Twitter Thread by Nicole Hemmer

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Donald Trump is leaving the White House within the hour. Re-reading his inaugural speech from four years ago, it's clear the two words he wanted to define his presidency were "America first." But the two words that ultimately did were "American carnage." /1

Even the opening lines are a reminder of what his presidency cost us: "Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power." That tradition ended on Jan. 6. /2

(He also thanks President and First Lady Obama "for their gracious aid throughout this transition," which suggests he can recognize grace, but not actually offer it.) /3

The speech was packed with familiar promises about rebuilding the military, bringing back jobs, boosting the economy, building the wall. Trump loved talking about infrastructure even then, though "Infrastructure Week" ended up as a punchline, not a program. /4

The promises were almost all broken. The unemployment rate is 2 points higher than when he took office, the stock market is up but the economy is weak, international alliances are frayed and America's reputation is in tatters. /5

In his inaugural, Trump talked about how the U.S. stood ready "to free the Earth from the miseries of disease." Instead, it has failed to even adequately respond to a pandemic that, in less than a year, has killed 400,000 Americans. /6

There is, though, one part of the speech that held true. Posing as a populist, Trump talked about returning power to "the people." The people he imagined were his supporters, who *did* feel empowered: empowered to reject masks, empowered to storm the Capitol. /7

Violent far-right groups felt empowered, too. The threat of right-wing violence, which had grown during the Obama years, grew more visible and deadly in the Trump years. Some adopted Trump's slogan, America First, and his banner. /8

But those who opposed Trump grew empowered, too. From the Women's March that flooded DC with peaceful protesters the day after inauguration, to the rush to airports to stop the Muslim ban, to the Black Lives Matter uprisings, Americans organized in historic ways. /9

Civic participation, from protests to organizing to petitions, became a way of life for many Americans. An irony of the Trump years is that, while it saw existential threats to democracy, it was also a time of massive voter turnout and active participation in politics. /10

More Americans no doubt understand the importance of democracy now in a way they didn't before. Of course, more Americans are skeptical of democracy than they were at the start of the Trump era. That's one of the many challenges we face going forward. /11

Trump reoriented the axis of American politics from liberal vs. conservative to liberal vs. illiberal, pro-democracy vs. anti-democracy. That legacy will last long after he leaves the White House. /12

In his inaugural address, Trump used "American carnage" as a descriptor, an American wasteland he vowed to heal. Instead, "American carnage" turned out to be a promise, one of the few that, in the final hours of his presidency, he managed to fulfill. 13/13