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“Crisis Of Their Own Legitimacy”

Peter Gelderloos, Tom Nomad

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The following interview with Tom Nomad and Peter Gelderloos offers up an anarchist analysis of the ongoing political fallout of Trump’s recent indictment and its impact on both the political landscape and the upcoming 2024 election cycle.

IGD: What does the current wave of indictments against Trump say about the current state of the elites in the US? Is this a move by the Democrats and their section of the ruling class to remove Trump by legal means, or just the slow mechanisms of the legal apparatus catching up with Trump? What can we learn from the growing divisions with the ruling class?

Tom Nomad: I think there are really two things going on here, and neither are able to be explained simply by saying Democrats are trying to get rid of Trump; it is more important than that. For Trump to be indicted federally like this means that the Department of Justice (DOJ) has determined that it is in the “best interest of the public” to prosecute these charges, and that this public benefit outweighs the potential for social or political unrest. The DOJ was caught in a difficult place. If

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To support Peter Gelderloos, who is recovering from surgery
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they tried to just indict him for everything, without extreme due process, and a really specific harm that they could point to as a result of his actions, then the fear is that MAGA rage would be stirred up. If they just let this slide, then it creates what in economics is called moral hazard, the idea that because someone was bailed out for previous egregious actions, then they can continue to do those actions and get bailed out in the future; this was the argument against economic bailouts in 2008 for example.

This tells me that the calculus in relation to both the strength and loyalty of his base, and the severity of his actions, has shifted, with the harm being seen as more concrete and significant, and the backlash seeming less likely. Right after January 6th this would have been impossible without significant violence. But, Trump has been losing support, and losing influence among his supporters; there is a MAGA after Trump discussion. The shift in his support, coupled with the fear of future presidents acting in this way, is largely what is driving these charges being filed right now.

That also tells me that we are seeing a situation not unlike that which existed around the New Deal, where different elements of the capitalist class were making different calculations about the best actions to take to preserve the system in the wake of the Great Depression. In the early 30s, the anti-New Deal crowd was arguing that the creation of social services would create dependent citizens that the wealthy would need to support for decades, while Roosevelt and some of the more progressive capitalists were arguing that without these services capitalism would be destroyed in the near future through workers' actions. In this scenario, most of the capitalist class decided that it made more sense to save themselves in the long run, and took actions that are still seen by some as a betrayal of their class interests.

I think that in this scenario, the calculation is similar in a way. The DOJ is concerned that a continuation of this politics of

animus, overt distortion, and combative existential conflict will shatter the stability of the political system, and they are correct. So, they are calculating that the short term political unrest that could result here is more manageable than the far longer term crisis in legitimacy that results from them not doing anything and letting Trump off.

Peter Gelderloos: Both the Democrats and Republicans are trying to restore and revitalize state power in the face of a major crisis of governance. This crisis, of course, is just another facet of the broader crisis engulfing the planet at the moment, but because as they are prioritizing the crisis of their own legitimacy and effectiveness to rule, they risk excluding or failing to grasp the general crisis – and may well exacerbate it.

The January 6th far-Right tantrum, the leaking of state secrets by right-wing grifters, and also the insurrections against police violence and racism frame the panorama: the State is suffering a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness. The Democrats are generally able to see this crisis more clearly and effectively, whereas the Republicans have generally been more effective at organizing responses to the crisis.

The Democrats understand that state power needs to be restored and relegitimized in a strategic way. In response to the anti-police insurrections, that meant symbolic gestures validating some of the concerns of those movements, and then the well developed machinery of NGOs and elections to pacify them and reintegrate them into a slightly modified version of the system of policing and white supremacy: the abolition to reform pipeline.

With regards to the far-Right and the growing prospects of a civil war, the institutional Left has responded with the less imaginative but necessary, from a ruling class perspective, response: fortifying the mythology of the rule of law and fortifying the institutions that uphold that mythology. In this vein, it is important to also mention the legal action against Fox News, alongside the prosecution of Trump. However, they have not

been very strategic or thorough in carrying this strategy out in a way that does not empower or provoke a backlash from the elements of the ruling class that are destabilizing the institutions of government nor from the portions of society most likely to lead the charge into civil war.

The Republicans have been much more effective at taking actions that mobilize and motivate, even as they bear primary responsibility for destabilizing the State by refusing to view the crisis objectively, acknowledging the institutional needs of the State as surpassing their own specific, ideological campaign.

One can trace an ironic beginning to this campaign in their impeachment of Bill Clinton. This was an attempt to create a moral panic, originating with the so-called Moral Majority, the Christian far-Right that was already taking the Party in a different direction since the Reagan years. The moral panic that has since evolved into a race panic as Republicans unrepentantly embrace white supremacy in its most reactionary form: the idea that whiteness (and its attendant heteropatriarchy) is under attack, surrounded by a dangerous, savage, implacable Other it needs to defend itself from.

This reactionary version of whiteness has always existed alongside a progressive version of whiteness, and both have been strategically necessary for the global implantation of capitalism. But the reactionary, paranoid whiteness has been most effective at motivating settlers to brutalize and conquer new territory, motivating elements of the lower and middle classes to purge society of revolutionary threats, and motivating the proles to go to war against some external enemy. In the current context, however, it only destabilizes the institutions of government while creating an echo chamber that makes it exceedingly difficult for Republicans to change strategy, because currently, the whole map has been conquered, and revolutionary threats are so incipient and lacking in consciousness or historical memory that the Democratic strategy of co-opting them

David Kilcullen, insofar as a stalemate against a well rooted insurgency (Iraq 2003) is far better than a defeat (Vietnam, 1975).

One of these two currents probably represents the future of the Republican Party, at least for the next four years. One will isolate the Party from the center Right, the other will cost the Party the support of the extreme Right. Each current needs Trump out of the way, but neither current is in a hurry to denounce Trump because he is currently the only politician capable of mobilizing a large part of the Right from extreme to center.

But they do want Trump out of the way. To the Right of Trump, most notably you have Florida governor Ron DeSantis, who represents a greater level of coherence between the Christian Right and the secular extremists mobilizing revanchist and reactionary opposition to Black resistance and queer and trans visibility. He also takes one or two significant steps in the direction of fascism, which are notably lacking in Trump's political practice. In a future text I'd like to explore this more, how many anarchists set ourselves up for failure in the moment when the 2020 rebellion needed to continue and evolve, by not distinguishing between fascism and a democratic right-wing extremism over the prior years. But for now, suffice it to say that DeSantis' willingness to go up against one of the major capitalists in Florida, the Disney Corporation, in a way that endangers future investment in the state, and over issues that could be described as coming from a cultural agenda, is highly significant.

While we're on this topic, let me also repeat a point made by a queer friend: there seems to have been less corporate investment in Pride this year. On the one hand, that opens up more space for autonomous and radical organizing. On the other, it should remind us how quickly our capitalist supposed allies will abandon us when the political winds shift.

To the center of Trump, we have figures like Chris Christy and Nikki Haley who want to revive the more strategic conservatism of W. Bush's handlers. Whether either of them have the intelligence to pull it off remains to be seen, and if they do, whether that actually does anything to alter the course of the US empire's senescence also remains to be seen, given how the second US invasion of Iraq was an effective attempt to reinvigorate US imperial power within a hawkish, interventionist paradigm, but in the long run did more to undermine US imperial power given the extent to which politically the war was a stalemate. Though it was certainly a partial validation of the counterinsurgency praxis elaborated by David Galula and

is far more effective. Moreover, there aren't any hot wars that the military needs help recruiting for.

Therefore, the reactionary whiteness the Republicans are promoting so effectively has no strategic targets, and is instead being directed at the institutions of government itself or other members of the ruling class, or it is being directed at other portions of society who are engaging in usually light forms of dissidence that the Left has not had much trouble in pacifying. By attacking them, the Right is potentially radicalizing them, increasing their fortitude and resistance, and creating the highly destabilizing image of a civil war on the horizon.

IGD: What will the fallout be of this move to go after Trump just months before the first GOP primary? What can we expect both from the elites and the far-Right? Will any of this matter at all, or just be more of the same?

Tom Nomad: If you were asking this a year ago, I would have said that it probably wouldn't have a lot of impact. But, in the last year there has been a surprising amount of opposition to Trump, in increasingly overt forms, within the GOP. Some of this opposition revolves around rejections of Trump as a person (that he is not the right "vehicle" for their "message"), as well as concerns about electability. But, above and beyond all other motivations, I think that other Republicans are seeing a chance to dethrone him.

Republican politics, since the 1990s, has centered around stirring up the base, giving them what they want, and not being able to moderate. This is driven by the entire conservative media ecosystem, and involves millions. The problem that emerges is that this internalization, this building of a closed political world, removes one from the ground and the people they are trying to turn into supporters, or marginalize out of politics. As such, the things that have meaning in that political space increasingly do not have much meaning either outside of that space or, because that ecosystem is fundamentally based on new outrages, even between different factions. We

have been seeing some of the more traditional blocks of the GOP re-emerge, like the religious right, who had formerly been fused into the grey soup that was Trumpism.

This creates two problems for the GOP. Firstly, factional competition is a thing again. When Trumpism was dominant there was little space for factions to emerge, differentiate, and try to influence the direction of the party. In a lot of ways, sort of like with Saddam Hussein, this kept the warring factions in place by imposing an even more repressive meta-structure that all politics needs to occur within. Now that we are seeing cracks, and these indictments are just more cracks, we are not only seeing factions emerge, but we are seeing them approach internal party politics and political competition as something with stakes again. That is likely to encourage that sort of factionalization until someone else can consolidate control.

Secondly, as a result of this internal factional competition, a lot of GOP politics has turned inward. Conservative politics has shifted from a politics based on bemoaning external social changes into being more about disowning the disloyal and imposing the Party Line, as a mechanism of factional domination. The dynamic this creates of one of mutual combat, where each engagement has the ability to make or break the rise of a specific faction. These indictments are just another wedge driving cracks into the Trumpian edifice of control over the GOP, and that will only exaggerate the conflicts already brewing.

Peter Gelderloos: Going back to the Clinton administration and the Christian Right's extremely moralistic impeachment campaign, Republicans have wanted to use punitive tools against their Democratic rivals, even as, going back to the Nixon years, they have believed they should be allowed to self-police in response to more serious breaches of ethics and legality.

As I noted, their emphasis has been on finding effective tactics rather than coherent strategies, so they aren't actually hypocrites since they don't actually believe in anything, at

least not in the way we would understand it. But that apparent hypocrisy temporarily blocked off their ability for ethical crusading against their political rivals. First of all, the leaders of the Christian Right and the "moral majority" brand fell from grace due to various scandals involving drug addiction, corruption, and marital infidelity and could only avoid impeachment, resignation, or legal problems by pleading for compassion and forgiveness. Subsequently, when they lined up behind Trump, they basically had to give up on the possibility of using moralistic campaigns against their rivals for breaching the norms of conservative Christian behavior, since Trump's numerous sins forced them to be constantly on the defensive.

The Christian part of the Republican base has largely had to self-isolate and suspend their campaign to spread conservative values, accepting the expedient lie that God works through imperfect instruments. Meanwhile, it has been the secular sectors of the Right that have been most effective, capitalizing on and exacerbating anxieties among the privileged and semi-privileged strata of US society, specifically in regards to race and to the ability of queer and trans people to come out of the closet.

This is important background as regards changes in the composition and the relative importance of the Right. Most of the planners and thinkers on the Right, secretly or not secretly, want to get rid of Trump, basically because he is a self-serving idiot who will probably cause the Republicans to lose the next election. But he is also the one with the most name-recognition and the one who currently has the greatest capacity to mobilize the base. So the first Republicans to come out against him will receive the greater part of his ire.

Additionally, Republicans don't want Trump to be prosecuted because they don't want the Democrats to have access to punitive governmental powers that might be used again in the future.