



IDEAS

Worse Than Treason

No amount of rationalizing can change the fact that the majority of the Republican Party is advocating for the overthrow of an American election.

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LAMBERT / GETTY

“We are what we pretend to be,” Kurt Vonnegut wrote in the opening of his 1962 novel, *Mother Night*, “and so we must be careful what we pretend to be.”

Republicans in Congress are pretending to be seditionists—and so they have

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Forget all the whispered denials and the off-the-record expressions of concern in private; ignore the knowing smirks on camera from GOP officials who are desperately trying to indicate that they're in on the joke. Brush aside the caviling of the anti-anti-Trump writers who would rather talk about that time in 2017 when some Democrats objected to the Electoral College vote (and were gaveled down by Joe Biden himself).

This is sedition, plain and simple. No amount of playacting and rationalizing can change the fact that the majority of the Republican Party and its apologists are advocating for the overthrow of an American election and the continued rule of a sociopathic autocrat.

This is not some handful of firebrands making a stand for the television cameras. In 2005, one Democrat in the House and one in the Senate filed an objection to counting Ohio's electoral votes, while insisting that they were not contesting the outcome of the presidential election itself. In 2017, a handful of Democratic members of the House objected to the electoral count. Because they lacked support in the Senate, then-Vice President Biden ruled the representatives out of order and declared, "It is over." In both cases, the Democratic candidate had already conceded.

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Today, the “sedition caucus” includes at least 140 members of the House—that is, some two-thirds of the House GOP membership—and at least 10 members of the Senate. Their challenge comes after weeks of insistence that the 2020 election was rigged, plagued by fraud, and even subverted by foreign powers. The president and his minions have filed, and lost, scores of lawsuits that ranged from minor disputes over process to childlike, error-filled briefs full of bizarre assertions.

Instead of threatening to gavel these objections into irrelevance, as Biden did four years ago, Vice President Mike Pence “welcomes” these challenges. Pence’s career is finished, but he could have stood for the Constitution he claims to love and which he swore to defend. However, cowardice is contagious, and no mask was thick enough to protect Pence from the pathogen of fear.

Perhaps the sedition caucus didn’t mean to go this far. Its members began by arguing that we all just needed to humor President Trump, to give him time to process the loss, and to treat the president of the United States as a toddler who was going home empty-handed. He wouldn’t be a dead-ender, they assured us, because that would be too humiliating. The Republican Party would never immolate itself for a proven loser.

But for Trump, there is no such thing as too much humiliation. The only shame in Trump world lies in admitting defeat. And so Trump doubled down, as anyone who had watched him for more than 10 minutes knew he would. And then he tripled, quadrupled, quintupled down. And just as they have done for the past four years, elected Republicans tried to convince themselves that if they supported *this* outrage, it would be the last time they would be required to surrender their dignity; that *this* betrayal of the Constitution would be the last treachery demanded of them. That if they complied one more time, they would be allowed to go back to their privileged lives far from the districts they claim to represent—places few of them really want to live after tasting life in the Emerald City.

It is possible that the sedition caucus knew that all these challenges would fail. It is possible that they know their last insult to American democracy, on Wednesday, will go nowhere, as well. This is irrelevant: Engaging in sedition for insincere reasons does not make it less hideous. Arguing that you betrayed the Constitution only as theater is no defense.

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Indeed, shredding the Constitution purely for personal gain is perhaps the worst of the sins of the sedition caucus. It would almost be a relief to know that these Republicans really believe what they're trying to sell, that they are genuine fanatics and ideologues who have at least paid us the respect of pitting their sincere beliefs against our own.

But we are, in the main, dealing with people who are far worse than true believers. The Republican Party is infested with craven opportunists, the kind of people who will try to tell us later that they were “just asking questions,” that they were “defending the process,” and of course, that they were merely representing “the will of the people.” Senators Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz are not idiots. These are men who understand perfectly well what they are doing. Senator Mitt Romney sees it clearly, noting that his GOP colleagues are engaged in “an egregious ploy” to “enhance political ambition.”

People of goodwill across the United States want some sort of road map to oppose this cold-blooded attack on the Constitution, but none exists. As James Madison warned us, without a virtuous people, no system of checks and balances will work. The Republicans have gone from being a party that touted virtue to being the most squalid and grubby expression of institutionalized self-interest in the modern history of the American republic.

The real solution will come after all of these schemes fail. Voters must not take the bait and try to tinker with hasty legal and constitutional fixes. These, too, will fail to contain a party that is determined to destroy legal and moral norms in the pursuit of raw power. The better course is to turn our attention to the business of governing, while vowing to drive every member of the sedition caucus out of our public life, both through the ballot box and by shunning their enablers.

The members of the public and the institutions of American life should shroud these seditionists in silence and opprobrium in perpetuity: no television interviews, no sinecures at universities or think tanks, no rehabilitating book tours, no jokey late-night appearances, no self-serving op-eds.

The sedition caucus is worse than a treasonous conspiracy. At least real traitors believe in something. These people instead believe only in their own fortunes and

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become what they pretend to be, and so they cannot—and must not—be trusted ever again with political power.

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