

Book Review: *The Demon of Unrest* by Erik Larson

Contemporary lessons from the slave power's plot to overturn the 1860 election

Eric London
2 September 2024

Erik Larson's new book *The Demon of Unrest*, published this year by Penguin Random House, takes place against a backdrop that readers will find familiar.

An American government is held captive by forces of extreme reaction. A far-right conspiracy to overturn the outcome of a national election develops in plain view. The plotters boast openly of their aims and plan a campaign of systematic mass violence in the event their "legal" efforts to retain power fall short. An unpopular, Pennsylvania-born Democratic president is kept off his party's ticket and adopts a policy of accommodation with his far-right opponents. The Supreme Court, widely hated as a result of a string of provocatively reactionary decisions, collaborates behind the scenes with the rebels. Over the coming months and years events will ultimately convince masses of people that the only way to halt the right-wing conspiracy is to *crush it* through mass revolutionary social struggle.

The president's name was James Buchanan, and Larson's book is about the winter of 1860-61, the four pivotal months between Abraham Lincoln's election on November 6, 1860 and his inauguration on March 4, 1861. In a preface Larson notes that Donald Trump's attempted coup of January 6, 2021 took place as he was drafting his manuscript. "I invite you now to step into the past," he writes, "as if you were living in that day and did not know how the story would end. I suspect your sense of dread will be all the more pronounced" given the unfolding crisis today.

An analysis of the similarities and differences between the two crises yield critical lessons for combating the threat of fascist dictatorship today.

The end of the Era of Compromise

In the November 6, 1860 general election, a country lawyer who had until fairly recently been a relatively little-known figure won a four-way national presidential race running on an anti-Slavery platform. Lincoln more than doubled the electoral votes won by his closest competitor, Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge (Buchanan's vice president) but won just 39.8 percent of the popular vote.

The rise of the Republican Party and Lincoln's election were powerful signs that the population—at least in the North and West—was finally breaking with the framework of compromise that had defined the American party system dating back to the aftermath of the revolution. In fact, even the Constitution itself had been a compromise, failing to mention slavery but allowing southern states to calculate slaves as "three-fifths" of a person for purposes of allocating congressional seats and electoral votes.

As the American government expanded west, raising time and time again the question of which property relations would exist in the new territories, the competing factions managed to piece together agreements which forestalled the sectional showdown. Each time circumstances provoked a new crisis over the slave question, a temporary solution was always cobbled together, such as during the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the initial compromise over the enforcement of a "gag rule" barring the reading of abolitionist petitions in Congress, and the Compromise of 1850. The main political figure who dominated political life during this span, the Whig leader Henry Clay, who at various times was Speaker of the House and a US Senator from the slave state of Kentucky, came to be known as "The Great Compromiser."

But each compromise only breathed new life into the slave system's political defenders, and strengthened the most reactionary tendencies in American politics. In the 1850s the defenders of slavery, including figures like James H. Hammond (whose life is treated in detail in Larson's book) began presenting the "peculiar system" as a positive good for slaves. As the reactionary movement grew, the Supreme Court smashed the compromise system when it ruled in its 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision that slavery was lawful in all territories, and that slaves on "free soil" remained chattel property.

The "slave power" dominated government not through popular mandate but thanks to the anti-democratic aspects of the Constitution, which allocates two Senate seats to each state regardless of population, mandates the election of the president not through popular vote but through the indirect Electoral College, and provides lifetime appointment of justices to the Supreme Court.

The slaveocracy reacts to Lincoln's election

The election of Lincoln provoked a ruthless effort by the slave power to use the levers of state power to prevent Lincoln and the "black Republicans" from taking power and challenging slavery. Southern states, led by the planter aristocracy in South Carolina and encouraged by pro-slavery "fire eaters," immediately threatened secession.

James Buchanan, a Northern Democrat and admirer of the slave system, had filled his cabinet with Southerners. Despite his nominal support for unionism he became a feckless tool in the hands of the slave power.

In his annual address to Congress, delivered on December 4, 1860, Buchanan asserted that Northern abolitionists were to blame for the national crisis and that while states had no "right" to secede, the federal government had no right to stop them from doing so. "It may safely be

asserted that the power to make war against a State is at variance with the whole spirit and intent of the Constitution,” he proclaimed.

Republican Senator William Seward aptly said Buchanan’s speech “shows conclusively that it is the duty of the President to execute the laws—unless somebody opposes him; and that no state has a right to go out of the Union—unless it wants to.” The same basic point applies to the Democrats’ response today to the events of January 6, 2021.

Democrats and the Buchanan administration spent the next weeks and months buying time for the emerging Confederacy and facilitating the transfer of weapons from Northern bases to those located below the Mason-Dixon line. Ft. Sumter and neighboring federal outposts located in the bay of Charleston, South Carolina (the epicenter of the recessionary movement) were starved of resources. It was the early-April effort to replenish dwindling food supplies at Ft. Sumter that ultimately provided the trigger for the outbreak of war, when South Carolina forces led by General P.G.T. Beauregard fired on the fort, forcing its surrender soon thereafter. *The Demon of Unrest* narrates the months leading up to the outbreak of the war by focusing on the debates and ultimate attempt to reinforce the fort.

The critical interregnum

But the most illuminating elements of the book are those which focus on how Lincoln navigated the extremely difficult and unprecedented position in which he found himself. These passages are remarkable for their total contrast with Joe Biden, Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party today, whose actions much more closely resemble those of Buchanan and his cabinet. As a president-elect, still months away from taking office, Lincoln showed far more concern and determination to oppose the budding insurrection than Biden and Harris do today, wielding immense power at the head of the executive branch, but taking no action against the threat of a return to power by the fascist gangster who has already instigated one violent attack on American democracy.

Larson explains that Lincoln was “acutely aware that he wasn’t even truly the president yet. The certification of electoral votes and his inauguration had yet to occur, and a rising swell of rumor warned that these might be disrupted, possibly by an invading force of Southern militia.” The position of Washington City, as it was then known, was extremely tenuous. Maryland, located to the capital’s immediate north, was a slave state and its major city, Baltimore, was rabidly hostile to Lincoln (credible assassination threats would soon force Lincoln to sneak through Baltimore en route to Washington, at night and in disguise). The Northern leadership took seriously the threat that the capital could be cut off from the northern states.

As the conspiracy continued to develop in plain view and as the southern states held their secession conventions, Lincoln remained in Springfield, Illinois until February, when he began the long train journey to Washington. Through the preceding weeks and months he watched as Buchanan sabotaged the federal government at every turn. Each day undermined the position of the federal government. In January 1861 Lincoln told a friend, “I would willingly take out of my life a period in years equal to the two months which intervene now and my inauguration to take the oath of office. Because every hour adds to the difficulties I am called upon to meet, and the present administration does nothing to check the tendency toward dissolution, I, who have been called to meet this awful responsibility, and compelled to remain here, doing nothing to avert it or lessen its force when it comes to me. My cup of bitterness is full and overflowing.”

Lincoln formed a close political relationship with his still-rival Seward

during this period, but when the latter made a speech in January indicating a willingness to compromise with the slaveocracy to avert war, Lincoln was forced to break his silence: “I will suffer death before I will consent or will advise my friends to consent to any concession or compromise which looks like buying the privilege of taking possession of this government to which we have a constitutional right,” he told the press. It is difficult to convey the degree to which such statements represented a break from the past, and they were greeted with profound enthusiasm by a growing section of the Northern population. Massive crowds—including self-proclaimed delegations of “workingmen”—greeted Lincoln on his journey east.

The tally of the Electoral College

The formal tally of the Electoral College was scheduled to take place on February 13. “That day,” Larson writes, “crowds of irate Southerners had gathered in Washington and converged on the Capitol clamoring to get inside.” But unlike on January 6, 2021, the unionist forces had made ample preparations. General Winfield Scott, the aging and ailing leader of the American military, “was well prepared,” Larson writes. “Soldiers manned the entrances and demanded to see passes before letting anyone in. Scott had positioned caches of arms throughout the building” and assigned undercover agents throughout the crowd. “The throng outside grew annoyed at being barred from entry” and began to shout and provoke the soldiers.

General Scott told the crowd that anyone who attempted to obstruct the count would be “lashed to the muzzle of a twelve-pounder and fired out of the window of the Capitol” and that Scott would personally “manure the hills of Arlington with the fragments of his body.” How far from Biden and the Democrats’ conciliation in the aftermath of January 6! Just three days after the riot, Biden declared, “we need a strong Republican Party,” even though the majority of congressional Republicans had participated in overt attempts to delay the tallying of the ballots.

Larson quotes New York diarist George Templeton Strong as remarking on the tallying of the Electoral College as a weak point in the constitutional democracy: “This was the critical day for the peace of the capital, a foray of Virginia gents... could have done infinite mischief by destroying the legal evidence of Lincoln’s election.” As a result of Lincoln’s warnings and Scott’s preparations, the tally took place as planned. Nevertheless, hundreds of soldiers and cannon were ordered to remain deployed throughout the city.

Lincoln continued on his way to Washington, making brief speeches to massive crowds who gathered to see him off to the White House. Lincoln remained opaque about how he would handle the unfolding crisis, but he left little doubt as to his views of slavery. In Philadelphia, Lincoln appealed to the revolutionary heritage of the country. “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence,” he said. “It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land” that made the revolution, he explained, “but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.”

“We must settle the question now”

South Carolina formally seceded on December 20, followed in the new

year by Mississippi and Georgia. When Lincoln took office on March 4, the first dossiers he was given pertained to the crisis over Ft. Sumter, which the Palmetto State had been surrounding with well-fortified artillery positions while food rations were running out. Later in March, Supreme Court Justice John A. Campbell attempted to negotiate with the rebels, without any authority whatsoever from the White House. When these negotiations came to light, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles remarked, “A strange set of things, when... one of the judges of the highest court were in communication with rebels discussing measures having in view a disruption of the union.”

On the early morning hours of Friday, April 12, South Carolina began bombarding Ft. Sumter. Several hours later, the surrounded federal forces began firing back. The Abolitionist Army Captain Abner Doubleday, under the command of Major Robert Anderson, returned fire. Though it was still unclear at the time (the first major battle, at Bull Run, would not be fought until July), the American Civil War had begun. Doubleday later reflected: “In aiming the first gun fired against the rebellion I had no feeling of self-reproach... The only alternative was to submit to a powerful oligarchy who were determined to make freedom forever subordinate to slavery.”

In May 1861, Lincoln summarized his attitude to the crisis in a comment to his secretary, John Hay: “We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority has the right to break up the government whenever it chooses.”

The war ended in the liberation of four million slaves. This outcome was not pre-ordained, it was secured through the revolutionary power of the union army and by the ingenious political leadership of Lincoln.

Biden: Today’s Buchanan

Today the danger posed by fascist reaction is great, and the plot is developing apace. Unlike in 1860-61, there is no figure within the ruling establishment who is capable of or interested in mobilizing the population to oppose the developing right-wing conspiracy. The reactionary set-up of American “democracy” gives the institutional advantage to Trump. He can win the presidency while losing the popular vote and he is openly plotting through extra-parliamentary maneuvers to rig the Electoral College. Should that fail, he plans to call the election a fraud and summon his supporters to overthrow the government. Once in power, he plans to deploy troops to major cities, arrest millions of immigrants, suppress social protest, and enforce martial law.

There is no comparing the present leadership of the Democratic Party with the leadership of Lincoln or of any of his contemporaries. In the epoch of the Civil War, the American ruling class had yet to complete what Lincoln in his November 1863 Gettysburg Address called the “unfinished work,” the “great task remaining”—i.e., the liberation of the slaves and the suppression of the slave owners’ rebellion.

The Union victory in the Civil War set the stage for the colossal growth of American capitalism, leading to its emergence as an imperialist power in 1898, with the Spanish-American War, and then assuming the role of the most powerful capitalist nation in the course of World War I and World War II. But over the past half-century, US imperialism has lost its global economic dominance and clings to its one remaining advantage: military violence.

Today’s American ruling class, having slaughtered millions in the wars of the last 30-plus years, dripping with the blood of the ongoing Gaza genocide and threatening the world with nuclear catastrophe in its war against Russia, has nothing in common with its revolutionary forebears. American Trotskyist James P. Cannon aptly labeled the imperialist

politicians of the present two-party system “desecrators of a noble dream.” To mention Joe Biden, Kamala Harris or their “left” lackeys like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the same sentence with a world-historical figure like Abraham Lincoln almost provokes embarrassment.

American capitalism was on the rise in 1860-61. Today it is in terminal decline. The historic task of crushing fascism and dictatorship falls to the working class, which can only carry out its task by abolishing the power of the capitalist class through socialist revolution.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact