

Opinion: Race

White supremacists declare war on democracy and walk away unscathed

The United States has a terrible habit of letting white supremacy get away with repeated attempts to murder American democracy



'This horrific attack on American democracy should have resulted in a full-throttled response. But, once again, white supremacy is able to walk away virtually unscathed.'

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American democracy's most dangerous adversary is white supremacy. Throughout this nation's history, white supremacy has undermined, twisted and attacked the viability of the United States. What makes white supremacy so lethal, however, is not just its presence but also the refusal to hold its adherents fully accountable for the damage they have done and continue to do to the nation. The insurrection on 6 January and the weak response are only the latest example.

During the war for independence, after the British captured Savannah, the king's forces set out to capture a wholly unprepared South Carolina. John Laurens, an aide-de-camp of George Washington, pleaded with the South Carolina government to arm the enslaved because the state didn't have enough available white men to fight the 8,000-strong British force barreling toward Charleston. This was a crisis born of South Carolina's decision to divert most of the state's white men from the Continental Army to fight the Redcoats and, instead, enlist them in the militia to control the enslaved population, whom they defined as the primary threat.

The response to Laurens' plan was, therefore, "horror" and "alarm". Umbrage even. The state's political leaders were so appalled that they questioned whether "this union was worth fighting for at all". The United States of America was not nearly as important as maintaining slavery. They, therefore, toyed with the idea of surrendering to the British, making a separate peace. For that flat-out refusal to fight with every resource at its command, and clear willingness to sacrifice the United States simply to maintain slavery, South Carolina suffered no consequences. It wasn't ostracized. It wasn't penalized. Instead, the state's leaders were fully embraced as Founding Fathers and welcomed into the new nation's halls of power.

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Several years later, at the 1787 constitutional convention, the south once again put white supremacy above the viability of the United States. In tough negotiations, South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia's representatives were willing to hold the nation hostage and risk its destruction unless protection of slavery and the empowering of enslavers was embedded in the constitution. The negotiators acknowledged exactly what was going on and even, sometimes, how reprehensible it was. When, for example, the delegates bowed down to the south's demands for 20 additional years of the Atlantic slave trade, James Madison admitted that without that concession, "the southern states would not have entered into the union of America". And, therefore, as "great as the evil is" he added "the dismemberment of the Union would be worse".

The same refrain played after the infamous three-fifths clause passed under the southern threat to walk away and, thus, scuttle the constitution and the United States. Massachusetts delegate Rufus King called the nefarious formula to determine representation in Congress one of the constitution's "greatest blemishes" while lamenting that it "was a necessary sacrifice to the establishment of the Constitution".

The enslavers' extortionist threats – white supremacy as the price for the nation to come into being – should have created a massive backlash. But it didn't. There was no retribution, only compliance and acquiescence. The demonstrated lack of accountability for threatening the viability of the United States served only to embolden the slaveholders, who bullied, harangued and pummeled other congressional leaders, including the brutal 1856 beating of Senator Charles Sumner by southerner Preston Brooks on the Senate floor, to get their way.

When the bullying and beatings no longer worked, and the nation dared elect a president opposed to slavery spreading any further, the slaveholders launched a military attack against the United States. They wanted, according to Alexander H Stephens, vice-president of the Confederate States of America, the "disintegration" of the Union. He said that the United States had to be destroyed because, unlike the US, the Confederacy's "cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition".

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To wage its war for white supremacy, the Confederates killed and wounded more than 646,000 American soldiers. In addition to the loss of life, fending off the CSA's devastating military assault cost the United States billions of dollars. The CSA also tried to badger and entice the British and French to ally with the Confederacy and attack the United States.

For doing so much to destroy this nation, after the CSA's defeat, the consequences were disproportionately minimal. President Andrew Johnson granted many of the Confederacy's leaders amnesty and allowed them to resume positions of power in the government. The entrée into American society for the traitors was also paved by the way the US supreme court dismantled many of the protections put in place by Congress for post-civil war Black citizenship – the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, as well as laws banning racial segregation and white domestic terrorism – and allowed the bureaucratic and lynching violence of Jim Crow to eviscerate the “self-evident” principles of equality. And to ensure that a narrative of white supremacy's innocence permeated the nation's textbooks, the Confederacy's treachery became the “war of Northern aggression” and the south's “Lost Cause” became nothing less than noble. The forgiveness tour continued as the states, not just in the south, allowed the erection of statues in the public square honoring those who committed treason.

The 6 January invasion of the US Capitol, provoked by the lie that cities with sizable minority populations, such as Atlanta, Milwaukee and Philadelphia, “stole” the 2020 election is, at its core, white supremacists' anger that African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans not only voted but did so decisively against Donald Trump. The invaders constructed gallows, stormed the US Capitol, wanted to hang Vice-President Mike Pence, who would not hand the election to Trump, and hunted for the speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. They beat police officers, yelled “nigger” at others, carried the Confederate flag through the halls of the building and decided that those defending the Capitol were the actual “traitors” who needed to be killed.

This horrific attack on American democracy should have resulted in a full-throttled response. But, once again, white supremacy is able to walk away virtually unscathed. US senators and representatives who were at the rally inciting the invaders were not expelled from Congress. Similarly, in shades of the post-civil war Confederacy, several politicians who attended the incendiary event at the Ellipse were recently re-elected to office. And those who stormed the Capitol are getting charged with misdemeanors, being allowed to go on vacations out of the country, and, despite the attempt to stage a coup and overturn the results of a presidential election, getting feather-light sentences.

It also took months to establish a congressional committee to investigate 6 January, but it's already clear that its subpoenas, as Steve Bannon and Jeffrey Clark so brazenly demonstrated, can be violated and mocked at will with no consequences. And, like the Lost Cause, its adherents have tried to rewrite this assault on America as “a normal tourist visit” or simply “law-abiding, patriotic, mom and pop, young adults pushing baby carriages”.

In other words, this nation has a really bad habit of letting white supremacy get away with repeated attempts to murder American democracy. It's time to break that habit. If we don't, they just might succeed next time.

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