

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Every Day Is Jan. 6 Now

Jan. 1, 2022

By The Editorial Board

The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

One year after the smoke and broken glass, the mock gallows and the very real bloodshed of that awful day, it is tempting to look back and imagine that we can, in fact, simply look back. To imagine that what happened on Jan. 6, 2021 — a deadly riot at the seat of American government, incited by a defeated president amid a last-ditch effort to thwart the transfer of power to his successor — was horrifying but that it is in the past and that we as a nation have moved on.

This is an understandable impulse. After four years of chaos, cruelty and incompetence, culminating in a pandemic and the once-unthinkable trauma of Jan. 6, most Americans were desperate for some peace and quiet.

On the surface, we have achieved that. Our political life seems more or less normal these days, as the president pardons turkeys and Congress quarrels over spending bills. But peel back a layer, and things are far from normal. Jan. 6 is not in the past; it is every day.

It is regular citizens who threaten election officials and other public servants, who ask, “When can we use the guns?” and who vow to murder politicians who dare to vote their conscience. It is Republican lawmakers scrambling to make it harder for people to vote and easier to subvert their will if they do. It is Donald Trump who continues to stoke the flames of conflict with his rampant lies and limitless resentments and whose twisted version of reality still dominates one of the nation’s two major political parties.

In short, the Republic faces an existential threat from a movement that is openly contemptuous of democracy and has shown that it is willing to use violence to achieve its ends. No self-governing society can survive such a threat by denying that it exists. Rather, survival depends on looking back and forward at the same time.

Truly grappling with the threat ahead means taking full account of the terror of that day a year ago. Thanks largely to the dogged work of a bipartisan committee in the House of Representatives, this reckoning is underway. We know now that the violence and mayhem broadcast live around the world was only the most visible and visceral part of the effort to overturn the election. The effort extended all the way into the Oval Office, where Mr. Trump and his allies plotted a constitutional self-coup.

We know now that top Republican lawmakers and right-wing media figures privately understood how dangerous the riot was and pleaded with Mr. Trump to call a halt to it, even as they publicly pretended otherwise. We know now that those who may have critical information about the planning and execution of the attack are refusing to cooperate with Congress, even if it means being charged with criminal contempt.

OPINION DEBATE

Will the Democrats face a midterm wipeout?

- MARK PENN AND ANDREW STEIN write that "only a broader course correction to the center will give [Democrats a fighting chance in 2022](#)" and beyond.
- MATTHEW CONTINETTI writes that "time and again, the biggest obstacle to a red wave hasn't been the Democratic Party. [It's been the Republican Party.](#)"
- EZRA KLEIN [speaks to David Shor](#), who discusses his fear that Democrats face electoral catastrophe unless they shift their messaging.
- MICHELLE COTTLE [examines two primary contests](#) that "will shake the parties well beyond the states in play."

For now, the committee's work continues. It has scheduled a series of public hearings in the new year to lay out these and other details, and it plans to release a full report of its findings before the midterm elections — after which, should Republicans regain control of the House as expected, the committee will undoubtedly be dissolved.

This is where looking forward comes in. Over the past year, Republican lawmakers in 41 states have been trying to advance the goals of the Jan. 6 rioters — not by breaking laws but by making them. Hundreds of bills have been proposed and nearly three dozen laws have been passed that empower state legislatures to sabotage their own elections and overturn the will of their voters, according to a running tally by a nonpartisan consortium of pro-democracy organizations.

Some bills would change the rules to make it easier for lawmakers to reject the votes of their citizens if they don't like the outcome. Others replace professional election officials with partisan actors who have a vested interest in seeing their preferred candidate win. Yet more attempt to criminalize human errors by election officials, in some cases even threatening prison.

Many of these laws are being proposed and passed in crucial battleground states like Arizona, Wisconsin, Georgia and Pennsylvania. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, the Trump campaign targeted voting results in all these states, suing for recounts or trying to intimidate officials into finding "missing" votes. The effort failed, thanks primarily to the professionalism and integrity of election officials. Many of those officials have since been stripped of their power or pushed out of office and replaced by people who openly say the last election was fraudulent.

Thus the Capitol riot continues in statehouses across the country, in a bloodless, legalized form that no police officer can arrest and that no prosecutor can try in court.

This isn't the first time state legislatures have tried to wrest control of electoral votes from their own people, nor is it the first time that the dangers of such a ploy have been pointed out. In 1891, President Benjamin Harrison warned Congress of the risk that such a "trick" could determine the outcome of a presidential election.

The Constitution guarantees to all Americans a republican form of government, Harrison said. "The essential features of such a government are the right of the people to choose their own officers" and to have their votes counted equally in making that choice. "Our chief national danger," he continued, is "the overthrow of majority control by the suppression or perversion of popular suffrage." If a state legislature were to succeed in substituting its own will for that of its voters, "it is not too much to say that the public peace might be seriously and widely endangered."

A healthy, functioning political party faces its electoral losses by assessing what went wrong and redoubling its efforts to appeal to more voters the next time. The Republican Party, like authoritarian movements the world over, has shown itself recently to be incapable of doing this. Party leaders' rhetoric suggests they see it as the only legitimate governing power and thus portrays anyone else's victory as the result of fraud — hence the foundational falsehood that spurred the Jan. 6 attack, that Joe Biden didn't win the election.

"The thing that's most concerning is that it has endured in the face of all evidence," said Representative Adam Kinzinger, one of the vanishingly few Republicans in Congress who remain committed to empirical reality and representative democracy. "And I've gotten to wonder if there is actually any evidence that would ever change certain people's minds."

The answer, for now, appears to be no. Polling finds that the overwhelming majority of Republicans believe that President Biden was not legitimately elected and that about one-third approve of using violence to achieve political goals. Put those two numbers together, and you have a recipe for extreme danger.

Political violence is not an inevitable outcome. Republican leaders could help by being honest with their voters and combating the extremists in their midst. Throughout American history, party leaders, from Abraham Lincoln to Margaret Chase Smith to John McCain, have stood up for the union and democracy first, to their everlasting credit.

Democrats aren't helpless, either. They hold unified power in Washington, for the last time in what may be a long time. Yet they have so far failed to confront the urgency of this moment — unwilling or unable to take action to protect elections from subversion and sabotage. Blame Senator Joe Manchin or Senator Kyrsten Sinema, but the only thing that matters in the end is whether you get it done. For that reason, Mr. Biden and other leading Democrats should make use of what remaining power they have to end the filibuster for voting rights legislation, even if nothing else.

Whatever happens in Washington, in the months and years to come, Americans of all stripes who value their self-government must mobilize at every level — not simply once every four years but today and tomorrow and the next day — to win elections and help protect the basic functions of democracy. If people who believe in conspiracy theories can win, so can those who live in the reality-based world.

Above all, we should stop underestimating the threat facing the country. Countless times over the past six years, up to and including the events of Jan. 6, Mr. Trump and his allies openly projected their intent to do something outrageous or illegal or destructive. Every time, the common response was that they weren't serious or that they would never succeed. How many times will we have to be proved wrong before we take it seriously? The sooner we do, the sooner we might hope to salvage a democracy that is in grave danger.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.