

## **Opinion: The fear of physical harm that keeps even Trump's supporters in line**

The words sent a jolt across the courtroom. “Could a president order SEAL Team 6 to assassinate a political rival?” Judge Florence Pan asked Donald Trump’s lawyer, as she and two other judges weighed the former president’s claim that he should enjoy absolute immunity from prosecution.

The answer, to anyone not a hardened tyrant, is “of course not.” But Trump’s lawyer danced around the question, which showed the absurdity of their claim, answering that the president could only be prosecuted if he had been previously impeached and convicted.

The fact that Trump’s team seemed at best ambivalent over what anyone else could clearly see would be a shocking abuse of power was not one of those far-fetched hypotheticals put forth in the law to frame an argument. Instead, it made headlines.

It resonated because it aligns with the Trump we have all come to know: a politician who has encouraged, promoted, justified and even praised political violence, as long as he sees it as a sign of support for him. And it resonated because Trump is once again sending very clear signals that he endorses and even encourages political violence to support his cause.

After Tuesday’s hearing, Trump appeared to threaten more unrest if he loses. “It’ll be bedlam in the country,” he warned. And when a reporter asked him if he would tell his supporters to refrain from violence, he ignored the question, ambling out of the room and passing up an opportunity.

Trump repeatedly has voiced support for those serving time — “hostages,” as he calls them — for their roles in the deadly attack on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, which he once described as a “beautiful day.”

Of course, those found guilty of crimes committed on Jan. 6 are not hostages; they are prisoners — convicted criminals. Trump’s adamant refusal to reject political violence strongly suggests that his choice of language is a deliberate tactic.

And as the election draws nearer and his legal troubles loom ever larger, Trump is refusing to condemn political violence — part of an apparent strategy to return to the White House instead of landing in prison.

We’ve seen this before. Dark clouds were gathering long before Jan. 6, most ominously during a 2020 presidential debate when Trump was asked if he would condemn White supremacists, specifically the Proud Boys. Trump responded with what sounded like marching orders: “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by,” he instructed them.

Three months later, the group’s members engaged in the violent effort to overturn the election results, an attempted coup against US democracy. Their leader was convicted of seditious conspiracy and sentenced to 22 years in prison.

Back then, I felt the ill wind. “I have witnessed moments like these in numerous undemocratic countries throughout my career,” I wrote. “The flashbacks were incandescent” after hearing Trump’s words.

Evidence of the impact of his support for brute force against his opponents continues piling up in the courts. ABC News found at least 54 criminal cases where the perpetrators of threats or violence, or their criminal defense lawyers, invoked Trump’s name in connection with their cases. “This is for Trump,” announced one man in Florida as he assaulted a Latino gas station attendant, for example.

But the real impact of the willingness of Trump’s supporters to use violence on his behalf can be seen inside his own Republican Party.

We may finally have the answer to why the GOP has bent to Trump’s wishes so willingly and why people of principle simply refuse to call out Trump’s lies about the 2020 election or any of his countless outrages: The party’s leaders are afraid. And not just for their political careers. They are afraid for their and their families’ personal safety. The possibility of violence threatens to tear apart a country whose people, surprisingly, agree about much more than we think.

“Americans are not as ideologically polarized as they believed themselves to be,” says Rachel Kleinfeld of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “but emotions (my italics) are being polarized for political purposes.” Emotions are the stock-in-trade of demagogues, and Trump is a master at manipulating them, including with calls for violence.

Who can forget his exhortation to supporters during a 2016 campaign rally, to “knock the crap” out of protesters. “Just knock the hell – I promise you, I will pay for legal fees,” he said to cheers.

An expert on political violence, Kleinfeld said that “violence and threats against elected leaders are suppressing the emergence of a pro-democracy faction of the GOP.”

If more Republicans were willing to speak out against Trump, to forcefully acknowledge that he lost the 2020 election, that his phony claims that legal cases against him are politically motivated are lies, then more Republican voters might be persuaded. But few are willing to do so, so Trump’s false, self-serving version of reality has taken hold with an astonishingly large segment of the country, dominating the Republican Party.

Beyond Washington, death threats, swatting assaults and the prospect of violence are silencing moderate, reality-based Republicans across the country, persuading local officials to keep quiet or step out of politics altogether in the face of death threats and harassment.

During Trump’s presidency, threats of violence against members of Congress skyrocketed. And now that the election is approaching and stakes for the former president are rising, threats of violence again are surging.

In just the past few days, police have arrested a man who threatened to kill Rep. Eric Swalwell and his children. Swalwell, a Democrat, has been a fierce Trump critic. Bomb threats have shut down multiple state capitols. Police recently rushed to the home of Judge Tanya Chutkan, who presides over the subversion case against Trump, in a swatting attack. And after Trump lambasted Maine's secretary of state and Colorado's Supreme Court for declaring him unqualified to be on their ballot, his backers launched a barrage of death threats against them.

As he leaves the door open to political violence, Trump recently sent an email to supporters falsely accusing Biden of a most egregious crime. Biden, he said, ordered special counsel Jack Smith to, "try, convict, and sentence Donald Trump to jail before the November 2024 election." That's the product of Trump's dangerous, self-serving imagination.

Trump is creating the conditions for an explosion of political violence — even if he's not a dictator yet and even if he doesn't have authority over Seal Team 6.