

Paul Krugman Issues a Warning About What We All Know Is Coming

The *New York Times* columnist sees calamity on the horizon for Trump's America.



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In September of 2001 the Administration of George W. Bush was running into trouble. A President who had lost the popular vote, installed into office only through a hotly contested Supreme Court decision, had nonetheless behaved from the start as if he possessed a mandate, eagerly dismantling his predecessor's achievements and turning the country on a hard rightward course, following a strategy that had been carefully concealed from the public during the campaign.

The public reaction was swift and negative—Bush's own popularity tanked precipitously as the public reacted to an agenda most had not realized they had voted for. Prior to September 11th his approval levels had dropped to the lowest¹ of his still-young Presidency.

All of that was transformed in a matter of hours, as the nation witnessed the worst terror attack America had ever experienced. Before the rubble had even been sifted to identify the bodies, Bush's popularity skyrocketed to 90%. Within a matter of weeks he began the process of lying us into an unnecessary war that had been planned prior to the attacks, using those same attacks as his justification. That war destabilized the entire Middle East and resulted in hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of pointless deaths.

Meanwhile, here at home, dissent was shouted down as unpatriotic. The Right Wing media outlets labeled protesters as traitors, and nearly all the so-called conventional news sources either abetted or encouraged the Administration's efforts, which soon instigated torture as an accepted practice, threw out the Geneva conventions, and instituted a web of foreign and domestic surveillance, the parameters of which are still undisclosed. Despite the fact that we were spending a trillion dollars for war, massive tax cuts were instituted benefitting only the wealthy.

Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman, writing for the *New York Times*², believes the situation we now find ourselves in, with Donald Trump holding the levers of power, is incomparably worse than anything the country faced with Bush or Cheney:

We're only three weeks into the Trump administration, but it's already clear that any hopes that Mr. Trump and those around him would be even slightly ennobled by the responsibilities of office were foolish. Every day brings further evidence that this is a man who completely conflates the national

¹ <https://www.gallup.com/poll/7591/bush-approval-drops-below-60-first-time-since-911.aspx>

² https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/opinion/when-the-fire-comes.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0

interest with his personal self-interest, and who has surrounded himself with people who see it the same way. And each day also brings further evidence of his lack of respect for democratic values.

The one positive thing that can be said about the Bush Administration is that it did not provoke the attacks of 9/11. Despite clear and well-documented early warning signs (which were ignored by Bush), the attacks, however carefully planned, were a shock to everyone, Bush included. And when the Courts began to rein in Bush and Cheney's abuses of power, while they were surely displeased—even irate—they never stooped so low as to undermine the basic institution of the Judiciary. As a result, the country slowly returned to a sense of normality because our institutions held up against the onslaughts.

Trump has already gone out of his way to provoke another terror attack on this country. By vilifying and demonizing not just Muslims by attempting to bar their entry into the country, but even equating those those who cross the Mexican border with the worst types of criminals imaginable, he has deliberately laid the groundwork for some type of retaliation. He has, in fact, invited it. And, as Krugman notes, he seems to want it:

The really striking thing about Mr. Trump's Twitter tirade, however, was his palpable eagerness³ to see an attack on America, which would show everyone the folly of constraining his power:

Krugman is referring to this "Tweet":

Just cannot believe a judge would put our country in such peril. If something happens blame him and court system. People pouring in. Bad!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 5, 2017

What Trump has done in attacking the very Judges and Courts that have (thus far) placed restraints upon his arbitrary abuse of power is to tie those restraints directly to the potential for further acts of terrorism against the country. He is telling us, in a very cold, cynical way, that he will consider himself blameless if we are attacked, with the unmistakable implication that such an attack would justify abandoning any constraints or limitations on his own powers:

Never mind the utter falsity of the claim that bad people are "pouring in," or for that matter of the whole premise behind the ban. What we see here is the most powerful man in the world blatantly telegraphing his intention to use national misfortune to grab even more power. And the question becomes, who will stop him?

It is abundantly clear that the malevolent cast of characters who make up his "inner circle" will do nothing to stop Trump from taking full advantage to exploit the public's fear and grief in the event of a large-scale terror event. His closest advisors, a white supremacist with a history of anti-Islamic hatred, and a general obsessed with Islamophobia in charge of the military, appear absolutely thrilled at the prospect of provoking an attack. They will not help us. In fact they would author the Orders that would attempt to initiate deportations and surveillance, limit speech and assembly, or otherwise revoke or "suspend" Due Process for certain "targeted" groups.

Neither will the Republican-dominated Senate, which, for all its phony pretensions of disapproval, is well on the way to confirming the most abominably incompetent President's cabinet in the nation's history. Neither they nor their ideological compatriots in control of the House of Representatives are going to lift a finger to help us.

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-tweets-on-so-called-judge-after-travel-ban-stay/>

The Judiciary does stand in his way, for now. But the nature of the Judiciary is not to be proactive but to react, most often after the damage has already been done. Trump is doing his best to undermine the Judiciary by his now-constant attacks on Judges who stand in the way of his exercise of arbitrary power. Ultimately they can only do so much.

No, when the terror attack comes—and Trump and Bannon are making damned sure that it does come—it will only be the common people, banding together, that will be able to stop him. If we let fear affect our judgments, an aftermath with rules imposed by people who have nothing but contempt for our institutions will be worse than anything terrorists could do to destroy us.

In the end, I fear, it's going to rest on the people — on whether enough Americans are willing to take a public stand. We can't handle another post-9/11-style suspension of doubt about the man in charge; if that happens, America as we know it will soon be gone.

We need to be ready.

What is coming will literally be the fight of our lives.

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Opinion
By Paul Krugman
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When the Fire Comes

What will you do when terrorists attack, or U.S. friction with some foreign power turns into a military confrontation? I don't mean in your personal life, where you should keep calm and carry on. I mean politically. Think about it carefully: The fate of the republic may depend on your answer.

Of course, nobody knows whether there will be a shocking, 9/11-type event, or what form it might take. But surely there's a pretty good chance that sometime over the next few years something nasty will happen — a terrorist attack on a public place, an exchange of fire in the South China Sea, something. Then what?

After 9/11, the overwhelming public response was to rally around the commander in chief. Doubts about the legitimacy of a president who lost the popular vote and was installed by a bare majority on the Supreme Court were swept aside. Unquestioning support for the man in the White House was, many Americans believed, what patriotism demanded.

The truth was that even then the urge toward national unity was one-sided, with Republican exploitation of the atrocity for political gain beginning almost immediately. But people didn't want to hear about it; I got angry mail, not just from Republicans but from Democrats, whenever I pointed out⁴ what was going on.

Unfortunately, the suspension of critical thinking ended as such suspensions usually do — badly. The Bush administration exploited the post-9/11 rush of patriotism to take America into an unrelated war, then used the initial illusion of success in that war to ram through huge tax cuts for the wealthy.

⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/25/opinion/reckonings-an-alternate-reality.html>

Bad as that was, however, the consequences if Donald Trump finds himself similarly empowered will be incomparably worse.

We're only three weeks into the Trump administration, but it's already clear that any hopes that Mr. Trump and those around him would be even slightly ennobled by the responsibilities of office were foolish. Every day brings further evidence that this is a man who completely conflates the national interest with his personal self-interest, and who has surrounded himself with people who see it the same way. And each day also brings further evidence of his lack of respect for democratic values.

You might be tempted to say that the latest flare-up, over *Nordstrom's* decision to drop Ivanka Trump's clothing line, is trivial. But it isn't. For one thing, until now it would have been inconceivable that a sitting president would attack a private company for decisions that hurt his family's business interests.

But what's even worse is the way Sean Spicer, Mr. Trump's spokesman, framed the issue: *Nordstrom's* business decision was a “direct attack”⁵ on the president's policies. *L'état, c'est moi*.

Mr. Trump's attack on Judge James Robart, who put a stay on his immigration ban, was equally unprecedented. Previous presidents, including Barack Obama, have disagreed with and complained about judicial rulings. But that's very different from attacking the very right of a judge — or, as the man who controls 4,000 nuclear weapons⁶ put it, a “so-called judge” — to rule against the president.

The really striking thing about Mr. Trump's *Twitter* tirade, however, was his palpable eagerness⁷ to see an attack on America, which would show everyone the folly of constraining his power:

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Don't talk about institutions, and the checks and balances they create. Institutions are only as good as the people who serve them. Authoritarianism, American-style, can be averted only if people have the courage to stand against it. So who are these people?

It certainly won't be Mr. Trump's inner circle. It won't be Jeff Sessions, his new attorney general, with his long history of contempt for voting rights. It might be the courts — but Mr. Trump is doing all he can to delegitimize judicial oversight in advance.

What about Congress? Well, its members like to give patriotic speeches. And maybe, just maybe, there are enough Republican senators who really do care about America's fundamental values to cross party lines in their defense.

But given what we've seen so far, that's just hopeful speculation.

⁵ <http://time.com/4664326/donald-trump-ivanka-nordstrom-sean-spicer/>

⁶ <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

⁷ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-tweets-on-so-called-judge-after-travel-ban-stay/>

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- ❑ A version of this article appeared in print on February 10, 2017, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: "When the Fire Comes".