
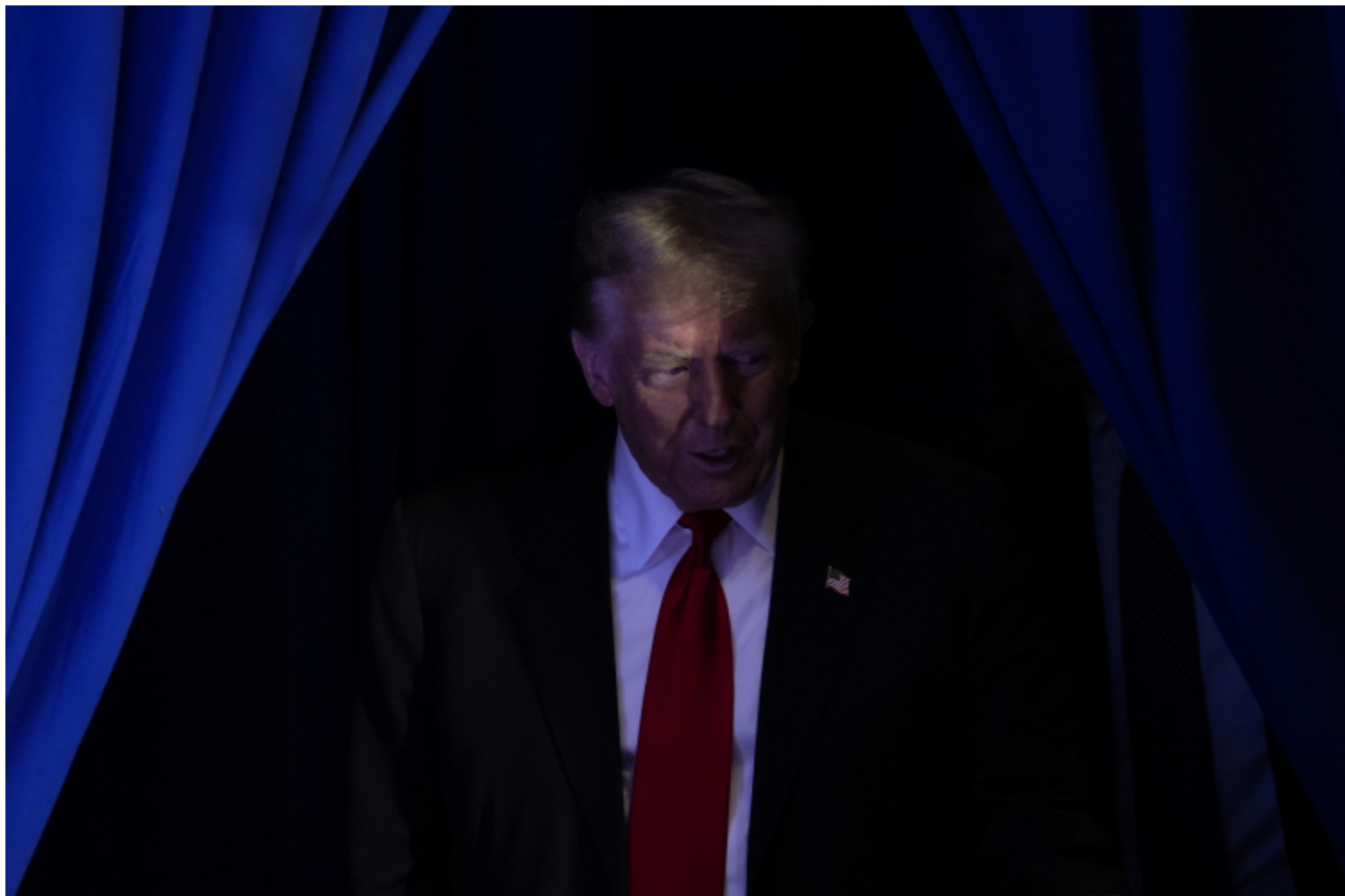


Bulwark Writers Double Down on Trump as Democracy's Destroyer

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2024/01/21/bulwark_writers_double_down_on_trump_as_democracys_destroyer_150353.html



COMMENTARY

Is a Trump victory in election 2024 destined to end democracy in America? How should a responsible citizen respond to the nation's likely descent into dictatorship? Does the determination to save America from imminent abrogation of the rule of law justify bending or breaking the law?

These are questions I raised recently at RealClearPolitics in "'Flight 93 Election' Anti-Trumpers Imperil the Rule of Law." Taking issue with Washington Post columnist Robert Kagan's lengthy essay, "A Trump dictatorship is increasingly inevitable. We should stop pretending," I argued that the distinguished historian and foreign policy analyst was wrong and irresponsible to contend that all signs point to Trump's consolidation of tyrannical government should he win in November. Anti-Trump intellectuals, I maintained, should stop declaring that a Trump dictatorship is increasingly inevitable, both because it is not and because their sky-is-falling rhetoric encourages extreme and even lawless measures to avert imaginary catastrophes.

Ronald Radosh and Gabriel Schoenfeld expressed their displeasure with my view in “Anti-Trump Means Anti-Democracy? You Can’t Be Serious.” Their article appeared in The Bulwark, which was “founded in 2019 by Sarah Longwell, Charlie Sykes, and Bill Kristol” and boasts of practicing journalism “with honesty and good faith.” The article’s sub-headline accuses me of advancing a “bizarre and disingenuous ‘I’m rubber, you’re glue’ argument.” This echoes Radosh and Schoenfeld, who state that I take “disingenuousness to a new height” and engage in “shameful” obscurantism. In replying to The Bulwark editors’ and writers’ disparagement of my reasoning and impugning of my character, I will restrict myself to defending my arguments and exposing their flawed ones.

Radosh, a CUNY professor emeritus of history, and Schoenfeld, a Niskanen Center senior fellow, distort my central contention. I do not maintain the absurdity that to oppose Trump is to threaten democracy. Rather, I criticize Kagan’s position, and that of other anti-Trump intellectuals, which is that to support Trump is to facilitate dictatorship.

The Bulwark, moreover, either misapprehends the playground taunt “I’m rubber, you’re glue” that it directs at me, or misapprehends my thinking, or both. To say, “I’m rubber, you’re glue” means, as kids of a certain generation well understood, that only the one who hurls the accusation is guilty of it. In contrast, the very title of my essay indicates, and the opening paragraphs develop the point, that some anti-Trump intellectuals resemble pro-Trump intellectuals like Michael Anton in his 2016 polemic, “The Flight 93 Election,” by arguing that a vote for the other side is a vote for dictatorship. Rather than simplistically “flipping the script,” as Radosh and Schoenfeld write, I went out of my way to argue that intellectuals on *both* sides were playing with fire by proclaiming that voters face a stark choice: Do the right thing and choose the writer’s candidate or destroy democracy in America.

Radosh and Schoenfeld also assert that I dismiss concerns about a Trump presidency: “As for Trump, Berkowitz assures us that there is little call to worry about his dictatorial proclivities.” I offered no such assurance. Character matters, and presidents go wrong in any number of ways. Nevertheless, I explained, it is unreasonable to insist that a second term in the White House will empower Trump to overthrow the American regime.

This is not to say that we have nothing to fear from dictatorial proclivities in our chief executives. We should always be on guard against the disposition to govern outside of and counter to the rule of law. Such dispositions tend to be amply concentrated in individuals who manage to win election to the presidency. That is an underlying lesson of the constitutional separation of powers. It applies to President Biden – with his lawless immigration policy, his unconstitutional forgiveness of student-loan debt, and his Justice Department’s efforts to sneak past the judiciary a sweetheart immunity deal for his son – as it would to a reelected President Trump.

Radosh and Schoenfeld fare no better in addressing my three main criticisms of Kagan’s summons to resist an incipient Trump dictatorship.

“First,” I wrote at RCP, “history provides scarce evidence of democracies deteriorating into dictatorships without the cooperation of the military, government bureaucracy, business world, media, and universities.” Radosh and Schoenfeld do not offer examples from history to counter my claim. Instead, they charge me with drastically misrepresenting the character of the U.S. government: “Berkowitz exaggerates grotesquely in calling the federal bureaucracy ‘overwhelmingly progressive’ (has he ever visited the Pentagon?).”

I have. Have they?

Radosh and Schoenfeld provide no evidence to contradict my claim that the federal bureaucracy is overwhelmingly progressive. Contrary to their snide reproach, the Pentagon bureaucracy (as opposed to the rank-and-file military, whose members lean right and are well-schooled in the laws of armed conflict, which teach that they are obliged to disregard unlawful orders) corroborates my generalization.

The Pentagon bureaucracy’s top echelon has assiduously pursued a diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda. Meanwhile, members of the rest of DoD’s sprawling bureaucracy, who return in the evening to their homes in D.C.’s Maryland and northern Virginia suburbs, typically possess conventionally left-of-center opinions. As a veteran national security adviser on Capitol Hill who works frequently with the Defense Department told me, to suppose that the Pentagon bureaucracy would back Trump’s arrogation of despotic power is “like saying the parental board of Georgetown Day School will embrace a Trump dictatorship.”

My second main criticism was that “Kagan offers not a word about the political forces that provoked voters to back Trump in 2015 and gave his candidacy new life in 2023.” Radosh and Schoenfeld follow suit. Unable or unwilling to put themselves in the position of a typical Trump voter, they are oblivious to the boost that elites’ disdain gives to Trump among working class voters and others who support him. My critics, moreover, are impervious to the impact of the false Russia collusion narrative advanced in 2016 by the Clinton campaign and the Obama administration Justice Department and FBI. Likewise, they ignore the effects of social media giants’ suppression a few weeks before the 2020 presidential election of the New York Post’s scoop about Hunter Biden’s incriminating laptop and the ramifications of the rash of lawsuits and prosecutions against Trump since he left office. The spectacle of the media’s skewed coverage, the weaponization of the bureaucracy, the intervention of Twitter and Facebook, and the politicization of the law strengthen many ordinary voters’ belief that elites conspire to thwart Trump at any cost.

Kagan’s view that, if reelected, Trump will almost inevitably assume dictatorial powers is seconded by Radosh and Schoenfeld and elaborated by writers at The Atlantic and The New York Times and by talking heads on CNN and MSNBC (as I observed in my column) as well as by professors (which Radosh and Schoenfeld helpfully note). This line of attack tends to reinforce many voters’ suspicions that the political and intellectual elites will stop at nothing to deny them the opportunity to vote for Trump. It also invigorates their political engagement. Consequently, as I observed, Kagan and kindred spirits unwittingly promote the very electoral outcome they seek to prevent.

Finally, I argued, “as if to confirm Trump voters’ convictions, Kagan himself provides chilling justification for effectively setting aside the rule of law.” To back that serious charge, I quoted a paragraph from Kagan’s article:

It is hard to fault those who have taken Trump to court. He certainly committed at least one of the crimes he is charged with; we don't need a trial to tell us he tried to overturn the 2020 election. Nor can you blame those who have hoped thereby to obstruct his path back to the Oval Office. When a marauder is crashing through your house, you throw everything you can at him – pots, pans, candlesticks – in the hope of slowing him down and tripping him up. But that doesn't mean it works.

It appeared to me when I wrote the original article, and still does, that these lines encourage lawlessness.

Kagan backs the use of courts of law – civil and criminal – to accomplish political ends. So long as Trump committed at least one of the many crimes with which he is charged, Kagan seems to be saying, all the lawsuits are justified, no matter how novel and farfetched the legal theories that underwrite them. And the realistic prospect of a Trump dictatorship, Kagan urges, legitimates the use of whatever weapons are handy to preserve democracy in America.

Radosh and Schoenfeld assert that my reading is “implausible,” but they do not provide an alternative interpretation.

The Bulwark writers raise serious concerns about Trump's ill-considered and disreputable efforts to overturn the 2020 election. But their repudiation of the questions I posed and the worries I elaborated as beyond the pale heightens concerns about the damage done by the fashionable Trump-will-institute-dictatorship argument. The Bulwark writers' approach is the discursive equivalent of treating one who disagrees about the consequences of a Trump victory in November as a violent home invader at whom one must desperately fling pots, pans, and candlesticks.

The intellectuals' debasement of public discourse also erodes democracy in America.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.