

A Republic, but Can We Keep It?
From the military and the Justice Department to the East Wing,
there's reason to wonder and worry.

By Peggy Noonan

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Donald Trump's supporters are feeling satisfaction after two astonishing achievements: He is the first president this century to establish order on the southern border, and he has secured some new possibility for a Mideast settlement. These are breakthroughs even if they don't last. But the people in this White House, with every triumph, become wilder and wilder. Their triumphalism is accelerating my now-chronic unease over the sense that the strict lines of our delicately balanced republic are being washed away.

Ben Franklin, famously asked by a woman on the street in Philadelphia what sort of government the Constitutional Convention had wrought, is reported to have said, "A republic, if you can keep it." The reply was wry and factual but also a warning: Republics are hard to maintain.

Are we maintaining ours?

Democrats worry about our democracy. Is that the area of greatest recent erosion? I doubt it. Donald Trump really won in 2016, you can trust those numbers, and he really lost in '20, and really won in '24. Your governor won, your congressman—you can pretty much trust the numbers even factoring in the mischief in any system built by man. When shocks happen—"I just want to find 11,780 votes"—the system has still held. The state of Georgia told the president to take a hike in 2020. If you've spent much of your adult life deriding the concept of states' rights, that moment would have complicated your view.

It isn't our democracy that I worry about, it is our republic. That's where we're seeing erosion, that's the thing we could lose.

Quickly, obviously, broadly: A republic is a form of government in which power begins on the ground, with the people, and shoots (and is mediated) upward. Power doesn't come from the top down. The people choose representatives who are protective of local interests while keeping their eye on the nation's. The government of which they're part is bound by laws, by a Constitution that is not only a document of enumerated laws but a mean, lean machine for preserving liberty.

The Constitution the founders devised was born of deep study of history, philosophy and

human nature. Their understanding of the last was deeply conservative. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary,” James Madison said. They aren’t, so one is.

The American republic would consist of three branches, with each knowing and protecting its specific powers and duties. The legislative branch would have chambers representing the people and the states, holding the power of the purse and the power to make law. Congress would represent.

For the executive branch, the presidency. The holder of that office would be a single person elected by the nation and anticipated to be energetic. The president would act—declare a direction and lead.

The judiciary would be guardian of the Constitution and the rule of law. It would have the power to strike down laws judged unconstitutional. Alexander Hamilton: “No legislative act, therefore, contrary to the Constitution, can be valid.” An independent judiciary would judge.

All three would work together in a system of divided powers; no part would completely dominate. They’d be in constant tension with one another. Madison distilled it down: “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” This would tend to limit corruption and keep “eruptions of passion,” to borrow a phrase of Hamilton’s, from swaying things too immediately and dramatically. Madison especially thought pure direct democracy would prove unstable, a too-slight skiff heaved about in history’s seas. A rooted republic would be a mansion that could take heavy winds.

The republic they devised produced not efficiency but equilibrium. It established not only a system but a spirit. It has seen us through for 237 years.

Are we maintaining our republic? Is our equilibrium holding? The last nine months a lot of lines seem to have been crossed—in the use of the military, in redirecting the Justice Department to target the president’s enemies, real and perceived. There are many areas in which you’ve come to think: Isn’t the executive assuming powers of the Congress here? Why is Congress allowing this? The executive branch takes on authority to bend its foes, defeat them. You ask: Is all this constitutional? The president “jokes” that he may not accept the Constitution’s two-term presidential limit. Are you laughing?

The 250th anniversary of July 4, 1776, comes up next year, and many of us are rereading the old documents. The past week I’ve talked to two historians, one rightish, one leftish, and both conversations turned toward Thomas Jefferson’s stinging bill of particulars against King George III in the Declaration of Independence.

They resonate in unexpected ways: “For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world.” “He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us.” “He has kept among us, in

times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our Legislatures.” “He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people.” “Obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither.”

The Founders didn’t want any of that. It’s why they created a republic.

The tearing down of the East Wing of the White House also seems, in this context of concern, disturbing. White House defenders dismiss qualms as pearl clutching—a big vital building’s gotta grow, it’s been torn down and built up before, we need more room.

But all this was done without public demand or support, and was done in a way that was abrupt, complete, unstoppable. Congress has the power of the purse for such projects but the president says no, our wonderful donors are paying for it, but the names of the donors were not quickly revealed. Your imagination was forced to go to—why? Might certain bad actors be buying influence? Crypto kings, billionaires needing agency approvals, felons buying pardons, AI chieftains on the prowl. Might the whole thing be open to corruption? Would it even have been attempted in a fully functioning, sharp and hungry republic? Or only a tired one that’s being diminished?

The photos of the tearing down of the East Wing were upsetting because they felt like a metaphor for the idea that history itself can be made to disappear.

I started with Trump supporters and end with them. They feel joy at real and recent triumphs, but deep down are rightly anxious about the world. Artificial intelligence, nukes, everything out of control, a cultural establishment that hates you. We may have to make some readjustments or revisions in our constitutional traditions, we’re in endgame time.

It all gives you a feeling of nihilism, something you’ve never felt in your entire honestly constructive life, and it’s so shocking that for a moment it leaves you giddy, and in the end, having been broken down a bit, you wind up laughing last week at a video in which an American president put a crown on his head in the cockpit of a fighter jet, flies over America, and drops human waste on it.

You just laugh, when nothing like that ever would have made you laugh before, and in fact would have hurt your heart.

Nine months in we’ve got to be thinking about these things.

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Substack

SABOTAGE

Federal agents at the polls. ICE in the shadows. Democracy on a clock.

By Closer to the Edge

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The Trump regime isn't hiding a damn thing anymore. Federal "election monitors" are being deployed into California and New Jersey — not to safeguard democracy, but to pre-fabricate the excuse to overturn it. The game is obvious: plant federal agents in the room, then claim they witnessed something suspicious the moment voters choose a result Dear Leader doesn't like.

And let's be crystal clear: this entire operation began with a request from the Republican Party itself. Not civil rights advocates. Not voting access groups. Not independent watchdogs. No — the same gang still marinating in the spoiled meat of the "stolen 2020" fantasy is now inviting federal power into local elections the way a vulture circles a dying animal — not to save it, but to feast on what's left of the carcass.

Harmeet Dhillon — now running the Civil Rights Division because apparently irony has been assassinated — is sending federal personnel on a mission: Stand around with lanyards and clipboards, say nothing, do nothing, then later claim they "saw irregularities." That's all they need. They're not looking for fraud — they're creating an observation they can weaponize.

This is a pre-written alibi, not election protection.

Gavin Newsom is right to pull the fire alarm. He sees what's coming: the second Prop. 50 passes, the regime will howl that the election was rigged — and now they'll have federal agents to point to as "proof." "We had our people there. They saw things. They were concerned." Concern trolling with the power of the state — that's the play.

And it gets darker. Because Newsom is also warning about the next phase: ICE and Border Patrol near polling places. Let's spell that out without euphemism: they want brown voters looking over their shoulder while deciding whether they feel safe enough to cast a ballot. They want fear in the air, uniforms by the door, and intimidation baked into the process. Not to prevent illegal voting — but to discourage legal voting from the "wrong" Americans.

That's not election integrity. That's authoritarian conditioning.

We've seen this model in collapsing democracies across history: First, claim elections can't be trusted. Then, inject the federal government into the process. Then, declare the results invalid. Then, replace "will of the people" with "will of the leader." The monitors are not the end of the story — they are the pilot episode of a series that ends with the Constitution in a shallow grave.

This is not about transparency. It's about control. It's about narrative. It's about installing a political cheat code: the only legitimate outcome is their victory — everything else is fraud.

Prop. 50 threatens Republican power. That's why California is the test site. Not because there's a problem — but because the regime needs a grievance to point at later. They're building the conspiracy theory first, and the evidence later. That is the authoritarian blueprint. It has never ended in freedom.

Voters are not being protected. They are being softened up.

And if people wait until the certification crisis to wake up, it will be too late. The theft isn't coming in the middle of the night — it's happening right now, in daylight, with official badges, staged legitimacy, and the language of "security" disguising the slow suffocation of democracy.

Newsom is shouting "wake up." He's right.

This is the theft before the theft.

And if California and New Jersey don't slam the door on this now, the rest of the country will learn what comes next — the hard way.