

MuseLetter

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A little over a year ago I wrote an essay titled [The United States: An Obituary](#). It was the tail end of the Trump regime and the early days of the novel coronavirus pandemic; dread was in the air, and I thought it was a good moment to look back on my country's troubled history and assess its prospects. The title pretty much summed up my thoughts at the time.

Now we have a different administration in Washington and the pandemic has abated enough so that office workers are back in cubicles, kids are in school, and airplanes are once again shuttling passengers to holidays, weddings, and business meetings. Does the nation have a new lease on life?

One would like to think so. Sadly, however, it looks to me as though the current period of relative calm may be brief, to be followed by worsening civil hostility.

One of the pieces of evidence leading me to this conclusion is the historical analysis published by ecologist Peter Turchin and colleagues. For an introductory overview, read "[Welcome to the 'Turbulent Twenties.'](#)" which Turchin co-wrote with sociologist/historian Jack Goldstone; for a more in-depth treatment, dive into Turchin's [Ages of Discord](#), published in 2016. Here are the opening sentences of the Turchin/Goldstone essay:

"Almost three decades ago, one of us, Jack Goldstone, published a [simple model](#) to determine a country's vulnerability to political crisis. The model was based on how population changes shifted state, elite and popular behavior. Goldstone argued that, according to this Demographic-Structural Theory, in the 21st century, America was likely to get a populist, America-first leader who would sow a whirlwind of conflict. Then ten years ago, the other of us, Peter Turchin, [applied](#) Goldstone's model to US history, using current data. What emerged was alarming: The US was heading toward the highest level of vulnerability to political crisis seen in this country in over a hundred years. Even before Trump was elected, Turchin [published](#) his prediction that the US was headed for the 'Turbulent Twenties,' forecasting a period of growing instability in the United States and western Europe."

As causes of unrest, the authors cite the behavior of elites over recent decades, who have been soaking up ever-larger shares of national wealth,

starving the rest of society of the means to maintain infrastructure, educate children, and provide affordable health care. Further, many leaders are increasingly seeking to take advantage of existing divisions among the populace, thereby deepening political polarization and eroding trust in institutions.

Trump was defeated in the presidential election of 2020; but, as Turchin and Goldstone forecast, he responded by questioning the election's legitimacy. The effect has been to undermine his followers' confidence in the country's entire political process.

It has just [come to light](#) that, in the final days of his regime, Trump was acting in such a deranged manner that the Chairman of Joint Chiefs, Mark Milley, feared the outgoing president would try to stage a military coup. Milley warned the heads of the US military branches, conducted daily update calls with the White House Chief of Staff, and likened the Commander in Chief's efforts to retain power to those of Adolf Hitler in the final hours of the Third Reich.

The insurrection in Washington, DC, on January 6, stoked by Trump himself, set a new and frightening national precedent for civil violence. In recent days Trump has [praised](#) the insurrectionists, and Republican lawmakers have backpedaled on initial condemnations.

As the Capitol building in Washington was being attacked on January 6, state houses across the country were mobbed by Trump supporters; the New Mexico State House was evacuated. More recently, two men are alleged to have planned to attack the Democratic Party headquarters building in Sacramento.

While tensions build, the Biden administration is seeking to spread the nation's wealth around a bit more evenly, by proposing to put significant amounts of money into infrastructure projects and by offering direct payments to parents. There's even talk of raising taxes on high earners. These happen to be exactly the sorts of measures that Turchin and Goldstone advised in their article (which someone on the Biden team assuredly read):

“What we need,” the scientists wrote, “is a new social contract that will enable us to get past extreme polarization to find consensus, tip the shares of economic growth back toward workers and improve government funding for public health, education and infrastructure.”

But the Biden wish list must somehow become law, and the path to that outcome is unclear. Political divisions within Congress appear to be too deep, with Republicans determined to stop Democrats from achieving anything whatsoever. Among the Republican base, Trump remains popular, and he is the current poll choice as the party's presidential candidate in 2024.

The next likely key development in this unfolding drama was initiated by the indictment of the Trump organization and its chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg, earlier this month. [Legal analysts](#) believe that this move could be a prelude to the indictment of Trump himself, along with his children (who are all officers of the organization), perhaps by the end of the year.

If indicted, Trump probably won't be able to beat the charges in court. The evidence of tax fraud will likely be incontrovertible, consisting of company records, reportedly including [signed checks](#), backed by testimony from underlings who have "flipped" in return for immunity. Trump's best hope to avoid conviction and the possibility of prison may be to stoke even more civil violence—that is, to create so much chaos that the legal system can no longer function, or so that he can effectively blackmail the government into backing down on prosecutions in exchange for stand-down orders from him to his belligerent followers. Anyone who thinks Trump wouldn't stoop this low simply hasn't been paying attention.

By the 2024 presidential election, and perhaps even by the 2022 midterms, we could be in a situation in which violence on the part of Trump's followers is so commonplace that it elicits little mainstream media comment unless the body count sets a grim new record. Both sides will be confident that opponents are cheating, either by rigging the vote or by denying potential voters access to the polls. Where things go from there is uncertain, but so far there is no credible pathway to compromise and peace. In the past, socio-political fires like this have usually burned themselves out eventually—but not before a lot of people got hurt.

It's as if a profoundly dissonant subliminal chord is being sounded throughout America, just below the auditory threshold. Nobody quite hears it, but everyone feels it. Everybody wants the chord to resolve, but the pathways toward harmony are contradictory and mutually exclusive. The dissonance is driving everyone crazy, making them irritated and ornery. But, much as we all yearn for it, there is as yet no resolution.