

Power, and How We Use What Power We Have

“Power does not change you; it unmasks you.” John F. Kennedy

Most Americans will remember 2020 for the fires, hurricanes, ice storms such as in Oklahoma, a highly controversial election, and, of course, an obstinate pandemic! In yet further mutations of a virus-within-The-Virus, conspiracy theories had begun feeding on the chaos caused by COVID, increasing suspicions and the spread of gossip. Person to person transmission of misinformation spun via social media like the old party game of telephone, though this one was far less innocent and with distortions that spread virally. The pandemic took a massive toll on the foundations of our government and ways of life we may have been taking for granted. A nation began warring with itself as a former president felt entitled to belittle women and competitors, and referred to those whose ideas differed from his own as “enemies.” Journalists repeatedly tracked lies, the effects of which were often ignored by prominent members of Congress, many of whom were willing to forfeit integrity and discard their principles in favor of grasping whatever holds on power they may have had, or, as some called it, political survival. On January 6, 2021, Congress met to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election. After turning on the news, I was transfixed in horror and unable to tear myself away from seeing the Capitol Police stave off a mob of rioters in order to protect the US Capitol. The assault went on ... and on ... and still on ... why don't they call in the National Guard? and on ... get the military? and still on ... sound an alarm!! I could not pull away from the horror of the David and Goliath panorama unfolding, certain—as I reassured myself—that reinforcements for the little guys would arrive at any moment.... I mean, wouldn't they? I was clueless as to what was really going on, and not certain if what I was seeing was even real. As I would later learn, and despite being terribly outnumbered, the Capitol Police, and also the Metropolitan Police of Washington, proved to be examples of keen intellect and sacrificial love for one's country in countering the January 6 assailants.

In an attempt to overturn election results with the “Big Lie” that it was he who really won, former President Trump incited over 2,000 heavily-armed supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol and wreak havoc. Severely outnumbered, Capitol police officers were left to stave off an insurrection that left four people dead, at least 138 injured, millions in damages to the Capitol, and subsequent suicides of four of the very officers who, against immense odds, had sought to do their part in upholding the nation's constitutional mandate for a peaceful transfer of power.¹ Anger at what the virus was doing to all of us built up alongside these and other political tremors, carving deep crevices in the foundation of a government whose stable functioning many had assumed could be taken for granted. But as the pandemic persisted in taking the lives of fellow citizens, six feet of social distancing and shifting political fault lines broke into emotional and ideological divides that stretched miles. Thus, a second year of enduring the pandemic began within the political chasms we still find ourselves working to bridge. Machiavellian plot lines and pent-up frustrations fused with the pandemic's eerie indifference to what was happening to our way of life and what we were doing to our country as a whole. This is what you might read in books, play games with, or watch online, but not encounter in real time. Internal political turmoil simmered as the bipartisan House Select Committee held hearings that retraced events inside the White House leading up to and during the January 6 insurrection on the Capitol. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss), Liz Cheney (R-WY), Pete Aguilar (D-CA), Adam Kinzinger (R-IL), Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Elaine Luria (D-VA), Jamie Raskin (D-MD), Stephanie Murphy (D-FL), and Adam Schiff (D-CA) were determined to distinguish, as best as possible, an historically accurate account of events, apart from fiction, gossip, conspiracy theories, and other forms of misinformation. In May, 2022, members of the committee began providing information that answered many of the questions raised by the attack on the Capitol. Rational, deliberative inquiries informed each hearing, and a mass of evidence, much of it coming from the former president's own lawyers, the courts, and many other Republicans, solidly backed up the assertions made. Each hearing gave still others the courage to come forward in order to provide additional perspectives and helped to unravel the events surrounding the insurrection. Despite having been repeatedly informed of losing the election—by his attorney general, numerous Republican attorneys, members of the Justice Department, and his own cabinet members; despite having filed 60+ lawsuits, all of which failed due to lack of evidence in support of the claims made; and despite many Republican state and election officials refusing to alter vote counts in his favor, the former president insisted on fraud that, ironically, *he himself* had been trying to perpetrate on the will of the American people.

Thus, the effects of what would come to be known as an insurrection in support of the “Big Lie”—that the 2020 election had been stolen—continued throughout the year—with some paralyzing repercussions. The inaction Chef Andrés had spoken of after Hurricane Katrina now seemed to render mute many Republican representatives in Congress—whom, one might have expected, had a constitutional duty as well as a moral imperative to speak out. Cassidy Hutchinson, a former senior aide to Mark Meadows, the former president's chief of staff, testified to the January 6 Select Committee that Trump wanted to march with the armed mob of protesters. When told the protesters couldn't get through the magnetometers, or security devices, because they had weapons and were wearing body armor, the former president reportedly said, “I don't care that they have weapons; they are not here to hurt me!” He then watched the storm of violence on television.² When Trump raged about not being allowed to join the heavily-armed, January 6 mob:—“They are not here to hurt me!”—he simultaneously ignored all concern for four people who would die that day, more than 138 injured, the possibility of Mike Pence being lynched, the ongoing trauma still suffered by many, at least four suicides, millions in damages to the Capitol building, and untold damage to the nation's psyche.³ That degree of indifference towards others, paired with excessive self-interest—“they are not here to hurt me!”—is indicative of a sociopath —behavior Trump had exuded before, particularly with women and with policies that separated children from their parents. Former Oath Keepers spokesperson Jason Van Tatenhove, who had supported the movement, drew a similar conclusion: someone “willing to...whip up a civil war” with followers ... “regardless of the human impact.”⁴ The former president did not act alone. In a January 5 email, White House chief of staff Mark Meadows said the National Guard would be on the scene to “protect pro Trump people.”⁵ In a phone call on December 27 to then acting-attorney general Jeffrey Rosen and acting-deputy attorney general Richard Donoghue, Trump urged the two men to give him cover and seemed very certain of “the rest”: “Just say the election was corrupt and leave the rest to me and the Republicans in Congress.”⁶

Gabriel Sterling, Republican and Chief Operating Officer of elections in Georgia, had asked Trump to “halt the fraud claims... because someone's going to get hurt.”⁷ Then Sterling addressed the complicity: “This is an election; this is the backbone of democracy, and all of you who have not said a word are complicit in this.”⁸ Rusty Bowers, former Republican speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives had campaigned for Trump. He received calls from then-President Trump and Rudy Giuliani pressuring him for a different slate of electors. In December, 2020, Bowers wrote in his personal journal: “I do not want to be a winner by cheating; I will not play with laws I swore allegiance to.”⁹ (Subsequently, he and his family were threatened and defamed, as were many others.) Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) would later summarize these events: “The people closest to Trump told him the truth. On January 6 ... they pled for him to act, to place his country above himself.”¹⁰ The hearings conveyed fear of people in power losing their grip on power—even at the expense of indifference to the best in our heritage. The indifference of those in power seemed to compete with that of a global pandemic's indifference to human suffering as it persisted in spreading. The political divisions that ensued were the major source of exhaustion to millions of Americans adrift in an ocean of distrust. Citizens able to agree to disagree, now increasingly used the “us vs. them” rhetoric of war and saw each other only as enemies. Threats to our democratic way of life felt imminent, everywhere. On August 31, 2021, President Biden pulled the United States out of its 20 year war with Afghanistan. We know the evacuation did not take place smoothly. What we did not know is that a year earlier—when there was more time to prepare, the U.S. had agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan, despite advice from Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley that doing so was “not feasible or wise.”¹¹ CNN correspondent Paul Le Blanc spoke with Sam Kiley, a senior international correspondent who witnessed the withdrawal. On the job for some 30 years, Kiley remarked, “It's pretty difficult to surprise me.”¹² Yet he found the airlift “extraordinary”...The numbers astronomical...Indeed, Americans witnessed the “largest airlift in US history, evacuating over 120,000 citizens, citizens of our allies, and Afghan allies of the United States.”¹³

Controversy remains, however, over the number of Afghan allies who helped Americans in the war effort and who remain at risk, though eligible for the Special Visa Immigrant (SIV) form to citizenship in the U.S. Although warned to leave, these Afghan allies are now at the mercy of the Taliban, which is hardly guaranteed when the “new government's security forces are run by a leader of the terrorist Haqqani Network wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”¹⁴ “James Miervaldis founded the nonprofit No One Left Behind (NOLB) to “ensure the U. S. keeps its moral obligation to our Afghan and Iraqi interpreters.”¹⁵ The organization is aware of some 200 approved SIV applicants and their families hiding throughout the country...who were told by the State Department to remain in place” during the evacuation.¹⁶ Sam Kiley remarked on seeing Afghans' fear for their future and on the “extreme loyalty” people felt toward those they had worked with inside Afghanistan. Efforts to get former colleagues and friends out were “heartening ... genuine relationships.”¹⁷ Kiley commented that “the human bonds that exist between the people in those nations remain very strong.”¹⁸ Despite, then, 20 years of war, political treachery, and dangerous uncertainties of the future, genuine human relationships—that is, simple “human bonds”—held fast. Amid the chaos, and in further testament to those human bonds, a flood of rejoicing filled people's hearts at the sight of a U.S. Marine lifting an Afghan baby to safety in the airport in Kabul. An Afghan linguist and cultural advisor, helping with evacuations, had grabbed his 16-day-old baby by her arm and passed her over a razor wire before trying to save his wife.¹⁹ The image was seared into memory, as were the father's reflections: “That day I handed over my baby to a total stranger. The only thing I trusted is that he was a Marine and that my daughter would be fine.”²⁰ Later that day “the three were evacuated on a flight out of Kabul” and taken to safety. Simple “human bonds” held again—even with a stranger—and despite war. This example of trust well placed in our common humanity was in marked contrast to the environment at home, where disagreements with each other kept intensifying. In May, 2021, the president had urged us to “give hate no safe harbor.”²¹ In the latter part of 2021, the contagious Delta variant preyed on the unvaccinated. With new cases and an average of 1900 more deaths per day, hospitals were struggling not to be overrun. ²²

Doctors and nurses urged 70 million Americans to do their part, as fear and anxiety became new normals—though not the ones we had wanted. Medical first responders pleaded with the public to cooperate when gathering in public places. Yet even amid severe staffing shortages, their calls now went largely unheeded, as others felt their freedoms were being infringed upon. In the US, more than 600,000 died in 2020, and more than 3600 health care workers died²³— despite the fact that we had the vaccine—a vaccine CNN's Dr. Sanjay Gupta hailed as the “moonshot of scientific developments”—whereas many others around the world did not have it.²⁴ Rev. Russell Moore, of the Southern Baptist Convention, thought more people would get the vaccine once they talked with neighbors. He felt the vaccine and technology were a gift from God to be thankful for because we can agree on it is going to get people back together again.²⁵ Gupta attributed the “pushback” to getting the vaccine to “purposeful misinformation” and “an erosion of trust” ... in both “the media and in large institutions.”²⁶ A year and a half later, court filings made public in the defamation lawsuit Dominion Voting System brought against Fox News revealed media executives and reporters at Fox knew the 2020 election fraud claims they were peddling were lies, but nevertheless “actively participated in shaping the narrative of a stolen election.”²⁷ The erosion of trust was not unfounded. But questions about the origin of the virus and to what extent it was used in support of political decisions were also voiced and await further investigations. An erosion of trust was also heard in UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call for more leadership at the Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland: “Leaders can still make this a turning point for their future rather than a tipping point to climate catastrophe.”²⁸ Perhaps in support of Guterres, the environment seemed eager to demonstrate unmistakable warnings of any further neglect. California saw its driest year in *nearly a century*,²⁹ followed by record-setting rains from convergence of two storms systems moving towards the northeast. Heavy winds downed trees; flash flooding led to mud slides.³⁰ Wildfires throughout the west were the *worst on record*.³¹ In December, 2021, the Midwest saw a “once-in-a-century” outbreak of the deadliest tornadoes across America's heartland with at least 59 twisters carving up ten states.³²

Kentucky Gov Andy Beshear spoke of a tornado—dubbed “the beast”—that “tore a 200-mile gash” across the state and was the “worst tornado event”³³ *in the state's history*; with “devastation like none of us has ever seen before.”³⁴ But like the human bonds Sam Kiley remembered from Afghanistan and that “had held,” something else also held—something commonplace and resilient. Something distinctly human—at our best. Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear commented, “We're going to grieve together, we're going to dig out and clean up together, and we will rebuild and move forward together. We're going to get through this. We're going to get through this together, because that is what we do.”³⁵ Others spoke of everyone pitching in, and the a cappella group Pentatonix used music to suggest “measuring one's spirit in love.”³⁶ Some even spoke of what then seemed somewhat quaint—that is, Americans' friendliness...with and towards each other.