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The Attack on Paul Pelosi and America's Long History of Political Violence



A San Francisco police officer stands guard in front of the home of U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) on October 28, 2022 in San Francisco, California. Paul Pelosi, the husband of U.S. Speaker of the house Nancy Pelosi, was violently attacked in their home by an intruder. One arrest has been made. Speaker Pelosi was not at home at the time of the attack. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

BY **JEREMI SURI**

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Civil War By Other Means:

America's Long and Unfinished

Fight for Democracy

Surrounded by law enforcement, the fugitive, John Wilkes Booth, refused to surrender. “I struck for my country,” he explained. “A country that groaned beneath this tyranny, and prayed for this end.” Abraham Lincoln’s assassin believed in the righteousness of his cause until the very end. He died from a gunshot wound as he resisted arrest, with the final words: “I did what I thought was best.”

History shows that violence is deeply engrained in American politics. It is a weapon wielded by powerful groups against elected leaders who challenge their power. It is used to prevent reforms, attack diversity, and scare citizens into submission. The political violence

in our nation's history, exemplified by Booth, is organized and purposeful. It is normalized by rhetoric that justifies it, and often encourages it.

Booth was not alone in believing that resistance to the political changes advocated by Republicans, especially the end of slavery, justified the murder of elected leaders. After Lincoln's assassination Southern writers defended Booth's violence, and they called for more. "There is no reason to believe," one of the most

popular newspapers explained “that Booth in killing Lincoln was actuated by malice or vulgar ambition.” What motivated the assassin? “God Almighty ordered this event,” according to a widely-read Houston newspaper. The assassin “freed us from the threatened yoke of a tyrant.” The warning was clear: other advocates of Republican politics in the Confederacy would face the merciless “finger of God’s providence.”

Language advocating violence against political adversaries expanded after Booth’s act, and it encouraged more of the same. The Civil War came home to the Confederacy because those who had fought against the Union Army now turned their guns on those who sought to change their region from within, particularly African-American citizens. From Memphis, Tennessee in 1866 to Colfax, Louisiana in 1873, to Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898 white mobs assassinated Republican officials

who challenged their domination of businesses, schools, and local governments. They flagrantly bullied Republican reformers into submission by killing selected figures in very public ways. The mutilated bodies hanged from trees in the center of many towns—and the publicly raped women—were a warning to anyone who dared to question the Democratic Party and its white Southern leaders.

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You Eat
Oatmeal
Every
Day,
This Is
What
Happens**



BY GUNDRYMD

Violent intimidation worked. After a surge of African-American voters

in 1868, and a wave of elected Republicans across the former Confederacy, the region settled into a century of white Democratic dominance. Right-wing extremist groups, like the Ku Klux Klan and the Red Shirts, policed communities to keep disadvantaged groups in their place. As late as the Second World War, repeated lynchings dissuaded judges and other officials from advocating serious reforms. The brutal murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964, and the non-conviction of their assailants, was evidence that vigilante justice was alive and well.

Vengeful words do not cause violence, but they make it more common by dehumanizing the target and valorizing the assailant. Thousands of white men, like Booth, who felt threatened by rising groups around them acted on the message they received to kill perceived “tyrants.” The politicians, newspapers, and other speakers who circulated violent

language knew what they were doing. Bullying is an old and effective technique for holding on to power. Social media only amplifies the intimidation.

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In recent years, Republicans have adopted this playbook. Leaders of the party have called for the “execution” of Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. They have circulated memes with guns pointed at her head. The Republican House minority leader (and perhaps soon-to-be speaker of the chamber) threatened to hit Pelosi over the head with a gavel at a recent fund-raiser. And, of course, the insurrectionists who broke into the Capitol on January 6, 2021 promised to “kill Pelosi” if they found her.

A follower of this rhetoric on the Internet came close. On the morning of October 28 David Wayne DePape allegedly broke into

Nancy Pelosi's home. He reportedly later told the FBI that he "was going to hold Nancy hostage" because she was the "leader of the pack of lies told by the Democratic Party." DePape reportedly wanted to break her kneecaps so "she would then have to be wheeled into Congress, which would show other members of Congress there were consequences to actions."

DePape's goal allegedly seems to have been to intimidate Democrats and their supporters. He referred to the founding fathers and claimed he too was fighting "tyranny." He allegedly attacked Pelosi's husband's skull with a hammer in front of the police because he believed his attack on her progressive "lies" was justified and supported by millions.

We can acknowledge the problems of mental illness without denying the politics that motivate DePape and many others. Like Booth, DePape was following a script for resisting change through violence.

Like his Jim Crow predecessors, he was defending inherited white male power against those who dared to challenge it, in this case a prominent woman from the Bay Area—"Nancy," he and so many others shout with derision. And as before, the promoters of the rhetoric that seems to have motivated DePape did not disavow his behavior. Republican leaders said little beyond pro forma sympathies, and some joked about it or alleged a leftwing conspiracy or something tawdry.

More political violence is likely in coming weeks as a hard-fought and bitter midterm election comes to a close, and an even angrier presidential election season begins. The rhetoric encouraging bullying is as pervasive as in Booth's time, and it works for Republicans who want to discourage voting, immigration, abortions, and even the teaching of uncomfortable history. Thanks to lax gun laws, Americans own more guns than ever before.

Because political violence works we cannot expect it to end on its own. Change came to the South after the Civil War only when the federal government prosecuted violent actors who had been exonerated by local authorities. This was the crucial work of the Justice Department, beginning in the late 1950s. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, like Ulysses Grant more than eighty years earlier, used the U.S. military to enforce the law on city streets and school grounds. President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation creating additional forms of federal enforcement, especially for voting rights. With these federal protections, courageous civil rights activists, like the late John Lewis, began to vote out the violent segregationists and replace them with new, more diverse elected officials.

The backsliding on federal enforcement of the law under President Donald Trump, combined with increasingly violent

Republican rhetoric, has taken our country backwards into its violent history. Without redoubled federal action, and concerted efforts to denounce and limit violent rhetoric, we should expect more attacks on the families of elected officials, and, sadly, maybe even prominent assassinations and new efforts towards a coup.

Our history is a warning against complacency about political violence; it offers a strong condemnation for those who encourage it. Democracy is best served when leaders of all kinds unmistakably denounce the *words and deeds* that target public officials for physical harm. The condemnations of political violence can never be too loud or too frequent.

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