



Political Violence in the United States: Moving Away From the Precipice

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Opinion

The United States has entered into a scary period, where threats of violence against political opponents are becoming normalized. At the national level, only a few Republican members of Congress are willing to speak out against the January 6th attack on the Capitol, even though some attackers called for the lynching of Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Party leaders, who initially denounced the violence have either gone silent (Senator Mitch McConnell) or completely changed their tune (Representative Kevin McCarthy). This failure, on the part of Republican leaders aside from Representative Liz Cheney, has contributed to the normalization of threatening languages and images. At the national level, Republicans are shrugging off Representative Paul Gosar's posting of an anime video that showed him killing Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and attacking President Biden. Although Gosar can claim that it is meant as political satire, he must know there are people, who take these suggestions seriously.

Introduction

A recent survey found that nearly one in five respondents agreed with the following statement, "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save our country." Broken down by party, 30% of Republicans, 17% of independents and 11% of Democrats agreed that 'patriots' might have to resort to violence [1]. There is a significant difference between thinking about committing an act of violence and actually doing so. But it only takes a single person with a gun to inflict enormous damage as both Democratic and Republican politicians learned through the shootings and a national survey of mayors found that nearly 80% had been harassed and 12.8% had been threatened with serious physical violence (e.g., death, rape, beating, or abduction), 11% had experienced violence against property and 1.1% had been injured in physical assaults. Female mayors were more likely than male mayors to be targeted for violence [2]. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, the number of threats increased

dramatically. According to one-third of election officials reported feeling unsafe and nearly 20% said they had received threats against their lives, as well as threats against their children and parents. The most recent group to be targeted are school board members, particularly those believed to be supporters of critical race theory or mandatory masking. The National School Boards Association described some incidents as "domestic terrorism" and Attorney General Merrick Garland expressed concern about the "disturbing spike of harassment, intimidation and threats of violence" against school board members and administrators. He ordered the FBI and federal prosecutors to work with local law enforcement to monitor and protect school board members and people working in public schools [3-5].

Threats of political violence against opponents is contrary to what has been the political norm in the United States for the past 100 years. Acts of political violence, such as occurred during the Civil Rights era, were denounced by leaders of both political parties. But this was not true during much of the nineteenth century. In the ante-bellum period, congressional decorum broke down as members engaged in duels and other physical assaults against one another. Acts of violence between pro-slavery and abolitionists were widespread in places, such as "Bloody Kansas" where at least 56 people were killed [6]. Those pre-Civil War deaths pale in comparison to the loss of life during the Indian Wars period, when the US military engaged in a war of attrition against indigenous populations [7,8]. Consider the December 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, where the 7th Cavalry soldiers surrounded a Lakota encampment and used Hotchkiss machine gun fire to kill several hundred largely unarmed and non-belligerent men, women and children [9]. Twenty Medals of Honor were awarded to the soldiers, who committed the massacre.

It is a time for party leaders, elected officials and grass roots activists to push back against the vitriol directed against those holding different views. As Mitch stated in his January 6th

congressional speech, "Self-government, my colleagues, requires a shared commitment to the truth and a shared respect for the ground rules of our system. We cannot keep drifting apart into two separate tribes with a separate set of facts and separate realities with nothing in common except our hostility towards each other and mistrust for the few national institutions that we all share." Small bipartisan steps---such as showing up for the signing of a bill, informal socializing on the Manchin houseboat, and working across the aisle to pass an infrastructure bill---serve to remind the public that doing the "people's business" can be accomplished without denigrating opponents. Consider the example of Justices Ginsburg and Scalia, who were the best of friends, known for attending the opera together, but were miles apart in terms of their judicial philosophies. Former Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, as well as Carter in the past, have provided additional examples of working together. In this vein, Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama currently have a public service announcement that asks Americans to "all come together" to raise funds for a national museum honoring Medal of Honor recipients. The PSA is being aired during the broadcasts of NFL games [10]. The Medal of Honor is awarded to members of the US armed services who demonstrate "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty". This is a worthwhile cause that should be a unifying one.

The former presidents could demonstrate greater political courage by joining the effort to rescind the medals that were awarded to 7th Calvary soldiers at Wounded Knee. In South Dakota, the state senate unanimously passed a resolution calling for the US government to investigate and consider rescinding the medals [11]. On the 100th anniversary, Congress formally apologized and expressed "deep regret" for the massacre. In late September 2021, the House of Representatives passed the National Defense Authorization Act., including language calling for rescinding the medals [12-14]. In doing so, Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama would honor those whose acts of bravery are in keeping with the nation's principles and discredit those whose acts dishonored the

nation's military. In a time when threats of political violence are becoming normalized, the distinction between courageous and honorable acts and those that are cowardly and dishonorable need to be emphasized by the country's leaders.

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