

Trump-World on Horseback: Conservative Coup Advocacy in the United States

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This article uses research on civilian support for and involvement in Middle East coups to contribute to the debate about Donald Trump’s efforts to remain in power beyond his legal term as President of the United States. After introducing the concept of civilian *coup advocacy* and its presence in American political life, the essay makes two related but distinct points about Trump’s months-long attempted power grab. First, it narrowly focuses on the question of whether the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, constituted a coup attempt. I provide a simple definition of a coup d’état: a coordinated and rapid attempt to seize executive authority. This basic definition centers any classification on the aims and actions of perpetrators, rather than their identity (e.g., civilians, soldiers, state officials, non-state actors). De-emphasizing identities in our definition of coups offers researchers conceptual simplicity, which in turn allows them to retain the necessary complexity involved in classifying various sub-types of coups (e.g., civilian, civil-military, military, self-coup). I argue that the storming of the U.S. Capitol was a civilian coup d’état with some features that resembled a “self-coup.”

Second, the essay diverges from debates about coup-classification. Instead, I write that the identification of instances of *coup advocacy*—or the willing promotion of a coup movement in support of a wider political cause—expands the scope of politically important “coup-adjacent” events worthy of study. For heuristic purposes, I consider the plan that retired General Michael Flynn publicly floated and that President Trump later pushed privately in the White House in December 2020. The unlikely plan amounted to an invitation for the United States military to weigh-in on a civilian political dispute—surely unfairly and in favor of U.S. conservatives. The mere suggestion undermines norms needed to preserve democratic life, such as the prohibition of extra-legal and violent political competition. Moreover, it undermines the norm of civilian supremacy over the military by signaling to the conservative bloc that in *exceptional* political circumstances the army’s assistance is *crucial*, not forbidden.

The lens of civilian coup advocacy highlights the political conditions in which segments of the elite begin advocating for coups (and other forms of political violence). Even if one disagrees that the Capitol storming was a coup, the event should be viewed within a wider context of an anti-democratic, civilian-led movement that promoted political violence in order to keep Donald Trump in the White House. To be certain, this means that conservative *civilian* elites in the Republican Party’s orbit are the biggest threat to American democracy—not the U.S. armed forces. Conservative coup advocates, in particular, are paving the way for future coups and unrest by

anointing their followers “men on horseback” (see Finer 1962), or saviors of the nation-state that conservatives envision. This behavior is an expected response to two conditions—*polarization* and *perceived electoral disadvantages*—that have produced high rates of coup advocacy in the Middle East. This toxic combination has now reached American shores.

Polarization, Election Fears, and Conservative Coup Advocacy

Civilian *coup advocacy* is the willing promotion of a coup d'état in support of a wider political cause. Coup advocacy takes a variety of forms, ranging from public incitement, which legitimates the use of violence, to participation in coup operations. Civilians such as business elites, religious leaders, politicians, and ordinary protesters provide different power resources or tools (e.g., money, office-holding, public platforms, social capital) to coup movements (see, e.g., Kinney 2021). Most commonly, civilians aid soldiers in civil-military coups, but armed civilians can also seize power independently of the military. The civilian elite and segments of the broader public in many Middle Eastern states have tended to advocate for coups under *polarized* conditions in which there is also fear of *electoral disadvantages* (see Kinney 2019; 2021). These conditions are now present in the United States.

Both the U.S. electorate and Congress are polarized (Neal 2020; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). As a result, conservative civilian elites have grown unwilling to countenance the rule of their liberal counterparts and are pressured not to compromise by their base.¹ They would rather the country be governed by conservatives in fatigues than elected liberals. Add to this that America's conservatives fear they cannot fairly compete in electoral contests (Badger 2020). The country's electoral machinery functions properly, but Republican electoral prospects are surely waning due to the party's unpopularity (Astor 2020). The problem is that conservatives *believe*—rightly or wrongly—that the odds of victory are stacked against them. Backed into the corners of their minds, the Republican Party has turned to anti-democratic tactics, especially voting restrictions. This effort has long involved incitement to various forms of political violence. After November 2020, however, conservatives's anti-democratic repertoire expanded to urging extra-legal transfers of authority and even the armed forces's involvement in political competition. This is a typical trajectory for coup advocates. After backing Iraqi General Bakr Sidqi's coup in 1936,

¹ New research on “right-wing authoritarianism” supports this claim (Knuckey and Hassan 2020).

for instance, politician Hikmat Suleiman said, “There was nothing left for us except the Army...so we resorted to the Army” (as cited in Tarbush 1982, 121). In sum, if American voters will not give conservatives the keys to the White House, they will force themselves in at gunpoint.

What’s in a Coup? Before discussing the storming of the U.S. Capitol, it is important to define coups d’état. Coup advocates promote *coordinated* movements to *rapidly* seize control of a polity’s *executive* authority. First, coups involve coordinated action; they are not spontaneous or unplanned. Coup participants have disparate but pre-defined roles that are meant to produce a singular outcome. In order to label an event a coup, there must be evidence of planning even if the aims seem fantastical and the actions taken toward that aim appear foolish. To put it succinctly, there must be a plan, even if it is a bad plan.

Second, a coup must be carried out over a short time span, with clearly definable beginning and end points. Bjørnskov and Rode (2020), for instance, argue that a discrete coup-event can last no more than seven days. While bids for executive authority can occur alongside weeks- or months-long protests—like in Egypt (2013) or Bolivia (2020)—coup operatives use these moments to quickly push their opponents from power before the latter have an opportunity to regain their footing or strike back. The use of a quick operation to alter state authority is an important aspect of coups that separates them from other forms of political violence. It is this feature of coups that allows relatively small conspiratorial cliques to find themselves in control of the state. If they fail, then the status quo remains and the perpetrators have to plan their next move.

Third, coups target *executive authority* (Marshall and Marshall 2007; Powell 2011; Bjørnskov and Rode 2020) within a polity rather than an entire government or regime. Insurrections more broadly target the entire government or regime structure, while the demands of mass uprisings range from incremental to revolutionary change. If there are many overlapping sources of authority within a nation-state (e.g., the U.S.), then the true target of a coup might not be as obvious as in places where authority is highly concentrated (e.g., Egypt). Those who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6 seemingly attacked Congresspersons in a bout of senseless rage, but the target was the incoming chief executive, then President-elect Joe Biden. The aim was to restore authority that was voted away from President Trump in November 2020. If there was no evidence of this narrow objective behind the January 6 movement, then we could describe the storming of the Capitol as an insurrection.

Some students of coups take the stance that coup perpetrators's institutional position vis-à-vis the state or coercive apparatus informs our classification of an event (Powell and Thyne 2011; Svobik 2012; Bjørnskov and Rode 2020; Chin, Carter and Wright 2021; Singh 2021, 2). According to this definition, we could not call the storming of the U.S. Capitol a coup absent direct evidence that former or current state officials or members of the coercive apparatus participated in the plot or its execution.

Although this essay examines whether occurrences on January 6 satisfy this more restrictive coup-definition, I argue that the minimalist characterization of coups outlined above is useful because it centers our focus on the aims and the actions of coup perpetrators rather than their identity. This does not mean that the identities of coup perpetrators are unimportant or inconsequential. Quite the contrary, different types of actors offer disparate but important power resources to coup movements (e.g., Singh 2014; Kinney 2019; 2021; Holmes 2021, 5). The basic definition offers researchers conceptual simplicity while retaining the complexity that is needed to classify various sub-types of coups. Members of the military execute *military* coups, which can be further dissected by officer rank, motivation, and context; civilians and soldiers carryout *civil-military* coups, which may be mostly civilian-led or merely receive strong civilian support in the form of protests or media incitement; and civilians are responsible for purely *civilian* coups, which can involve a countless number of socio-political configurations, including state and non-state actors, oligarchs, politicians, and more. For example, the Cline Center describes January 6 as an “attempted dissident coup,” i.e., one that is “initiated by a small group of discontents to include ex-military leaders, religious leaders, former government leaders, members of a legislature/parliament, and civilians” (Cline Center 2021). The following section weighs-in on whether or not events on January 6 amounted to a coup.

Trump Supporters on Horseback: Storming the U.S. Capitol

The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6 was a purely civilian coup attempt. While there is no smoking gun tying President Trump to the assault on the Capitol, the coup attempt nevertheless appears to blur the boundaries between a self-coup and a more typical coup. On the one hand, Trump did not use (probably because it was not possible) the typical self-coup tool-kit, e.g., shelving the constitution, adjourning the legislature (De Bruin 2020, 7). On the other hand, the attack was a final stand after President Trump's unsuccessful months-long effort to overturn

the free-and-fair November 2020 election and consolidate his position in office. Led by armed extremist groups, the Capitol invaders targeted governmental officials as a means to the clearly-stated end of keeping President Trump in the White House by disrupting the transfer of executive authority to President-elect Biden (Bennett, Brown, Cahlan, Sohyun Lee, Kelly, Samuels, and Swaine 2021).

Although the Capitol storming was not organized effectively enough to succeed, there is an abundance of evidence that it was a planned effort rather than the manifestation of overly enflamed mob passion. Federal investigators have concluded that armed right-wing extremists, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers (many members of which are active duty police and soldiers or veterans), carefully plotted “an armed assault on the seat of American government” (Barrett, Hsu, and Davis 2021, 5-6). For example, they led parts of the crowd to specific points of the building in order to overwhelm the police. The extremists also engaged the throngs of civilian protesters in pre-discussed chants (e.g., “Hang Mike Pence!”) designed to incite them to a level of violence necessary for their plan to unfold (Leonhardt 2021, 6). Two pipe bombs were discovered: one near the Republican National Committee building and another near Democratic National Committee headquarters (Leatherby, Ray, Singhvi, Triebert, Watkins, and Willis 2021, 9)—an unlikely coincidence without pre-coordination.

The violence on January 6 had been incited for weeks and there were on-going protests in Washington, D.C. leading up to the event, but the actual coup-operation was designed to be a short, one-off assault on the Capitol building. The moment of execution was intentionally chosen in order to disrupt Congress’s ability to certify the election for President-elect Biden. In a planned speech to the crowds moments before the attack, President Trump—the leader of the American right, who was intensely tapped into his followers’s publicly-discussed designs for that day—conferred the legitimacy of the highest office in the land on the violent plans of the coup organizers. Funneling these Trump-supporters-on-horseback toward the Capitol building as the certification process was unfolding, the event’s organizers used the crowds like pawns on a bloody chessboard. Their scheme was thwarted within a matter of hours.

Did the Capitol storming satisfy the more conservative coup-definition? That would require involvement by former or current members of the state or coercive apparatus. There was heavy involvement by both active duty and retired servicemembers, especially of the far-right Oath Keepers, but they were acting in an unofficial (or non-state) capacity (Leonhardt 2021, 14). These

participants possess tactical knowledge that active-duty members of the military and police have. Like their Syrian counterparts, current and former police and military involvement reveals a right-wing faction within the American coercive apparatus. Disregarding their connection to this assault in a discussion of coup-classification serves only to maintain a conceptual division between state and society.

More broadly, coups, including the Capitol attempt, often reveal the extent to which the boundary between state and society is an analytical fiction. A *network* of conservative leaders and activists both inside and outside of government helped to plan and incite the violence on January 6. In a typical example of *coup advocacy*, the Chair of the Arizona Republican Party, Kelli Ward, tweeted on December 19, 2020 that President Trump should “cross the Rubicon” (as cited in Cunningham-Cook 2021, 1-2) which not only urges political violence but specifically references Julius Caesar’s violation of the Roman norm of civilian supremacy over soldiers. Ward also amplified the violent rhetoric of one of the event’s main organizers, Ali Alexander, an early leader of the “Stop the Steal” movement with ties to wealthy GOP donors, like the Mercer Family. In the lead up to the Capitol storming, Alexander explicitly and repeatedly encouraged the use of violence, such as imploring demonstrators to “1776” (violently overthrow) elected U.S. officials on January 6 (Cunningham-Cook 2021, 2; Grim and Chávez 2021, 21; Sommer 2021, 2). Republican Representatives like Andy Biggs (Arizona), leader of the House Freedom Caucus; Paul Gosar (Arizona); and Mo Brooks (Alabama) helped Ali Alexander organize the January 6 rally despite this explicit call to violent action. Although all three tried to distance themselves from the event when it failed, *during* the assault Rep. Gosar posted on Parler (an alternative to Twitter) that, “Americans are upset,” alongside a photograph showing “rioters climbing the Capitol walls” (Grim and Chávez 2021, 19). Given the public nature of the Capitol invaders’s intentions, it is difficult to accept that these officials were unaware of what was being planned for January 6.

It is meaningful when public officials use their platform to advocate for coups (and other forms of political violence) because they possess the legitimacy of their office and have the power to influence their followers. More concerning, however, are credible allegations that elected GOP officials offered “reconnaissance tours” ahead of January 6 to would-be perpetrators of the Capitol storming (Cheney and Ferris 2021). If true, members of the GOP went beyond public incitement to include active participation. This would also satisfy the conservative definition of coups d’état.

President Trump’s responsibility in this affair also complicates the distinction between state and non-state. As Commander-in-Chief, the President authorizes the use of legitimate violence. President Trump tried to form a coalition with armed non-state actors by courting extremist groups—including an explicit endorsement of one of the coup participants, the Proud Boys, during a nationally televised presidential debate (Ronayne and Kunzelman 2020). This dynamic is similar to the loyal *baltajiyya* (regime thugs) that protect Arab autocrats when called upon by the state. Based on public reporting and testimony from President Trump’s second impeachment trial, he was aware an armed mob was descending on Washington, D.C. to protect him, but still used rhetoric borrowed from event organizers to incite that mob. Trump then assisted the assault with inaction because he was pleased with their actions (Leonhardt 2021, 3; Sorkin 2021). GOP Rep. Denver Riggleman went as far as to claim that President Trump had been in contact with “people connected to” the attack (Feinberg 2021, 9). European intelligence officials reported immediately after the event, with a high degree of certainty, that Trump had led a “coup attempt” (Prothero 2021). Some in the mob shouted, “We are listening to your boss: Trump,” and others claimed to find moral courage from Ted Cruz, a Republican Senator from Texas (Leonhardt 2021, 13). Indeed, many in the mob were taking orders from ex-President Trump. Some shouted at police, “We are listening to your boss: Trump” (Leonhardt 2021, 13). Many who stormed the Capitol building have even adopted the “*public* [i.e., state] *authority* defense,” or in other words: “The president told me to do it” (Shamsian 2021, 6).

The Flynn-Trump Plan: Inciting a Coup

Although it did not receive as much fanfare as the Capitol storming, in December 2020 retired General Michael Flynn publicly offered an exceptional proposal to invite the armed forces into an overtly political role that would favor of conservatives. On December 1, Gen. Flynn floated the idea on Twitter, on behalf of the “We The People Convention,” to declare martial law, place federal troops in swing states, and “rerun” those states’s elections. In mid-December, Flynn repeated the idea in great detail on *Newsmax*, a media outlet which President Trump promoted to his loyalists (Sommerlad 2020). Alarming, Trump picked up on the idea and pushed the plan at

an official White House meeting later that week.² According to *Axios* reporters Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu (2021, 7), that December 18 meeting pitted “conspiracists against a handful of White House lawyers and advisers determined to keep the president from giving in to temptation to invoke emergency national security powers, seize voting machines and disable the primary levers of American democracy.” During the gathering, *Overstock.com* CEO Patrick Byrne, a Trump ally, exclaimed, “There are guys with big guns and badges who can get these things [i.e., seize voting machines]” (as quoted in Swan and Basu 2021, 64). The (far-fetched) idea was to declare a state of exception, thus giving conservatives the power to use the armed forces rather than the courts in their battle with the Democratic Party.

Why should we pay attention to this instance of civilian coup advocacy if it did not manifest in an actual coup attempt? The point is not whether it had a reasonable chance to succeed, but that it at once signals and establishes two dangerous normative precedents. First, it undermines the legitimacy of elections to settle political differences and instead urges political violence against one’s political opponents. Second, coup advocates lay the groundwork for future coups by undermining the crucial norm stigmatizing the armed forces’s involvement in civilian political disputes. They do so by telling their constituents that in *exceptional* circumstances the army’s assistance is *crucial*, not forbidden. Scholars of coups tend to agree that coup perpetrators need legitimacy to subvert normal political processes (e.g., Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Powell 2012; Svolik 2012; Whitehouse 2012; Casper and Tyson 2014; Grewal and Kureshi 2019). Civilian coup advocates legitimate the military’s entrance into politics by priming their constituents for a future coup. When elites call publicly for an *exceptional* maneuver (e.g., a coup) they are placing their actions within an intelligible political context. In simple terms, conservative voters cannot cheer on a coup until conservative elites explain to them why they should. In the conservative milieu, Flynn’s and Trump’s argument for taking this exceptional step was plain: they were rectifying an unfair electoral outcome. If one believes the election was stolen—and the failure of Trump’s legal challenges the work of sinister forces—then political violence is the only option left. Coup advocates make that option legitimate.

² There is no evidence, as far as I know, that Flynn and Trump were in direct contact or “plotting” with one another. This is an instance of *coup-incitement*, which is a type of coup advocacy.

Conclusion

This essay argued, first, that the storming of the U.S. Capitol was a purely civilian coup and, second, that the Flynn-Trump plan was a politically important instance of coup advocacy. What both of these points suggest is that the United States is now faced with a violent and anti-democratic bloc of civilians determined to undermine American democracy. The storming of the U.S. Capitol was one discrete data point that supports this assertion. In other words, while it is important to classify coups d'état, one must not lose sight of the underlying conditions in which coups become a legitimate tool for political competition. GOP *civilians* are the biggest threat to U.S. democracy—not the armed forces. Like their Middle Eastern counterparts, GOP coup advocates are making future coups more likely in their anti-democratic response to polarization and electoral disadvantages.

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