

A White Pill for Disappointed Populists

President Donald Trump conceded the 2020 election Thursday night. Many voices on the right and left are condemning him and his followers because a small number of his rally attendees that day briefly occupied the capitol building—one of whom, Ashli Babbitt, was brutally and unnecessarily slain by federal law enforcement. Some are suggesting that the national populist movement of which Trump has been the figurehead has been permanently damaged as a result of this display of outrage from the right—even though the damage and loss of life paled in comparison to the leftist riots and criminality that America has suffered from all year.

I don't share those concerns. I believe that, after a period of ultimately futile repression that is probably coming from Washington D.C. and Silicon Valley, the national populist movement will emerge stronger than ever—and that it will be stronger and more effective after Trump.

It didn't take any great insight to see that Trump was an inconsistent and incoherent representative of the Middle Americans who put him into power. He demonstrated that from the very beginning, with the capricious firing of several of his most loyal advisors in his first year, and his bizarre hiring of several neoconservative and establishment GOP political fossils whom he should have known would be disloyal to him and his base. As a television star and capitalist pitchman, Trump was merely the most effective weathervane. During the 2016 primaries, it was only Trump who seemed to be able to feel the powerful winds of discontent blowing from America's heartland.

That primal force was the voice of many working-class Americans, many of them former Democrat voters, who were sick

of the choices on offer. They wanted an end to foreign immigration that was undermining their job prospects and community solidarity; they wanted an end to the pointless foreign wars that served no national interest and for which their sons died or were maimed; they wanted a check on the rapacious capitalism that was shipping their jobs overseas and on the corrupt academic and media class that was forcing the normalization of cultural radicalism at home.

Despite Trump's promises, his delivery fell short—whether due to his own faults or opposition from the entrenched managerial elite. But the power behind Trump was never in the man himself—it was in the powerful wind of national populism that blew at his back, and which, to his credit, he was savvy and courageous enough to catch in his sails and allow to carry him into the White House.

And thus, as futile as it seems in retrospect, it was the right approach for Trump supporters, and those who support national populism, to support Trump up until his concession speech on the evening of Thursday, Jan. 7. It was actually the best strategy for them to be more loyal to him than he was to them. In arriving in such force and in fervor for a truly largely peaceful protest in support of President Trump, they showed that the ideas of national populism will not be ignored. The Republican Party will either have to change from within or be conquered from without.

Yes, a small number of populists may have gone too far in occupying the Capitol Building, but that's a small transgression in the larger scheme of things, and one that was done many times in the past, by feminists, by Black Panthers, by war veterans—the equivalent of Pearl Harbor, as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer histrionically claimed, it was not. Yes, the established political powers will try to blow this out of proportion and use it to justify repression and censorship, online and off. Yes, the GOP and others will try to subvert this new force to the neoliberal/neoconservative

consensus, as they did the Tea Party.

Yes, there will be political struggles. But the events of Jan. 6 should make it clear that a significant section of the country is willing to fight those battles, and to win them, with Trump—or perhaps even better—without him.

(Note to us over-40s: I looked up this “white pill” the younger generation likes to talk about; apparently it means “good news.”)

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(Correction: The first paragraph of an earlier version of this article incorrectly spelled Babbitt’s last name with only one “t,” based on initial press reports.)

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