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Don't Let Trump Make America Into an Image of Himself



By **Jamelle Bouie**
Opinion Columnist

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Carrie Mae Weems, “Echoes for Marian” (2014)

There have been several American Republics.

I know that sounds strange. The unusual stability of our constitutional system means we don't think of our political orders in those terms — that's for the French, now on their Fifth Republic.

But the long endurance of our constitutional text — to say nothing of our cultural reverence for the framers as oracles — obscures the structural transformations that mark our political history and experience. The American Republic of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe is not the Republic of Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren and Henry Clay, which is not the Republic of Ulysses Grant and so on.

It's not just that with each era, Americans brought fresh eyes to the Constitution, exercising powers that their predecessors might have rejected as tantamount to tyranny. It's that they organized themselves politically in new and novel ways and reconfigured the Republic for their own purposes. The Americans of the framers' era could not imagine the mass politics of Jacksonian America, which could not imagine the biracial politics and unified national state of Reconstruction.

This isn't an idle academic exercise. To recognize that there have been several iterations of these United States is to clarify the stakes for today's election. It's not that we'll lose America if Donald Trump wins a second term. The United

States will endure. But his victory might mark the end of one Republic and the start of another, although “Republic” may not be the right word for what comes next.

The American Republic we have was forged in the fire of the 1930s, the 1940s and the consensus that followed. It is defined by an administrative state that takes an active role in the management of the economy; by social insurance that supports most Americans with some protection from the vicissitudes of the market; by courts that restrain the power of the individual states to act on their citizens; and by the federal protection of civil rights as well as a broad interpretation of the Constitution that secures rights of privacy, including the right to contraception and the right to an abortion.

Of course, this settlement was never quite settled. It was contested from the moment it took shape. And since Trump won office in 2016 — and with it, the opportunity to remake the Supreme Court — conservatives have notched critical victories against each part of the foundation of the current Republic. In just the past two years, the court has gutted the ability of federal agencies to interpret statutes and issue rules, all but made it illegal for public institutions to directly address racial inequality, undermined federal protection of voting rights and unraveled the Constitution’s long-established protection of the right to bodily autonomy, threatening the right to privacy as a result.

Despite these victories, the problem for conservatives is that they have not yet had the chance to consolidate these victories using the national state. A second Trump victory gives them that chance. What else is the Heritage Foundation’s “Mandate for Leadership” — the now infamous Project 2025 — but a blueprint for weaponizing the federal government against what remains of the existing political order? With Trump in the White House, social conservatives can use executive action to try to ban abortion; MAGA nationalists can end most forms of immigration, commence mass deportations and leverage civil rights laws against imagined “anti-white” discrimination; and reactionary opponents of social insurance can weaken Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. And this is to say nothing of Trump’s own plans to rule as an autocrat under a court-sanctioned theory of unitary executive authority.

Should the United States take this path on Election Day, then we can expect the America we have to fade into the past, to be supplanted by an American Republic that is far more exclusive — and far more resistant to change. A majority of Americans may not want it, they may not even expect it, but they’ll be on the way to living in a United States that treats the “rights revolution” of the 1960s and ’70s, to say nothing of the New Deal, as a legal and political mistake.

The 1860 presidential election usually wins the contest for the most consequential election in American history. After all, it put the United States on an irrevocable path to disunion and war. But as important as 1860 was, I tend to think of 1864 as the critical campaign. In that election, conducted during wartime in an extraordinary demonstration of the nation’s commitment to its Constitution, a national unity coalition of Republican and Democratic unionists faced off against “Peace Democrats” whose main objective was to sue for peace and end the war at all costs. They would leave slavery intact, affirm the total sovereignty of the individual states, and should Confederates want to return, welcome them back into the Union with open arms.

The stakes were as high as they’ve ever been, as is evident from the first words of the platform of the National Union Party — the name given to the unionist coalition. “Resolved,” it reads: “That it is the highest duty of every American citizen to maintain against all their enemies the integrity of the Union and the paramount authority of the Constitution and laws of the United States.”

If Abraham Lincoln had lost re-election, the United States would have still stood. There would have been, even in disunion, an American Republic. But the nature of that Republic — the meaning of it — would have fundamentally changed.

So now the question is: Will the meaning of our Republic change or will we hold fast to the egalitarian ideal that shapes this country as we understand it? Will we keep striving to make good on a more inclusive vision of American democracy?