



ARGUMENT

A Moment of National Shame and Peril—and Hope

We may be witnessing the beginning of the end of American democracy, but there is still a way to stop the descent.

BY [JOHN ALLEN](#)
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U.S. President Donald Trump leaves the White House to go to St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, on June 1. BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The slide of the United States into illiberalism may well have begun on June 1, 2020. Remember the date. It may well signal the beginning of the end of the American experiment.

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The president of the United States stood in the Rose Garden of the White House on Monday, railed against weak governors and mayors who were not doing enough, in his mind, to control the unrest and the rioters in their cities, and threatened to deploy the U.S. military against American citizens. It was a stunning moment. But, in particular, it was notable for three important reasons.

First, Donald Trump expressed only the barest of condolences at the murder of George Floyd, but he also said nothing about the fundamental and underlying reasons for the unrest: systemic racism and inequality, a historic absence of respect, and a denial of justice. All of these factors are centuries old and deeply engrained in an American society that systematically delivers white privilege at the expense of people of color.

Yes, he mentioned George Floyd, but he did not touch on long-standing societal problems at all. He sees the crisis as a black problem—not as something to be addressed by creating the basis and impetus for a move toward social justice, but as an opportunity to use force to portray himself as a “law and order” president. The reasons were irrelevant to the opportunity. Remember the supposed invasion of the southern border and his deployment of federal troops ahead of the 2018 midterm elections? The president’s failure to understand the reality of the problem was on full display when, on Saturday, he attempted to explain that his supporters, the so-called Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, “love African American people. They love black people. MAGA loves the black people.” Evidently his movement, MAGA, is a coherent thing, and it’s white, which leads to the next point about his speech.

Second, Trump was clear he views those engaged in the unrest and criminal acts in these riots as terrorists, an enemy. He said so, ostensibly as justification to deploy the U.S. military to apply federal force—his “personal” force—against the riots. Indeed, the secretary of defense used the military term “battlespace” to describe American cities.

While there may be some very accomplished criminals on both sides of the riots, the truth is that they are minuscule in numbers. The vast majority of the people protesting in the streets are justifiably furious at the murder of George Floyd, but they’re even angrier over pervasive injustice, mass incarceration, frequent false arrests, and an institutionalized devaluation of black lives and property. And yes, as this anger has spilled over, violence and criminality have ensued. But as much as the president would like them to be—indeed, needs them to be—terrorists, that is not what these people are. The president and members of his administration seem bent on ensuring that the so-called antifa—or anti-fascist—movement is fully on display as a principal reason for the violence. To deal with antifa, the president even tweeted that he intended to designate the group a terrorist organization—never mind that he has no authority to designate any domestic movement as such. Those of us who’ve looked closely at homegrown violent extremism do, in fact, agree that a domestic terrorism statute should exist. And were such a statute to come into being, the obvious targets for designation as domestic terrorists are, first and foremost, violent white supremacist groups and individuals who provide material assistance to these groups.

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And even if antifa is found to fit the statute as well, let me be clear: White supremacists have murdered, lynched, tortured, terrorized, oppressed, and discriminated against black Americans from the beginning of the idea of America. They have killed black Americans by the thousands, often in the most horrific ways imaginable. Far more damage to the United States has come from these terrorists—fascists, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis, all feeling newly empowered today—than those who have opposed them.

Finally, the governors have sufficient law enforcement capacity—and, if necessary, the combat power of the National Guard—to handle their respective crises. If not, they can ask for federal assistance. There is no precedent in modern U.S. history for a president to wield federal troops in a state or municipality over the objections of the respective governor. Right now, the last thing the country needs—and, frankly, the U.S. military needs—is the appearance of U.S. soldiers carrying out the president’s intent by descending on American citizens. This could wreck the high regard Americans have for their military, and much more.

Third, in a bid to create some appearance that he can empathize with those demonstrating peacefully in the streets, the president proclaimed himself the “ally of peaceful protesters.” But, at that very moment, just a few hundred feet away across Lafayette Park, fully equipped riot police and troops violently, and without provocation, set upon the peaceful demonstrators there, manhandling and beating many of them, employing flash-bangs, riot-control agents, and pepper spray throughout. These demonstrators had done nothing to warrant such an attack. Media who were watching over the scene craned their cameras to try to understand what had happened to justify this violence, until it became clear for all to see. The riot police had waded into these nonviolent American citizens—who were protesting massive social injustice—with the sole purpose of clearing the area around St. John’s Episcopal Church, on the other side of the park, so the self-proclaimed “ally of peaceful protesters,” Donald Trump, could pose there for a photo-op.

There had evidently been a debate within the president’s inner circle about the efficacy of attempting a national statement to create a sense of unity in this moment of crisis. Clearly, the argument in favor of such a statement did not carry the day. The president has failed to show sympathy, empathy, compassion, or understanding—some of the traits the nation now needs from its highest office. Perhaps sensing this moment as an opportunity for an easy victory after his appalling leadership failure in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the president came down hard: hard on the governors and mayors he’d labeled as weak, the same ones he’d left to fend for themselves during the pandemic, and hard on the Americans in the streets against whom he is preparing to dispatch “thousands upon thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel, and law enforcement.” At the end of his speech, offhandedly saying something about going to pay homage to a national shrine, the president departed back into the White House.

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St. John's Episcopal Church is one of the most historic churches in the United States, in which every president since James Madison has worshipped. It had been damaged the night before, when a fire had been contained in the basement with little damage. But on the afternoon of June 1, it was surrounded by members of the U.S. Secret Service, other law enforcement personnel, and soldiers. Tear gas was hanging in the air, with vomit still on the street from demonstrators overcome by gas and pepper spray. The debris of peaceful protesters attacked in the clearing operation littered the street. As it became clear where the president was headed, and as the reality of what was unfolding set in, a horrified nation looked on.

The president stood in front of St. John's, holding a Bible aloft, and expropriated the image of the church, the Holy Bible, and the Christian faith as the backdrop and basis for his words and deeds in dealing with this crisis. It wasn't enough that peaceful protesters had just been deprived of their first-amendment rights—this photo-op sought to legitimize that abuse with a layer of religion. To make matters worse, he was joined in the church photo-op by the other members of his staff and cabinet, including the press secretary, the chief of staff, and the national security advisor. Much worse still, he was joined in the picture by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Attorney General William Barr.

One wonders, did Esper and Barr know that hundreds of peaceful U.S. citizens had been attacked by riot police just minutes before, their civil right massively violated just to set the stage for their picture? Did it occur to them that in posing with the president and the Bible he held in front of a church, ostensibly calling down the authority of God on this cause, they were violating the spirit of one of the most important strictures in America, the separation of church and state? And if federal troops are indeed dispatched into the states to take action against American civilians, where does the Bible and the Christian God figure into the president's deployment order? The framers of the Constitution intended the separation for a reason, and the commander in chief just trampled it.

In the immediate aftermath of this dark moment, late into the night, there was an eruption of theological debate about what it all meant on that historic day when a U.S. president weaponized the church and the Bible for a photo-op in order to justify his cause. Bishop Mariann Budde of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington said all anyone needed to say in order to settle the debate: "Let me be clear: The president just used a Bible, the most sacred text of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and one of the churches of my diocese without permission as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and everything that our churches stand for." Apart from the bishop's truly righteous indignation, there really was no need for further discussion. Donald Trump isn't religious, has no need of religion, and doesn't care about the devout, except insofar as they serve his political needs.

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We know why he did all this on Monday. He even said so while holding the Bible and standing in front of the church. It was about MAGA—“making America great again.”

To even the casual observer, Monday was awful for the United States and its democracy. The president’s speech was calculated to project his abject and arbitrary power, but he failed to project any of the higher emotions or leadership desperately needed in every quarter of this nation during this dire moment. And while Monday was truly horrific, no one should have been surprised. Indeed, the moment was clarifying in so many ways.

So, what is to be done? At nearly the same moment that Americans were being beaten near the White House on behalf of their president, George Floyd’s brother Terrence Floyd visited the site of George’s murder. Overcome with grief and anger, he loudly upbraided the crowd for tarnishing his brother’s memory with violence and looting. And then he told Americans what to do: vote. “Educate yourselves,” he said, “there’s a lot of us.” So, while June 1 could easily be confused with a day of shame and peril if we listen to Donald Trump, if instead we listen to Terrence Floyd, it is a day of hope. So mark your calendars—this could be the beginning of the change of American democracy not to illiberalism, but to enlightenment. But it will have to come from the bottom up. For at the White House, there is no one home.

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