

The GOP's many allusions to armed revolution and justified violence

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During his five-plus years as a politician and president before Jan. 6, 2021, Donald Trump repeatedly and suggestively alluded to the prospect of violence by his supporters. Then it happened. Those supporters took the hint and stormed the U.S. Capitol, intent on overturning a democratic election on the basis of false claims that it had been stolen from them.

Whether Trump's actions before or during Jan. 6 amounted to incitement is a nuanced legal question. The House impeached Trump for that alleged high crime, but the Senate did not convict him — despite a historically bipartisan vote on the matter. Even many of those who voted to acquit Trump, like Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), explicitly linked Trump's rhetoric to the actions of his supporters that day. Trump was acquitted despite the fact that many high-profile Republicans had preemptively warned that Trump's violent rhetoric could one day lead to just such a scene.

Despite it all, nearly 10 months after Jan. 6, suggestions of legitimized violence continue to permeate the GOP and the conservative movement. Trump has faded into the background somewhat, thanks to his bans from social media and his being out of office, but others have gladly picked up the torch, with almost no pushback from their party leadership.

The most recent example involves Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), who this week suggested that the attack on the Capitol actually was in line with the Declaration of Independence. She claimed that violence at demonstrations for racial justice was worse, “whereas January 6th was just a riot at the Capitol. And if you think about what our Declaration of Independence says, it says to overthrow tyrants.”

Greene's comment reflects how some Republicans spoke about Jan. 6 beforehand. As The Post reported at the time, several Republicans had compared the situation to 1776 and otherwise had suggested a need for violence. These were not allusions to peaceful efforts to overturn an election; they were about armed revolution.

But although the fervor understandably died down for a while, you needn't look far to see this kind of rhetoric continuing to rear its ugly head. Trumpian allusions to the prospect and even need for political violence and a 1776-esque revolution are coming up with increasing frequency. To wit:

- Even the day after Jan. 6, Rep. Mo Brooks (R-Ala.) compared the situation to Nazi Germany, in which people who are upset could either immigrate “or you can resist, often through violence.”
- Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-N.C.) in August also pitched this as a choice between legitimate elections and violence, saying stolen elections would “lead to one place, and that's bloodshed.” “As much as I am willing to defend our liberty at all costs, there's nothing that I would dread doing more than having to pick up arms against a fellow

American. And the way that we can have recourse against that is if we all passionately demand that we have election security in all 50 states.” (A spokesman later played this down, saying Cawthorn was saying he “fears others would erroneously choose that route.”)

- Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) said in May, “We have a Second Amendment in this country, and I think we have an obligation to use it.” He then made clear what he meant: That it was about “the ability to maintain an armed rebellion against the government if that becomes necessary.” (He qualified this by saying, “I hope it never does.”)
- The conservative Claremont Institute, which employs the architect of Trump’s effort to overturn the election in Congress, published a piece in March calling for a “counterrevolution.” It said those counterrevolutionaries must be “willing to take the next step and accept that most people living in the United States today — certainly more than half — are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term.”
- Pearson Sharp, a host on Trump’s favorite cable news outlet, One America News, delivered a commentary in June suggesting execution for as many as tens of thousands of people supposedly responsible for stealing the election. (Sharp explained that he was merely discussing the legal code.)
- Fox News host Tucker Carlson has repeatedly pointed to legitimized violence and the supposed warlike footing on which we find ourselves. This week, he previewed a new series suggesting that conservative activists were being targeted in a supposed new “war on terror” as part of a supposed “patriot purge” (the title of his documentary.) In August, he said of the handling of the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal, “This can’t go on. When leaders refuse to hold themselves accountable, over time people revolt. That happens. We need to change course immediately — and acknowledge our mistakes; the people in charge need to acknowledge their mistakes — or else the consequences will be awful.”

This last one is instructive. Did Carlson say people *should* revolt? Not explicitly. Instead, he suggestively held it out there as an eventuality that might arrive if our leaders don’t *do the right things*. In this case, it was on Afghanistan. In most of the other cases, it was the myth of stolen elections.

It’s the same trick Trump used. He at times specifically legitimized violence by his supporters, but he mostly held it out there as a prospect — something perhaps to be avoided. It gave him the plausible deniability he and his defenders flogged throughout his presidency. He wasn’t actually *endorsing this*; he was just throwing it out there as something some other people might do.

The problem is that this prospect was wielded with such frequency that it was almost impossible to dismiss it as anything other than an intentionally implied threat. And extreme supporters have a way of taking the hint, which many Capitol rioters say they did from Trump’s violent rhetoric. They said they believed they were doing what Trump wanted.