

Woodward and Costa's *Peril*: An inside account of Trump's coup d'etat

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Peril, the recent book by journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, reconstructs the systematic, months-long effort by former President Donald Trump to overthrow the American Constitution and establish a fascist dictatorship, culminating in the January 6, 2021 coup d'etat attempt.

Based on interviews with top Trump administration, military and congressional officials, *Peril* constitutes a semi-official, controlled release of information about the events of April 2020 through January 2021.

As a reporter for the *Washington Post*, Woodward helped expose the Watergate conspiracy that led to President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. Since then, he has made a career of using his virtually unlimited access to the upper echelons of the state to publish insider accounts of the White House under multiple administrations. Robert Costa is an investigative journalist with the *Washington Post*.

Many of the leading actors in the book, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley and former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, were deeply implicated in Trump's attacks on democratic rights, parroting the would-be dictator's language about "dominating the streets" in response to protests against police violence and accompanying him on his June 1 show of force at Lafayette Square.

These officials' own complicity in Trump's unconstitutional actions, however, makes all the more damning their categorical assertions that Trump actively worked to establish a presidential dictatorship in America.

According to *Peril*,

Milley believed January 6 was a planned, coordinated, synchronized attack on the very heart of American democracy, designed to overthrow the government to prevent the constitutional certification of a legitimate election won by Joe Biden.

It was indeed a coup attempt and nothing less than "treason," he said, and Trump might still be looking for what Milley called a "Reichstag moment." In 1933, Adolf Hitler had cemented absolute power for himself and the Nazi Party amid street terror and the burning of the Reichstag parliamentary building.

Another section of the book describes how, according to Milley, Trump sought to use the forces of the state to cement his dictatorship.

Milley vividly recalled a statement that Trump had made to Breitbart News in March of 2019: "I can tell you I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the bikers for Trump. I have the tough people, but they don't play it tough until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad."

It seemed to be a warning. Milley thought of the military, the

police, the FBI, the CIA and the other intelligence agencies as the power ministries. These power centers had often been the tools used by despots.

Later, Milley describes the forces mobilized on January 6:

Some were the new Brown Shirts, a U.S. version, Milley concluded, of the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party that supported Hitler. It was a planned revolution. Steve Bannon's vision coming to life. Bring it all down, blow it up, burn it, and emerge with power.

To this effect, House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith told Milley, "The great fear was that he would use the Pentagon and the Department of Defense basically to stage a coup." Smith added, "My fear with Trump was always that he was going to engineer a fascist takeover of the country."

What are Milley's motivation in making these statements? No doubt, on an individual level, there is an effort to salvage his reputation as the man who walked in uniform behind the would-be dictator as he directed police to attack peaceful protesters.

But broader forces are at work. There is among the military and other sections of the state significant concern that Trump is rallying his forces for another go, much as Hitler licked his wounds after the failed Munich beerhall putsch of 1923 only to be installed as chancellor in 1933 and arrogate dictatorial powers to himself within a matter of months.

If Trump were to use the military to establish a dictatorship in America, military officials feared it would completely delegitimize the US military, and the regime would quickly be engulfed in a mass upheaval.

As the book observes, Esper was "worried the most highly regarded institution in the country, the finely tuned and proudly nonpartisan military machine, was in jeopardy of being swept into a political storm."

Milley warned that a victory for Trump, electoral or otherwise, means that "the street's going to explode with riots and civil unrest."

Whatever the motives of the various players, Woodward's account provides valuable information about the series of events that led up to Trump's coup attempt on January 6.

As 2020 began, Trump was strengthened by the failure of the Democrats' first impeachment effort, based on the claim that he withheld military aid to Ukraine for domestic political purposes. The impeachment gained little public traction. Trump's son-in-law and top adviser Jared Kushner told Woodward, in his previous book *Rage*, that the impeachment was "a bonanza for Trump's approval ratings."

But just as the impeachment was concluding, Trump would face the defining crisis of his presidency: the COVID-19 pandemic.

While he was able to run circles around the Democrats, the pandemic exposed Trump as an ignorant buffoon, monomaniacally peddling hoaxes and conspiracy theories in the interest of boosting the wealth of his Wall Street cronies.

And that is where the main events of *Peril* begin. On April 27, three days after Trump made a series of idiotic, rambling remarks that were interpreted by the public as an instruction to drink bleach, the campaign began to believe that Trump was headed for a catastrophic electoral debacle. “Trump was on the road to epic defeat,” the pollsters concluded, according to *Peril*.

That month, Attorney General William Barr told Trump, “Mr. President, I think you’re on a trajectory to lose the election.”

Against the backdrop of mass economic dislocation and death in the COVID-19 pandemic, the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 triggered mass protests across the United States.

Faced with a looming electoral defeat, Trump quickly seized upon the demonstrations as a potential means to circumvent the constitutional order—elections and all.

In response, he sought to bring active-duty troops from the 82nd Airborne into Washington. This posed a crisis, with military officials seeing Trump’s action as being equivalent to a “crossing the Rubicon” moment.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper told Trump, “We will alert the troops and start moving them north from Fort Bragg. But we’re not going to bring them into the city.”

“Mr. President, there is no need to call up the Insurrection Act,” Esper said.

The book continues, “Milley agreed with Esper’s approach. Neither he nor Esper wanted a potentially bloody, unpredictable street confrontation between Black Lives Matter protesters and highly lethal, combat-trained U.S. military forces.”

On June 1, Lafayette Square was forcefully cleared of peaceful protesters by police in riot gear using tear gas, by order of Attorney General Barr. Trump then walked across Lafayette Square, accompanied by Milley and Esper.

Milley and Esper told Woodward and Costa that they had no idea what they were doing. They were told to come to the White House, then to “line up,” and walk behind Trump after police cleared the square.

This is, perhaps, the most unbelievable aspect of Woodward’s account. Just hours before, in a phone call with state governors, Esper referred to peaceful, constitutionally protected demonstrations as a “battlespace” that had to be “dominated.”

Milley, likewise, claimed he was wearing battledress “to be more comfortable,” a statement that is totally unbelievable coming from America’s top political general.

But regardless, the clearing of Lafayette Square was, according to Milley’s account in *Peril*, a turning point. “Milley said Trump had politicized the U.S. military. They had become Trump’s pawns.”

Whatever the irregularities in the accounts of Milley and Esper, it was clear that they were profoundly disturbed at the implications of what Trump was trying to do.

The next day, Milley issued a letter to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff declaring, “Every member of the U.S. Military swears an oath to support and defend the constitution and the values embedded in it,” adding that the military must “operate consistent with national laws.”

While the coup attempt of June 1 did not succeed, Trump only accelerated his plans, staging a fascist diatribe at the first presidential debate in which he screamed and talked over Biden and Fox News journalist and moderator Chris Wallace. During the Republican National Convention, Trump held a Nazi-style night-time rally at the White House. He pointed to the presidential mansion and raged at his opponents, “The fact is, I’m here ... and they’re not.”

These monomaniacal outbursts were directed not at mobilizing broad support in the presidential election but to send a clear signal to Trump’s fascist base, as he put it in the first debate, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.”

On November 3, Trump lost the election and launched a series of scurrilous lawsuits claiming massive vote rigging. When, according to *Peril*, Senate Republicans investigated these claims, they found them to be entirely without merit. Dozens of courts soon ruled the same way.

That left Trump with one last-ditch gambit. Trump sought to pressure Vice President Mike Pence not to certify the election results when Congress took up the question on January 6, blocking the transfer of power. This was to be accompanied by an assault on the Capitol by rioters, with heavily armed forces standing by.

On December 30, pro-Trump organizations announced a rally on January 6. “JANUARY SIXTH, SEE YOU IN DC!” Trump tweeted from Mar-a-Lago, where he was spending the holiday.

The events of January 6 were masterminded by the fascist ideologue Steve Bannon, working with Jason Miller, the co-host of his podcast and Trump campaign senior adviser, and their frequent guest, Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s personal lawyer.

“You’ve got to return to Washington and make a dramatic return today,” Bannon told Trump, as recounted in *Peril*.

Trump unexpectedly cut his trip short and rushed back to Washington, as Bannon demanded.

According to *Peril*,

Bannon told Trump to focus on January 6. That was the moment for a reckoning.

“People are going to go, ‘What the fuck is going on here?’” Bannon believed. “We’re going to bury Biden on January 6th, fucking bury him.”... “We are going to kill it in the crib. Kill the Biden presidency in the crib,” he said.

In the days leading up to January 6, Pence vacillated on whether he would support blocking the certification. Pence told former Vice President Dan Quayle, “But he [Trump] really thinks he can. And there are other guys in there saying I’ve got this power.” The authors write, “He wanted to know, veep to veep, whether there was even a glimmer of light, legally and constitutionally, to perhaps put a pause on the certification if there were ongoing court cases and legal challenges.”

When Quayle told Pence just to count the votes, Pence protested, “You don’t know the position I’m in.” Eventually, Pence was persuaded not to back Trump’s coup plot.

When Trump found out that Pence did not plan to support him, Jason Miller put out a statement in the name of the campaign that Trump and Pence were in “total agreement that the Vice President has the power to act.” When Pence’s staff protested, Miller “refused to retract a word.”

When it comes to the most critical day, January 6, Woodward and Costa are extremely sparing of operational details. Their account relies on innuendo and deniable he-said-she-said accounts.

But it is clear that acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller, appointed by Trump after his defeat in the election, obstructed the deployment of the National Guard to the Capitol. The dispatch of the National Guard went through Pence, and deliberately around Trump, according to *Peril*.

“Is it true Trump said no?” Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin asked Milley. Had the president refused to send in the National Guard? That possibility was flying around Capitol Hill.

“I purposely did not go to Trump,” Milley told her. “I went to Pence. I informed Pence we were sending the Guard. Pence welcomed that.”

“It was smart you didn’t involve Trump,” Slotkin said. “Good on you for not involving Trump.”

Belatedly, police reinforcements arrived and were able to clear the building of rioters. But, as Woodward recalled, “Milley could not rule out that the January 6 assault, so unimagined and savage, could be a dress rehearsal for something larger.”

After the events of January 6, Milley, who as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was not in the chain of command, made a concerted action to ensure that he had operational control of all military orders.

In a conversation with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi after Trump’s January 6 coup attempt, Milley said, “My obligation to the American people is to make sure that we don’t have an unnecessary war overseas. And that we don’t have the unlawful use of American force on the streets of America. We’re not going to turn our guns on the American people and we’re not going to have a ‘Wag the Dog’ scenario overseas.”

Pelosi asked Milley, “And you said not only nuclear, but also use of force?” Milley, according to *Peril*, replied, “Absolutely ... The same thing domestically, with things like martial law stuff, the Insurrection Act.”

In her conversation with Milley, according to *Peril*, Pelosi declared,

“[i]t is a sad state of affairs for our country that we’ve been taken over by a dictator who used force against another branch of government. And he’s still sitting there. He should have been arrested. He should have been arrested on the spot. He had a coup d’état against us so he can stay in office.

The Republicans have blood on their hands and everybody who enables him to do what he does has blood on their hands and the traumatic effect for our country.

Pelosi would never use such language in public. She never called the actions of January 6 a coup d’état, effectively making her one of the people who “enables” Trump.

Given the unsourced nature of the book, nothing it asserts can be taken for granted. But if this is what is being released, what is being kept secret?

One thing is clear, however. Donald Trump sought to carry out a fascist coup in America. This reality confirms the warnings of the *World Socialist Web Site* in real time. Just 12 hours prior to the insurrection of January 6, the WSWS warned of “an active and ongoing effort by President Donald Trump to stage a coup d’état, nullify the results of the election and establish a presidential dictatorship.”

We added, “Anyone who believes that “it can’t happen here”—that the United States is immune from fascism and dictatorship—is blinding himself to the reality of the crisis of American capitalism. It not only can happen here, but it is happening here.”

That statement was only the latest in a continuous series of warnings spanning more than two years.

On January 11, 2019, the WSWS warned, Trump is “making clear that he is prepared to use the presidency to effectively obliterate the separation of powers, marking a milestone in the destruction of American democracy.”

These repeated warnings have all been confirmed.

It is clear that the crisis that centered on Trump’s attempt to overthrow the 2020 presidential election in a coup d’état is not over. But, as the WSWS wrote on October 4:

There are two conspiracies surrounding the events of January 6. The first was Trump’s plot to overthrow the Constitution and install himself as dictator. The second is the ongoing effort to downplay and cover up the significance of the coup plot and shield the conspirators from prosecution...

But after having attempted to overthrow the Constitution in the greatest political conspiracy in American history, Trump continues to live like a king on his Mar-a-Lago estate, regrouping his forces and plotting his return to power between rounds of golf. And Trump’s Republican co-conspirators operate with impunity while the Democrats praise them as their “colleagues.”

The Democratic Party is far more worried about the growth of working-class resistance to the far right than it is about the dangers of a fascist coup.



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