Twitter Thread by Megan McArdle



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It turns out to be bad idea for people who have large public microphones to act as if they're venting to their 120 Facebook friends.

> Sidney Powell Sued by Dominion for $1.3 Billion Over Vote-Fraud Claims - she deserves to be bankrupted financially - she already is intellectually and morally bankrupt. https://t.co/77Tyulfdhi
>
> — Jeffrey Flier (@jflier) January 8, 2021

And oh, look, this is a perfect segue to a tweetstorm about my latest column! https://t.co/KLt5LF0H6A

So I've been saying Trump is dangerous basically since the beginning. Not because I thought he was going to cancel elections and become a dictator; I didn't think he had the competence, or American institutions the vulnerability, for that.

I thought he was dangerous because he said stuff no politician could say, and that was corrosive to American democracy in all sorts of ways. What happened on Wednesday doesn't need to itself be a coup in order to pose a mortal long-term danger to the Republic.

Also I didn't want the impulsive, belligerent narcissist to have access to nuclear launch codes, but that's a discussion for another time.

I got pushback over and over. "It's just words! He doesn't *do* anything."

But as we saw vividly demonstrated on Wednesday, words are how political leaders encourage their followers to do dangerous, anti-democratic stuff. There's a reason we freak out when political leaders say those kinds of words.

It's hard for politicians to get their supporters to attack congress using semaphore, or mime, or waggling their butt like a bee on a nectar high. In forbidding politicians to make certain kinds of utterances, we are making our democratic institutions safer in a very concrete way

In retrospect, I think one reason this was so hard for his supporters to take was that they perceived this tut-tutting as an attack on *them and their friends*, who were often saying some pretty extreme stuff at parties or on Facebook.

And before my lefty followers sound the domestic terrorism alarm, let me point out that I have heard some truly blood-curdling rage-storms from left-leaning friends. Lots of folks say stuff in the heat of an emotional moment that they would never really do, or support.

I myself once suggested to a German bank president that people who drive the speed limit in the left-hand lane should face a firing squad. I had a little whiskey in me and was feeling puckish. I am also vehemently opposed to the death penalty for any crime at all.

And most of the time it is basically harmless when ordinary folks swap their theories about how the election was actually stolen. Democrats who just got mad at me for saying this, should remember those hobbyists were all on the left in 2004, and very numerous. Nothing came of it

These things become more dangerous the closer they get to power. It was, in fact, deeply offensive and unpatriotic when Barbara Boxer alluded to a voting machine conspiracy theory in congress, and Democrats should have stomped on it, hard.

However.

It was way more dangerous when Trump signaled that he was willing to dive deep into this stuff and wallow in it, rather than performing a little quickie fan service for the conspiracy theory LARPers on the party fringe.

Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way. Way.

More dangerous.

Trump didn't raise an objection on the floor that almost no one ever heard. He used his megaphone--the largest megaphone in the world--to sell a baseless conspiracy to his followers. And then spur the truest believers to act on it.

IT takes a politician to form that kind of focal point. Most people idly swapping calumny with like-minded friends would never dream of doing something about it; even the ones who do wouldn't have any particular ideas abotu what to do.

Yes, some tiny number might turn to individual acts of terror, which is awful. But for a concerted attack on Democracy itself, you need a figure like Trump.

Now, we got lucky in multiple wasys: Trump is not very competent or hard-working, and thus his attacks were badly planned & executed; US institutions are strong, and wouldn't let them succeed; and he is old and doesn't have time to rebuild his movement and come back in 10 years

But American institutions are strong in significant part because we don't let politicians act like Donald Trump, particularly not when they get close to the white house. It's not a law of nature; it's something we're actively doing. If we stop doing it, we lose our immunity.

Anyway, point is that it was possible to think that what Trump was doing was immoral and evil, and that the man himself was unfit, while recognizing that regular people saying quite similar things on Facebook were neither a threat to democracy, nor

necessarily awful human beings.

(Some percentage of people saying anything on Facebook, even "I like puppies", will be awful human beings, of course.)

I'm not sure it was ever possible to communicate that distinction to Trump's followers. It would have been especially hard because of course many on the left resist making that distinction, and are even now winding up to tell me I'm a despicable apologist for whatever.

Still, I think it might have helped separate Trump from his followers if we'd been clearer that the expectations are higher for someone holding higher office--as we now see, for good reason--and were not out to get them, even if they were saying some of the same stuff.

Maybe not, of course; my husband thinks I'm a hopeless utopian. But I wish we'd tried.

Anyway, the column itself is on *why* all the taboos Trump violated were good and necessary--something that should have gone without saying, but obviously didn't. So:

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