

The clear and present danger of Trump's enduring 'Big Lie'

By [MELISSA BLOCK \(/PEOPLE/MELISSA-BLOCK\)](#) • DEC 23, 2021



(https://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/shared/npr/styles/x_large/nprshared/202201/1065786745.jpg)

Pro-Trump rioters storm the U.S. Capitol following a rally with President Donald Trump on Jan. 6. His supporters gathered in the nation's capital to protest the ratification of Joe Biden's Electoral College victory.

SAMUEL CORUM / GETTY IMAGES

It's been nearly a year since the United States suffered an unprecedented attack on constitutional democracy.

When a violent mob stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, the goal was to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and install Donald Trump to a second term.

Call it an insurrection or a coup attempt, it was fueled by what's known as the "Big Lie": the verifiably false (<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-michael-pence-electoral-college-elections-health-2d9bd47a8bd3561682ac46c6b3873a10>) assertion that Trump won. Joe Biden won 306 votes in the Electoral College (<https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/2020>), while Trump received 232. In the popular vote, Biden won by more than 7 million votes (<https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/2020presgeresults.pdf>).

Many are warning that over the past year, that "big lie" of a stolen election has grown more entrenched and more dangerous.

"I've never been more scared (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3926381) about American democracy than I am right now, because of the metastasizing of the 'big lie,' " says election law expert Rick Hasen, co-director of the Fair Elections and Free Speech Center (<https://www.law.uci.edu/centers/fefs/>) at the University of California, Irvine.



(http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2021/12/20/gettyimages-1294946010_custom-4cff1e54e7c93c4e37588532f1b08f4989098169.jpg)

A rioter identified in court documents as Josiah Colt of Meridian, Idaho, jumps from the public gallery to the floor of the Senate chamber on Jan. 6. Colt has pleaded guilty to one felony count.

WIN MCNAMEE / GETTY IMAGES

"This is not the kind of thing I expected to ever worry about in the United States," Hasen says. "I kind of feel like a climate scientist from five years ago or [an] expert on viruses a couple of years ago, sounding the alarm and just hoping that we're not too late already."

A "big lie" with roots in history

In rallies across the country, Trump continues to hammer on the fiction that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him.

Speaking at a rally in Georgia in September (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?514951-1/president-trump-rally-perry-georgia&event=514951&playEvent&auto>), Trump trumpeted his familiar, baseless claim that the election was "corrupt" and "rigged."

"I have no doubt that we won, and we won big," Trump said. "The headlines claiming that Biden won are fake news — and a very big lie."

A couple of weeks later, he repeated the fiction at a rally in Iowa (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?515118-1/president-trump-holds-rally-iowa>). "We didn't lose," he insisted to a crowd that rewarded him with chants of "Trump won!"

By inverting the narrative, attempting to slough off the "big lie" and pin it instead on his opponents, Trump exploited an age-old tactic, says Yale University history professor Timothy Snyder.



http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2021/12/20/gettyimages-1345757630-edit_custom-b0bec2f0bb7a83b76d298fff31640dd613631721.jpg

Former President Donald Trump repeated his lies about a "totally corrupt" election at a rally at the Iowa State Fairgrounds on Oct. 9. "We didn't lose," he told the crowd, which rewarded him with chants of "Trump won!"

SCOTT OLSON / GETTY IMAGES

"Part of the character of the 'big lie' is that it turns the powerful person into the victim," he says. "And then that allows the powerful person to actually exact revenge, like it's a promise for the future."

Snyder, author of the books *The Road to Unfreedom*

(<https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2018/06/07/going-down-timothy-snyders-road-to-unfreedom>) and *On Tyranny* (<https://www.npr.org/2017/03/06/518858371/on-tyranny-explores-new-threats-facing-american-political-system>), has spent years studying the ways tyrants skewer truth. Snyder points to Hitler's original definition (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joseph-goebbels-on-the-quot-big-lie-quot>) of the "big lie" in his manifesto, *Mein Kampf* and the ways he used it to blame Jews for all of Germany's woes.

"The lie is so big that it reorders the world," Snyder says. "And so part of telling the big lie is that you immediately say it's the other side that tells the big lie. Sadly, but it's just a matter of record, all of that is in *Mein Kampf*."

A lie that's become embedded in public opinion

Over the past year, Trump's lie that election fraud cost him the White House has become firmly anchored in public opinion.

According to a CNN poll (<http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2021/images/09/15/rel5e.-elections.pdf>) conducted this summer, fully 36% of Americans do not believe that President Biden legitimately won the election. Among Republicans, that number leaps to 78%.

In an NPR/PBS *Newshour*/Marist poll (<https://maristpoll.marist.edu/polls/npr-pbs-newshour-marist-national-poll-trust-in-elections-threat-to-democracy-biden-approval-november-2021/>) conducted in October, just 34% of Republicans say they trust that elections are fair, while 75% of Republicans say Trump has a legitimate claim that there were "real cases of fraud that changed the results." Just 2% of Democrats agreed with that statement.

What's more, says Timothy Snyder, "the 'big lie' is not just in people's minds. It's also now in the law books."

Snyder points to the raft of new laws (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2021>) passed in Republican-led states that restrict voting. Over the past year, at least 19 states have passed laws limiting ballot access.



(http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2021/12/21/210828_votingrightsmarch_turner_30_custom-4fc292d46fc79c37d45be40552161ebf26a1ba61.jpg).

Thousands came to Washington for the March On For Voting Rights on Aug. 28. Martin Luther King III, the Rev. Al Sharpton and Texas Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee are among those pictured.

TYRONE TURNER FOR NPR

In addition, Trump loyalists in battleground states are running for powerful offices (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/addressing-insider-threats-elections>) that control elections. These are candidates who are endorsed by Trump (<https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-09-20/trump-endorses-big-lie-proponents-for-state-election-posts>), because they've embraced his lie that he won the 2020 election.

And some Republican-controlled state legislatures have moved to seize power over elections (<https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/jul/14/are-state-legislators-really-seeking-power-overrul/>), opening a path where they could overrule voters and substitute their own slate of electors to choose the winner.

All of it, Snyder says, is a direct outcome of Trump's "big lie" and is deeply troubling for the future.

"All of those things set us up for a scenario where the candidate who loses by every measure, not just by the popular vote, but by the Electoral College, the candidate who loses by every measure will nevertheless be installed as president of the United States," Snyder says. "I think that is probably the most likely scenario in 2024 as things stand now."

That scenario needs to be confronted immediately, Snyder says: "It's right in front of our eyes. The most interesting and the most distressing thing about American news coverage right now is that we don't treat the end of democracy in America as the story. That is the story."

We delude ourselves, Snyder says, if we think we're immune from an anti-democratic turn. "We imagine that there's somehow this immovable American democratic background, which doesn't really exist," he says. "We can lose democracy just like anybody else can, just like most people have in the history of democracy. We can lose it, and we're losing it right now."

"The fierce urgency of now"

As of yet, the Democratic-led Congress has been unable to pass (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/us/politics/voting-rights-king-family.html>) legislation to protect voting rights, a fact that Carol Anderson, professor of African-American Studies at Emory University, finds appalling.

She argues that passing voting rights laws would "short-circuit the damage that the 'big lie' is doing and will do."

Anderson sees "a Democratic Party that does not understand that American democracy is hanging by a thread, and does not grapple with the fierce urgency of now."

We have been, in her words, "baptized in American exceptionalism" — the naive belief that the demise of democracy can't happen here.

"Even after you have had the insurrection," Anderson says, "even after you have had these legislatures write these laws figuring out not only how to stop Black people, brown people, indigenous people from voting, but also how to lower the guardrails of democracy that prevented Trump from being able to overturn the results in these states; so even after seeing this, to not move and do what needs to be done to protect this nation?" Anderson sighs. "It's unconscionable."



http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2021/12/20/gettyimages-1345710678_custom-badf54635ebb49b862adfd92ad5dc43cc509e2fe.jpg

Guests arrive for a rally with former President Donald Trump at the Iowa State Fairgrounds. Like Trump, his fans continue to perpetuate the "big lie."

SCOTT OLSON / GETTY IMAGES

For Anderson, author of the books *White Rage*

(<https://www.professorcarolanderson.org/white-rage>) and *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy* (<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/30/929669118/an-historic-vote-among-many>), Trump's lie about the election sprouts from the same twisted

roots as his birtherism lie (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/>), which is the conspiracy theory Trump peddled, falsely claiming that Barack Obama was born outside the U.S. and therefore ineligible to serve as president.

Linking both, she says, is a clear racist throughline.

"Foundational to that is the devaluation and the dismissing of American citizenship for Black people," Anderson says. "This is about, 'My nation is about the real Americans. And all of those folks aren't real Americans.' It is so vile. It is so racist. And it works. That's the thing, it works."

After all, Anderson says, if you repeat the lie enough times, it starts to sound like the truth.

A failed coup is practice for a successful one

In Congress, the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (<https://january6th.house.gov/>) has interviewed hundreds of witnesses to establish the truth of what happened that day.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., is one of just two Republicans on the committee. An outspoken Trump critic, he has announced he won't run for reelection.

Kinzinger compares conspiracy theories to a cancer eating away at the Republican Party, and feeding that cancer, he says, is the "big lie."

"The thing that's most concerning is that it has endured in the face of all evidence," he says. "And I've gotten to wonder if there is actually any evidence that would ever change certain people's minds."

Beyond his committee's mission of uncovering what happened on Jan. 6 itself, Kinzinger has broader questions.

"More importantly in my mind, what is the rot in the system that led up to Jan. 6? And where have we come since? And how do we stop anything like this from happening again?" he asks. "'Cause even though Jan. 6 technically failed, there's a lot of areas where you can learn from, if your goal is to overthrow a legitimate election and potentially do it successfully next time."

And that is precisely the lesson from history, says Yale professor Timothy Snyder.

"It wasn't enough, but next time, it could well be enough. And the fact that it's been rehearsed makes me worry," he says. "This is what historians and political scientists who study coups d'etat say. They say a failed coup is practice for a successful one."



http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2021/12/20/gettyimages-1230626963-edit_custom-3154e7d036283c82d2060953c541cc233494ee5e.jpg

Virginia National Guard soldiers march across the east side of the U.S. Capitol on their way to their guard posts on Jan. 16. After the riots at the U.S. Capitol Building, the FBI warned of additional threats in the nation's capital and in all 50 states.

SAMUEL CORUM / GETTY IMAGES

What we're potentially looking at, Snyder warns, is nothing less than the end of the democratic United States as we've come to know it.

"That's just the reality," he says. "And in order to prevent things from being frightening, you have to look right at them and say, 'OK, that's the monster. How can I disassemble it? How can I take it to pieces? How can I make sure that that story isn't our only story?' But it will be unless we tell it to ourselves straight."

We have to confront that reality, Snyder says, if we are to find the courage and conviction to do something about it.

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MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

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(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Multiple Capitol injuries. Multiple Capitol injuries.

BLOCK: When a violent mob stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, the goal was to overturn the results of the presidential election and install Donald Trump in a second term. Call it an insurrection or a coup attempt, it was fueled by the big lie - that Trump had won. Many warned that over the past year, that big lie has grown more entrenched and more dangerous. It's a fiction that Trump continues to hammer on any chance he gets, like at these rallies in the last few months.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DONALD TRUMP: I have no doubt that we won. And we won big. They rigged the election. And now - they say lost. We didn't lose. The headlines claiming that Biden won are fake news and a very big lie. You know...

BLOCK: See what Trump did there?

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

TRUMP: Fake news and a very big lie.

BLOCK: He flipped the narrative. It's an age-old tactic.

TIMOTHY SNYDER: Part of the character of the big lie is that it turns the powerful person into the victim. And then that allows the powerful person to actually exact revenge like it's a promise for the future.

BLOCK: Yale history professor Timothy Snyder has spent years studying the ways tyrants skewer truth. He points to Hitler's original definition of the big lie in his manifesto, "Mein Kampf," and how he used it to blame Jews for all of Germany's woes.

SNYDER: The lie is so big that it reorders the world. And so part of telling the big lie is that you immediately say it's the other side that tells the big lie. Sadly, but it's just a matter of record, all of that is in "Mein Kampf."

BLOCK: Over the past year, the big lie has become firmly anchored in public opinion. A recent CNN poll found that 78% of Republicans believe President Biden did not win the election. And according to an NPR/PBS Newshour/Marist poll, just 34% of Republicans trust that elections are fair.

SNYDER: The most distressing thing about American news coverage right now is that we don't treat the end of democracy in America as the story. That is the story. We imagine that there's somehow this immovable American, democratic background, which doesn't really exist. We can lose democracy just like anybody else can, just like most people have in the history of democracy. We can lose it. And we're losing it right now.

BLOCK: Consider the raft of new election laws enacted around the country. Snyder says what it adds up to...

SNYDER: Is that the big lie is not just in people's minds, it's also now in the law books.

BLOCK: In the last year, 19 states have passed new voting restrictions. We see Trump loyalists in battleground states running for powerful offices that control elections, candidates who are endorsed by Trump because they've embraced his lie that he won the 2020 election. And some Republican-controlled state legislatures have moved to seize

power over elections, opening a path where they could overrule voters and substitute their own slate of electors to choose the winner. All of it, Snyder says, a direct outcome of Trump's big lie.

SNYDER: All of those things set us up for a scenario where the candidate who loses by every measure, not just by the popular vote, but by the Electoral College - the candidate who loses by every measure will nevertheless be installed as president of the United States. I think that is probably the most likely scenario in 2024 as things stand now.

BLOCK: The democratic emergency is here today, says election law expert Rick Hasen.

RICK HASEN: I've never been more scared about American democracy than I am right now because of the metastasizing of the big lie.

BLOCK: Hasen, a professor at UC Irvine, warns there's now a well-established playbook for how to subvert an election.

HASEN: This is not the kind of thing I expected to ever worry about in the United States. But we're at a moment. I kind of feel like a climate scientist from five years ago or an expert on viruses a couple of years ago, sounding the alarm and just hoping that we're not too late already.

CAROL ANDERSON: I see a Democratic Party that does not understand that American democracy is hanging by a thread and does not grapple with the fierce urgency of now.

BLOCK: That's Carol Anderson, professor of African American Studies at Emory University. We have been, in her words, baptized in American exceptionalism, the naive belief that this can't happen here.

ANDERSON: Even after you have had the insurrection, even after you have had these legislatures write these laws, figuring out not only how to stop Black people, brown people, Indigenous people, from voting, but also how to lower the guardrails of democracy that prevented Trump from being able to overturn the results in these states. So even after seeing this, to not move and do what needs to be done to protect this nation, it's unconscionable.

BLOCK: For Anderson, author of the books "White Rage" and "One Person, No Vote," Trump's big lie about the election sprouts from the same twisted roots as his birtherism lie, the conspiracy theory Trump peddled falsely claiming that Barack Obama was born outside the U.S. and ineligible to serve as president. You can't ignore the clear, racist through line in both, she says.

ANDERSON: Foundational to that is the devaluation and the dismissing of American citizenship for Black people. This is about, my nation is about the real Americans. And all of those folks aren't real Americans. It is so vile. It is so racist. And it works. That's the thing, it works.

BLOCK: Because, Anderson says, if you repeat the lie enough times, it starts to sound like the truth. In Congress, a House select committee is working to establish the truth of what happened on January 6. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois is one of just two Republicans on the committee.

ADAM KINZINGER: Yeah. There's only two of us. But, you know, two is a mighty number, I guess.

BLOCK: Kinzinger, an outspoken Trump critic, has announced he won't run for reelection. He compares conspiracy theories to a cancer eating away at the Republican Party. And feeding that cancer is the big lie.

KINZINGER: The thing that's most concerning is that it has endured in the face of all evidence. And I've gotten to wonder if there is actually any evidence that would ever change certain people's minds.

BLOCK: Beyond his committee's mission of uncovering what happened on January 6 itself, Kinzinger has broader questions.

KINZINGER: More importantly, in my mind, what is the rot in the system that led up to January 6? And how do we stop anything like this from happening again? Because even though January 6 technically failed, there's a lot of areas where you can learn from if your goal is to overthrow a legitimate election and potentially do it successfully next time.

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SNYDER: I mean, this is what historians and political scientists who study coups d'etat say. They say a failed coup is practice for a successful one.

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