

How the Capitol siege could save American democracy

A catalyst is needed to break the Trumpian cult of personality. The more Republicans reject it, the better the odds of the US regaining a reasonable, law-abiding alternative to the Democratic Party.

Nomi Claire Lazar

For *The Straits Times*

Crises are turning points. And for America's ailing democracy, Wednesday's siege of the United States Capitol may prove to be a moment not of reckoning, but of redemption.

Since his surprise success in the Republican primaries, Mr Donald Trump's often outrageous behaviour had wedged establishment Republicans in an uncomfortable position.

Rattled by his visceral appeal, and wary of career suicide, challenges in future primaries, or lost opportunities for Republican Supreme Court nominees, many of them calculated it was better to endure for the perceived greater good.

These Republicans joined the President in spouting the outrageous, supported the unsupportable, unsure of a political future staked on truth and democracy.

Still, a steady trickle of Republican defectors – from anonymous authors in *The New York Times* to former senior officials with tell-all memoirs – moved to check Mr Trump's worst extremes, gesturing to like-minded Republican colleagues who just lacked the moral and political courage to speak out.

Others claimed to hold their tongues in the hope of checking the President's worst excesses. These held tongues helped Mr Trump hold the centre.

Fear, self-regard and rationalisation are friends of tyrants and bullies everywhere. But now America needs those Republicans to take courage and stand up.

Because of the way its political system is structured, if American democracy is to survive, it needs a reasonable, law-abiding alternative to the Democratic Party.

For stability, both parties must contest the middle ground first, and appeal to the fringes only carefully. That means Mr Trump's power needs to break closer to the fringe, if the Republican Party is to



The storming of the United States Capitol on Wednesday by supporters of President Donald Trump could be the turning point that most Republican politicians need to separate themselves from Mr Trump and return to the centre, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

escape his control.

That he retains control at all is unusual. Most presidents who lose elections are lame ducks. But Mr Trump's cult of personality has no term limits. The spectacle of excess he engineered formed a welcome relief for some Americans from the humdrum, and from social and economic woes.

For others, Mr Trump provided a release for stifled rage, racism and anti-government sentiment. Republican lawmakers who had overcome their distaste worried about the political base. And with whispers of a Trump media empire to come, on which they might be dependent, continuing to toe the line seemed sensible. Until Wednesday.

In instigating an armed attack on America's elected officials, complete with pipe bombs targeting both parties' headquarters, Mr Trump crossed a line. People died. Many watched in disbelief. Others said, "well, what did you expect?", and still others saw, in this breach, the end of American democracy.

SEPARATING FROM TRUMP

But a crisis is a turning point, a crux. In grassroot revolutions – Berlin 1989, Minsk 2020 – fear of tyrants prevents most from coming out in the street. Then some catalyst brings out a brave few. Seeing them, others join. Then comes the tipping point, and enough stand up that this bravery is normalised, appears reasonable.

The movement becomes sustainable, grows cyclically.

Could the siege of the Capitol be such a catalyst? It would be foolhardy to think Trumpism, its conspiracies and lies will soon disappear. Even in the wake of insurrection, more than 100 Republican members of Congress, playing to their base, continued to baselessly object to electoral votes for President-elect Joe Biden.

For many on the violent fringe, Trumpism is an identity, and ideas hitched to identities are often intractable.

But most Republican politicians needed, knew they needed, and were desperate for, some politically viable means of returning to the centre. They needed an excuse to separate themselves from Mr Trump. The siege of America's Capitol provided just this chance.

As we have experienced in the current pandemic, we can become desensitised to – even when we are exhausted by – all kinds of extremes. This was the case with Mr Trump's behaviour. It was easy to just go along.

But here were armed men and women, wielding baseball bats and knives, smashing windows, vandalising, defacing and threatening those the American people had elected to represent them, along with their staff.

And they did this in order to subvert the democratic process. They did this at the instigation of the President who swore an oath to "preserve, protect and defend

the Constitution".

The siege was so explicit, so extreme and so bluntly factual that it belied the ability of the news pundits to normalise. There was no way to say "oh, there Trump goes again!" or "we've seen all this before".

REPUBLICANS PUSH BACK

The siege of the Capitol shows Republicans are – figuratively – moving into the street in protest against Trumpism. The more who come, the more Mr Trump is marginalised, the more will follow. The mood in a chastened Senate on Wednesday night suggested as much. Even long-time Trump allies like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham strongly and directly condemned the insurrection.

The Republican establishment outside the chambers chimed in too. Numerous administration officials resigned. Former president George W. Bush did not mince words even if he did not name Mr Trump in his condemnation of the "sickening and heartbreaking" mayhem at the Capitol.

"Insurrection could do grave damage to our nation and reputation," he said. "In the United States of America, it is the fundamental responsibility of every patriotic citizen to support the rule of law. To those who are disappointed in the results of the election: Our country is more

important than the politics of the moment."

Even Vice-President Mike Pence broke ranks, if more cautiously. Facebook and Twitter, long hesitant to shut Mr Trump down, did so.

The Republicans only now breaking from Mr Trump are not heroes. They enabled this crisis in the first place. Indulging his lies, slanders and excesses, they threatened the democracy they swore to protect.

But America needs Republicans themselves to push back violence and viciousness to the fringe, and reclaim their share of the centre. And perhaps it took something this extreme to show them their calculus had been mistaken.

Will we see a cyclic deflation of rhetoric, the restoration of the reasonable to the mainstream? Will the events on Wednesday have been the tipping point? Time will tell.

But as more and more come out into the street against Mr Trump, the political cost of joining grows lower and lower. The storming of the Capitol may turn out to have been just the redemptive moment America so badly needed.

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