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Critical to Democracy

WE THE PEOPLE DO NOT SERVE THE LEADERS

One year ago, I wrote “2020 Crossroads: The Nation Votes on Conexit.” The column described the Trump administration’s enmity against the Constitution and democracy itself. Since then his administration has gained significantly more ground in its push to topple our democratic republic and substitute an authoritarian regime that is its polar opposite.

Every principle of freedom, liberty, equality, the rule of law and the welfare of the people is being shattered in an iconoclastic raid against the sacred virtues and foundations of a free society that Americans have always embraced as their heritage. Like the sacking of Rome, a civilization is being destroyed.

A notorious and unapologetic admirer of tyrants, President Donald Trump aspires to become one. He has methodically rid the government of anyone who places loyalty to country above fealty to himself. He has replaced patriots with sycophants whose attributes begin and end with blind obedience to his dictates.

Truth in government has become a forbidden vice if it contradicts the narrative and lies of its leader. Science is wholly subordinated to propaganda in order to serve political agenda. Warnings from climate scientists regarding fossil fuel emissions and their existential threat to life are ignored, government scientists are silenced, and the people are falsely assured that the emissions are not only harmless, but beneficial.

Similarly, warnings from epidemiologists regarding a deadly pandemic are ignored, described as a hoax, and downplayed until it hits the nation with overwhelming fatalities. Science informs us that climate change will reap a far greater toll on populations and social order if we continue on the path of denial. Walls will be of absolutely no use to our country.

The Republican Party, which has produced the calamity known as the Trump administration, has shrunk in membership as it embraces white supremacy, nationalism and the politics of division, enmity and conflict. Its leadership spurns democracy and hastens towards autocracy. It cannot win the popular vote because it turns its back on the majority of the nation’s voters.

So it resorts to tactics that suppress, distort and even cancel voting or its results, and thus suppresses democracy itself. It engages in gerrymandering to put its thumb on the scale in favor of white voters. It closes polling places in areas populated largely by non-white voters. It opposes voting by mail because, as the party leader himself admitted, if voting were made more convenient, Republicans would not win elections.

Even during the pandemic, the Republicans insisted on a voting protocol that risked the lives of voters. And on the greatest stage of all — the prize of the White House itself — the Supreme Court, voting on strictly partisan lines, halted Florida’s recount of the votes in a razor-thin election to summarily award the presidency to George W. Bush in an unprecedented disruption of a state’s right to ensure the accuracy of its voting processes.

More recently, in Georgia, Brian Kemp, a Republican, won election as governor over Stacy Abrams, an African American Democratic candidate, after purging more than half a million voters from the ballots cast in the election (mostly African Americans) when he had been secretary of state of Georgia,

using a methodology that allegedly was racially based.

And returning to the White House, we have witnessed Trump’s clandestine attempt to extort a foreign government to launch a criminal investigation into his domestic political opponent for the office by conditioning the release of vital funding for military aid on the initiation of such an investigation. The Republican-controlled Senate essentially endorsed the conduct, accepting the argument that he could do anything to stay in power and refused to check his abuse of that power.

Cheating in politics is a very slippery slope. Eventually the facade of a democracy becomes annoying and unnecessary, as does the Constitution with its structure of co-equal branches of government.

An example of the facade being swept away happened quite recently in Hungary, where the government abandoned the pretext altogether. Thus on March 30, Hungary’s Parliament — the equivalent of our Senate — voted to allow its prime minister, Viktor Orban, to rule by decree indefinitely. The Hungarian measure allowed Orban to indefinitely suspend the nation’s parliament and punish journalists with up to five years imprisonment for publishing “fake news” (i.e., anything that contradicts Orban).

Orban is one of those tyrants that Trump enthusiastically praises for his ruling style. It thus comes as no surprise that within just two weeks of Orban’s “rule by decree indefinitely” squashing of democracy, Trump began announcing that his powers as president were “absolute” and that he had the power to adjourn (suspend) Congress by executive order without its consent (i.e., rule by decree).

One hardly needs to consult Sherlock Holmes to grasp the

connection.

Some political leaders draw inspiration from such historical figures as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and others who courageously made mountains of freedom for the people. The leader of the Republican Party, on the other hand, finds his inspiration in the likes of Orban, Putin and Kim Jong Un. The party he leads has become unrecognizable. The term “conservative” used to be associated with upholding the ideals and values of our Constitution and democracy. Today, in a cataclysmic about-face, it has morphed into an ideology of authoritarianism.

The last authoritarian ruler America had was King George III. Is MAGA a subliminal call to return to his mode of governance? We should hang our heads in shame if we so dishonor our heritage by meekly submitting to tyranny after over two centuries of being the beacon of democracy for the world.

The 2020 election is as critical to our democracy as anything since our nation’s birth. Our Constitution and republic cannot survive unless they are protected and nurtured. The Constitution is being weakened severely by a totalitarian virus, and the people must act in unison this November to keep our democracy alive. It is truly on a ventilator. The Senate has failed in the obligation the Founders entrusted in it of protecting the nation from just such a threat that they knew would come. It rests with us to pass on our freedom, liberty and precious Constitution to our posterity. Our leaders serve us — we the People do not serve them.

Thomas Coffin is a retired United States Magistrate Judge. He served 24 years in the United States District Court for the District of Oregon, from 1992 to 2016.