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USA - Debate

Riot on the Hill

- Debate -

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Yesterday's 'sacrileges' in our temple of democracy - oh, poor defiled city on the hill, etc. - constituted an 'insurrection' only in the sense of dark comedy. What was essentially a big biker gang dressed as circus performers and war-surplus barbarians - including the guy with a painted face posing as horned bison in a fur coat - stormed the ultimate country club, squatted on Pence's throne, chased Senators into the sewers, casually picked their noses and rifled files and, above all, shot endless selfies to send to the dudes back home. Otherwise they didn't have a clue. (The aesthetic was pure Buñuel and Dali: 'Our only rule was very simple: no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted.')

But something unexpectedly profound happened: a deus ex machina that lifted the curse of Trump from the careers of conservative war hawks and right-wing young lions, whose ambitions until yesterday had been fettered by the presidential cult. Today was the signal for a long-awaited prison break. The word 'surreal' has been thrown around a lot, but it accurately characterizes last night's bipartisan orgy, with half of the Senate election-denialists channeling Biden's call for a 'return to decency' and vomiting up vast amounts of noxious piety.

Let me be clear: the Republican Party has just undergone an irreparable split. By the White House's Führerprinzip standards, Pence, Tom Cotton, Chuck Grassley, Mike Lee, Ben Sasse, Jim Lankford even Kelly Loeffler are now traitors beyond the pale. This ironically enables them to become viable presidential contenders in a still far-right but post-Trump party. Since the election and behind the scenes, big business and many mega-Republican donors have been burning their bridges to the White House, most sensationally in the case of that uber-Republican institution, the National Association of Manufacturers, which yesterday called for Pence to use the 25th Amendment to depose Trump. Of course, they were happy enough in the first three years of the regime with the colossal tax cuts, comprehensive rollbacks of environmental and labor regulation, and a meth-fed stock-market. But the last year has brought the unavoidable recognition that the White House was incapable of managing major national crises or ensuring basic economic and political stability.

The goal is a realignment of power within the Party with more traditional capitalist interest groups like NAM and the Business Roundtable as well as with the Koch family, long uncomfortable with Trump. There should be no illusion that 'moderate Republicans' have suddenly been raised from the grave; the emerging project will preserve the core alliance between Christian evangelicals and economic conservatives and presumably defend most of the Trump-era legislation. Institutionally, Senate Republicans, with a strong roster of young talents, will rule the post-Trump camp and, via vicious darwinian competition - above all, the battle to replace McConnell - bring about a generational succession, probably before the Democrats' octogenarian oligarchy has left the scene. (The major internal battle on the post-Trump side in the next few years will probably center on foreign policy and the new cold war with China.)

That's one side of the split. The other is more dramatic: the True Trumpists have become a de facto third party, bunkered down heavily in the House of Representatives. As Trump embalms himself in bitter revenge fantasies, reconciliation between the two camps will probably become impossible, although individual defections may occur. Mar-a-Lago will become base camp for the Trump death cult which will continue to mobilize his hardcore followers to terrorize Republican primaries and ensure the preservation of a large die-hard contingent in the House as well as in red-state legislatures. (Republicans in the Senate, accessing huge corporation donations, are far less vulnerable to such challenges.)

Tomorrow liberal pundits may reassure us that the Republicans have committed suicide, that the age of Trump is over, and that Democrats are on the verge of reclaiming hegemony. Similar declarations, of course, were made

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during vicious Republican primaries in 2015. They seemed very convincing at the time. But an open civil war amongst Republicans may only provide short-term advantages to Democrats, whose own divisions have been rubbed raw by Biden's refusal to share power with progressives. Freed from Trump's electronic fatwas, moreover, some of the younger Republican senators may prove to be much more formidable competitors for the white college-educated suburban vote than centrist Democrats realize. In any event, the only future that we can reliably foresee - a continuation of extreme socio-economic turbulence - renders political crystal balls useless.

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Source *New Left Review* [Sidecar](#).

Expanded and updated version *The Guardian*, 8 January 2021 "[With the Capitol riot the Trumpists have become a de facto third party](#)".

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