

OPINION

The American polity is cracked, and might collapse. Canada must prepare

The U.S. is becoming increasingly ungovernable, and some experts believe it could descend into civil war. What should Canada do then?

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By 2025, American democracy could collapse, causing extreme domestic political instability, including widespread civil violence. By 2030, if not sooner, the country could be governed by a right-wing dictatorship.

We mustn't dismiss these possibilities just because they seem ludicrous or too horrible to imagine. In 2014, the suggestion that Donald Trump would become president would also have struck nearly everyone as absurd. But today we live in a world where the absurd regularly becomes real and the horrible commonplace.

Leading American academics are now actively addressing the prospect of a fatal weakening of U.S. democracy.

This past November, more than 150 professors of politics, government, political economy and international relations appealed to Congress to pass the Freedom to Vote Act, which would protect the integrity of US elections but is now stalled in the Senate. This is a moment of "great peril and risk," they wrote. "Time is ticking away, and midnight is approaching."

I am a scholar of violent conflict. For more than 40 years, I've studied and published on the causes of war, social breakdown, revolution, ethnic violence and genocide, and for nearly two decades I led a centre on peace and conflict studies at the University of Toronto.

Today, as I watch the unfolding crisis in the United States, I see a political and social landscape flashing with warning signals.

I'm not surprised by what's happening there – not at all. During my graduate work in the United States in the 1980s, I sometimes listened to Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing radio talk show host and later television personality. I remarked to friends at the time that, with each broadcast, it was if Mr. Limbaugh were wedging the sharp end of a chisel

into a faint crack in the moral authority of U.S. political institutions, and then slamming the other end of that chisel with a hammer.

In the decades since, week after week, year after year, Mr. Limbaugh and his fellow travellers have hammered away – their blows’ power lately amplified through social media and outlets such as Fox News and Newsmax. The cracks have steadily widened, ramified, connected and propagated deeply into America’s once-esteemed institutions, profoundly compromising their structural integrity. The country is becoming increasingly ungovernable, and some experts believe it could descend into civil war.

How should Canada prepare?

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In 2020, president Donald Trump awarded Mr. Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The act signalled that Mr. Limbaugh’s brand of bullying, populist white ethnocentrism – a rancid blend of aggrieved attacks on liberal elites, racist dog-whistling, bragging about American exceptionalism and appeals to authoritarian leadership – had become an integral part of mainstream political ideology in the U.S.

But one can’t blame only Mr. Limbaugh, who died in early 2021, and his ilk for America’s dysfunction. These people and their actions are as much symptoms of that dysfunction as its root causes, and those causes are many. Some can be traced to the country’s founding – to an abiding distrust in government baked into the country’s political culture during the Revolution, to slavery, to the political compromise of the Electoral College that slavery spawned, to the overrepresentation of rural voting power in the Senate, and to the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War. But successful polities around the world have overcome flaws just as fundamental.

What seems to have pushed the United States to the brink of losing its democracy today is a multiplication effect between its underlying flaws and recent shifts in the society’s “material” characteristics. These shifts include stagnating middle-class incomes, chronic economic insecurity, and rising inequality as the country’s economy – transformed by technological change and globalization – has transitioned from muscle power, heavy industry, and manufacturing as the main sources of its wealth to idea power, information technology, symbolic production and finance. As returns to labour have stagnated and returns to capital have soared, much of the U.S. population has fallen behind. Inflation-adjusted wages for the median male worker in the fourth quarter of 2019 (prior to the infusion of economic support owing to the COVID-19 pandemic) were lower than in 1979; meanwhile, between 1978 and 2016, CEO incomes in the biggest companies rose from 30 times that of the average worker to 271 times. Economic insecurity is widespread in broad swaths of the country’s interior, while growth is increasingly concentrated in a dozen or so metropolitan centres.

Two other material factors are key. The first is demographic: as immigration, aging, intermarriage and a decline in church-going have reduced the percentage of non-Hispanic white Christians in America, right-wing ideologues have inflamed fears that traditional U.S. culture is being erased and whites are being “replaced.” The second is

pervasive elite selfishness: The wealthy and powerful in America are broadly unwilling to pay the taxes, invest in the public services, or create the avenues for vertical mobility that would lessen their country's economic, educational, racial and geographic gaps. The more an under-resourced government can't solve everyday problems, the more people give up on it, and the more they turn to their own resources and their narrow identity groups for safety.

America's economic, racial and social gaps have helped cause ideological polarization between the political right and left, and the worsening polarization has paralyzed government while aggravating the gaps. The political right and left are isolated from, and increasingly despise, each other. Both believe the stakes are existential – that the other is out to destroy the country they love. The moderate political centre is fast vanishing.

And, oh yes, the population is armed to the teeth, with somewhere around 400 million firearms in the hands of civilian

Some diagnoses of America's crisis that highlight "toxic polarization" imply the two sides are equally responsible for that crisis. They are not. While both wings of U.S. politics have fanned polarization's flames, blame lies disproportionately on the political right.

According to Harvard's renowned sociologist and political scientist Theda Skocpol, in the early 2000s fringe elements of the Republican party used disciplined tactics and enormous streams of money (from billionaires like the Koch brothers) to turn extreme laissez-faire ideology into orthodox Republican dogma. Then, in 2008, Barack Obama's election as president increased anxieties about immigration and cultural change among older, often economically insecure members of the white middle-class, who then coalesced into the populist Tea Party movement. Under Mr. Trump, the two forces were joined. The GOP became, Dr. Skocpol writes, a radicalized "marriage of convenience between anti-government free-market plutocrats and racially anxious ethno-nationalist activists and voters."

Now, adopting Mr. Limbaugh's tried-and-true methods, demagogues on the right are pushing the radicalization process further than ever before. By weaponizing people's fear and anger, Mr. Trump and a host of acolytes and wannabees such as Fox's Tucker Carlson and Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene have captured the storied GOP and transformed it into a near-fascist personality cult that's a perfect instrument for wrecking democracy.

And it's not inaccurate to use the F word. As conservative commentator David Frum argues, Trumpism increasingly resembles European fascism in its contempt for the rule of law and glorification of violence. Evidence is as close as the latest right-wing Twitter meme: widely circulated holiday photos show Republican politicians and their family members, including young children, sitting in front of their Christmas trees, all smiling gleefully while cradling pistols, shotguns and assault rifles.

Those guns are more than symbols. The Trump cult presents itself as the only truly patriotic party able to defend U.S. values and history against traitorous Democrats beholden to cosmopolitan elites and minorities who neither understand nor support “true” American values. The Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. capitol must be understood in these terms. The people involved didn’t think they were attacking U.S. democracy – although they unquestionably were. Instead, they believed their “patriotic” actions were needed to save it.

Democracy is an institution, but underpinning that institution is a vital set of beliefs and values. If a substantial enough fraction of a population no longer holds those beliefs and values, then democracy can’t survive. Probably the most important is recognition of the equality of the polity’s citizens in deciding its future; a close runner up is willingness to concede power to one’s political opponents, should those equal citizens decide that’s what they want. At the heart of the ideological narrative of U.S. right-wing demagogues, from Mr. Trump on down, is the implication that large segments of the country’s population – mainly the non-white, non-Christian, and educated urban ones – aren’t really equal citizens. They aren’t quite full Americans, or even real Americans.

This is why Mr. Trump’s “Big Lie” that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him – a falsehood that nearly 70 per cent of Republicans now accept as true – is such potent anti-democratic poison. If the other side is willing to steal an election, then they don’t play by the rules. They’ve placed themselves outside the American moral community, which means they don’t deserve to be treated as equals. There’s certainly no reason to concede power to them, ever.

Willingness to publicly endorse the Big Lie has become a litmus test of Republican loyalty to Mr. Trump. This isn’t just an ideological move to promote Republican solidarity against Democrats. It puts its adherents one step away from the psychological dynamic of extreme dehumanization that has led to some of the worst violence in human history. And it has refashioned – into a moral crusade against evil – Republican efforts to gerrymander Congressional districts into pretzel-like shapes, to restrict voting rights, and to take control of state-level electoral apparatuses.

When the situation is framed in such a Manichean way, righteous ends justify any means. One of the two American parties is now devoted to victory at any cost.

Many of those with guns are waiting for a signal to use them. Polls show that between 20 and 30 million American adults believe both that the 2020 election was stolen from Mr. Trump and that violence is justified to return him to the presidency.

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In the weeks before the November, 2016, U.S. election, I talked to several experts to gauge the danger of a Trump presidency. I recently consulted them again. While in 2016 they were alarmed, this last month most were utterly dismayed. All told me the U.S. political situation has deteriorated sharply since last year’s attack on Capitol Hill.

Jack Goldstone, a political sociologist at George Mason University in Washington, D.C., and a leading authority on the causes of state breakdown and revolution, told me that since 2016 we've learned that early optimism about the resilience of U.S. democracy was based on two false assumptions: "First, that American institutions would be strong enough to easily withstand efforts to subvert them; and second, that the vast majority of people will act rationally and be drawn to the political centre, so that it's impossible for extremist groups to take over."

But especially after the 2020 election, Dr. Goldstone said, we've seen that core institutions – from the Justice Department to county election boards – are susceptible to pressure. They have barely held firm. "We've also learned that the reasonable majority can be frightened and silenced if caught between extremes, while many others can be captured by mass delusions." And to his surprise "moderate GOP leaders have either been forced out of the party or acquiesced to a party leadership that embraces lies and anti-democratic actions."

Mr. Trump's electoral loss has energized the Republican base and further radicalized young party members. Even without their concerted efforts to torque the machinery of the electoral system, Republicans will probably take control of both the House of Representatives and Senate this coming November, because the incumbent party generally fares poorly in mid-term elections. Republicans could easily score a massive victory, with voters ground down by the pandemic, angry about inflation, and tired of President Joe Biden bumbling from one crisis to another. Voters who identify as Independents are already migrating toward Republican candidates.

Once Republicans control Congress, Democrats will lose control of the national political agenda, giving Mr. Trump a clear shot at recapturing the presidency in 2024. And once in office, he will have only two objectives: vindication and vengeance.

A U.S. civil-military expert and senior federal appointee I consulted noted that a re-elected president Trump could be totally unconstrained, nationally and internationally.

A crucial factor determining how much constraint he faces will be the response of the U.S. military, a bulwark institution ardently committed to defending the Constitution. During the first Trump administration, members of the military repeatedly resisted the president's authoritarian impulses and tried to anticipate and corral his rogue behaviour – most notably when Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley, shortly after the Capitol insurrection, ordered military officials to include him in any decision process involving the use of military force.

But in a second Trump administration, this expert suggested, the bulwark could crumble. By replacing the civilian leadership of the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs with lackeys and sycophants, he could so infiltrate the Department with his people that he'll be able to bend it to his will.

After four years of Mr. Trump's bedlam, the U.S. under Mr. Biden has been comparatively calm. Politics in the U.S. seems to have stabilized.

But absolutely nothing has stabilized in America. The country's problems are systemic and deeply entrenched – and events could soon spiral out of control.

The experts I consulted described a range of possible outcomes if Mr. Trump returns to power, none benign. They cited particular countries and political regimes to illustrate where he might take the U.S.: Viktor Orban's Hungary, with its coercive legal apparatus of "illiberal democracy"; Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, with its chronic social distemper and administrative dysfunction; or Vladimir Putin's Russia, with its harsh one-man hyper-nationalist autocracy. All agreed that under a second Trump administration, liberalism will be marginalized and right-wing Christian groups super-empowered, while violence by vigilante, paramilitary groups will rise sharply.

Looking further down the road, some think that authority in American federalism is so disjointed and diffuse that Mr. Trump, especially given his manifest managerial incompetence, will never be able to achieve full authoritarian control. Others believe the pendulum will ultimately swing back to the Democrats when Republican mistakes accumulate, or that the radicalized Republican base – so fanatically loyal to Mr. Trump – can't grow larger and will dissipate when its hero leaves the stage.

One can hope for these outcomes, because there are far worse scenarios. Something resembling civil war is one. Many pathways could take the country there – some described in Stephen Marche's new book *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future*. The most plausible start with a disputed 2024 presidential election. Perhaps Democrats squeak out a victory, and Republican states refuse to recognize the result. Or conversely, perhaps Republicans win, but only because Republican state legislatures override voting results; then Democratic protestors attack those legislatures. In either circumstance, much will depend on whether the country's military splits along partisan lines.

But there's another political regime, a historical one, that may portend an even more dire future for the U.S.: the Weimar Republic. The situation in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s was of course *sui generis*; in particular, the country had experienced staggering traumas – defeat in war, internal revolution and hyperinflation – while the country's commitment to liberal democracy was weakly rooted in its culture. But as I read a history of the doomed republic this past summer, I tallied no fewer than five unnerving parallels with the current U.S. situation.

First, in both cases, a charismatic leader was able to unify right-wing extremists around a political program to seize the state. Second, a bald falsehood about how enemies inside the polity had betrayed the country – for the Nazis, the "stab in the back," and for Trumpists, the Big Lie – was a vital psychological tool for radicalizing and mobilizing followers. Third, conventional conservatives believed they could control and channel the charismatic leader and rising extremism but were ultimately routed by the forces they helped unleash. Fourth, ideological opponents of this rising extremism squabbled among themselves; they didn't take the threat seriously enough, even though it was growing in plain sight; and they focused on marginal issues that were too often red meat for the extremists. (Today, think toppling statues.)

To my mind, though, the fifth parallel is the most disconcerting: the propagation of a “hardline security doctrine.” Here I’ve been influenced by the research of Jonathan Leader Maynard, a young English scholar who is emerging as one of the world’s most brilliant thinkers on the links between ideology, extremism and violence. In a forthcoming book, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, Dr. Leader Maynard argues that extremist right-wing ideologies generally don’t arise from explicit efforts to forge an authoritarian society, but from the radicalization of a society’s existing understandings of how it can stay safe and secure in the face of alleged threats.

Hardline conceptions of security are “radicalized versions of familiar claims about threat, self-defence, punishment, war, and duty,” he writes. They are the foundation on which regimes organize campaigns of violent persecution and terror. People he calls “hardliners” believe the world contains many “dangerous enemies that frequently operate in and through purported ‘civilian’ groups.” Hardliners increasingly dominate Trumpist circles now.

Dr. Leader Maynard then makes a complementary argument: Once a hardline doctrine is widely accepted within a political movement, it becomes an “infrastructure” of ideas and incentives that can pressure even those who don’t really accept the doctrine into following its dictates. Fear of “true believers” shifts the behaviour of the movement’s moderates toward extremism. Sure enough, the experts I recently consulted all spoke about how fear of crossing Mr. Trump’s base – including fear for their families’ physical safety – was forcing otherwise sensible Republicans to fall into line.

The rapid propagation of hardline security doctrines through a society, Dr. Leader Maynard says, typically occurs in times of political and economic crisis. Even in the Weimar Republic, the vote for the National Socialists was closely correlated with the unemployment rate. The Nazis were in trouble (with their share of the vote falling and the party beset by internal disputes) as late as 1927, before the German economy started to contract. Then, of course, the Depression hit. The United States today is in the midst of crisis – caused by the pandemic, obviously – but it could experience far worse before long: perhaps a war with Russia, Iran or China, or a financial crisis when economic bubbles caused by excessive liquidity burst.

Beyond a certain threshold, other new research shows, political extremism feeds on itself, pushing polarization toward an irreversible tipping point. This suggests a sixth potential parallel with Weimar: democratic collapse followed by the consolidation of dictatorship. Mr. Trump may be just a warm-up act – someone ideal to bring about the first stage, but not the second. Returning to office, he’ll be the wrecking ball that demolishes democracy, but the process will produce a political and social shambles. Still, through targeted harassment and dismissal, he’ll be able to thin the ranks of his movement’s opponents within the state – the bureaucrats, officials and technocrats who oversee the non-partisan functioning of core institutions and abide by the rule of law. Then the stage will be set for a more managerially competent ruler, after Mr. Trump, to bring order to the chaos he’s created.

Washington State Park workers put up a new Canadian flag in front of an American flag about to be replaced during scheduled maintenance atop the Peace Arch in Blaine, Wash., this past Nov. 8. ELAINE THOMPSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A terrible storm is coming from the south, and Canada is woefully unprepared. Over the past year we've turned our attention inward, distracted by the challenges of COVID-19, reconciliation, and the accelerating effects of climate change. But now we must focus on the urgent problem of what to do about the likely unravelling of democracy in the United States.

We need to start by fully recognizing the magnitude of the danger. If Mr. Trump is re-elected, even under the more-optimistic scenarios the economic and political risks to our country will be innumerable. Driven by aggressive, reactive nationalism, Mr. Trump "could isolate Canada continentally," as one of my interlocutors put it euphemistically.

Under the less-optimistic scenarios, the risks to our country in their cumulative effect could easily be existential, far greater than any in our federation's history. What happens, for instance, if high-profile political refugees fleeing persecution arrive in our country, and the U.S. regime demands them back. Do we comply?

In this context, it's worth noting the words of Dmitry Muratov, the courageous Russian journalist who remains one of the few independent voices standing up to Mr. Putin and who just received the Nobel Prize for Peace. At a news conference after the awards ceremony in Oslo, as Russian troops and armour were massing on Ukraine's borders, Mr. Muratov spoke of the iron link between authoritarianism and war. "Disbelief in democracy means that the countries that have abandoned it will get a dictator," he said. "And where there is a dictatorship, there is a war. If we refuse democracy, we agree to war."

Canada is not powerless in the face of these forces, at least not yet. Among other things, over three-quarters of a million Canadian emigrants live in the United States – many highly placed and influential – and together they're a mass of people who could appreciably tilt the outcome of coming elections and the broader dynamics of the country's political process.

But here's my key recommendation: The Prime Minister should immediately convene a standing, non-partisan Parliamentary committee with representatives from the five sitting parties, all with full security clearances. It should be understood that this committee will continue to operate in coming years, regardless of changes in federal government. It should receive regular intelligence analyses and briefings by Canadian experts on political and social developments in the United States and their implications for democratic failure there. And it should be charged with providing the federal government with continuing, specific guidance as to how to prepare for and respond to that failure, should it occur.

If hope is to be a motivator and not a crutch, it needs to be honest and not false. It needs to be anchored in a realistic, evidence-based understanding of the dangers we face and a

clear vision of how to get past those dangers to a good future. Canada is itself flawed, but it's still one of the most remarkably just and prosperous societies in human history. It must rise to this challenge.

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