
Wednesday, January 6, 2021

ABSTRACT A commentary on the recent assault on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, in which the author situates the attack in the longer history of white supremacy, Christian nationalism, patriarchy, and unfettered capitalism. **KEYWORDS** Christian nationalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, US Capitol

As I write this commentary, I am struck by the array of responses to what happened on Wednesday, January 6, 2021. It is now a few weeks since the attack. And, as I continue to listen to and read the “analyses,” “assessments,” and “predictions” that the insurrection is generating, I remain deeply frightened, saddened, and angered by it all. Because, like others, I view what happened at our nation’s capital as an event that has been going on long before January 6, and is continuing to unfold after it, I am not inclined to attempt to offer an explanation or summary as such. I cannot. It is not only that what took place is ineffable; it’s the fact that we are still witnessing and enduring the hate, denial, violence, and (il)logic of those who remain committed to white supremacy, patriarchy, Christian nationalism, and unfettered capitalism. What I am offering here is my reaction to all of this at this particular moment, and, of course, it is not a particularly good moment.

To some, the insurrection that took place at the Capitol on January 6 and the failed coup that was incited by a sitting president of the United States are unimaginable. But to me and many others, what happened is very understandable, and even predictable, and therefore very “imaginable.” For the past four years as president and even many more years prior to obtaining (“serving in” doesn’t seem the appropriate phrase) the presidency, Donald J. Trump has made his ambitions and aspirations loud and clear—to serve himself. In the process, he has advanced and amplified white supremacy, patriarchy, Christian nationalism, and unfettered capitalism, all of which has fired up his base, and beyond. Even those who might otherwise prefer even slightly less racist, sexist, and xenophobic rhetoric, if only for cover, appear to have been unable to pull themselves away from the attractive lure (for them) of the ridiculous tax cuts, court appointments at every level, and policy decisions and executive orders regarding the environment, trade, and immigration, never mind the inaction and many deadly decisions about the pandemic.

That so many millions of Americans (fellow citizens?) voted in record number for a charlatan, grifter, and fascist may not be shocking or surprising, but the fact that so many voted for him again should be frightening and alarming for all the obvious reasons.

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As I watched and listened to Trump inciting the crowds of supporters, I was struck by the fact that so many people were there in Washington, DC, to “stop the steal.” They either believed Trump’s mendacity or were happy to use him and his presidency as the vehicle to move their agenda of grievances, conspiracies, and hates forward. They were there to reclaim their country, and Trump exhorted them to do so as they marched toward the Capitol followed by television cameras, brandishing their Confederate flags, wearing their T-shirts with “Camp Auschwitz” printed in bold lettering, and carrying signs and banners announcing that Jesus was with them and they were good Christians “saving” their country. Their country!

One of the many painful moments of January 6 was the rioters’ (re)declaration of independence from the United States, and the reassertion of their country, one in which the Confederate flag was welcome and where a Christian god watched over and blessed them. About an hour prior to the storming of the Capitol, pastor Paula White, chair of the Evangelical Advisory Board for President Trump and a proponent of “prosperity theology” (a paradoxical, if not contradictory, ideology mixing and fusing the acquisition of wealth and Christianity), addressed the soon-to-be insurrectionists, advocating the need to reclaim their country, their lives. At that moment, the intersection of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and Christianity was broadcasted live for all to bear witness. On the day that the democratically elected winner of the presidency was to have his votes certified by Congress, the Proud Boys, neo-Nazis, and Christian nationalists, following the word of Trump and that of God, attacked the Capitol.

It was at that moment that those looking to save their country asserted the existence of some other country and the abandonment of the United States of America. We got to watch the insurrection and the secession simultaneously. If there were any question prior to January 6, on that day, at that moment, the many thousands of supporters of Donald J. Trump, in Washington, DC, to “stop the steal,” broke into the Capitol and broke away from the United States. They occupied the streets and eventually the Capitol itself, and no longer inhabited the United States, their former country, but instead established another nation, in a manner not unlike the formation of the Confederate States of America in 1860. This time, however, instead of possessing territory below the Mason Dixon line, they possessed only “the big lie” that Trump told them. They left the United States for some other place ordained by their god (let’s call it “Trumpland?”), a nation full of falsehood, anger, and violence. And to paraphrase Amanda Gorman, who spoke some fourteen days later at Joseph R. Biden’s inauguration, they may have been able to delay democracy, but were unable to destroy it. In that moment of eloquence, poise, beauty and hope, Amanda Gorman reaffirmed the promise of the United States, a promise extolled by others before her, with a saliency that our wounded and flawed nation demanded, as a reminder of our past and as an inspiration for what we still might become.

This is, in part, what makes January 6, 2021, so frustrating and frightening. The men and women who fought their way into the Capitol fought in a very different way than the late Congressman John Lewis “fought” his way in or the way Rosa Parks “fought” her way to occupy a seat at the front of the bus. The insurrectionists fought their way into the Capitol, “the people’s house,” by overtaking the Capitol Police in their pursuit of

overturning a legitimately executed election. While Amanda Gorman reminded us of those many brave individuals who have fought for democracy and social justice, the insurrectionists fought to overthrow it. With no apparent sense of the history of our nation or the Capitol itself, the rioters broke into the building and broke down the law and order that the Capitol, however problematically, is supposed to represent. The converging mob of white supremacists, Christian nationalists, and various militias took over a building that has historically served their very causes and prejudices far better than those the insurrectionists feared would take control the Capitol if the election of Joseph R. Biden were in fact “certified.” The Trump-Republican strategy to demonize and devalue people of color, non-Christians, and immigrants has been successful. As a result, any threat to Trump’s stronghold over the nation is perceived by his supporters as a threat to their nation itself.

They fought their way in, demanding to reclaim law and order, decency, and honor, and to reinstall and reinsert the values and demands of the real America, the real Americans, that is, themselves. They did so dressed in all sorts of odd apparel, not unlike the early look of the Ku Klux Klan before they settled on hiding themselves underneath their white hood and robes. From Mardi Gras-like costumes, such as the QAnon “shaman’s” Viking garb, to combat fatigues, and carrying signs and flags, among them numerous Trump banners, MAGA hats and Confederate flags, they proudly demonstrated who and what they are. But as they roamed and rampaged throughout the Capitol, did they have any sense that they were voicing their outrage over what America had become in a building constructed by slaves and in which were housed statues honoring the likes John Caldwell Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, Barry Goldwater, and, unbelievably, Jefferson Davis, a pantheon of some of the heroes of white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and the Confederacy itself. Thus, in a strangely inverted (perverted?) manner, the insurrectionists fought their way into the history they were attempting to retrieve, but were distracted by their indignation and hate and did not seem to take notice that the halls and chambers they filled had been already filled with racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and a well-established caste system, long before the insurrectionists themselves arrived with their contemporary indignation and hate. The insurrectionists were hunting down those members of Congress whom they consider anathema to the America they were making great again. They were looking for traitors such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman, and Cori Bush (also known as “The Squad”), people with names and ethnic backgrounds, whose very existence in Congress, in the United States, undermines the white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and patriarchy that is their foundation, the ground upon which they stand (proud).

Interestingly enough, although work on the Capitol was temporarily halted at the start of the Civil War, it resumed in 1862. And no Confederate flag made its way into the building during that war. So, not even the official, actual Civil War brought the Confederacy so explicitly and visibly into the Capitol, although clearly white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and a fully formed caste system resided there since the inception of our nation. But on January 6, 2021, the Confederate flag was being defiantly waved throughout the Capitol, as the enraged and strangely clad “true patriots” searched for

those they see only as mutant forms of Americans, deviants that must be prevented from distorting and destroying the United States. As senators, congresswomen/men, and their staff hid, as the Secret Service personnel, with guns drawn, frantically moved Vice President Pence to safety, just steps ahead of the insurrectionists, Donald J. Trump watched his supporters on television at the White House, enjoying what he saw and refusing to issue any statement to call off the attack he had earlier incited. The coup he designed and instigated almost worked, but while insurrection was thwarted, Trump and his *Trumpistos* did successfully secede from the Union and reignite the Civil War. They transported themselves from the very center of our democracy, free and fair elections, to the realm and domain of tyranny, led by King Trump, which is where they have been residing for quite some time.

It is worth noting that through the very gesture to “stop the steal” and reinstall (not reelect) Trump as their leader, the insurrectionists actually rendered visible a fundamental fact about where they have been and where they wish to go. In their violent demonstration of loyalty to Trump, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and the caste system that has been the underbelly of our nation from its inception, Trump and his supporters announced loudly and clearly that the very system they were embracing and advancing was failing *them* miserably. At the moment of the January 6 insurrection, there was the public identification of the Trump supporters being little more than the detritus of the white supremacist, Christian nationalist, and caste-structured system they identified with and were reaffirming by storming the Capitol. So, while they were embracing and asserting this system, they also made the point that they were upset with their status and the state of their own existence due to this system. Despite being white, Christian, and overwhelmingly male, the rioters were shafted by the caste system that overlapped with the racist, religious prejudice and sexist ideology and the history they stormed the Capitol to assert.

The white supremacists, Christian nationalists, patriarchal and free-market caste elitists were together in their demonization and hate for all things and everyone non-white, non-Christian, non-sexist, and not a supporter of the free-market caste system. But what was exposed on January 6 included just how harmful white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and patriarchy are and have been to white Christian males who are not part of the upper economic echelon of the confederation, just as they were and were not truly part of the Confederacy—slavery was about economics and caste, which ultimately had little loyalty to the wealth and wellbeing of white male Christians who were not already part of the elite, other than to exploit their fears, anger, hate, and bodies when the Confederacy needed soldiers on the battlefield. This was the moment when the wealthy senators, corporate CEOs, and Trump cadre distanced themselves from the hordes (the *hoi polloi*) symbolically and physically, as they have always done. At the very moment of a profound expression of dedication to Trump, and whiteness, Christianity, and patriarchy, we witnessed and endured a moment of a profound expression of frustration and confusion by white Christian males regarding their poor standing politically, economically, and culturally. They have been wronged by the system in which they have sustained and invested their time and energy. Perhaps, this explains in part why at the moment they

took over the Capitol, they did not quite know what to do next. The leadership, their leadership had once again abandoned them, leaving them with only their hate, fear, and violence.

Sadly, it appears that the Civil War, which never ended, has erupted once again, not surprisingly during a calamitous moment in our nation's history and in human history. Amidst the death, economic hardship, and fear caused by the coronavirus, we have also had to endure the autocratic incompetence, negligence, and corruption of a sitting president and his administration. Faced with losing power, Trump went all out in his efforts to overthrow the election by overthrowing the very government he ruled ("led" doesn't quite seem appropriate). The chaos that ensued was the most recent battle of the war that began before 1861 and didn't end in 1865. And this war rages on, and the disparate groups that have been fighting here and there found themselves together, having been given a direct order by their leader. January 6, 2021, at the nation's Capitol became another battle, not unlike the first official attack of the Civil War; it was the Battle of Fort Sumter televised for all the world to see. That the general of the battle was the sitting president of the United States only highlights the profound division and deadly tensions that remain embedded in the very fabric of our nation, a nation that since before it's birth was predicated on white supremacy, Christian nationalism, patriarchy, and a longing for an origin mythology that could cover over genocide and slavery.

On January 6, 2021, "the lost cause" was for another moment found and for another moment embraced by those barging into the Capitol. Today, however, the nostalgia for a past that never was is layered over by conspiracy theories and out-and-out lies about our past, present, and future: slavery is but an inconvenient memory, the virus will simply disappear, and the environment will be just fine, among other such lies. But for those who entered the Capitol fueled by such a distorted understanding of the world and of themselves, the war continues, and we are forced to ask how to proceed. The answer is both simple and difficult, just as the war continues, so does the struggle for justice. And those committed to this struggle must continue the work; we have examples of how to do this from the past and the present.

That it was during the 2020 pandemic that people committed to this struggle hit the streets around the world to protest white supremacy and the violence it validates and sustains is testament to their vision, courage, and love. That the protests were organized through and by Black Lives Matter (BLM) is testament to the vision, courage, and love of its founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi and the many others who have joined the movement and founded and co-founded "chapters" across the country, including Melina Abdullah (the co-founder of BLM in Los Angeles) who has put her voice, heart, and body on the line many times for this struggle. This is how we proceed: with love and solidarity, with courage and vigilance, with persistence and vision. Those committed to this struggle must "fight" on many fronts at once, but fight in the spirit and manner of Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr, Angela Davis, and William J. Barber, and those many, many more courageous and loving less-known individuals who put their lives in motion and on the line for justice each and every day.

As I write this reaction to January 6, 2021, the struggle continues in many ways, on many fronts. One example is the current effort to get the California State Department of Education to pass the “California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.” The curriculum is the third iteration, and the effort has taken a long and arduous road to fruition, which may occur in March. It is another example of love, courage, and vision, of persistence and commitment. If passed, the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum could prove a “model” not just for the many school districts throughout California, but beyond the state’s borders. Ethnic Studies was born out of the struggle for justice and remains an important part of that struggle. For the moment, the insurrectionists have left the Capitol, but they remain driven by distortions, lies, fear, and hate and will continue to wage their war. Those of us committed to struggle against those distortions, lies, fear, and hate will be well served if the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum does get passed, as it will be a significant initiative to meet the distortions, lies, fear, and hate with history, facts, understanding, analysis, and richer and fuller truth about who we have been, who we are, and who we might someday be as a nation. So, as the war continues, fortunately so does the struggle. ■