

[A Trump Dictatorship Is Increasingly Inevitable. We Should Stop Pretending. \(rsn.org\)](https://www.rsn.org)

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Robert Kagan/The Washington Post

Barring some miracle, Trump will soon be the presumptive Republican nominee for president.

(photo: Anthony Gerace/The Washington Post)

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Let's stop the wishful thinking and face the stark reality: There is a clear path to dictatorship in the United States, and it is getting shorter every day. In 13 weeks, [Donald Trump](#) will have locked up the Republican nomination. In the RealClearPolitics [poll average](#) (for the period from Nov. 9 to 20), Trump leads his nearest competitor by 47 points and leads the rest of the field combined by 27 points. The idea that he is unelectable in the general election is nonsense — he is tied or ahead of [President Biden](#) in all the [latest polls](#) — stripping other Republican challengers of their own stated reasons for existence. The fact that many Americans might prefer other candidates, much ballyhooed by such political sages as Karl Rove, will soon become irrelevant when millions of Republican voters turn out to choose the person whom no one allegedly wants.

For many months now, we have been living in a world of self-delusion, rich with imagined possibilities. Maybe it will be [Ron DeSantis](#), or maybe [Nikki Haley](#). Maybe the [myriad indictments of Trump](#) will doom him with Republican suburbanites. Such hopeful speculation has allowed us to drift along passively, conducting business as usual, taking no dramatic action to change course, in the hope and expectation that something will happen. Like people on a riverboat, we have long known there is a waterfall ahead but assume we will somehow find our way to shore before we go over the edge. But now the actions required to get us to shore are looking harder and harder, if not downright impossible.

The magical-thinking phase is ending. Barring some miracle, Trump will soon be the presumptive Republican nominee for president. When that happens, there will be a swift and dramatic shift in the political power dynamic, in his favor. Until now, Republicans and conservatives have enjoyed relative freedom to express anti-Trump sentiments, to speak openly and positively about alternative candidates, to vent criticisms of Trump's behavior past and present. Donors who find Trump distasteful have been free to spread their money around to help his competitors. Establishment Republicans have made no secret of their hope that Trump will be convicted and thus removed from the equation without their having to take a stand against him.

All this will end once Trump wins Super Tuesday. Votes are the currency of power in our system, and money follows, and by those measures, Trump is about to become far more powerful than he already is. The hour of casting about for alternatives is closing. The next phase is about people falling into line.

In fact, it has already begun. As his nomination becomes inevitable, donors are starting to jump from other candidates to Trump. The recent [decision by the Koch political network](#) to endorse GOP hopeful Nikki Haley is scarcely sufficient to change this trajectory. And why not? If Trump is going to be the nominee, it makes sense to sign up early while he is still grateful for defectors. [Even anti-Trump donors must ask](#) whether their cause is best served by shunning the man who stands a reasonable chance of being the next president. Will corporate executives endanger the interests of their shareholders just because they or [their spouses](#) hate Trump? It's not surprising that people with hard cash on the line are the first to flip.

The rest of the Republican Party [will quickly follow](#). Rove's [recent exhortation](#) that primary voters choose anyone but Trump is the last such plea you are likely to hear from anyone with a future in the party. Even in a normal campaign, intraparty dissent begins to disappear once the primaries produce a clear winner. Most of the leading candidates have [already pledged](#) to support Trump if he is the nominee, even before he has won a single primary vote. Imagine their posture after he runs the table on Super Tuesday. Most of the candidates running against him will sprint toward him, competing for his favor. After Super Tuesday, there will be no surer and shorter path to the presidency for a Republican than to become the loyal running mate of a man who will be 82 in 2028.

Republicans who have tried to navigate the Trump era by mixing appeals to non-Trump voters with repeated professions of loyalty to Trump will end that show. As perilous as it is for Republicans to say a negative word about Trump today, it will be impossible once he has sewn up the nomination. The party will be in full general-election mode, subordinating all to the presidential campaign. What Republican or conservative will be standing up to Trump then? Will the Wall Street Journal editorial page, which has been [rather boldly](#) opposing Trump, continue to do so once he is the nominee and it is a binary choice between Trump and Biden? There will be no more infighting, only outfighting; in short, a tsunami of Trump support from all directions. A winner is a winner. And a winner who stands a reasonable chance of wielding all the power there is to wield in the world is going to attract support no matter who they are. That is the nature of power, at any time in any society.

But Trump will not only dominate his party. He will again become the central focus of everyone's attention. Even today, the news media can scarcely resist following Trump's every word and action. Once he secures the nomination, he will loom over the country like a colossus, his every word and gesture chronicled endlessly. Even today, the mainstream news media, including The Post and NBC News, is [joining forces](#) with Trump's lawyers to seek televised coverage of his federal criminal trial in D.C. Trump intends to use the trial to boost his candidacy and discredit the American justice system as corrupt — and the media outlets, serving their own interests, will help him do it.

Trump will thus enter the general-election campaign early next year with momentum, backed by growing political and financial resources, and an increasingly unified party. Can the same be said of Biden? Is Biden's power likely to grow over the coming months? Will his party unify around him? Or will alarm and doubt among Democrats, already high, continue to increase? Even at this point, the president is [struggling with](#) double-digit defections among Black Americans and younger voters. [Jill Stein](#) and [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) have already launched, respectively, third-party and independent campaigns, coming at Biden in the main from the populist left. The decision by Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) not to run for reelection in West Virginia but instead to contemplate [a third-party run](#) for the presidency is potentially devastating. The Democratic coalition is likely to remain fractious as the Republicans unify and Trump consolidates his hold.

Biden, as some have [pointed out](#), does not enjoy the usual advantages of incumbency. Trump is effectively also an incumbent, after all. That means Biden is unable to make the usual incumbent's claim that electing his opponent is a leap into the unknown. Few Republicans regard the Trump presidency as having been either abnormal or unsuccessful. In his first term, the respected "adults" around him not only blocked some of his most dangerous impulses but also kept them hidden from the public. To this day, some of these same officials rarely speak publicly against him. Why should Republican voters have a problem with Trump if those who served him don't? Regardless of what Trump's enemies think, this is going to be a battle of two tested and legitimate presidents.

Trump, meanwhile, enjoys the usual advantage of non-incumbency, namely: the lack of any responsibility. Biden must carry the world's problems like an albatross around his neck, like any incumbent, but most incumbents can at least claim that their opponent is too inexperienced to be entrusted with these crises. Biden cannot. On Trump's watch, there was no full-scale invasion of

Ukraine, no major attack on Israel, no runaway inflation, no disastrous retreat from Afghanistan. It is hard to make the case for Trump's unfitness to anyone who does not already believe it.

Trump enjoys some unusual advantages for a challenger, moreover. Even Ronald Reagan did not have Fox News and the speaker of the House in his pocket. To the degree there are structural advantages in the coming general election, in short, they are on Trump's side. And that is before we even get to the problem that Biden can do nothing to solve: his age.

Trump also enjoys another advantage. The national mood less than a year before the election is one of bipartisan disgust with the political system in general. Rarely in American history has democracy's inherent messiness been more striking. In Weimar Germany, Hitler and other agitators benefited from the squabbling of the democratic parties, right and left, the endless fights over the budget, the logjams in the legislature, the fragile and fractious coalitions. German voters increasingly yearned for someone to cut through it all and get something — anything — done. It didn't matter who was behind the political paralysis, either, whether the intransigence came from the right or the left.

Today, Republicans might be responsible for Washington's dysfunction, and they might pay a price for it in downballot races. But Trump benefits from dysfunction because he is the one who offers a simple answer: him. In this election, only one candidate is running on the platform of using unprecedented power to get things done, to hell with the rules. And a growing number of Americans [claim to want that](#), in both parties. Trump is running against the system. Biden is the living embodiment of the system. Advantage: Trump.

Which brings us to Trump's expanding [legal battlefronts](#). No doubt Trump would have preferred to run for office without spending most of his time fending off efforts to throw him in jail. Yet it is in the courtroom over the coming months that Trump is going to display his unusual power within the American political system.

It is hard to fault those who have taken Trump to court. He certainly committed at least one of the crimes he is charged with; we don't need a trial to tell us he tried to overturn the 2020 election. Nor can you blame those who have hoped thereby to obstruct his path back to the Oval Office. When a marauder is crashing through your house, you throw everything you can at him — pots, pans, candlesticks — in the hope of slowing him down and tripping him up. But that doesn't mean it works.

Trump will not be contained by the courts or the rule of law. On the contrary, he is going to use the trials to display his power. That's why he wants them televised. Trump's power comes from his following, not from the institutions of American government, and his devoted voters love him precisely because he crosses lines and ignores the old boundaries. They feel empowered by it, and that in turn empowers him. Even before the trials begin, he is toying with the judges, forcing them to try to muzzle him, defying their orders. He is a bit like King Kong [testing the chains](#) on his arms, sensing that he can break free whenever he chooses.

And just wait until the votes start pouring in. Will the judges throw a presumptive Republican nominee in jail for contempt of court? Once it becomes clear that they will not, then the power balance within the courtroom, and in the country at large, will shift again to Trump. The likeliest outcome of the trials will be to demonstrate our judicial system's inability to contain someone like Trump and, incidentally, to reveal its impotence as a check should he become president. Indicting Trump for trying to overthrow the government will prove akin to indicting Caesar for crossing the Rubicon, and just as effective. Like Caesar, Trump wields a clout that transcends the laws and institutions of government, based on the unswerving personal loyalty of his army of followers.

I mention all this only to answer one simple question: Can Trump win the election? The answer, unless something radical and unforeseen happens, is: Of course he can. If that weren't so, the Democratic Party would not be in a mounting panic about its prospects.

If Trump does win the election, he will immediately become the most powerful person ever to hold that office. Not only will he wield the awesome powers of the American executive — powers that, as conservatives used to complain, have grown over the decades — but he will do so with the fewest constraints of any president, fewer even than in his own first term.

What limits those powers? The most obvious answer is the institutions of justice — all of which Trump, by his very election, will have defied and revealed as impotent. A court system that could not control Trump as a private individual is not going to control him better when he is president of the United States and appointing his own attorney general and all the other top officials at the Justice Department. Think of the power of a man who gets himself elected president despite indictments, courtroom appearances and perhaps even conviction? Would he even obey a directive of the Supreme Court? Or would he instead ask [how many armored divisions](#) the chief justice has?

Will a future Congress stop him? Presidents can accomplish a lot these days without congressional approval, as even Barack Obama showed. The one check Congress has on a rogue president, namely, impeachment and conviction, has already proved all but impossible — even when Trump was out of office and wielded modest institutional power over his party.

Another traditional check on a president is the federal bureaucracy, that vast apparatus of career government officials who execute the laws and carry on the operations of government under every president. They are generally in the business of limiting any president's options. As Harry S. Truman [once put it](#), "Poor Ike. He'll say 'do this' and 'do that' and nothing at all will happen." That was a problem for Trump in his first term, partly because he had no government team of his own to fill the administration. This time, he will. Those who choose to serve in his second administration will not be taking office with the unstated intention of refusing to carry out his wishes. If the Heritage Foundation has its way, and there is no reason to believe it won't, many of those career bureaucrats will be gone, replaced by people carefully "vetted" to ensure their loyalty to Trump.

What about the desire for reelection, a factor that constrains most presidents? Trump might not want or need a third term, but were he to decide he wanted one, as he has sometimes indicated, would the [22nd Amendment](#) block him any more effectively from being president for life than the Supreme Court, if he refused to be blocked? Why should anyone think that amendment would be more sacrosanct than any other part of the Constitution for a man like Trump, or perhaps more importantly, for his devoted supporters?

A final constraint on presidents has been their own desire for a glittering legacy, with success traditionally measured in terms that roughly equate to the well-being of the country. But is that the way Trump thinks? Yes, Trump might seek a great legacy, but it is strictly his own glory that he craves. As with Napoleon, who spoke of the glory of France but whose narrow ambitions for himself and his family brought France to ruin, Trump's ambitions, though he speaks of making America great again, clearly begin and end with himself. As for his followers, he doesn't have to achieve anything to retain their support — his failure to build the wall in his first term in no way damaged his standing with millions of his loyalists. They have never asked anything of him other than that he triumph over the forces they hate in American society. And that, we can be sure, will be Trump's primary mission as president.

Having answered the question of whether Trump can win, we can now turn to the most urgent question: Will his presidency turn into a dictatorship? The odds are, again, pretty good.

It is worth getting inside Trump's head a bit and imagining his mood following an election victory. He will have spent the previous year, and more, fighting to stay out of jail, plagued by myriad persecutors and helpless to do what he likes to do best: exact revenge. Think of the fury that will have built up inside him, a fury that, from his point of view, he has worked hard to contain. As he [once put it](#), "I think I've been toned down, if you want to know the truth. I could really tone it up." Indeed he could — and will. We caught a glimpse of his deep thirst for vengeance in his Veterans Day [promise to](#) "root out the Communists, Marxists, Fascists, and Radical Left Thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our Country, lie, steal, and cheat on Elections, and will do anything possible, whether legally or illegally, to destroy America, and the American Dream." Note the equation of himself with "America and the American Dream." It is he they are trying to destroy, he believes, and as president, he will return the favor.

What will that look like? Trump has already named some of those he intends to go after once he is elected: senior officials from his first term such as retired Gen. John F. Kelly, Gen. Mark A. Milley, former attorney general William P. Barr and others who spoke against him after the 2020 election; officials in the FBI and the CIA who investigated him in the Russia probe; Justice Department officials who refused his demands to overturn the 2020 election; members of the [Jan. 6](#) committee; Democratic opponents including Rep. Adam B. Schiff (Calif.); and Republicans who voted for or publicly supported his impeachment and conviction.

But that's just the start. After all, Trump will not be the only person seeking revenge. His administration will be filled with people with enemies' lists of their own, a determined cadre of "vetted" officials who will see it as their sole, presidentially authorized mission to "root out" those in the government who cannot be trusted. Many will simply be fired, but others will be subject to career-destroying investigations. The Trump administration will be filled with people who will not need explicit instruction from Trump, any more than Hitler's local gauleiters needed instruction. In such circumstances, people "[work toward the Führer](#)," which is to say, they anticipate his desires and seek favor through acts they think will make him happy, thereby enhancing their own influence and power in the process.

Nor will it be difficult to find things to charge opponents with. Our history is unfortunately filled with instances of unfairly targeted officials singled out for being on the wrong side of a particular issue at the wrong time — the State Department's "China Hands" of the late 1940s, for instance, whose careers were destroyed because they happened to be in positions of influence when the Chinese Communist Revolution occurred. Today, there is the whiff of a new McCarthyism in the

air. MAGA Republicans insist that Biden himself is a “[communist](#),” that his election was a “[communist takeover](#)” and that his administration is a “[communist regime](#).”

It’s therefore no surprise that Biden has a “pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agenda,” as the powerful chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.), [put it](#) this year, and is deliberately “ceding American leadership and security to China.” Republicans these days routinely charge that their opponents are not just naive or inadequately attentive to China’s rising power but are actual “sympathizers” with Beijing. “Communist China has their President ... China Joe,” Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) tweeted on Biden’s [Inauguration Day](#). Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) [has called](#) the president “Beijing Biden.” The Republican Senate nominee in New Hampshire last year [even called](#) Republican Gov. Chris Sununu a “Chinese Communist Party sympathizer.” We can expect more of this when the war against the “deep state” begins in earnest. [According to](#) Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), there is a whole cabal determined to undermine American security, a “Uniparty” of elites made up of “neoconservatives on the right” and “liberal globalists on the left” who are not true Americans and therefore do not have the true interests of America at heart. Can such “anti-American” behavior be criminalized? It has in the past and can be again.

So, the Trump administration will have many avenues to persecute its enemies, real and perceived. Think of all the laws now on the books that give the federal government enormous power to surveil people for possible links to terrorism, a dangerously flexible term, not to mention all the usual opportunities to investigate people for alleged tax evasion or violation of foreign agent registration laws. The IRS under both parties has occasionally looked at depriving think tanks of their tax-exempt status because they espouse policies that align with the views of the political parties. What will happen to the think-tanker in a second Trump term who argues that the United States should ease pressure on China? Or the government official rash enough to commit such thoughts to official paper? It didn’t take more than that to ruin careers in the 1950s.

And who will stop the improper investigations and prosecutions of Trump’s many enemies? Will Congress? A Republican Congress will be busy conducting its own inquiries, using its powers to subpoena people, accusing them of all kinds of crimes, just as it does now. Will it matter if the charges are groundless? And of course in some cases they will be true, which will lend even greater validity to a wider probe of political enemies.

Will Fox News defend them, or will it instead just amplify the accusations? The American press corps will remain divided as it is today, between those organizations catering to Trump and his

audience and those that do not. But in a regime where the ruler has declared the news media to be “enemies of the state,” the press will find itself under significant and constant pressure. Media owners will discover that a hostile and unbridled president can make their lives unpleasant in all sorts of ways.

Indeed, who will stand up for anyone accused in the public arena, besides their lawyers? In a Trump presidency, the courage it will take to stand up for them will be no less than the courage it will take to stand up to Trump himself. How many will risk their own careers to defend others? In a nation congenitally suspicious of government, who will stick up for the rights of former officials who become targets of Trump’s Justice Department? There will be ample precedents for those seeking to justify the persecution. Abraham Lincoln suspended habeas corpus, the Wilson administration [shut down](#) newspapers and magazines critical of the war; Franklin D. Roosevelt rounded up Japanese Americans and placed them in camps. We will pay the price for every transgression ever committed against the laws designed to protect individual rights and freedoms.

How will Americans respond to the first signs of a regime of political persecution? Will they rise up in outrage? Don’t count on it. Those who found no reason to oppose Trump in the primaries and no reason to oppose him in the general are unlikely to experience a sudden awakening when some former Trump-adjacent official such as Milley finds himself under investigation for goodness knows what. They will know only that Justice Department prosecutors, the IRS, the FBI and several congressional committees are looking into it. And who is to say that those being hounded are not in fact tax cheaters, or Chinese spies, or perverts, or whatever they might be accused of? Will the great body of Americans even recognize these accusations as persecution and the first stage of shutting down opposition to Trump across the country?

The Trump dictatorship will not be a communist tyranny, where almost everyone feels the oppression and has their lives shaped by it. In conservative, anti-liberal tyrannies, ordinary people face all kinds of limitations on their freedoms, but it is a problem for them only to the degree that they value those freedoms, and many people do not. The fact that this tyranny will depend entirely on the whims of one man will mean that Americans’ rights will be conditional rather than guaranteed. But if most Americans can go about their daily business, they might not care, just as many Russians and Hungarians do not care.

Yes, there will be a large opposition movement centered in the Democratic Party, but exactly how this opposition will stop the persecution is hard to see. Congress and the courts will offer little relief. Democratic politicians, particularly members of the youngest generation, will yell and scream, but if they are not joined by Republicans, it will look like the same old partisanship. If Democrats still control one house of Congress, they will be able to blunt some investigations, but the odds that they will control both houses after 2024 are longer than the odds of a Biden victory. Nor is there sufficient reason to hope that the disordered and dysfunctional opposition to Trump today will suddenly become more unified and effective once Trump takes power. That is not how things work. In evolving dictatorships, the opposition is always weak and divided. That's what makes dictatorship possible in the first place. Opposition movements rarely get stronger and more unified under the pressures of persecution. Today there is no leader for Democrats to rally behind. It is difficult to imagine that such a leader will emerge once Trump regains power.

But even if the opposition were to become strong and unified, it is not obvious what it would do to protect those facing persecution. The opposition's ability to wield legitimate, peaceful and legal forms of power will already have been found wanting in this election cycle, when Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans threw every legitimate weapon against Trump and still failed. Will they turn instead to illegitimate, extralegal action? What would that look like?

Americans might take to the streets. In fact, it is likely that many people will engage in protests against the new regime, perhaps even before it has had a chance to prove itself deserving of them. But then what? Even in his first term, [Trump and his advisers](#) on more than one occasion [discussed invoking the Insurrection Act](#). No less a defender of American democracy than George H.W. Bush invoked the act to deal with [the Los Angeles riots in 1992](#). It is hard to imagine Trump not invoking it should "the Communists, Marxists, Fascists, and Radical Left Thugs" take to the streets. One suspects he will relish the opportunity.

And who will stop him? His own handpicked military advisers? That seems unlikely. He could make retired Lt. Gen. [Michael Flynn](#) chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff if he wanted, and it is unlikely a Republican Senate would decline to confirm. Does anyone think military leaders will disobey commands from their duly elected, constitutionally authorized, commander in chief? Do we even want the military to have to make that call? There is every reason to believe that active-duty troops and reservists are likely to be disproportionately more sympathetic to a newly reelected President Trump than to the "Radical Left Thugs" supposedly causing mayhem in the streets of their towns and cities. Those who hope to be saved by a U.S. military devoted to the protection of the Constitution are living in a fantasyland.

Resistance could come from the governors of predominantly Democratic states such as California and New York through a form of nullification. States with Democratic governors and statehouses could refuse to recognize the authority of a tyrannical federal government. That is always an option in our federal system. (Should Biden win, some Republican states might engage in nullification.) But not even the bluest states are monolithic, and Democratic governors are likely to find themselves under siege on their home turf if they try to become bastions of resistance to Trump's tyranny. Republicans and conservatives throughout the nation will be energized by their hero's triumph. The power shift at the federal level, and the tone of menace and revenge emanating from the White House, will likely embolden all kinds of counter-resistance even in deep-blue states, including violent protests. What resources will the governors have to combat such attacks and maintain order? The state and local police? Will those entities be willing to use force against protesters who will likely enjoy the public support of the president? The Democratic governors might not be eager to find out.

Should Trump be successful in launching a campaign of persecution and the opposition prove powerless to stop it, then the nation will have begun an irreversible descent into dictatorship. With each passing day, it will become harder and more dangerous to stop it by any means, legal or illegal. Try to imagine what it will be like running for office on an opposition ticket in such an environment. In theory, the midterm elections in 2026 might hold hope for a Democratic comeback, but won't Trump use his considerable powers, both legal and illegal, to prevent that? Trump insists and no doubt believes that the current administration corruptly used the justice system to try to prevent his reelection. Will he not consider himself justified in doing the same once he has all the power? He has, of course, already promised to do exactly that: to use the powers of his office to persecute anyone who dares challenge him.

This is the trajectory we are on now. Is descent into dictatorship inevitable? No. Nothing in history is inevitable. Unforeseen events change trajectories. Readers of this essay will no doubt list all the ways in which it is arguably too pessimistic and doesn't take sufficient account of this or that alternative possibility. Maybe, despite everything, Trump won't win. Maybe the coin flip will come up heads and we'll all be safe. And maybe even if he does win, he won't do any of the things he says he's going to do. You may be comforted by this if you choose.

What is certain, however, is that the odds of the United States falling into dictatorship have grown considerably because so many of the obstacles to it have been cleared and only a few are left. If eight years ago it seemed literally inconceivable that a man like Trump could be elected, that obstacle was cleared in 2016. If it then seemed unimaginable that an American president would try to remain in office after losing an election, that obstacle was cleared in 2020. And if no one could believe that Trump, having tried and failed to invalidate the election and stop the

counting of electoral college votes, would nevertheless reemerge as the unchallenged leader of the Republican Party and its nominee again in 2024, well, we are about to see that obstacle cleared as well. In just a few years, we have gone from being relatively secure in our democracy to being a few short steps, and a matter of months, away from the possibility of dictatorship.

Are we going to do anything about it? To shift metaphors, if we thought there was a 50 percent chance of an asteroid crashing into North America a year from now, would we be content to hope that it wouldn't? Or would we be taking every conceivable measure to try to stop it, including many things that might not work but that, given the magnitude of the crisis, must be tried anyway?

Yes, I know that most people don't think an asteroid is heading toward us and that's part of the problem. But just as big a problem has been those who do see the risk but for a variety of reasons have not thought it necessary to make any sacrifices to prevent it. At each point along the way, our political leaders, and we as voters, have let opportunities to stop Trump pass on the assumption that he would eventually meet some obstacle he could not overcome. Republicans could have stopped Trump from winning the nomination in 2016, but [they didn't](#). The voters could have elected Hillary Clinton, but they didn't. Republican senators could have voted to convict Trump in either of his impeachment trials, which might have made his run for president much more difficult, but [they didn't](#).

Throughout these years, an understandable if fatal psychology has been at work. At each stage, stopping Trump would have required extraordinary action by certain people, whether politicians or voters or donors, actions that did not align with their immediate interests or even merely their preferences. It would have been extraordinary for all the Republicans running against Trump in 2016 to decide to give up their hopes for the presidency and unite around one of them. Instead, they behaved normally, spending their time and money attacking each other, assuming that Trump was not their most serious challenge, or that someone else would bring him down, and thereby opened a clear path for Trump's nomination. And they have, with just a few exceptions, done the same this election cycle. It would have been extraordinary had [Mitch McConnell](#) and many other Republican senators voted to convict a president of their own party. Instead, they assumed that after Jan. 6, 2021, Trump was finished and it was therefore safe not to convict him and thus avoid becoming pariahs among the vast throng of Trump supporters. In each instance, people believed they could go on pursuing their personal interests and ambitions as usual in the confidence that somewhere down the line, someone or something else, or simply fate, would stop him. Why should they be the ones to sacrifice their careers? Given the choice between a high-risk gamble and hoping for the best, people generally hope for the best. Given the choice between doing the dirty work yourself and letting others do it, people generally prefer the latter.

A paralyzing psychology of appeasement has also been at work. At each stage, the price of stopping Trump has risen higher and higher. In 2016, the price was forgoing a shot at the White House. Once Trump was elected, the price of opposition, or even the absence of obsequious loyalty, became the end of one's political career, as [Jeff Flake](#), [Bob Corker](#), [Paul D. Ryan](#) and many others discovered. By 2020, the price had risen again. As Mitt Romney recounts in McKay Coppins's [recent biography](#), Republican members of Congress contemplating voting for Trump's impeachment and conviction feared for their physical safety and that of their families. There is no reason that fear should be any less today. But wait until Trump returns to power and the price of opposing him becomes persecution, the loss of property and possibly the loss of freedom. Will those who balked at resisting Trump when the risk was merely political oblivion suddenly discover their courage when the cost might be the ruin of oneself and one's family?

We are closer to that point today than we have ever been, yet we continue to drift toward dictatorship, still hoping for some intervention that will allow us to escape the consequences of our collective cowardice, our complacent, willful ignorance and, above all, our lack of any deep commitment to liberal democracy. As the man said, we are going out not with a bang but a whimper.