

SEP Summer School 2021 Lecture

# January 6, 2021: Donald Trump's plot against America

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## Introduction

On January 6, 2021, the president of the United States transformed the White House into the command center of a fascistic plot to overturn the results of the election.

This was the reactionary crescendo of a presidential administration unlike any other in American history. For the first three years of his term, Donald Trump danced back and forth over the blurred line that separates the formal trappings of bourgeois parliamentarism from personalist dictatorship. He attempted to force his Democratic and Republican rivals to bend to his will by threatening to unleash his supporters and trigger social chaos.

He was tolerated and even encouraged by finance capital because his movement was a battering ram for extreme political reaction against the working class. He moved from crisis to crisis like a mad pyrotechnic sitting on a mountain of dynamite, directing the entire political establishment further and further to the right.

In his last year in office, Trump stopped dancing to-and-fro over the line of dictatorship and resolved to cross it definitively. The coronavirus pandemic triggered a series of crises that forced his hand. His popularity—never high to begin with—fell to new lows.

From the spring of 2020 to January 2021, as deaths piled up, as the economy shut down, and as social discontent exploded onto the streets, Trump was engaged in an ongoing effort to invoke the Insurrection Act, impose martial law and remove whatever legal and political restraints remained on his actions.

He now aims to transform the Republican Party into a fascist party under his personal control. The Democrats, in alliance with the military and intelligence agencies, have worked to control social opposition to his policies while pressuring him from the right on foreign policy. What the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote throughout this period has been proven correct.

Trump's plot was stopped, for the time being, not by the Democrats, but by the intervention of the military, which said it would not accept martial law, not yet. The Democratic Party opposed making any mass appeal because doing so would trigger demands for social reform. Even when the

Democratic Party's entire congressional delegation was huddled in the basement of the US Capitol, their appeals for salvation were still made in private, to the military alone. They will not defend democratic rights even when their lives depend on it.

The military, for its part, did not intervene in defense of democracy, but to maintain stability and law and order. The institution which is pulling out of Iraq and Afghanistan dripping in the blood of over a million civilians becomes kingmaker at home. When the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Mark Milley, said, "We're the guys with the guns," this was not just a statement of fact about the present balance of power, but a warning for the future. The Democrats have pushed the military forward as chief arbiter of political power.

In a court of law, it would not be difficult to prove that Trump possesses the intent—the *mens rea*—to carry out a coup. After all, he states his aims openly and on a regular basis. Nevertheless, after having watched these events take place before their very eyes and after having listened to Trump's own words, the political representatives of the affluent middle class scoff at the suggestion that dictatorship was even a remote possibility. They neither see evil nor hear evil, but that doesn't stop them from speaking it.

Twenty years ago, they shrugged off the Clinton impeachment scandal as unimportant and described the 2000 election crisis as a "tempest in a teapot." Today, they raise a number of pathetic arguments: The state is far too strong, the social order far too stable for a coup to take place. Trump is too stupid, too much of an improviser to organize one.

A coup takes place only if it follows the script of past coups to the line, like a stage production. The set must feature tanks in the streets, the assassination of heads of state, a March on Rome. In their pathological complacency and their desperate desire to be rescued from the class struggle, they become hostile to alerting the working class of the dangers of the coup, even when the coup's directors, producers and the star himself recycle scenes from Hitler's theater and recite his soliloquies.

This is the response of a social layer that has nothing to add to the progressive development of humankind. Thirty years ago, the petty-bourgeois "left" declared "farewell to the working class" and concluded that the dissolution of the Soviet Union proved the unviability of Marxism for all time. The American ruling class proclaimed with beaming self-confidence "the end of history," that capitalism had vanquished socialism and that American imperialism was ushering in a new world order of social stability based on the principles of liberal democracy.

Today it is universally understood even by representatives of the big bourgeoisie that this declaration was positively delusional. The guarantor of world order is now its chief source of chaos. American "democracy," which presented itself as a model for the world, now leads the way in a global resurgence of fascism. The world's policeman did not bring order

and harmony, but war and a resurgence of inter-imperialist conflict.

US imperialism destroyed entire societies in search of world domination, only to weaken its own position and tear its own society apart. Sections of the American petty-bourgeoisie that once believed in its American dream are now susceptible to Hitlerian nightmares. What was once the confident bulwark of world reaction against socialism abroad now promotes a strongman to crush the danger of socialism at home.

As only the Trotskyist movement foresaw, American imperialism is having its rendezvous with disaster. The present juncture poses real dangers, but also has profoundly revolutionary implications. Which tendency prevails will be determined by the intervention of our party. So how did this all come to be?

## Who is Donald Trump?

Donald Trump was spat out after a half-century of political reaction during the decline of American capitalism's post-war boom. If Theodore Dreiser were to describe Trump's life, he would explain that Trump personifies a ruling class that is unimaginably wealthy, extremely ruthless and shockingly backwards. It is fitting that the story of Trump's family fortune begins in a whorehouse in the Yukon Territory, which his grandfather Friedrich, an émigré from Rhineland-Palatinate in southwest Germany, set up in the late 1890s to provide the miners of the Klondike gold rush with liquor and prostitutes. It was all downhill from there.

Trump's grandfather moved to New York, where Trump's father, Fred, a fascist who praised Hitler and marched with the KKK, made the family's first millions. Born in 1946, Donald Trump's rise as a young man was made possible through draft dodging, his father's money, large and regular donations to both political parties, an army of lawyers and decades of desperate and tasteless self-promotion. He idolized his mentor Roy Cohn, his only true friend, who served as Joe McCarthy's attorney and was a driving force in the anti-communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Trump swindled his way into adulthood through the corporate bonanza of the 1980s in the era of Ronald Reagan. He was held up by the media establishment as the living icon of the god of American moneymaking in the time of capitalist triumphalism.

Trump was an apt representative of American capitalism in its period of decline. He tore down historically protected buildings, replaced them with monstrosities and put his name on top. In 1987, the Stalinists invited him to Moscow to build a hotel in the name of perestroika. In 1989, Trump demanded the death penalty be brought back to kill the Central Park Five, innocent black youth framed up by the police for an assault they did not commit. In the 1990s he made friends with the Clintons, the Giulianis and the Epsteins. He built a national following with the help of NBC, which ran 15 seasons of his show "The Apprentice."

In his own personal views, Trump is without a doubt an admirer of Hitler. In the recent book titled *Frankly, We Did Win This Election*, journalist Michael Bender describes a discussion between Donald Trump and his former chief of staff, John Kelly, in 2018.

Trump told Kelly, "Well, Hitler did a lot of good things." Bender explains that "the chief of staff told the president that he was wrong, but Trump was undeterred. Trump pointed to Germany's economic gains once Hitler took over as chancellor."

According to a 1990 interview with his then-wife, Ivana, Trump kept a book of Hitler's speeches in his bedside cabinet. *Vanity Fair* wrote that "Ivana Trump told her lawyer Michael Kennedy that from time to time her husband reads a book of Hitler's collected speeches, *My New Order*, which he keeps in a cabinet by his bed." William Shirer, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, explained, "In these speeches Adolf

Hitler talks about his views on Jews and Other Races, his Domestic Program, his Foreign Policy, and the Aryan Master Race."

Ivana also said that when one Trump Organization leader came to meet with Trump, he would always click his heels and say, "Heil Hitler," upon entering Trump's office. In the same interview, Trump's lawyer told *Vanity Fair*, "Trump is a believer in the Big Lie theory. If you say something again and again, people will believe you."

None of this precluded Trump from being a longtime fixture in New York Democratic Party circles, and the same politicians hiding in a bunker under the Capitol on January 6 were in his office begging for money not so long before. From 1989 to 2009, Trump gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Democrats, far more than he gave to Republicans. He was a registered Democrat from 2001 to 2009. But, hitching his sails to the wind of the Tea Party movement, Trump launched the Birther campaign in 2011, insisting that Barack Obama was a Muslim and was not a US citizen. Four years later, he announced his run for president.

## The objective roots of Trumpism

Donald Trump, we have often remarked, did not fall out of the sky and into the Oval Office. He is the political personification of the most dangerous tendencies of nearly 200 years of American bourgeois reaction. The American ruling class, in its existential struggle for self-preservation, has conjured up all its historically derived experience in counterrevolution and spat it out in the presidency of Donald Trump.

He borrows the strategy of the pre-emptive counterrevolutionary putsch from the Southern slaveowners, who viewed civil war as preferable to a Lincoln presidency. His imperialist threats echo the racist thug Teddy Roosevelt, who proclaimed that America had the right to dominate what he called "the world's waste spaces," a more polite version of Trump's "shithole countries."

Trump idolizes Andrew Jackson for overriding the Supreme Court to force the removal of the Native Americans. He pines for the days of the old frontier, when sheriffs deputized the angry mob to hang suspected criminals. He warns of the Yellow Peril and the marauding hordes of immigrants, building detention centers on the same ground where Japanese internment camps once stood. He borrows the slogan "America First" from the Nazi-sympathizers around Charles Lindbergh. He speaks of communism and socialism in language more violent and unrestrained than that used even by Joseph McCarthy himself.

His worldview is rooted in a fascistic social Darwinism that has always been present in the consciousness of the ruthless American capitalist class. What was subdued in the period of its explosive growth is unleashed in the period of its decline. Social programs and regulations on corporate exploitation must be eliminated so that society can return to its natural state, the survival of the fittest. It is Ronald Reagan's dream unleashed. The bipartisan response to the coronavirus pandemic has been to let the world's population get sick and die for the sake of the markets. In the eyes of the ruling class, the virus is cleansing society of the weak so that the strong may profit. If the masses complain, then "Let them drink bleach."

There are two fundamental historical processes underlying Trump's rise to power. First, the intractable decline of US imperialism, the loss of its position of geostrategic domination, and the catastrophic impact of 30 years of permanent war on every level of American society. Second, the extraordinary growth of social inequality, which has shattered whatever remained of American bourgeois democracy, enforced by the artificial suppression of the class struggle carried out by the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO. Both processes compel the ruling class ever further to

reaction, motivated by fear of the increasingly real prospect of social revolution.

In the 30 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, American imperialism has turned broad swaths of the world into smoldering ruins, while eviscerating domestic social programs and transferring trillions to the rich. The class struggle was ruthless, but one-sided. The country became an oligarchy. The trade unions complied with their own destruction and were reduced to rumps. The country is in a state of social collapse and social distress has no progressive outlet within the framework of the capitalist system. Mass shootings and other outbursts of despair and backwardness take place on a regular basis.

In 2000, amid the crisis surrounding the US presidential election, the International Committee of the Fourth International explained that bourgeois democracy could not survive on such rotten foundations. In December of that year, as the Supreme Court deliberated over whether to halt the counting of votes in Florida, David North said:

What the decision of this court will reveal is how far the American ruling class is prepared to go in breaking with traditional bourgeois-democratic and constitutional norms. Is it prepared to sanction ballot fraud and the suppression of votes? Is it prepared to install in the White House a candidate who has attained that office through blatantly illegal and anti-democratic methods? A substantial section of the American ruling elite, and perhaps even a majority on the Supreme Court, is prepared to do just that. This is because, among this social layer, there has been a dramatic erosion of support for traditional forms of bourgeois democracy.

The decision rubber-stamped the theft of the 2000 election, and the Democrats complied without a fight. There was no constituency within the ruling class for the defense of democratic rights. The path was open for Bush, Cheney and their allies at the Project for a New American Century to use the shadowy events of September 11 to launch the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The ruling class inaugurated a period of relentless nationalist propaganda and police state repression. Incredible crimes were justified by the war on terror. There was endless flag-waving and the military and intelligence agencies were elevated above civilian life, placed beyond criticism, their powers greatly strengthened through the PATRIOT Act. The state transformed itself into a massive covert operation, as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange would soon reveal. Rudy Giuliani was held up by both parties as America's Mayor, certainly a great leader, perhaps a future president. Giuliani himself tried to cancel the New York City elections that year, an experience that he would later bring to bear as Trump's accomplice in the 2020 election fraud lie.

The Democratic Party supported the Bush administration in ushering in this period of extreme reaction. Shocked by the massive anti-war demonstrations of 2002-2003, the Democratic Party turned further to the right, supporting the war in Iraq and sanctioning the Bush administration's crimes in those rare instances where the executive branch deigned to notify the Congress of its plans. The Democratic Party sank Howard Dean's primary run after the Vermont governor emerged as a rallying point for growing anti-war sentiment in 2004.

Permanent war and state repression had a toxic impact on American society. War seeped into every social vein. In the 2004 essay *Militarism and Social Polarization*, as the words Bagram, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib entered the lexicon, David North explained the impact these wars would have on American society:

We are not dealing with merely a process of intellectual degeneration. The relentless accumulation of wealth in a very small stratum of the American people has the inevitable impact of narrowing the real social base upon which bourgeois rule rests. The ruling class is compelled to create another base, consisting of elements that stand outside of, and are, to a considerable extent, independent of, the broad mass of the people. This is the role of the volunteer army, which is supplemented by gangs of contract killers and torturers hired by the military to augment the forces of repression in Iraq and Afghanistan. The experience of urban warfare in Iraq, where American soldiers become accustomed to, and, in some cases, even acquire a taste for, killing and repressing civilians on a mass scale, is creating a dangerous social type upon which the ruling elite will increasingly depend to maintain "law and order" in the United States.

In 2007-2008, a global financial crisis on a scale comparable only to the Great Depression threw millions out of their homes, led to widespread unemployment and levels of social suffering not seen since the Hungry Thirties. George W. Bush was the most hated president in history and the wars were viewed by most of the population as crimes carried out through lies. Barack Obama rose to prominence promising "hope" and "change" and won in a landslide election that took place weeks after the collapse of Lehman Brothers and AIG. A massive bailout was arranged for the banks and nothing done for the masses of people. The American ruling class announced to the world that this time there would be no New Deal, Fair Deal, or any deal at all.

Social inequality came to dominate every aspect of political life, though it received virtually no mention by any politician or the corporate press. The Obama administration was a battering ram for the financial aristocracy and a privileged section of the upper middle class that makes up the "next nine" percent behind the aristocrats in the top 1 percent. The administration responded to Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 with no change in policy. Under the Obama administration, the Democratic Party's definitive break from any social reform program was solidified. It deported three million immigrants and expanded the wars in the Middle East, North Africa and East Africa.

On April 30, 2015, Bernie Sanders announced his candidacy for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Though it was assumed Sanders would play the role of left "also-rans" like Dennis Kucinich, Sanders would win 13 million votes as a "socialist" calling for political revolution in the land of anti-communism. The Democratic Party cheated him of the nomination in 2016 and made plain it would never enact policies that would challenge the wealth of the aristocracy.

On June 15, 2015, Trump announced he was running for president in a fascist speech that began with the words, "Our country is in serious trouble," and ended with "Make America Great Again." It was a rallying cry for the darkest trends in American society: racism, extreme nationalism, militarism and anti-immigrant xenophobia. The Democrats called Trump's supporters "deplorable," but it was the Democrats themselves who promoted such sentiments as nobly patriotic during the war on terror.

The media mocked Trump's launch and the political establishment sagely agreed he had no chance. But he, too, would wildly exceed their expectations. His opponents in the Republican primary one by one expressed their moral outrage over Trump's racist appeals, only to transform themselves into his most sycophantic senatorial gauleiters.

In November 2016, after a violent campaign in which he threatened to declare himself winner even if he lost the vote, Trump was the second most hated person in America. But the most hated person was Hillary Clinton, who spent much of the campaign denouncing the working class,

telling coal miners she was going to put them out of work forever, and intimating that white people are all racist.

In 2016, for the first time in its history, the Democrats won a majority of votes from the wealthiest 10 percent of voters. The Democratic Party had the support of the pseudo-left, which called for supporting Clinton. The decades-long enrichment of the privileged upper-middle class pushed its politics farther to the right.

Bush-era social critics like Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert became smiling spokesmen for the establishment. Under Obama, groups like the ISO and Socialist Alternative rejected “knee-jerk anti-imperialism” and supported the Democrats’ wars abroad. Within the top 10 percent, identity politics became a weapon in the fight for positions and privilege. The proponents of racial and gender politics grew more zealous and more prominent as inequality grew and the ruling class sought measures to divide workers and protect its interests.

But the Democrats lost the Electoral College. Support collapsed in industrial Democratic cities like Milwaukee, Detroit and Philadelphia. Democrats ran a bellicose campaign denouncing Trump as a stooge of Russia and lost the most support in counties with high casualty rates from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For several hours on election night, Clinton refused to concede. Her popular vote lead was growing as the Pacific states turned out massively against Trump. Longtime Clinton advisers urged her to fight. But then, Barack Obama called her, twice, speaking to her as a representative of the intelligence agencies and commander in chief of the military. He told her that her concession was necessary to avoid social instability. She complied. Barack Obama greeted Trump warmly at the White House, said the election was an “intramural scrimmage” between two sides of the same team, and, having declared that this was “the best time to be alive,” poetically left the mainland for a Caribbean vacation with billionaire Richard Branson.

### **The Trump administration assumes power**

Trump entered the White House in January 2017 having lost the popular vote by a greater margin than any previous victorious candidate in history. He was aware that the vast majority of voters who supported him did so because they were angry and confused, not because they were fascists like him. But he used the power of the presidency to cultivate a fascist base and to build support within the military and the repressive apparatus of the state, where the roots of power lie. He targeted rank-and-file soldiers, police and immigration officials, all of whom he visited in campaign-style official visits.

During his inauguration speech, he ordered military officers to appear behind him, but the soldiers then received an order to pull back. In an appeal to the military brass and the financial elite, Trump appointed a cabinet comprised first of generals and second of bankers. The Democratic Party and corporate media heaped praise on Trump for these “reasonable” nominations, and the Democrats in the Senate voted to confirm his cabinet full of “adults in the room.”

But Trump also appointed Steven Bannon his chief strategist and Stephen Miller his senior adviser, the two most powerful non-cabinet level positions after the chief of staff. And it was these two fascists—especially Miller—who would guide the White House’s political strategy.

To the radical middle class, the fact that Trump did not have absolute power to do whatever he pleased from day one is proof that Trump cannot be a fascist or aspiring dictator. This shows how little they know about history. The Trump cabinet reflected the unstable character of the alliance forged by its reactionary social constituencies. From the start it was a bloc

of the military and the banks with fascists in the shadows and Trump at the head. In January 1933, Hitler could only form a government based on an alliance with the German National Peoples Party, the traditional arch-conservative party, and its leader, Alfred Hugenberg. In his February, 1933 essay *Before the Decision*, Trotsky wrote:

The government of Hugenberg-Hitler includes within itself a complex system of contradictions: between the traditional representatives of the agrarians on the one side and the licensed representatives of large capital on the other; between both of these on the one side, and the oracles of the reactionary petty-bourgeoisie on the other. The combination is extremely unstable. In its present form it will not long endure.

Trotsky explained that even as chancellor, Hitler’s action was limited by his bourgeois opponents. Writing weeks before the Reichstag Fire and the Enabling Act, Trotsky said that barring some extraordinary event that thrust Hitler to total control, the contradictory character of Hitler’s coalition meant he “must provoke a semblance of civil war (he himself is afraid of an out-and-out civil war)” to maintain power. Trotsky continued, “[Hitler’s] substantial colleagues in the ministry, at whose disposal are the Reichswehr and the Steel Helmets, would prefer to strangle the proletariat by ‘peaceful’ measures. They are much less inclined to provoke a minor civil war for fear of a big one.”

At some basic level, Trump understood this about his rivals within the ruling class, though he did not command the type of movement Hitler had at his disposal in 1933. At each stage, he provoked social tensions to the breaking point, knowing that a semblance of civil war and the growth of instability would strengthen his coalition from above. The greater the opposition to Trump’s policies from below, the more the ruling class relied on the unsavory methods of his supporters to protect their wealth. Trump guaranteed them a rising stock market, tax cuts and an end to all restrictions on profits, and he promised to crush the social opposition that would inevitably ensue. Trotsky wrote in *Before the Decision*:

The investiture of Hitler with power served a twofold purpose: first, to decorate the camarilla of property owners with the leaders of “a national movement”; and secondly, to place the fighting forces of fascism at the direct disposal of the proprietors.

It was not with a light heart that the high and mighty clique made a deal with the malodorous fascists. There are too many, all too many fists behind the unbridled upstarts; and therein lies the dangerous side of the brown-shirted allies; but in that very same thing is also their fundamental, more exactly, their only advantage. And this is the advantage that decides, for such are the times now that there is no guaranteeing property except with fists. There is no way of dispensing with the Nazis.

### **The political strategy of the Trump administration, 2017-2019**

For the first three years of his administration, Trump cultivated a pogrom-style atmosphere against immigrants, whom he scapegoated for social ills, and used attacks on immigrants as the chief ideological lever to build a fascist movement independent of both parties. He appealed to fascist groups and inspired a culture of political violence against opponents. He tested and expanded the power of the executive branch

through declarations of national emergency. He floated the possibility of arresting his opponents, canceling elections and remaining in office permanently. He flaunted court decisions and attacked the legislature's power of the purse.

Trump aimed to transform Congress into a body to be consulted when it agreed and ignored when it didn't, and the judiciary into a rubber stamp staffed with his appointees. Over the course of his term, Congress and the courts followed Trump's strategy, bending to his will and affirming the "legality" of his extra-constitutional measures at every step.

His first initiative in office, in January 2017, was to ban travel from seven majority-Muslim countries on the advice of fascist aides. In February, Trump and Miller claimed that undocumented immigrants cast three million illegal votes for Clinton. At a rally in July, he told police in Long Island to get "rough" on people, calling gang members "animals" who transformed "beautiful quiet neighborhoods into blood-stained killing fields." In August, he threatened to unleash a possible nuclear war, warning North Korea he would bring down "fire and fury" if they challenged sanctions. Later that month, he praised neo-Nazis as "very fine people" after a fascist murdered Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In February 2018, he told a Cincinnati rally that Democrats engaged in "treason" when they refused to applaud his State of the Union Address. In March, he joked about remaining "president for life" at a private speech to donors. In April, he signed a proclamation deploying the National Guard to the border and ordered immigration officials to begin separating thousands of children from their parents, many of whom have not been and will never be reunited. In June, he proposed ending due process for immigrants. In July, he tweeted a threat to destroy Iran. In August, he began calling the press the "enemy of the people." In October, a fascist shot and killed 11 people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. In November, with Trump's support, the border police at the Tijuana border launched a savage attack on a caravan of immigrants from Central America.

In February 2019, Trump declared a national emergency at the border and ordered construction of a massive border wall. In April, he threatened to permanently close the US-Mexico border. In May, he laughed when a supporter at a rally in Florida shouted that immigrants should be shot. In June he threatened massive immigration raids on 10 so-called "sanctuary cities."

In July, he congratulated fascist war criminal Eddie Gallagher on his acquittal in military court. On July 4, he put tanks on the streets of Washington D.C. for his "Salute to America." Two weeks later, he called four Democratic congresswomen "communists" and told them to "go back to the crime-infested places from which they came." He encouraged crowds to chant, "Send Ilhan Omar back" at a rally in North Carolina. The Supreme Court ruled Trump could use military funding to build his border wall. In August, a fascist Trump supporter killed 25 people at a heavily immigrant Walmart in El Paso, Texas.

In October, the *New York Times* reported that Trump had stated he wanted to shoot migrants in the legs and keep them away from the southern border with a trench filled with water, alligators and snakes. Trump also reportedly asked for a cost estimate for an electrified wall with spikes that could pierce human flesh. That same month he told a crowd in Minneapolis that troops would be coming home from Syria because "we may need them for something else," i.e., for use domestically. In November, Trump's secretary of defense, Mark Esper, fired Navy Secretary Richard Spencer over the latter's refusal to reverse the demotion of war criminal Eddie Gallagher. Trump called Gallagher "one of the ultimate fighters," saying of Gallagher and two other war criminals, "I stuck with three great warriors against the deep state."

From 2017 to 2019, Trump was ever encroaching on democratic norms as the courts and Democratic Party consistently gave way. As Trump built his extra-legal coalition, the strategy of the Democratic Party was to

downplay the danger of his fascist strategy, ignore or join in his ruthless attacks on immigrants, and oppose him from the right on questions of foreign policy.

The Democrats' strategy was dominated by an understanding that any appeal to the social needs of working people could produce a social explosion. They adopted the method of the palace coup. They viciously harangued Trump as a Russian stooge and attempted to impeach him not for his constant violations of the Constitution, but for a phone call with Ukrainian President Zelensky. In the June 2017 statement "Palace coup or class struggle," we wrote:

The working class confronts in Trump and his administration a vicious enemy, dedicated to the destruction of its democratic rights and a further lowering of its living standards. It is a government that is pursuing an international agenda based on "America First" chauvinism. The working class must oppose this government and seek its removal. But this task must not be entrusted to Trump's factional opponents in the ruling class.

As Trump carried through his term, his popularity fell and social opposition grew. Trump used this dynamic to increase the power of his office by inducing big capital to rely on his methods. This strategy would come to a head in 2020.

## Trump and Hitler

Characterizing the final year of Trump's term requires drawing a historical comparison. In the statement "No to American fascism," we wrote:

To downplay, let alone deny, the fact that the Trump presidency is metastasizing rapidly into a right-wing authoritarian regime, with distinctly fascist characteristics, is to close one's eyes to political reality. The old refrain, "It can't happen here"—i.e., that American democracy is eternally immune from the cancer of fascism—is hopelessly out of date.

That has proven to be absolutely correct. We now know that Trump and his advisers were consciously copying the strategy of Hitler and the Nazis in the lead-up to Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933.

The role of Stephen Miller, in particular, cannot be underestimated here. He was one of a small handful of Trump's most trusted advisers. He is the only staff member whom Trump has never publicly attacked. He is clearly a fascist and a careful student of Hitler.

Miller is the son of liberal Santa Monica, California landlords. His great grandfather immigrated to the US from Belarus to escape the Tsar's anti-Jewish pogroms. His Santa Monica High School yearbook quotation was from Teddy Roosevelt: "There can be no fifty-fifty Americanism in this country. There is room here for only 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are American and nothing else."

His rise to national prominence was itself the product of the Democratic Party and the proponents of identity politics. Miller became a regular on CNN and Fox News as a 20-year-old Duke student when, as a prominent campus right-winger, he defended the Duke lacrosse team from allegations they raped two women at a frat house in March 2006. When it

became clear that the lacrosse students were not, in fact, guilty of rape, Miller parleyed his role as an opponent of the overreach of identity politics into staffer jobs for Republican congresspersons, including Minnesota's far-right Michelle Bachman, and then Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions.

Once in the White House, Miller was placed in charge of Trump's immigration policy. His strategy was based on Hitler's writings on the US immigration system. In 1928, Hitler wrote approvingly of how the US Immigration Act of 1924, enacted by both parties with the signature of President Calvin Coolidge, excluded non-white "strangers of the blood" from the US. Hitler repeatedly praised the 1924 act and American immigration law generally as a great tool in racial purification.

In a series of leaked emails from 2015 and 2016 provided to the Southern Poverty Law Center by a former Breitbart writer who corresponded with him, Miller gushed repeatedly over the 1924 Immigration Act of which Hitler was so fond, heaped praise on Coolidge, and cited fascist websites like *American Renaissance*, VDARE and the Center for Immigration Studies as the basis for his plans in the White House.

Miller promoted the fascist novel *The Camp of the Saints*, whose plot features a horde of Indian immigrants invading France and raping white women with the help of French socialists. When Miller was a student at Duke University, he worked closely with open neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, who said of Miller, "I knew him very well when I was at Duke."

The anti-immigrant basis of Trump's strategy was not the only way the American president modeled himself on the German Führer. Trump promotes his Big Lie conspiracy theories about the "Wuhan lab leak" and election fraud, mimicking Goebbels. His speeches, which are almost all written by Miller, are full of terms pulled directly from Hitler, including denunciations of "special interests," "cultural Marxism," the "lying media," and even references to QAnon-style secret "child trafficking" rings, a specter that was also regularly referenced by Hitler and his supporters as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda.

Trump's rallies, which he carried out regularly during his term, were also pageants of nationalism, violence and anti-communism. Like Trump, Hitler and Goebbels would regularly threaten hecklers and encourage supporters to rough them up. In his book *Unfathomable Ascent*, Peter Ross Range writes:

In industrial Essen, a steelworkers' and coal miners' town, Hitler fanned the anger of a roughshod audience that was spoiling for corporeal vengeance against the authors of all ills: Communists, Jews, big business. The crowd roared when Hitler issued a blunt endorsement of thuggish tactics. If five hundred Communists stormed the hall—filled with eight thousand Nazi supporters—Hitler said he would simply tell the police, 'leave this to us!' Everyone in Hitler's audience knew what he meant, especially the young men no doubt rubbing brass knuckles in their pockets.

Even the backdrop of Trump's rallies was a cheap mimicry of Leni Riefenstahl. Trump held rallies at airplane hangers, flying in on Air Force One at sunset and walking from the tarmac onto the stage before taking off for his next whistle stop.

Trump, like Hitler, regularly made perfunctory denunciations of the excesses of his own movement. Ross Range writes, "Hitler was having it both ways. His show of respect for the army and claim of adherence to electoral 'legality' sent mollifying messages to the military and to polite society. But his pitiless threat of beheadings on public squares fed red meat to his belligerent base." For both men, electoral politics was just one

method of paving the way for dictatorship. It was preferred to the extent that it presented the lowest risk of triggering a social explosion from below and thereby won support from finance capital, but it was just a means to an authoritarian end.

In one of the most underreported events of the Trump presidency, at sometime in late 2019, Stephen Miller proposed invoking the Insurrection Act to "enlist troops in [their] personal war against illegal immigration." Miller was proposing to transform the myriad fascist gangs into a government-sponsored posse, an anti-immigrant force of civilians loyal to Trump—modern American storm troopers. The military halted this proposal for the time being. At around this time, Miller and Trump also proposed abolishing birthright citizenship, enshrined in the 14th Amendment.

Trump's defense of war criminals like Eddie Gallagher was also pulled directly from Hitler's playbook. When five storm troopers were put on trial in Silesia for murdering a communist in the town of Potempa in 1932, Hitler made them into national martyrs. Ross Range writes, "Hitler was outraged. He very publicly sent the five Storm Troopers a telegram of support. 'I feel tied to you with limitless loyalty,' he wrote. 'Obtaining your freedom is from this moment forward a point of honor for us.'" This reads almost exactly like Trump's tweets.

At the CPAC conference in Dallas this past July, Miller concluded his speech by proclaiming that with Trump leading their resurgent movement, "We will triumph!" This was an almost word-for-word repetition of the Nazi propaganda slogan "Wir werden siegen, weil uns Adolf Hitler führt." ("We will triumph, because Adolf Hitler is leading us.")

And last month, Trump gave his movement a martyr, praising January 6 rioter Ashli Babbitt, who was killed by Capitol security, as an "innocent, wonderful young woman." This, too, is copied from Hitler, who promoted storm trooper Horst Wessel as a martyr after his death in 1930. January 6, to which we will return in greater detail, also resembled the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 in terms of its underlying aims. Both were plans to kidnap political opponents and ransom them in exchange for state power. Both failed tactically. Neither was their architects' last word.

## The pandemic and the social physiognomy of Trumpism

The outbreak of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020 shocked the already crisis-ridden society. In January, the pandemic spread across the world. At the time the coronavirus reached the US, the Democrats were engaged in a hysterical impeachment campaign aimed at forcing a more belligerent policy toward Russia. The effort collapsed and was forgotten almost immediately. Both parties launched a policy toward the pandemic that was fascistic at its roots. Hundreds of thousands of people were to be sacrificed at the altar of capitalist production.

In March, perhaps the world's first international wildcat strike spread across the planet as workers demanded shutdowns and the implementation of safety measures. In the US, a handful of Democratic and Republican officials implemented modest, temporary restrictions, including Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, where most of the walkouts were concentrated. The stock markets crashed, posting the biggest point drops in history.

The strategy of the ruling class, with Trump in the lead, began to develop and acquire a more violent form. Their mantra was that factories must run and the markets must rise, no matter the human cost. Finance capital ordered that opposition from below be put down. Trillions must be transferred to the banks. Immense pressure—even to the point of violence—must be brought to bear on any politician who shows any hesitancy in immediately opening businesses and schools. Death and

profits, full steam ahead.

Trotsky made clear that the petty-bourgeoisie, in the epoch of capitalist decay, can be inspired by the revolutionary resolution of the working class and follow it in the struggle for socialism. But in the absence of a movement of the working class, as Trotsky wrote in August 1932: “The economically powerful big bourgeoisie, in itself, represents an infinitesimal minority of the nation. To enforce its domination, it must ensure a definite mutual relationship with the petty bourgeoisie and, through its mediation, with the proletariat.”

He continued:

When the social crisis takes on an intolerable acuteness, a particular party appears on the scene with the direct aim of agitating the petty bourgeoisie to a white heat and of directing its hatred and its despair against the proletariat. In Germany, this historical function is fulfilled by National Socialism (Nazism), a broad current whose ideology is composed of all the putrid vapors of disintegrating bourgeois society.

Over the course of the months that followed the initial shutdowns, the social basis of Trump’s blend of American fascism crystallized and its essence appeared more clearly. Finance capital, through Trump, mobilized the shop owners and layers of the professional petty-bourgeoisie as its shock troops against the working class. Though likely not the majority of these layers, a profoundly backward set of real estate agents, salon owners, veterans, off-duty soldiers and restaurateurs grew more enraged and violent. The death toll grew as did social anger over the government’s policy of death and profits, and Trump whipped up his big lies to scapegoat China for the crimes of the US ruling class.

In April, Trump tweeted “LIBERATE” Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia from those states’ Democratic governors’ imposition of mild restrictions to stop the spread of the pandemic. In April and May, Trump supporters and fascist militias protested at state capitols with their assault rifles, demanding an end to all COVID-19 mitigation measures and a return to work.

Trump grew louder in his claims that mail-in ballots were fraudulent and that the Democrats, illegal immigrants and socialists were plotting to steal the election. In May, Trump threatened to shut down Twitter after the company notified users that his claims of mail-in ballot fraud were not true. Anti-Asian hate crimes became more commonplace as a result of efforts to scapegoat China. It was a veritable celebration of social murder, the Heideggerian “Being-toward-death,” Francisco Franco’s “Viva La Muerte.” The markets were elated when Trump declared in May that the US would reopen, “vaccine or no vaccine.”

On May 25, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police. Eight percent of the total US population was to participate in the protests that ensued across the country.

Beginning with his June 1 Rose Garden speech, Trump responded to the mounting opposition to his policies with a several-month-long attempt to invoke the Insurrection Act, impose martial law, cancel the elections if necessary and declare that protesters were terrorists subject to mass incarceration without trial. Such a move would have firmly established his control over the military.

### **The significance of the June 1 coup attempt**

On the evening of May 28, Trump denounced the mass protests that had

spread throughout the country, attacking the protesters as “THUGS.” He warned: “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

On May 30, he tweeted that protesters at the White House would be “greeted with the most vicious dogs, and the most ominous weapons,” and would be “really badly hurt, at least.” In their book *I Alone Can Fix It*, reporters Carol Leonning and Philip Rucker describe internal deliberations that confirm exactly what the WSWS was writing at the time of the June putsch attempt. In a White House strategy meeting on May 30, Stephen Miller, always in the inner circle, argued for the invocation of the Insurrection Act. “Mr. President, you have to show strength. They’re burning the country down,” he said.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, also present at the meeting, argued that invoking the Insurrection Act would lead to a drastic escalation of the crisis. He did not oppose martial law as a defender of democratic rights, but as a defender of the crown jewels of the American state. The military was prepared to crush an insurrection, Milley said, but the time had not come yet.

On June 1, Trump was enraged by media coverage of his retreat to the White House bunker as protesters descended on the area. He again discussed invoking the Insurrection Act, but Esper advised against it.

Trump “slammed on the resolute desk and yelled that Esper wasn’t helping him fix the problem.” He suggested Milley command a military operation to take over Washington D.C. and suppress the protests. The military refused. “Now red in the face, Trump demanded that somebody give him a solution because this chaos in the streets required an immediate and deafening response.” Trump shouted, “You’re all fucked up, every one of you is fucked up.”

Though Trump had again not yet ordered the invocation of the Insurrection Act, Leonning and Rucker write that “Esper sensed the president was on the verge of giving them a direct order to activate soldiers.” To pre-empt this, Esper promised 5,000 additional National Guard troops and 5,000 federal law enforcement officers. Trump was reportedly frustrated, but agreed.

Immediately after this meeting, Trump, Attorney General William Barr, Esper and Milley held a conference call with governors about the demonstrations. Trump declared at the meeting that Milley was “in charge” of the operation, which contradicted the military’s demands for civilian control. Nevertheless, Esper and Milley both repeated the need to “dominate the battle space.”

Trump expressed his attitude to all forms of social opposition. “It’s a movement,” he said, matter-of-factly. “If you don’t put it down, it will get worse and worse.” The Democratic Party agreed, and deployed police or the National Guard to crush protests in almost every major Democratic state and city.

After the meeting, staff for various governors who were on the call believed the president was about to impose martial law.

Several high-level military figures met that afternoon to try to stop Trump from invoking the Insurrection Act. It appeared likely that the military would refuse orders to impose the Act, and Trump feared making any move that would set up a definitive break with the Pentagon.

That afternoon, Trump delivered his infamous Rose Garden speech, declaring that he was “dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel and law enforcement officers to stop the rioting, looting, vandalism, assaults and the wanton destruction of property.” He added, “If a city or state refuses to take the actions that are necessary... then I’ll deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them.”

Later that evening, Esper and Milley walked with Trump across Lafayette Square, which federal police had just cleared of peaceful protesters with vicious force. According to Leonning and Rucker, “some White House aides told Barr, Esper and Milley to trail several paces behind Trump, allowing him to lead the entourage alone.” Trump took his

photos holding a bible in front of St. John's church. That night, Esper was photographed meeting with deployed members of the National Guard.

Though questions remain about Milley and Esper's efforts to play both sides, the military brass viewed the clearing of Lafayette Square as an attempt by Trump to establish his control over the military through the defense secretary and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Under immense pressure from within the armed forces, Esper gave a press conference on June 3 in which he attempted to excuse his behavior, claiming he was misled into appearing with Trump. He weakly said he thought he was inspecting a nearby bathroom and explicitly stated that the Department of Defense opposed invoking the Insurrection Act. "The option to use active-duty forces in a law enforcement role should only be used as a matter of last resort, and only in the most urgent and dire of situations," he said.

Shortly after Esper's press conference, Esper and Milley traveled to the Oval Office to meet with Trump. Trump reportedly screamed at Esper, "You betrayed me! You're fucking weak! What is this shit? I make the decisions on the Insurrection Act. I'm the president, not you. This is about presidential authority. This is about presidential prerogative."

On June 10, Trump targeted social protests in Seattle and Portland, claiming protesters were "terrorists" and again demanding the deployment of the military, though he was opposed from within his cabinet.

In August, Trump again demanded the deployment of the military in Portland to clear a protest camp there. Federal police without badges or name tags began arresting people on the streets and taking them away in unmarked cars. When Trump again demanded the implementation of the Insurrection Act, Attorney General Barr explained that martial law risked triggering a massacre that would spark an uncontrollable reaction from the population. "For every one of these that works there's a Waco where people are killed," he said.

On August 25, fascist Kyle Rittenhouse murdered protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin and was praised by the president for exercising his rights. Five days later, anti-fascist Michael Reinhoel was assassinated by federal agents in Lacey, Washington and denounced by Trump as a communist and a criminal who deserved to die.

## The 2020 election

In September of 2020, polls showed Trump losing heavily to Biden, largely as a result of the mass death and social suffering caused by the government's response to the pandemic. Trump escalated claims of voter fraud and ordered supporters not to vote by mail. On September 23, Trump said at a press conference that he would not accept the outcome of the election if he lost. "We're going to have to see what happens... the ballots are a disaster," he said.

On September 24, he told a rally in North Carolina that he was "not sure" the election would be fair. During the first presidential debate on September 29, he was asked to condemn the Proud Boys, to which he replied, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by." Biden continued to shrug off these threats, claiming they were merely proof of Trump's instability, not part of a fascist strategy to overturn the election. Biden instead appealed to his supporters for calm.

In early October, Trump tested positive for COVID-19 and nearly died. On October 5, he demanded to leave Walter Reed Hospital and to return to the White House to be at the center of his ongoing plot. He produced a video of his return that almost exactly mimicked Leni Riefenstahl's fascist propaganda film for Hitler, *Triumph of the Will*, shot for shot.

On the night of October 7, as the election campaign reached a fever pitch and the COVID-19 death toll swelled into its second wave, the FBI arrested members of a fascist paramilitary unit that was planning to kidnap

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and raid the Michigan State Capitol in a bid to trigger an uprising. Their chief grievance was that Whitmer had imposed temporary restrictions on businesses due to the pandemic and that Democrats were planning to steal the election. They had met and organized their plot at protests called by Trump to "liberate" the state. On October 8, Trump responded to the news by attacking Whitmer, falsely claiming she shut down churches during the pandemic.

On October 15, Trump defended the fascist QAnon conspiracy theory, declaring that its adherents "are very much against pedophilia. They fight it very hard." At a rally in Michigan on October 17, he denounced Whitmer's COVID-19 restrictions as the crowd chanted, "Lock her up!" On October 19, Michigan sheriffs and police associations announced they would not enforce a proposed ban on assault weapons at polling stations. On October 27, Trump again downplayed the plot and repeated his denunciations of Whitmer. We now know that some sheriffs, including Barry County's Darr Leaf, planned to seize ballot boxes and impound them so they could not be counted.

On Election Day, Trump was preparing to declare victory and call for a halt to vote-counting of mail-in ballots, which were slated to be counted after the counting of in-person ballots, which would skew heavily for Trump. He transformed the White House into his election night headquarters, a substantial break in tradition.

The military was preparing again for the possibility of a massive social explosion. According to Leonning and Rucker:

In Washington, the triumvirate that had spent so much energy that summer and fall keeping Trump from deploying active-duty troops on the streets of American cities—Esper, Milley, and Barr—were tracking intelligence and social media for any signs of unrest on election day... The trio were also on guard for the possibility that Trump would invoke the Insurrection Act in some way to quell protests or to perpetuate his power by somehow intervening in the election... If Trump won, significant civil unrest was expected in several cities."

Late on election night, Trump held a press conference and declared he had won the election and that Biden was committing fraud.

Despite Biden's sclerotic basement campaign, by November 3, 2020 over 80 million people voted to remove Donald Trump from the White House in a massive popular rejection of his brutal vision for the future. Fifteen million more people voted against him in 2020 than in 2016.

But to the state, it was not the seven million vote difference that determined who would be the next president, but the military, which made clear it would not support Trump if he attempted to remain in power, and emerged as the kingmakers in Washington. Trump fired Esper and attempted to promote his own loyalists into the leadership of the military, the FBI and the CIA. He wanted to dismiss Milley as well, but could not, since top military brass told Trump they would resign en masse if he did so. The details will be the subject of the next report.

## The role of the International Committee and WSWS

Both the putsch and the response of the Democratic Party testify not to the strength of capitalist class rule, but to its weakness. In his November 2020 lecture delivered in the midst of the election crisis, David North wrote:



The events now taking place in America signify the end of that long period where the affairs of world capitalism could rest securely under the leadership of US imperialism. The United States will no longer be able to play that role. The crisis in the United States has called into question the viability of the capitalist system and it certainly opens up the opportunity for the intervention of the working class as a decisive historical force. This is what is coming next. It has not yet developed openly to that point, but the American working class will make its presence felt. People now have something to say about how this crisis is settled. If not in the next week or next month, six months or even a year, the time cannot be long off before we begin to see a movement by that enormously powerful social force, the American proletariat.

Now we are witnessing the beginning of this process. The strikes of the recent period show not only the objective development of the class struggle, but also the critical role played by our party in them. The ignominious collapse of the US occupation of Afghanistan, after 20 years of war and hundreds of thousands dead, is a milestone in the collapse of the American empire that will have a profoundly revolutionary impact on the consciousness of workers all over the world. The Russian revolutions of both 1905 and 1917 took place amid substantial military defeats of the Tsar's armies, as did the German revolutions following World War I. Our work in this period will determine the outcome of the social struggles to come. It all comes down to the crisis of revolutionary leadership. It would be a grave error for comrades to underestimate the importance of the immense political authority the International Committee carries forward into the present situation.

Today, the statements of the plenums of the International Committee, the perspectives documents, and books like *A Quarter Century of War*, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* and *The Crisis of American Democracy*, as well as the daily coverage in the *World Socialist Web Site*, appear jarringly prophetic. This is not the product of clairvoyance, but of the constant effort, over the course of many decades and critical internal struggles, to assimilate all the political experiences of the working class and transform this understanding into a fighting program of revolutionary action.

We not only foresaw crisis, war and economic catastrophe, we also understood that the more intense the earthquakes produced by shifts in the tectonic plates of capitalist society, the more forcefully a new socialist future was emerging to break through and shatter the old order. What was lacking was revolutionary leadership. It is now our historic obligation to strengthen the links in this historical continuity and carry the traditions of the socialist movement into the struggles of the working class. Only this will prepare the party and the working class for the revolutionary upheavals ahead.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**