bad characters to support him. We now know this, and are grappling with how to put things right.

President John Kennedy wrote a book about how individuals could do brave things to better our country, despite mainstream opposition. Profiles in Courage has entered the American consciousness. One recent example of this was when Senator John McCain defied his party's endless attack on Obamacare and voted thumbs down on defunding this important medical insurance.

The untimely death of Colin Powell, the first Black man to rise to the top of the military and ruling administrations in the White House, has reminded us all of what honor and character are. He demonstrated the courage of the individual when he saw that the political party to which he belonged, the Republicans, who once stood for service, honor, and caution, had morphed into a party increasingly tolerating racism, misogyny, and selfishness.

He publicly left the party when his long-time friend, John McCain, brought in Sara Palin, an ignorant populist, as his running mate. The very thought of this incompetent woman being one heartbeat away from the presidency was the last straw. He would have endorsed McCain against Obama in that election on the basis of experience, but could not support what had happened to the once party of Abraham Lincoln. He supported Obama instead.

When Trump became president, a man whose entire life had been a model of corruption and norms destroying, Powell spoke out. He, and a small but growing group of former Republicans attempted to warn the country about what was coming.

It is only in dictatorships that elections are exercises in fraud and violence until now. Trump incited the assault on Congress to overturn the election that he had lost. Our elections are enmeshed in protections that make them the envy of the rest of the world.

If a leader lies loudly and continually, he can drown out other voices of truth and reality. This is exactly what President Trump has tried to do. We now have a minority of violence-prone men and women who have declared themselves storm troopers of Trump, ready to do anything to prevent the process of peaceful transfer of power.

One hand cannot clap. We cannot protect our political democracy with just one party that is willing to follow the time-honored norms of decency, being generous winners of elections and graceful losers. Our norm is to regard the opposite party as a competitor, not an enemy.

It is agonizing to watch the Republican dilemma spilling out before us. In the struggle between decency and corruption, Republicans initially recoiled from the January 6 attack in which mobs were ready to lynch even their own Vice President. In a brief demonstration of honor, Mitch McConnell, Kevin McCarthy, and even Lindsey Graham all condemned Donald Trump as the fomenter of the siege. This seemed to make up for their refusal to remove Trump from office after two impeachments by Congress. However, within hours, they all reverted to their former position of cowering before the bully. To hear all of them struggle to agree with Trump that he was cheated by a fraudulent election is the opposite of profiles in courage. It is shameful.

Our democracy is in danger if we cannot pull back from this folly. No matter how good are the checks and balances of our constitutional system, they do not guarantee success if people of bad character are in government. We need to use the behavior of Colin Powell as a template for what a patriot is. Somehow, we must never again ignore the damage that evil individuals can do if they are voted into office.

686 words

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