

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7010>



USA

'We're witnessing a fundamental political realignment'

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV552 - January 2021 -

Publication date: Monday 25 January 2021

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

This interview with Mike Davis on the crisis in the United States article appeared on the *Red Flag* website on 15 January 2021 [here](#).

The House has voted to impeach Donald Trump for “incitement of insurrection”. What do you make of the choice to impeach on this ground?

We need to be very careful in analysing this. “Insurrection” and “coup” are hyperbole: there was no plan to seize power on 6 January. On the other hand, there may have been a plot to capture or even kill members of the Senate and the House, particularly Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nancy Pelosi. So “riot with deadly intent” is the most accurate term, and we now know that certain Republicans in the House helped organise the invasion.

In one survey a few years ago, researchers were stunned by the large number of Trump voters who believed that political violence, even the overthrow of what they considered unlawful government, to be totally justified. And we now have polls showing that 70 percent of Republicans still strongly back Trump.

A majority of Republicans in the House, moreover, voted against certifying the election. These Trump diehards now constitute a de facto third party. Since Trump thinks only of revenge, there is little chance of reconciling this group with the majority of Republicans in the Senate who voted in favour of accepting Biden's election. The Republican Party is splitting in two even if both wings retain the same brand name. The Trump movement indeed has become a genuinely neo-fascist force organised around the myth of the “stolen election” and tacitly condoning political violence. Their rage has become even more incandescent after Facebook and Twitter closed down Trump's accounts.

On the other hand, what happened in Washington was also a liberation of sorts for many Republicans on the other side of the certification debate. The Trump cult has stifled the ambitions of younger conservative senators such as Ben Sasse (Nebraska) and Tom Cotton (Arkansas). Now a space has been cleared for them to run in the presidential primaries in 2024. Intra-party polarisation has also emboldened Republican hawks like congresswoman Liz Cheney, daughter of George W. Bush's former vice president, who hate Trump's coddling of Russian President Putin and blame him for undermining American hegemony.

This “post-Trump” wing has been given courage by an extraordinary revolt of the party's traditional business donors against the president. I must confess to astonishment when, on 6 January, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), representing the entire spectrum of older industries large and small, called on Mike Pence to invoke the 25th Amendment to depose Trump. For 125 years, NAM has been virtually identical with the Republican Party, so this was a real earthquake, as was the declaration by the Koch network, the superpower coalition of donors on the right, that it would re-evaluate contributions in light of the Capitol riots.

But we shouldn't leap to the conclusion that post-Trumpism is a rebirth of “moderate Republicanism”. It is not. The break is with Trump authoritarianism, not with most of his far-right domestic policies. It remains to be seen whether the hard Christian right, which has anointed Trump as the hand of Jesus, will also divide. In any event, we're witnessing a fundamental political realignment occurring in real time.

The new administration will be inaugurated on 20 January. Can you say something about what Joe Biden and the ruling class hope to get out of the next four years of Democratic rule?

His cabinet and advisory appointments are almost entirely Obama regime veterans, and especially members of his vice-presidential staff. Progressives have been scorned, with one notable exception: the nomination of Deb Haaland (a Democrat from New Mexico) as the first Native American cabinet member (Department of the Interior).

His promise to be "the most pro-labour president in history" coexists uncomfortably with his heavy support from Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood. One of his chief goals, moreover, is the restoration of the North Atlantic alliance, not only as barrier to Russian ambitions, but as a vehicle for synchronising stimulus packages and maintaining the stability of big finance. Domestically, most of his vaunted "green energy" revolution, if adopted, will subsidise private industry, not expand the public sector.

We should recall how he won the nomination after having lost so many primaries to Bernie Sanders. During the South Carolina primary, there was an incredible rallying to his side of the entire Democratic establishment, the other defeated candidates and the traditional Black leadership in the south. The implicit slogan was "stop Sanders at all cost".

After Bernie conceded defeat, his campaign and Biden's agreed to form a series of working committees to negotiate the content of the Democratic platform. To the horror of millions, in the healthcare group, the Sandernistas conceded universal health care — they decided not to make it a make-or-break issue in the election and accepted instead Biden's far weaker modification of Obamacare, which would still keep private insurance companies at the centre of medical provision. This was a huge defeat at a time of the greatest medical crisis since the Spanish flu.

Given the way the impeachment is being carried out — the daily valorisation of and rallying around the sacred institutions of US democracy — is it a distraction for progressives whose tasks soon will be to challenge many of the policies of the incoming administration?

We need to challenge the cant about the Constitution. I personally consider nothing more obnoxious than the unctuous reverence for the Constitution on the part of the Democrats. If you look at it historically, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson was a fierce critic of the Constitution. Both Republican progressives and the Socialist Party at the time regarded the Constitution as an obstacle and nothing holy.

But it shows how completely the Democratic leadership has bought in to this almost biblical reverence of a document created by slave owners and wealthy merchants to control demands for democracy and to stabilise slavery in the south. And anointing with holy water the Constitution also precludes the fundamental structural reforms that must take place, starting with the abolition of the Electoral College.

So the establishment is just gloating over itself and instrumentalising the events of 6 January to its advantage. This also creates more leverage for the new administration, which is a restoration of the status quo ante — the Obama personnel and regime. It gives them more leverage to try to punish and control the progressive wing of the party.

However, the two Democrats who publicly have been the least enthusiastic about impeachment are the president-elect himself and Bernie Sanders. Biden still drinks the Kool-Aid and subscribes to the myth of bipartisanship in Congress, of a moderate centre in American politics. It's just like Obama's quest to bring us all together and make us nicer and more decent people. It's a real delusion, but clearly one he believes in. Bernie Sanders will probably vote to convict Trump, but he's been very clear that working-class America has to be, always, the major issue in the foreground, has to be the highest priority.

Having said that, the greatest crime of the Trump administration is not what happened on 6 January. It's the fact that from the late spring onward, the administration has been sabotaging and undermining the public health response to

the pandemic. Its hands are bloodstained and responsible for the deaths of at least half of the almost 400,000 people who have died. We should be demanding an independent commission to investigate all this, but also to indict those responsible. I doubt this has any purchase in Congress. But, if necessary, it should be conducted independently by medical experts and above all give voice to rank-and-file workers. It would be hideous to allow Trump and his administration to escape any kind of real punishment for the fact that their policies have become the active vector of the coronavirus infections.

Obama gave amnesty, informally, to the Bush administration for its war crimes and use of torture and then turned around and extended the same kind of informal amnesty to the bankers who brought the American economy down. Biden's instinct is to not punish the Trump administration — although he may modify this to some degree because of the pressure that he's under.

The trick for progressives is to demand punishment and criminal indictment, but at the same time not allow the Biden administration or the Democratic leadership in the House and Senate to turn impeachment and so on into a distraction.

I think it's entirely possible for progressives to demand the sternest punishment for the Trump administration, but at the same time point out the need for fundamental structural reform. The American constitutional political system is completely undemocratic in certain aspects. The Senate, for example, was designed primarily as a check on the tendencies and movements towards democracy in the early republic. Even if reform is difficult or ultimately impossible to accomplish, it's necessary to change the discourse and to put these hallowed institutions in a realistic light.

Thinking more broadly about the situation in the US in 2021, what do you think are the most consequential "known knowns" and "known unknowns"? What do you think are the most important issues facing the US left?

The conditions in this country are extreme for low-wage workers in general and the working class as a whole. They're living under depression conditions. And it's doubtful that the Biden administration will be able to do anything dramatic about that, at least in the short term.

The great priority must be struggles to organise workplaces and defend workers, to organise in the communities around life and death issues like rent control and medical coverage and to build effective national protest movements after the bitter experience of last year — of seeing the pandemic response annexed by the Trumpites, allowing the far right to mount the only effective protest movement that occurred, rather than a broad progressive coalition fighting for workplace safety and supporting the healthcare and essential workers. Never has the progressive camp, or more explicitly the American left, had greater tasks and responsibilities placed on it than it has for the forthcoming year.

Among the known unknowns is the cold war with China, of which Australia is the front line. Biden ran on Trump positions about China. Remember this was one of the centrepieces of the second Obama administration — the pivot from the Middle East to South-East Asia and the South China Sea, and the attempt to create a more activist and militant alliance against China. This is extraordinarily dangerous. I think progressives should do everything they can to support the rights of Uyghurs and democracy in China. But a cold war is an extraordinarily dangerous situation.

Another known unknown is the ability to restore, within the OECD bloc, a stabilising level of economic growth. I tend to be extremely sceptical about that possibility. Clearly, in the United States, the private sector cannot any longer create a stable supply of well-paid, meaningful jobs to compensate for the job losses that have occurred so far in the pandemic, but especially for what all the mainstream economists are telling us will be job losses due to the

application of artificial intelligence to every sector of the economy. What that means is that the public sector has to be the engine that drives employment and keeps up the level of domestic demand — but public sector employment, particularly in the English-speaking countries, has been savagely cut over the last generation.

Another known unknown will be whether the labour uprising and resurgence, which is the central hope of the left, will occur. Right now, the most progressive unions are ones like the National Nurses United and some of the public sector unions. But other sections of the union movement that historically have been decisive power centres have been enormously weakened by job automation and job export, but also by corruption. The United Auto Workers, once the most powerful single union in the country, which set the pace for national labour negotiations, was eviscerated a few years ago by immense corruption and crisis inside the leadership. The American union movement has very activist and committed sectors, but it also suffers from a great amount of internal decay.

Then there's climate change and the environmental crisis. In places like Australia and California, what we're seeing in the phenomena of annual or biannual mega-fires is an immense biological transition. Forests are dying and not being replaced. Fire is creating irreversible changes in the landscape. Drought is ravaging some of the most important irrigated agricultural systems in Europe. Food security is as precarious as it has been in a generation and will grow even more so. This is the background crisis to everything else. And certainly here in California, like you in Australia, we have a heightened sense of this. I live in San Diego, but I grew up in the rural East County. And almost half of the East County has been burnt in the last sixteen or seventeen years. California's iconic landscapes in some cases are disappearing. It's no longer a matter of an episodic disaster; it's a continuing catastrophe that grow bigger and bigger every year.

You shouldn't ask me these questions because, you know, I'm always characterised as a prophet of disaster (laughs). I probably have too many bad scenarios. I ultimately believe that global capitalism can't create meaningful social roles for humanity, that it cannot decarbonise the planet, that it cannot prevent nuclear wars, that it cannot provide food security. I don't think another golden age of capital is possible, certainly not globally.

And China's ability to step in and take the place of America, as it did after the 2008 financial crisis, engage in vast public spending campaigns that increase demands for products and help a large part of the world escape the economic crisis — well it's an open bet on China's capacity to do this, but I'm extremely doubtful that a new market-based world order will emerge to bring us back to anything that represents prosperity.

Rather, the opposite seems to be happening, with, even in the rich countries, enormous numbers of people, particularly young people, reduced to the most marginal economic roles, without any forward motion or ability to escape the purgatory of casualised and contingent labour or, for that matter, the housing crisis that threatens to put hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets.

On the other hand, the United States differs from Western Europe in one important aspect. Okay, we've seen the growth of far-right authoritarian movements which had success in areas of Western and Central Europe among formerly left-wing blue-collar workers. But in this country, the most astonishing thing, I think, is not so much the rise of Trump and far-right populism. It's that among people under 30, every poll shows that a majority looks more favourably on socialism, whatever that means to them, than on capitalism. And it's that so many of them, hundreds of thousands of them, have been active in campaigns from the Occupy movement to Black Lives Matter and so on.

One of the principal concerns of progressives right now is how to sustain that activism, how to prevent it from being demobilised. Much of the future rests on the ability of the left to do that. There's been no other country — certainly no European country, or Australia, New Zealand or Canada — that has seen such a powerful resurgence of the left, or one that is so solidly, generationally specific and anchored. And of course, youth of colour, the coming plurality of the American population, played a central role in this — particularly the Black women who built Black Lives Matter. After

'We're witnessing a fundamental political realignment'

Sanders' concession, you faced the possibility that tens of thousands of young people who had been active in his campaign would just become pessimistic and disorganised, when instead their activism was recycled by BLM. We must conserve and nurture activism above all.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.