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Rampage at the US Capitol: Historic Second Impeachment

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SYNOPSIS

On 6 January 2021, the US Capitol building was stormed and vandalised by a pro-Trump mob. This was preceded by a pro-Trump rally on the morning of the attack, where Trump urged his audience to never concede the election and to march to the Capitol with force. A week later, the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Trump for a second time in an unprecedented, historic bipartisan move to charge 'Mr. Trump for inciting violence against the government of the United States'.

COMMENTARY

THE RAMPAGE at the US Capitol by a mob, which significantly represented all socio-economic sectors of the population, has been popularly labelled as an insurrection. Historically, insurrections have implied revolutions and rebellions against injustices and oppression. However, the right-leaning mob that stormed the Capitol was motivated instead by fascistic and neo-Nazi sentiments that favour intimidation, terror, and the perpetuation of inequalities in the name of racial and ethnic superiority of one group over the others.

For a country that has historically presented itself as a secular, liberal democracy, the audacity of the storming of a US government building by such a mob not only shatters the image of America as the custodian of liberal democracy worldwide but presents itself as a kind of an American 'blasphemy'.

An American 'Blasphemy'

I suggest that the storming of the US Capitol by a right-leaning mob represents itself as an American 'blasphemy' for three distinct reasons:

First, the regalia of the mob that stormed the Capitol involved painted declarations of unconscionable statements such as ‘Camp Auschwitz’, or ‘6MWE’ ─ translated as ‘6 million weren’t enough’, a reference to the Jewish victims of Nazi Germany ─ that stand as a stark irony for a country that is Israel’s ‘best friend’.

Second, the chanting of “this is my America” while storming the Capitol have been decrypted as a rejection of liberal, multiracial democracy, which is grounded in an unapologetic support for the dominance of the ‘majority’ over the ‘minority’, and not a rejection of injustices and oppression. And third, the carrying of the Confederate flag into the Capitol building, historically a symbol of slavery, has been interpreted as the mob’s support for racial inequalities.

I propose that acts of ‘blasphemy’ can be explained with reference to philosophical notions and their particular manifestation in contemporary America.

Tyranny of the Majority

What has now been dubbed the ‘mob rule in the Capitol’ is strikingly similar to the predictions of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), the French philosopher who wrote the prophetic book, *Democracy in America* (1835), after his travels through America in 1831.

Tocqueville considered the *tyranny of the majority* to be a central feature of American democracy, characterised by the domination of the majority group over the minority group; the propensity towards populist demagogues that justify such domination as patriotism; and the subsequent ‘patriotic fervour’ that becomes instilled in the ‘majority’ by such demagoguery, which leads to the creation of militias that dominate and intimidate the minority population with impunity.

In contemporary America, we have witnessed this demagoguery in the personification of Trump’s presidency and his rallies that have demonised the non-white immigrant and racial minorities as the reasons for the economic miseries of the white middle class.

Such demagoguery has served to embolden and radicalise the disgruntled populace that has come to view political empowerment as an entitlement that can be expressed through violence. The storming of the Capitol by a right-leaning mob with impunity is a stark illustration.

The Libertarian Factor

In essence, American democracy is founded on libertarian principles of limited government and individual rights. Libertarianism was popularised by John Locke, the British philosopher who is regarded as the ‘father of liberalism’ and the inspiration behind the American constitution.

Libertarianism in contemporary America has morphed into two distinct varieties: right-libertarianism and left-libertarianism. The critical significance of right-libertarianism is that the right-wing and far-right groups and movements in America have come to justify

their militancy, hate, and violence in terms of their individual rights to action at best, and their perceived 'sovereign citizenship' at worst.

This attitude regards all other citizens as merely fake Americans against whom all actions are considered legitimate and indeed necessary, even that of violence and terrorism. This leads to impunity in actions in cases of political militancy, and absurdity in other cases such as the rejection of mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic on ground of individual rights, despite the tragedy of unprecedented levels of pandemic-related deaths in America.

In politics, right-libertarianism has also meant a support for individual, private ownership of military-grade weaponry; an unapologetic display of hateful views in public while adorning such weaponry; a rejection of mainstream libertarianism and liberal notions of equal rights and justice for all; and the ironic relegation of any political opposition as a threat to the authenticity of America.

The storming of the Capitol by right-leaning mobs is then just one manifestation of a mindset which is grounded in a sense of unaccountability that is justified with reference to *unqualified individual rights*.

Paradox of Tolerance

The paradox of tolerance essentially states that unlimited tolerance can lead to intolerance because it would allow violent, intolerant groups to fester and destroy an open society. The complexities of a democratic society are that freedom will invariably be understood in various ways.

Hate groups understand their freedom in terms of their right to reject and use violence against whom they consider as outsiders; they do this under the guise of their freedom and agency, and their belief that their intolerance should be tolerated in a democratic society.

The storming of the Capitol by an emboldened right-leaning mob starkly illustrates this paradox. In his book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper (1902-1994) argues that while the mere utterance of intolerant views is not incompatible with an open society, the advocacy of violence is.

Violent groups must thus be suppressed through judicial processes to preserve an open, liberal democracy. This applies to the case of the right-leaning mob that stormed the Capitol building, but it also ought to apply to President Trump for his incitements to violence.

Historicism and Dangers of Second Impeachment

Richard Falk, an American professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University, describes Trump's incitement to 'militant and violent demonstrations at the US Capitol' as having 'shaken the foundation of American constitutionalism, symbolically and substantively'. Others, including Capitol Hill journalists, have referred to Trump's incitements as a sedition in all its accurate senses.

The 13 January 2021 House of Representatives' second impeachment of President Trump, on grounds of inciting violence against the US government, confirms this sentiment. In US history, no president has ever been impeached a second time; that Trump holds this dubious honour is both historic and potentially troubling for this very reason.

The troubling implications of a second impeachment are exacerbated by Twitter's permanent blocking of Trump's account on grounds of his volatile content, with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram following suit. Falk argues that the blocking of such access, while understandable, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the acts of tyrants in pseudo-democratic countries and dictatorships.

Perceptions of being unfairly clamped-down almost always give rise to a volatile reaction. More significantly, Trump's right-wing support base is going to view these actions as oppressive, thereby viewing the second impeachment as a final affront that requires a 'patriotic' ramping-up of their resistance against a system that they consider as having gone awry.

Trump's right-wing support base is likely to view the recent developments as a subversion by 'the left' to trample on the interests of 'real patriots'. We can expect more consequent rampages in public spaces such as the one we witnessed on 6 January. An even larger danger is articulated in references to the idea of 'The Divided States of America' or 'The Radical States of America' as predictions and warnings of where the country may be heading.

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