



WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY

# Donald's Plot Against America

Now, he and his GOP enablers are peddling the Second Big Lie: that January 6 was just legitimate protest. It's the crucial ingredient in convincing America to return them—and him—to power.

Mary L. Trump /  
August 12, 2021

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I felt as though I had stumbled across a crime scene so violent that I couldn't process it, let alone synthesize the images in front of me. The parts remained stubbornly separate, and there was no way to grasp the meaning of the whole.

In the early afternoon of January 6, while the mob was still swarming the stairs of the Capitol, I was asked in an interview what I thought of the unfolding situation. I watched the crowd that had been stoked that morning by my uncle, and by Republicans like Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, and Mo Brooks, with their Confederate flags, their MAGA hats, and their Camp Auschwitz shirts; I watched the smoke (the origin of which I couldn't yet discern) drift through the air, and I heard their shouts of grievance and anger. It looked like a scene from a failed country whose government had just been toppled, a banana republic; but it was the United States of America, my country, our country, and, knowing who was responsible for the chaos here, the first word that came to my mind was “tawdry.”

Of course, it was so much more than that—so much more dangerous and serious than that, as we would eventually find out. At around 2:15, while Republicans Cruz

and Paul Gosar were objecting to the legitimate results of the election, the insurrectionists breached the Capitol, Congress was adjourned, and frantic attempts were made to get the vice president and all of the senators and representatives to safety.

Two hours later, the Georgia Senate race was called for Jon Ossoff. It mattered, certainly; it meant that the Democrats would control the Senate. But there was no room for celebration. After four years of Donald’s incessant attacks and ineptitude, we were already exhausted. Joe Biden’s victory was supposed to have offered us some reprieve, but having given Donald room to promote his Big Lie, elected Republicans had now granted him the opportunity to incite an insurrection. So there would be no respite from the madness, from Donald’s particular blend of mendacity, cruelty, and destructiveness. There would be no celebrating.



Mary Trump

PHOTOGRAPH BY DINA LITOVSKY/REDUX FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

That horrific day—which we now know General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referred to as a “Reichstag moment”—was bracketed by Donald’s incendiary speech given just before noon and a video released two hours after the Capitol had been breached that added more fuel to the fire. The speech itself was full of grievances—lies about the “landslide election” that had been stolen from him, threats to Mike Pence, whom he led the crowd to believe had the power to

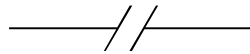
overturn the results of the election, fabrications about people voting as Santa Claus and Democrats' taking down statues of Jefferson and Lincoln, and calls to action demanding that the crowd force Congress to "do the right thing." In the 62-second video, Donald says the word *peace* three times, presumably because somebody convinced him he had to distance himself from the role he played in stoking the mob's violence; but, because he can never help himself in these instances, he kept hammering away at what was supposedly stolen from them. The video sickened me just as the "apology" video he recorded after the *Access Hollywood* tape was released had sickened me. I feared the same result—that there would be no consequences.

That night, after I was finally able to turn off the news, the only two things I knew with absolute certainty were: one, that for the first time in our nation's history there had not been a peaceful transfer of power, because my uncle, who could not accept his resounding defeat and the humiliation that came with it, had attempted to inspire a coup; and two, the next two weeks before Joe Biden's inauguration would be the most dangerous this country had ever lived through.

On November 7, after Joe Biden was declared the winner, Donald began peddling the Big Lie—massive voter fraud and cheating by Democrats had turned Donald's landslide victory into a loss. The phrase "the Big Lie," coined by Adolf Hitler, describes the technique of saying something so outrageously false that people will believe it simply because they think nobody would have the audacity to lie so brazenly. This has been a specialty of Donald's since, as a teenager, he had to convince his father everything he did was always the biggest, the greatest, and the best. Back then, his lies protected him from his father's wrath. The Big Lie about the election protected him from having to face the deep narcissistic wound he'd suffered after losing to Biden. In addition, it kept his base riled up—keeping them afraid of what a Biden administration planned to take away from them (or force upon them) and enraged by what he claimed had been stolen from them.

In Donald's January 6 video, the Second Big Lie was born. By telling them that they are loved and special, he transformed the violent anti-American mob into patriots who had merely been trying to save their country from the Democratic Party's treasonous attempt to steal the election from him—and therefore from them. We've seen how this has become a strategy for almost every single Republican politician as well. Despite the testimony given by D.C. police officers Daniel Hodges and

Michael Fanone, Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn, and Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell in front of the House select committee on July 27, which was impossible for any empathetic human being to watch without feeling a visceral rage and profound sadness, this will continue to be the Republican strategy. They know that if midterm voters still remember the truth about January 6, they're in trouble. The insurrection of January 6 should have been a wake-up call. It looks, instead, to have been a dress rehearsal.



In the mind-bogglingly long and destabilizing year since the publication of my first book, *Too Much and Never Enough*, America's weaknesses and structural deficiencies have been laid bare because one man, Donald John Trump, did something none of his predecessors would have dreamed of doing—through his destruction of norms, he actively set out to undermine and dismantle the very institutions that were designed, in part, to protect us from leaders like him. Keeping him in check required a functioning legislative branch and Cabinet secretaries, like the attorney general or the head of health and human services—who were willing to act with some independence—to put country over party. But having shown himself incapable of building anything, Donald has always been expert at tearing things down. In this endeavor, he has had plenty of sycophants, enablers, and users, just as he has throughout his life. And Republicans saw a way to make the most of it.

As a politician, Donald has benefited greatly from his rabid base of supporters. He embodies their fear and gives expression to their grievance. He doesn't just give them permission to indulge in their white supremacy; he champions it. He makes them feel good about their prejudices. Following him by denying the virus or claiming immunity from it is another way for them to feel superior. It's bizarre, because in the process they are putting themselves and those they love at risk, but it is similar to the function lynching has historically served for white people. Lynchings are not only about showing the power of the aggressor but also about demonstrating the other person's weakness and total subservience. That makes sense in the context of what white supremacists and white supremacy were trying

to accomplish, because, in an incurably racist society, the power so clearly belonged to the one race, and the vulnerabilities so clearly belonged to the other. The response to Covid—the denialism and disdain for science—functions the same way, but in this case, whether they acknowledge the reality and the risk or not, the denialists are victims, too. These are devout (for lack of a better word) Republicans. If the people they've voted for, at every level of government, equate mask-wearing with being liberal or claim that worrying about catching a deadly virus somehow makes you weak, you will follow their lead. Donald took it a step further. In order to demonstrate their allegiance and support, it was no longer enough for them to attend a rally. They had to do so in the middle of a deadly pandemic without social distancing or wearing a mask

That's the part that is confounding. But it demonstrates how deeply it matters to them that they, at least in their own minds, maintain a position of superiority over those they consider less-than—particularly Black Americans and immigrants—and stay connected to a man who, through a mesmerizing dance of his followers' micro-concessions and his own micro-aggressions against them, keeps them in thrall. That their children are dying or their parents and friends are dying isn't beside the point—it is the point.

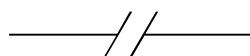
It's impossible to understand the appeal Donald has for his followers if we try to do so from the perspective of people who value honor, decency, empathy, and kindness in their leaders. It isn't that they see things in Donald that aren't there. They identify with what is—the brazenness of his lies, his ability to commit crimes with impunity, his bottomless sense of grievance, his monumental insecurity, his bullying, and, perhaps most intriguing, the fact that he is an inveterate failure who keeps being allowed to succeed. Donald is their proxy and their representative. And their ardor has only seemed to grow since his loss. We need only look at data from North Carolina Senate candidate Ted Budd's campaign to see how complete this identification is. When Republican primary voters were told that Budd had been endorsed by Donald, there was a 45-point net swing in his favor, skyrocketing him to a 19-point lead over his primary opponent. The idea that any other one-term president (George H.W. Bush or Jimmy Carter) would have had the same kind of influence is laughable. On the other hand, though, neither one of them would have tried.

By the same token, elected Republicans, Donald's chief enablers, see Donald as a means of perpetuating their own power. But they aren't just putting up with the worst of him simply because they see him as a means to an end. He *is* them. They value his mendacity and his name-calling and his autocracy because these work for them as well.

Republicans counter truth with absurdity, rendering the truth inoperable. Now a party of fascists, they call Democrats socialist communist Marxists, which is effective in part because it is so nonsensical and in part because they are never asked to define the terms. They cover up their massive (and successful) efforts at voter suppression with wild claims of widespread voter fraud, which essentially doesn't exist—31 incidents in over a billion votes cast, a number so vanishingly small as to have no meaning.

The main mechanism by which they can successfully carry out these sleights of hand is fear. Whether it's drug dealers from Mexico or caravans from Central America or Democratic presidents coming for your guns, abolishing religion, or letting gay people get married, they need to keep their voters afraid.

Mr. Lockwood, the frame-narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, describes a feverish nightmare in which, during a blizzard, he sees a child outside his window begging to be let in. He is so undone by the appearance of this wraith that he drags its wrist across the broken pane of glass, until its blood soaks his bedsheets. "Terror made me cruel," he says. Fear is a deeply unpleasant emotion, and Republicans have become expert at stoking it, on the one hand, and transforming it into anger on the other. This state of affairs makes it much easier for their followers to become comfortable with the cruelty of their leaders—whether of policy or of action—as long as it is directed at groups they've been told they should fear. It also makes it easier for the Republican rank and file to be comfortable with their own cruelty—it feels better than fear, and it allows them to delude themselves into thinking they have some measure of control, because they have been granted permission by the powers that be to express their cruelty with impunity.



Elected Republicans have become Donald's greatest enablers since his father, Fred. For all of their professed reluctance and half-hearted attempts to keep Donald at arm's length, almost every single elected Republican at every level of government, either tacitly or enthusiastically, very quickly came to support his breaches—against decency, the rule of law, and the Constitution. Kevin McCarthy went from being one of Donald's critics in the immediate aftermath of January 6 to pretending that creating a commission to find out what happened on that day was somehow a partisan witch hunt. Elise Stefanik intuited that going all in with Donald would be her best chance for advancement. The number three Republican in Congress, Liz Cheney, had the audacity to stand up against the Big Lie, for which she was removed from her leadership position and replaced by Stefanik.

The most dangerous Republican enabler by far is, of course, Mitch McConnell, who saw an opportunity that even he probably never dared hope for: The guy in the Oval Office wouldn't just sign off on every aspect of the Republicans' agenda, he would push the envelope—of decorum, of autocracy—so far that the system itself could be used to create permanent minority rule. Donald showed his party (and yes, it is his party) the limits of pretending to care about good governance or play by the rules. He also showed them the utility of not just stoking racism and hatred of the Other—in the form of immigrants, Democrats, and even epidemiologists—but championing those who espoused them.

**It was possible for Donald, the weakest man I have ever known, to exploit the weaknesses in the system not because he introduced them, but because they were there for him to exploit in the first place.**

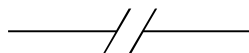
McConnell is the greatest traitor to this country since Robert E. Lee (with the difference that McConnell has been trying to take our country down from within). He has always been expert at using existing rules and procedures in ways they weren't intended to be used, and yet—whether it was denying Merrick Garland a hearing, pushing through Amy Coney Barrett's confirmation, or ending the filibuster as it applied to Supreme Court nominees but employing it to block legislation that would expand voting rights—his anti-democratic maneuvers have been performed within the bounds of the system. The fact that he's misusing the system outlined in the Constitution isn't an exoneration of him, however; it's a



condemnation of the Constitution's limitations. The definition of treason in the Constitution is so narrow (levying war against the country or giving aid and comfort to the enemy) that a case could never be made against him. It would be difficult, however, to find anybody in modern times who has so undermined our democracy.

This destruction of norms by Donald and other Republicans in the executive and legislative branches has happened so quickly, and has been so thorough, that it's clear the seeds of it must have been planted a long time ago. It was possible for Donald, the weakest man I have ever known, to exploit the weaknesses in the system not because he introduced them, but because they were there for him to exploit in the first place.

These situations are not the result of four years or even four decades of poor governance—although the worsening of the problem has certainly accelerated since Ronald Reagan's disastrous presidency. The combination of "trickle-down" economics, his devastating handling of the AIDS crisis, and the intensification of the "War on Drugs," with all of its racist implications, accelerated the divide between Americans along economic, cultural, and racial dimensions. But we really need to go back to this country's inception to understand how we got here and to assess how we can possibly repair the extensive damage. With Joe Biden's election, we did indeed snatch democracy from the jaws of autocracy—a rarity in human history. But as the insurrection of January 6 made clear, we are not out of the woods yet—far from it.



I contend that we have arrived at this fraught political moment in which it feels that everything is at stake because of our long history of, on the one hand, failing to hold powerful white men accountable and, on the other, the normalization of white supremacy. How else do we grapple with the fact that we Americans appear so spectacularly vulnerable to corrupt and incompetent leaders? How else do we understand the breathtaking extent to which the federal government, because of the cynicism, selfishness, and opportunism of *one man*, proved incapable of

managing the crises of Covid and the ensuing economic fallout? How else do we explain the effectiveness of Donald's strategy of race-based division? And how do we avoid acknowledging that supporting him or even accepting him meant that institutionalized racism was not only not a deal breaker, it was an effective political strategy?



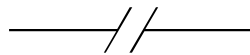
American terrorists, January 6, 2021

ASHLEY GILBERTSON/VII/REDUX

The initial response of Donald's administration to the pandemic was driven by his inability to take it seriously. Once the virus had undeniably taken hold here, Donald hung on to the fact that it had originated in China, which allowed him to make it about the Other from the outset. In spring of 2020, when Covid was spreading almost exclusively in blue states, and later, when it became clear that Black Americans were being disproportionately affected, it was easier for him to dismiss the danger. Even when it became clear that no one was safe, he made the case that Americans had to choose between combating the virus and saving the economy, squandering what could have been an extraordinarily unifying moment for this

country. But Donald has no interest in unity. He thrives on division and chaos—much of it racially driven. We saw this in the way he exploited the backlash against Barack Obama’s presidency, thereby giving his base permission to express their racism even more openly and proudly.

The Republicans haven’t lost their way. They have, instead, found it. And it has led them straight toward unabashed white supremacy and fascism. This is nothing new. We saw what happened after the Civil War. The traitors of the Confederacy were given a pass by the North, and the promise to grant freedmen and women their 40 acres was largely reneged in the interest of reestablishing “national unity.” Because of the enormity of the North’s postbellum failures and the terrorist tactics employed by the re-empowered Southern Redeemers—those believers in the Lost Cause, who are the direct ancestors of those who sullied the Capitol Rotunda with their Confederate flags—the Black vote in the South was all but eliminated. The large majority of the electorate of the Southern slave states remained racist and reactionary, allowing the South to continue as a closed, fascist state for another century.



Only the Democrats and the media can save democracy from fascism. But the Democrats are split between the activists who understand the stakes, and the institutionalists who keep following a rule book the Republicans lit on fire a long time ago. On the one side, the progressives and pragmatists, senators like Elizabeth Warren, Chris Murphy, and Amy Klobuchar, seem to understand the urgency of the problem—American democracy can’t survive if we fail to realize that the United States Senate is currently operating under the tyranny of the minority. On the other side, institutionalists like Joe Manchin and Dianne Feinstein cling to the idea that maintaining long-standing mechanisms like the filibuster, which is not in the Constitution and impedes the Senate’s ability to act democratically, is more important than enacting legislation that would, on the one hand, help the American people in substantive ways while bolstering Biden’s presidency and, on the other, prevent the Republican Party from turning this country into an apartheid state. It remains to be seen whether President Biden himself, who understands the

workings of the body in which he served for almost 40 years, will be able to transcend his own institutionalist leanings. His July 13 speech on voting rights was a powerful repudiation of Republican voter suppression—but he didn't mention the filibuster once.

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What happens next also depends on how the media portray what's currently going on. In 2016, the media lent Donald's run a gravitas and seriousness it hadn't earned. The Senate's failure to convict him of impeachment the first time around was a crucial moment, as it allowed Donald to campaign for the 2020 election as if he were a legitimate candidate—but this time with all of the attendant powers of incumbency, including the massive bullhorn. By asking him questions they would ask any other candidate, the media didn't just confer upon him legitimacy, they erased the fact that he was a traitor to his country who had been impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress after seeking the help of a foreign power (for the second time) in undermining his political opponent. Anybody who was paying attention knew the trial Republicans put on was a sham, a shabby bit of political theater, the outcome of which was a foregone conclusion. "I am trying to give a pretty clear signal I have made up my mind," said Senator Lindsey Graham before the trial even began. "I'm not trying to pretend to be a fair juror here."

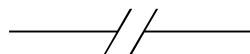
Since the election was called for Joe Biden, the media have done reasonably well calling the Big Lie what it is, and yet Republicans who *lie* about the Big Lie continue to be given a platform. There are propaganda outlets, led by Fox News, that amplify the lies of the Republican Party while distorting (or ignoring) facts. Many in the mainstream media, however, act as if journalistic neutrality means giving both sides equal time no matter the content of their message.

The Republicans continue to think that Donald is somebody whom they need. While it's true that Trumpism, so-called, doesn't scale, and that only Donald can carry the mantle of Trumpism, the fact that it's not a winning formula (after all, Republicans, largely thanks to Donald, lost the House, the Senate, and the White House) is completely irrelevant. They continue to embrace Donald because they

need him to keep the Big Lie alive in order to maintain the support of the base, so they can advance their voter-suppression legislation while continuing to cast doubt on the last election by pushing for audits in states, like Arizona, where the popular voter margin was narrow.

Every undemocratic facet of our system—from the filibuster to the Electoral College to voter suppression to failing to make the District of Columbia a state—favors Republicans. They have no incentive to change anything. Tens of millions of voters may be effectively disenfranchised by their legislation and faux-audits, but *their* voters are not. The endgame is to make it impossible for people who would vote against them to vote at all. In a country of changing demographics and increasing openness to diversity, at a time when elected Republicans are on the wrong side of almost every issue—gun safety, taxes, voting rights—they know the only way for them to cling to power is to cheat, and if there is one skill the de facto leader of their party has, it's his ability to cheat his way out of—or into—just about anything.

Trumpism doesn't need to scale. Republicans just need to keep that 35 percent so riled up that the base seems bigger than it is while they quietly make sure the rest of us don't have a voice.



The stakes are incredibly high in every election going forward. The 2020 election was more important than 2016, and 2022 will be more important than 2020. We can't discount the pernicious influence of white supremacy, which is not just an extremist movement. It's not just the KKK, the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers. It is the mainstream of the Republican Party, and we don't need to qualify it.

Not only can't Republicans give up their white supremacy, it turns out they don't have to. It has been and continues to be a winning strategy. Donald got 62 million votes in 2016 and 74 million votes in 2020. Though Biden's win was decisive, Republicans overall beat expectations, picking up seats in the House and becoming a minority in the Senate that, because of the filibuster, functionally leaves them with an enormous amount of leverage. We desperately needed a total repudiation

of Donald and his Republican enablers. We did not get one.

It's a tragedy, but it comes from having for decades convinced their electorate to vote against its own economic self-interest in the name of racial superiority. Their attitudes in this matter are positional. The question for them isn't just "Am I doing well?" but "Am I doing better than?" And we all know who it is they need to be outperforming. As long as that is what matters to them, they will double down on white supremacy and hatred of the other side while maintaining their ability to do so through gerrymandering and voter suppression. That's all they've got.

On July 6, President Biden tweeted, "Six months ago today, insurrectionists carried out a violent and deadly assault on our Capitol. It was a test of whether our democracy could survive. Half a year later we can declare unequivocally that democracy did prevail. Now, it falls on all of us to protect and preserve it."

This well-intentioned statement misses the mark. The danger hasn't passed—in fact, as Republicans continue their almost universal support for the first Big Lie, while using it to promote hundreds of sweeping voter-suppression laws in almost every state, they are now lining up behind the Second Big Lie, which is that the insurrection of January 6 was an inside job perpetrated by the FBI, or that the violent attempt to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power with the intention of hunting down the speaker of the House and hanging the vice president was a fun-filled protest carried out by wonderful real Americans like Ashli Babbitt, the latest martyr to their cause. Now, those who participated (and their supporters) are being told that it is they who have been wronged, it is they who are the patriots, and only they whose voices deserve to be heard.

Republicans have made it clear that going forward they will embrace whichever version of the Second Big Lie is most useful in the moment—causing the kind of cognitive dissonance they have become quite comfortable with. It's absurd—but it's also effective with enough of their voters that we can't dismiss it, just as we can't dismiss Donald. It's exhausting. And it's infuriating. But we look away at our peril. Democrats need to accept that there is no longer anything to hope for from their Republican colleagues. For all intents and purposes, we currently live in a country with only one functioning political party that is working to make the lives of all Americans better, only one party that believes in democracy.

Democrats must stop squandering their advantage as they waste time waiting for Republicans to feel shame. They have none. Over the four years Donald was in the Oval Office, there were any number of opportunities for Republicans to break with a man who, at every turn, undermined everything they claimed to have stood for—law and order, the military, moral conservatism, fiscal responsibility, and small government. And yet they never did.

January 6 should have been a wake-up call for all of us, Republicans in particular. Initially at least, some of them had been scared enough by a mob intent on committing violence against any member of Congress they came across to recognize that the monster they'd deluded themselves into thinking they controlled could not, after all, be tamed. Instead, they have followed Donald's lead. Less than six months after the fact, Georgia Representative Andrew Clyde claimed the insurrection was a "bold-faced lie" and nothing more than "a normal tourist visit," despite the fact that there is a photo of him rushing to help barricade the door against the mob. Donald continues to double down on his claim that these were peaceful people and actually said "there was such love at that rally." There has been no pushback from Republican leadership. There can't be. They know that any investigation into what happened that day is a losing proposition for them—either because they've been covering it over or because they're guilty of sedition. They also know that the 2022 election will turn in part on how many Americans they can convince of the Second Big Lie: that the insurrection never happened.

And as far as the 2024 presidential election is concerned, I initially thought Donald wouldn't run. Even if he managed to convince himself that he had won but the Democrats had somehow stolen the victory from him, his defeat was so resounding, I believed that, although he might pretend to run as a way to raise money and keep the spotlight on himself, he would never put himself in that position again. Now I'm not so sure. As has been the case since my grandfather discovered that his second son could be of use to him, everything has broken his way. In this case, almost the entire Republican Party has backed not one but two Big Lies that benefit him. If enough people buy into the Second Big Lie, if enough of those voter-suppression laws pass and Republicans make significant gains in Congress and state legislatures in 2022, Donald might begin to think that a win in 2024 would be a sure thing for him, and he might make the decision to run after all. And if he were to win ... there would be no coming back from that.

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