

Commentary

Yes, This Is a Revolution

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The battle for the survival of the United States of America is upon us. It has not come in the form of traditional civil war. There are no uniformed armies, competing flags, or alternate constitutions. The great showdown is not being fought within the physical limits of a battlefield. It is instead happening all around us and directly to us. It defines our culture, sustains our media, and gives new shape to our public and private institutions. In this fight, there is no distinction between what was once known as the culture war and politics rightly understood. The confrontation stretches through time and space, reframing our distant past even as it transforms the horizon, erupting from coast to coast, and constraining our lives in subtle and obvious ways. And it's happening too fast for us to take its full measure.

For partisans, it often feels as if everything stands or falls on the ideological battles of the day. But this is different. This is objectively real, and it's remaking the nation before our eyes.

We know it's different this time because the stakes are continually articulated by the enemies of the current order. They are demanding, and in some cases getting, a new and exotic country. The police are indeed being defunded. The statues are coming down. The heretics are being outed. The dissenters are being silenced. The buildings are burning, and the demands are ever growing.

In June, the editors of *Commentary* called this combination of mob violence, cultural torment, and public intimidation "the great unraveling." Since then, things have gotten appreciably worse.

The great unraveling at first consisted of riots and looting under the pretense of seeking justice for the recently killed George Floyd; the anarchist occupation of a section of Seattle; and a rash of accusations, confessions, and dismissals of individuals who showed insufficient fealty to the new anti-racist paradigm. At the time, extreme policy proposals, such as defunding municipal police departments, were subjects for popular discussion and debate. Everyday Americans swapped Black Lives Matter reading lists and strove, however misguidedly, to broaden their conception of racial inequity.

As of this writing, Portland, Oregon, has endured more than two months straight of anarchist violence directed at federal buildings and employees. In other cities—New York, Los Angeles, Richmond, Omaha, and Austin, to name a few—mob violence continues to erupt regularly, always connected to cries for justice and sometimes resulting in death. Accelerating the general dissolution, police forces have been successfully hobbled in response to the killing of George Floyd, and the resulting spike in murder and violent crime shows no sign of abating. All the while, armchair lynch mobs have continued to claim the scalps of those who veer from or merely stumble on the path to social-justice enlightenment. It is the full-time job of any American with a public presence to bow down before the identity cult. Professional athletes have mutated overnight into a congeries of Kaepernicks. As for the public, 62 percent of all Americans,

according to a poll by the CATO Institute, now say they're afraid to voice their political views lest they be punished professionally.

Leading media organizations, as they did from the start, lend their approval to all of it. After months of defending chaos in the streets as "mostly peaceful," the media elite is openly covering for a movement whose defining features are intimidation and mass violence. And having completed their Internet-assigned reading in black–white relations, a majority of Americans (56 percent, according to a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll) now find the United States guilty as charged of systemic racism.

Which is now all but beside the point, as perceived racism has less and less to do with the passions convulsing the nation. Statues of abolitionists—indeed, of Frederick Douglass—are torn down with no less vigor than those of slave owners. And the social-justice paradigm has proved capable of accommodating a growing number of grievances. "Cancel the rent," to take one example, has joined "defund the police" as a rallying cry for the mob. As law professor Amna A. Akbar explains in a July 11 *New York Times* essay: "The people making these demands want a new society. They want a break from prisons and the police, from carbon and rent." Toward the end of her essay, titled "The Left Is Remaking the World," Akbar writes: "And whatever you think of their demands, you have to be in awe of how they inaugurate a new political moment, as the left offers not just a searing critique, but practical ladders to radical visions."

Akbar's wish list is ambitious, but at least it's itemized. Other activists occupy the realm of the purely abstract, where the burden of citing specific complaints can be dispensed with altogether. "This is no longer a political issue," said one Portland protestor through his megaphone. "This is no longer a [policing] issue. This is no longer a government issue. This is no longer pointed at one thing. This is a humanity issue."

If it wasn't clear in late May and early June, it should be well understood by now that we are in the throes of a genuine revolution of the most extravagant sort. Like messianic revolutionaries of the past, the revolutionary mob of the 21st century is out to "remake the world." Their compass is "no longer pointed at one thing." It's aimed in all directions at once. As Thomas Paine said approvingly of France in 1791, "it is the age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for." A mission so grandiose demands the most radical assault on the current order, and changing the world begins with changing one's country. So it was in France in 1789, Russia in 1917, and China in 1949. And this is especially so if one's country is seen as the seat of the present evil and is also the most powerful nation on the planet. This is, then, most fundamentally a revolution against the United States of America and all it stands for.

And yet, we seem to be treating the great unraveling as something less than a revolution. Apart from the boasts of the revolutionaries themselves, we are apt to hear characterizations of the moment as either "an opportunity for change" or, among those who are wary of it, a "fever" that will blow over in time. But what we are living through now is more consequential than any period of recent unrest, and it's not just another leftist wave destined to roll on until it loses strength. Indeed, a revolution's ultimate power comes from its being underestimated, tolerated, or accepted by those outside its ranks. The speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, has adopted the language of the revolution, calling federal agents "stormtroopers." For New York Representative Jerry Nadler, anarchist violence in Portland is but a "myth." And the media's abiding sympathy for the revolutionary cause has become mainstream journalism's new North Star. The great

unraveling has won the tacit approval of the press, influential policymakers, and a great many ordinary Americans. It is, therefore, already remaking the world.

We tend not to recognize the revolution for what it is—first of all because it seems to lack a proper paramilitary element. Popular notions of insurgency involve images of AK-47s, organized bands of armed men, and the general flavor of war. But in truth, the current revolution has drifted much further into this territory than the media care to admit. The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), the anarchist territory formerly established in Seattle, boasted a provisional armed “security” force. Weeks after CHAZ was dismantled, Seattle police responding to a riot uncovered a cache of weapons including explosives, bear spray, spike strips, and Tasers. Antifa members not only routinely dress in similar black garb but have come to rely on a crude but dangerous arsenal of improvised fire bombs, fireworks, rocks, bricks, and frozen water bottles. In New York, three rioters were arrested for throwing Molotov cocktails at police vehicles. Revolutionaries in cities around the country have shown up to “protests” with rifles and assorted arms.

The revolution lacks martial discipline but not a body count. Three weeks in, some 20 people had been killed during riots alone. The number has climbed steadily since. Within the brief life of Seattle’s CHAZ, there were four shootings and two deaths. You can add to these the hundreds dead (overwhelmingly African-American) in major cities due to new policing restrictions. And this is to say nothing of the multitude of nonfatal injuries, including hundreds suffered by law enforcement. Among these is the likely permanent blinding of three federal agents in Portland whose eyes were targeted with high-power lasers.

The cost of revolutionary violence in destroyed property and ruined livelihoods has been gargantuan, somewhere in the billions of dollars and climbing ever higher. And if you don’t think vandalism is a sufficiently revolutionary act, you’d do well to note that the term “vandalism” itself was coined during the French Revolution to describe the ruination of the country at the hands of the *sans culottes*.

But more important than all this, a revolution should not be understood as synonymous with an armed insurgency. It is the transformation of popular ideas and beliefs and, most important, of a country’s national character that marks the advent of revolution. The French Revolution was inaugurated by the non-violent creation of the National Assembly, years before the Terror. The Russian Revolution was preceded by 12 days of protests kicked off by a Women’s Day March. By clinging to the colorful notions of revolution in our shared imagination, we dangerously underestimate the significance of what has transpired in the U.S. this summer.

Some have been prone to discount the revolution as a mere by-product of seemingly larger national woes. In the run-up to the riots, the nation suffered from a dispiriting pandemic and a paralyzing lockdown. As a result, we went from 3.5 percent unemployment to 14.7 percent in two months. For more than a decade, political polarization has been growing and faith in American institutions has been plummeting, both trends sped up and magnified exponentially over the course of the Trump presidency.

But these overarching conditions don’t vitiate the sincerity or salience of the revolutionary cause. To the contrary, they mimic precisely the classic circumstances under which revolutions have been birthed. It is in soil fertilized by decayed public trust that revolutions take root—whether or not those revolutions actually address the source of destabilization. One year before the onset of

the French Revolution, France saw a totally failed harvest. One month before, a devastating hailstorm nearly wiped out national yields again. These disasters along with broad French distrust of the church and other institutions *outside* the monarchy all contributed to the fall of the king. Illness and disease have also been classic contributors to revolution. In 1917, St. Petersburg, ground zero for the Russian Revolution, was considered the unhealthiest major city in Europe. Its ongoing woes included a deadly cholera epidemic only a few years earlier.

The power of seemingly extraneous events to set a country's course for revolution is an astounding fact of history. And the role of happenstance in history's great cataclysms is an almost mystical phenomenon. For all the social upheaval and inequality generated by czarist Russia's attempt at industrialization, the revolution would never have happened without the country's devastating involvement in World War I. It was the scale of occupation, displacement, and death that finally broke the people's faith in the empire. And that war was triggered, literally, by a high-school teenager named Gavrilo Princip, who shot and killed Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914.

We have our own Gavrilo Princip in the person of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who might prove over time to have been the most consequential figure of the 21st century thus far. Chauvin became one of history's epochal nobodies when he was captured by video leaning on the neck of, and likely killing, George Floyd during an arrest for suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. The monstrous conduct of this one man lit a match in a country where the crooked timber of humanity had broken down into kindling. For three months prior, Americans had watched as their jobs, loved ones, plans, security, and very sense of self were swallowed up by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. They no longer knew much about the world they lived in, but they knew that what took place in Minneapolis was evil. Chauvin's action became a stand-in for all that was wrong with the United States. His brutality was the nation's, as meted out by a racist police force on a campaign of black genocide. And so the unraveling began.

It mattered not at all that in 2019, police nationwide had killed 15 unarmed black people in a country that 42 million blacks call home. Nor did it matter that multiple studies have shown that police are decidedly trigger-shy when confronting unarmed black suspects. In revolution, symbolism trumps reality. On July 14, 1789, when the French stormed the Bastille, the foremost symbol of Bourbon persecution, they found exactly seven political prisoners inside.

The erroneous charge against police has been a popular argument since 2013, when Black Lives Matter was formed. That this and other left-wing claims have been circulating for years might cause some to think of the revolution as no more than America's always-simmering radical fringe coming to a brief boil. But what we're witnessing is not a temporary surge in extreme ideas. It's the cultural triumph of those ideas and their institutional enforcement, sometimes with the imprimatur of the government. It is, in our own domestic form, an American version of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Unlike Mao's campaign, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, our revolution hasn't been engineered from the top down. It has progressed upward from within the population. Like the Cultural Revolution, however, it is primarily aimed at the leading institutions of the political left. It seeks to remake in its own image the Democratic establishment and those sectors of society associated with present-day liberalism. As it succeeds in this aim, it imposes its writ on the rest of us.

The revolution's left-liberal targets, in the media and the academy and mass entertainment, have been quick to adapt—some out of genuine sympathy with the cause, others hoping to protect their political standing, and still others out of abject fear. In China, few dared criticize violent Red Guard gangs for fear of seeming unsympathetic to the revolution. In the United States, rioters are furnished with every excuse the elite can muster. And the broad acceptance of the revolution in liberal institutions has resulted in a widespread pressure campaign of accusation, confession, and reeducation.

Mao sought to eradicate what he labeled the Four Olds: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas—the established mental life of the country. Our own pressure campaign is shaped by similar goals. The revolutionaries have deemed American customs, culture, habits, and ideas racist. And instead of Mao's *Little Red Book* to guide them in the ways of the proletariat, they have Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, which shows them all the hidden places where racism is to be found and rooted out.

It turns out, that means everywhere. In July, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture issued guidelines announcing that the scientific method, the importance of hard work, Judeo-Christian belief, respect for authority, planning for the future, protection of private property, and politeness were all manifestations of white dominance.

Establishing racism's boundless domain is one thing, but the real work of the revolution is in going after its undercover practitioners. In July, Seattle's Office of Civil Rights developed a course to get white city employees to confront their "Internalized Racial Superiority." The in-person training involves attendees "processing white feelings," such as "sadness, shame, confusion, or denial." And "retraining," which requires "ways of seeing that are hidden from us in white supremacy." After these, attendees are to take "action to shift power," committing to "redistribute resources, change who's in power, alter institutions, etc." They must then "reflect" on how their "family benefits economically from the system of white supremacy even as it directly and violently harms Black people."¹ They are to consider how their "white silence" and "white fragility" have hurt black co-workers. Echoing the museum guidelines, the city then calls upon white employees to acknowledge that their sense of individualism, comfort, and objectivity are signs of their "internalized racial superiority." Finally, comes confession: "Reflect on a time in the past two to three months when you did something that you believe caused harm to a person of color."

"White feelings," "white silence," "white fragility"—these are quotes from a government document.

The entire process mimics the notorious Maoist struggle sessions, during which thousands of victims were humiliated and forced to confess their disobedience to the cause of the revolution. Struggle sessions of a less official sort are ongoing in America, playing out mostly in social and traditional media. There is, for example, the telling case of *Poetry* magazine, whose editor stepped down in response to the public fury created by a poem containing the offending word "negress" in the publication's July/August issue. At first, *Poetry* editors tried to appease the mob, issuing a letter in which they "acknowledge[ed] that this poem contains racist language and that such language is insidious, and in this case is particularly oppressive to Black, Pacific Islander, and Asian people, and we are deeply sorry."

In revolutions, however, the purpose of confession is not to elicit forgiveness but to further the purge. So, less than a month later, editor Don Share issued a statement of his own, apologizing for the poem and explaining that he would be stepping down as editor. Share's letter was a riot of revolutionary gobbledygook: "Because we read poetry to deepen our understanding of human otherness, I failed in my responsibility to understand that the poem I thought I was reading was not the one that people would actually read." He went on: "I deeply regret that my misjudgment of the poem has affected Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander people and anyone systematically othered by institutions with a white dominant culture, such as this one." It ends: "As writers and readers move forward the conversation about this poem in particular, and racism in general, I will be grateful for the insights they afford. I hope that these essential conversations will change not only *Poetry* magazine, but poetry itself—and perhaps the world." Naturally.

For those not being re-educated by the state or canceled by the media mob, that is, for ordinary low-profile Americans, there are other channels of coercion. In the *New York Times*, writer Chad Sanders recommends interfamilial blackmail. In a June 5 op-ed, he suggested to white people: "[Send] texts to your relatives and loved ones telling them you will not be visiting them or answering phone calls until they take significant action in supporting black lives either through protest or financial contributions." This, too, is straight out of the Cultural Revolution, during which Chinese were compelled to shun and turn against any family members with even the most remote connections to the wrong ideas.

What to do? Those of us who stand opposed to the revolution and its aims harbor the hope that the revolutionaries will "eat each other alive" or that their mixed motivations, outlandish ideas, and repellent actions will ultimately blow up the movement from within. But such internal dynamics can serve to refine, not kill off, revolutions. Revolutionary France was a perpetual and bloody power struggle between parties such as the Hébertists, Thermidoreans, and Jacobins. Such competition ensured that, in the long run, the fiercest elements came out on top. The same can be said of the battles between the Mensheviks, the Left SR, and the Bolsheviks of Russia. The Cultural Revolution was itself a sustained effort to wrench and secure control of the Chinese Communist Party. And in all these cases, important nonrevolutionary fellow travelers found reason to make common cause and go along with the winners at any given moment. Judging from history (and the present), it is unlikely that the revolution will self-destruct.

It can, however, be countered.

Opposing the revolution will necessarily be a slower, more considered process than that which brought it into being. Revolutions are sparked into existence and take off at full gallop. They are born reckless and their nature doesn't change. This is part of what makes them detestable to the civil-minded. Thus, putting down a revolution isn't a matter of mirroring its recklessness from the opposite direction; it's a sober process of reasserting prudence and order. The counterrevolution will not be won in the streets.

It will be accomplished, if it is to be accomplished, as Americans outside the revolution's burning core come to grips with what it is; as its wreckage exceeds its justification; and as the gap between revolutionary claims and reality becomes too great to ignore. Metropolitan liberals may be passionate about social justice, but they won't want their cities forever blighted by crime.

Americans of faith may feel compelled to support a movement claiming to speak for the oppressed, but they won't abide Bibles in bonfires.²

At the moment, the elites are stunned. The revolution's instantaneous appearance amid a larger national crisis took them by surprise. They have scrambled to get on the side of the supposedly righteous. But as more Americans endure the noxious consequences of the unraveling, elected officials responsive to their needs will be compelled to change course. Let us not forget that after the immediate upheavals of the 1960s, busing, quotas, and spiking crime all came under attack by the American public—despite an elite atmosphere that sought to discredit the response as an explosion of racist rage. Even with the strength of that criticism, busing was ended, the use of quotas in hiring was curtailed, and punishment for criminal action became tougher.

The revolution's most exploitable weakness is that it is wrong. To be sure, catastrophically mistaken revolutions have succeeded in the past. Most revolutions are in fact terrible affairs all the way through. But even so, they grew out of intolerance for states and systems that deserved contempt. Louis XVI's France was a deeply corrupt country, already undone by war debt, aristocratic privilege, and a mode of inequality that would be science-fictional by current Western norms. Much the same applies to czarist Russia, too, which was a punishing hell for displaced peasants and industrial workers. The current revolutionaries, on the other hand, are *fundamentally* wrong. As a factual matter, America is a vigorous democratic republic—the freest and least prejudiced country of this or any time.

Thus, the revolutionaries lack a sufficiently malicious counterforce to justify their loathing. The U.S. does not and cannot furnish them with the complementary element they desperately want to put on trial: a truly unjust state and society. They must, instead, invent these and rebel against their own invention. Unlike Russia and France, we have no nobility, so they try to create one in the idea of white privilege. White people, however, are not nobles; they're Americans, living out lives at every strata of society. The revolutionaries claim we live in a fascistic military state. But in truth, unlike revolutionary France and Russia, all we have are federal agents armed with nonlethal means to disperse violent crowds. We have none of the true institutionalized injustices that have inspired insurrectionary vengeance in other places and times. And because the United States is fundamentally good, most Americans may, in time, become circumspect about tearing it all down.

The fact that 62 percent of the public is currently scared to speak its mind on political matters suggests that a majority of Americans already entertain some doubt about what's going on in the country. This is deeply encouraging, but of no use unless they decide to speak out. It is essential that conservatives continue to vigorously challenge the revolution at every turn. But if sanity and reason reside only on a small island called conservatism, the country will not survive. On this point, therefore, the most hopeful sign on the horizon is the new and growing tranche of writings from journalists and thinkers who are not associated with the political right but who nonetheless have a clear sense of the great wrong being done in the name of justice and equality. People as different as Bari Weiss, Andrew Sullivan, John McWhorter, Thomas Chatterton Williams, and Matt Taibbi have written firmly and incisively about the civil unrest and thought-policing that threaten to derail the American project. These are writers with a large readership, and their work can strike minds on the left with the power of epiphany. Their coming forward to say what others won't makes it easier for more liberal Americans to stand up and declare themselves against the

chaos. Thus, regardless of their opposition to certain conservative principles, they should be encouraged and welcomed as allies in this most pressing matter.

The American Constitution, for all its awe-inspiring facility to keep the country on the best course possible, contains no fail-safe mechanism to guard against the predations of a tyrannical mob. There are only strong arguments. In *Federalist* No. 10, James Madison addressed the danger that “factions” pose to national political life. “By a faction,” he wrote, “I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” Madison argued that our best defenses against rule by faction were the massive size of the then proposed republic, “the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties, against the event of any one party being able to outnumber and oppress the rest,” and the soundness of our representative government. In these he found “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government” that would make it “less apt” for an “improper or wicked project...to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it.” One wonders here about the fate of the Pacific Northwest.

For the rest of the country, we must hold fast to Madison’s vision and urge on those varied parties who will, in greater numbers, come to oppose the revolution. Only when they step forward will our elected officials and institutional leaders be forced to respond. Precisely because of the Founders’ foresight, the United States remains the best hope for mankind. Razing every statue in the country won’t erase that fact. May the great unraveling, in the end, provoke a fresh and thorough consideration of the American achievement and incite a new and deeper appreciation of our nation’s glories.