

August 30, 2020

[Heather Cox Richardson](#) Aug 31   

Lots of folks are finally paying attention to the rise of authoritarianism here in the U.S. They are right to be concerned.

Scholars have seen worrisome signs all along. Trump has dismissed nonpartisan career officials and replaced them with loyalists. He has fired the independent inspectors general. He denies Congress's right and duty to investigate members of the Executive Branch. He has used the Department of Homeland Security and other law enforcement officers of the Executive Branch as a private army. He has packed the courts. He has used the government to advance the interests of himself and his family, which he has installed into government positions. He has solicited help from foreign governments to get reelected. And he and his cronies are trying to undermine our election by preemptively saying the Democrats are committing fraud and by slowing down mail service when voters need to be able to mail in their ballots.

Now, Trump is clearly trying to change the national narrative from his disastrous response to the coronavirus and the economic crash to the idea that he alone can protect white Americans from their dangerous Black neighbors.

Stoking violence is a key tool in the authoritarian's toolkit. The idea is to increase civil disorder. As violence increases, people will turn to a leader who promises "LAW & ORDER," as Trump keeps tweeting. Once firmly in power, an authoritarian can then put down his opponents with the argument that they are dangerous criminals.

Trump is advancing just such a strategy. He and members of his administration refuse to condemn violence, and insist that legitimate protesters are all "Antifa." They are blaming Democrats and "liberal politicians and their incompetent policies" for violent protests, although most of the injuries at the protests have been caused by police or by rightwing thugs. They are stoking white people's fear of their Black

neighbors, with Trump going so far as to talk of how he will keep low-income housing from the suburbs to protect the “Suburban Lifestyle Dream.”

And they are going on the offensive, demanding that Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden condemn the violence that they insist comes from protesters, while Trump is actually inciting it from rioters on the right. It is gaslighting at its finest.

America has seen this pattern before. Secessionist leaders before the Civil War needed badly to distract southern white farmers, who were falling behind in an economic system that concentrated wealth at the top, and they howled that northerners were assaulting white southerners and wanted to stamp out their way of life, based in human enslavement. They refused to permit any alternative information to reach their voters. And in the end, they succeeded in rallying their supporters to war.

But that does not have to happen here, now. We can see exactly what Trump is doing, and refuse to embrace it. Democratic leadership is calling out Trump for “willfully fanning the flames of this violence,” as Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA) put it today.

Today Biden released a statement saying “the deadly violence we saw overnight in Portland is unacceptable. Shooting in the streets of a great American city is unacceptable. I condemn this violence unequivocally. I condemn violence of every kind by anyone, whether on the left or the right. And I challenge Donald Trump to do the same.... We must not become a country at war with ourselves. A country that accepts the killing of fellow Americans who do not agree with you. A country that vows vengeance toward one another....”

“As a country,” he continued, “we must condemn the incitement of hate and resentment that led to this deadly clash.... What does President Trump think will happen when he continues to insist on fanning the flames of hate and division in our society and using the politics of fear to whip up his supporters? He is recklessly encouraging violence.... The job of a President is to lower the temperature. To bring

people who disagree with one another together. To make life better for all Americans, not just those who agree with us, support us, or vote for us.”

In Wisconsin, still reeling from the shooting of Jacob Blake in the back by law enforcement officers, the Lt. Governor cited Trump’s “incendiary remarks” and attempts to create division and said that Trump should not come to Kenosha on Tuesday as he currently plans. Governor Tony Evers (D) agreed, as did Kenosha’s mayor. Evers wrote: "I, along with other community leaders who have reached out, are concerned about what your presence will mean for Kenosha and our state. I am concerned your presence will only hinder our healing. I am concerned your presence will only delay our work to overcome division and move forward together."

It is important to remember that Trump’s apparent power play is a desperate move.

More than 180,000 Americans have died of Covid-19 on his watch. We have far more deaths per capita than other advanced countries, and we still have no national testing program. The White House is now apparently taking the position that we will all just have to live with the disease and that schools and businesses should simply reopen, but Americans are not happy about Trump’s handling of the coronavirus. Today he tried to help his numbers by retweeting a thread from a far-right website saying that, in fact, only around 9000 people have died in the U.S. of Covid-19, because the rest had co-morbidities and were going to die anyway. The argument is so far off the mark that Twitter flagged it for violating rules.

Polls show Trump continuing to lag behind Biden by significant numbers. Fifty-nine percent of Americans disapproved of the programming at the Republican National Convention, and he saw no bounce from it. Trump’s overall approval rating is a dismal 31%.

And Trump remains dogged by tell-all books and lawsuits that threaten to reveal criminality. Today, the *New York Times* ran a story by Michael S. Schmidt, a reporter covering national security and federal elections for the paper. Schmidt has a book coming out on Tuesday. It reveals that in 2017 former deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein limited Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation. Rosenstein kept Mueller from exploring Trump’s own relationship with Russia while he was

investigating Russia's efforts to get Trump elected and Trump's efforts to stop the inquiry. Rosenstein limited Mueller to conducting a criminal investigation and did not permit him to expand his inquiries.

Rosenstein did not tell the acting Director of the FBI, Andrew McCabe, that he had taken an investigation of Trump himself off the table, and McCabe did not realize it had happened. McCabe said that he was "surprised and disappointed" to hear this news, and had he known, he would have had the FBI do such an investigation "because we had information that indicated a national security threat might exist, specifically a counterintelligence threat involving the president and Russia. I expected that issue and issues related to it would be fully examined by the special counsel team." McCabe noted that the issue at hand "was first and foremost a counterintelligence case.... Could the president actually be the point of coordination between the campaign and the Russian government? Could the president actually be maintaining some sort of inappropriate relationship with our most significant adversary in the world?"

Meanwhile, Senator Tammy Duckworth is keeping a tally of how many days it's been since we learned that Russia offered bounties to Taliban-linked fighters for killing U.S. or allied soldiers in Afghanistan. Trump has refused to respond to that intelligence.

Russian troops appear to be trying to pick a fight with U.S. soldiers in northeastern Syria, the region from which the U.S. abruptly withdrew last fall. After smaller incidents, on Tuesday, in a Russian convoy sideswiped a U.S. vehicle and a Russian helicopter buzzed the convoy. Seven U.S. soldiers were injured, none seriously. The Pentagon blamed Russian forces for "deliberately provocative and aggressive behavior." A bipartisan group of lawmakers called on the White House to "clearly communicate to the highest levels of the Russian government and military that actions like this will not be tolerated," but so far, Trump has said nothing.

—

Notes:

Schmidt: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/us/politics/trump-russia-justice-department.html>

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/27/us-russia-syria-troops-403721>

<https://mitchell.house.gov/media/press-releases/bipartisan-member-statement-condemning-russian-aggression-toward-us-troops>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/world/middleeast/pentagon-russia-syria.html>

<https://www.cNBC.com/2020/07/29/trump-suburban-voters-will-no-longer-be-bothered-by-low-income-housing.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/08/30/its-time-challenge-cockeyed-reaction-violence/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/us/politics/biden-kamala-harris-speech-trump.html>

<https://www.cNBC.com/2020/08/30/biden-condemns-portland-violence-goes-after-trump.html>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/30/politics/mandela-barnes-trump-kenosha-wisconsin-visit/index.html>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/white-house-convention-covid-testing/2020/08/27/44b53cda-e8c4-11ea-bc79-834454439a44_story.html

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/us/politics/trump-protests-violence-coronavirus.html>



CougFan82 @CougFan82

There's a popular tweet going around stating the CDC now reports 6% of COVID deaths are actually from COVID, and the rest could be blamed on other comorbid or preexisting issues. Here's four reasons why you don't want to fall into believing this trap people. A thread:

August 30th 2020

420 Retweets **805** Likes

<https://www.vox.com/2020/8/30/21407646/trump-approval-poll-rnc-abc-news-ipsos>

[Share](#)



You're on the free list for Letters from an American. For the full experience, become a paying subscriber.

[Subscribe](#)

© 2020 Heather Cox Richardson [Unsubscribe](#)

548 Market Street PMB 72296, San Francisco, CA 94104



[Publish on Substack](#)