

salon

Longtime GOP insider Mike Lofgren on his former party: "Going easy on these people will not work"

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Republican officials at the highest level support insurrection, terrorism and treason. They have presided over a political culture that, for many years, has inculcated seditious desires within millions of expertly programmed citizens. The consequences became manifest on Jan. 6 when a rabid mob of neo-Confederates, fascists and associated psychotics took the Capitol by force, perhaps hoping to murder duly elected members of Congress — not to mention the vice president — and install Donald Trump as dictator.

As surreal as that summary of recent events might seem, it was not entirely unpredictable. Mike Lofgren, a former Republican congressional staff member of 28 years, began warning about the danger of the GOP in 2011, even going so far as to condemn his longtime party as a "death cult." Before his retirement, Lofgren worked in both the House and Senate as a specialist staffer for national security affairs, tasked with analyzing Pentagon budget requests and preparing military-related legislation.

Lofgren's formal training, not incidentally is as a historian. He holds an M.A. in history from the University of Akron, and went on to study European history on a Fulbright scholarship at the University of Bern and the University of Basel in Switzerland.

The unique combination of Lofgren's historical expertise and his long career in the "boiler room" of legislative politics, as he calls it, put him in the perfect position to see the destructive monstrosity that Republicans and their far-right allies have created. He has detailed his analysis and experience in two books, "[The Party Is Over: How Republicans Went Crazy, Democrats Became Useless and the Middle Class Got Shafted](#)" and "[The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government](#)."

With that latter title, by the way, Lofgren was not gesturing toward the conspiracy-theory delusion currently popular among Trump supporters. Rather, he meant "deep state" as an [umbrella term](#) for the lobbying firms, corporate donors and military-industrial complex that have a stranglehold on American public policy.

I recently discussed the insurrection at the Capitol, how best to combat right-wing extremism and the future of the Republican Party with Lofgren in a phone conversation, lightly edited here for length and clarity.

We'll start with the obvious. What was your gut reaction as you watched the act of domestic terrorism — the siege of the Capitol — live on television? Now that you've had time to process it, what is your interpretation of the event both in terms of what happened and how the United States should proceed?

I worked for three decades in Congress. Regardless of how peeved I might have been over some policy or another, I was proud of my public service. To see the place trashed like that, and I mean really desecrated — there were people shitting on the floor, and smearing it on the walls. The insane violence of a mob beating a cop with a fire extinguisher and shoving him down the marble stairs was horrifying. At the same time, once the mob was dispersed, they went throughout the D.C. metro area randomly beating up people whom they could victimize. Later that afternoon, my daughter, who does not live in D.C. but in Arlington, across the river, was out walking her dog, and saw these thugs spewing out of the Metro station like toxic waste. She had to do a 180. Arlington was placed under curfew that night. All these occurrences, including having to worry about my own family's safety, left some pretty vivid impressions, to say the least.

In terms of the larger picture, at least three allied European intelligence agencies believe that Trump fomented the mob because he could not get the military to assist him. They have suggested there was at least some degree of collusion with federal law enforcement. Given how fast the Capitol Police chief resigned and left the building, there's some credence to that. Second, that view is reinforced by a former senior official on Trump's National Security Council — Fiona Hill, whom everyone should recognize from the Russiagate testimony she gave. She believes that Trump was consciously trying to trigger a coup using the military, and that the intervention from 10 former secretaries of defense may have prevented it.

We now know that the Republican Attorneys General Association sent out robocalls the day before, encouraging people to descend on the Capitol. Republican dark money financed the rioters, gave them bus tickets and chartered the transportation. Dark money is the so-called 501(c)(4) organizations with anonymous donors, that Republicans on the Supreme Court claim is such a wonderful idea for freedom.

Finally, two-thirds of House Republicans voted to nullify the results of legitimate elections that had been recounted multiple times and survived many court challenges. They did this a few hours after the entire place was vandalized and everybody's lives were in danger. A YouGov poll found that 45 percent of Republicans, after the fact, approved of the assault on the Capitol. [In fairness, a more robust ABC News/Washington Post poll conducted this past week found that only 20 percent of Republicans approved.] And now there is new information that extremists plan to encircle the Capitol to assassinate Democrats.

The severity of the threat means that we cannot afford an ineffective response. Considering your experience in government and your wider historical perspective, how do you suggest we react?

It is necessary to see the historical analogies that tell us what works and what doesn't work. The thing that pops into everyone's mind is the Civil War. People tend to get all misty-eyed about

Lincoln's statement, "With malice toward none, and charity for all." That was his second inaugural address in March of 1865. What were the results? A couple of weeks later, what he got out of it was a bullet in the head. What Blacks got out of it was Jim Crow. What Confederates got was pardons, amnesties, dropped charges and the ability to rewrite history. The rest of us were saddled with them, and now we have a large portion of the country — a single region that is basically a Third World state.

The Civil War was not a fluke. Weimar Germany is another example. Compared to the devastation that the Germans caused in France and Belgium, the Versailles Treaty was very mild. The gratitude for that mildness was a buildup of authoritarianism in Germany, people in all walks of life thinking that they were victims, the police and the courts going very easy on the perpetrators of the Beer Hall Putsch — a guy named Hitler was involved in that — and the results were not very happy.

Now, let's see what works in these cases. We haven't had much trouble with Germany in the past 75 years, because in 1945, basically, they were treated to a Carthaginian peace — a massive military occupation and a few strategic hangings of the ringleaders. It was assisted, of course, by the fact that the Germans had to be on their best behavior, because they didn't want us to go home, and leave them to the tender mercies of the Russians.

Those examples show you what works, and what encourages people in cases of massive insurrection. Being overly lenient only encourages them.

Lawrence Rosenthal, a leading scholar of right-wing extremism, often gives the same warning. They see liberal society as "weak and flabby," and will interpret any reluctance to act with aggression as confirmation of their central thesis. Then they will push the envelope further. So what is the correct approach?

I agree with him. The approach has to be, first, governmental, with laws and the application of those laws, but also socially, by boycotting and putting pressures on corporations. It is also individual, each person dealing with other individuals. I say this because I've personally confronted the issue. It is important to tell relatives and friends in no uncertain terms, "You can stop invoking Jesus. I sure as hell don't want to hear about Black Lives Matter. You are not a good citizen or a patriot if you continue to vote for these Republicans. I might have to keep your grandkids away from you unless you repent of this. I don't want their young minds poisoned by hatred and violence."

Decent people will have to ask themselves, "Wouldn't you rather have a friend who is not nuts? Wouldn't you rather not have to carefully steer the conversation away from politics so that Uncle Fred doesn't make a scene and ruin Thanksgiving dinner?" You don't need to hang onto relationships with hate-filled or deluded people out of habit or obligation. You can find other friends.

The social media prohibitions are also good. These people crying censorship and free speech have no understanding that you cannot compel a private individual to use his privately-owned platform to broadcast incitements to murder. It is a complete inversion of the First Amendment.

Next, companies cutting off donations is a start. Credit rating agencies should rate these GOP officials, and those who supported the insurrection, at zero. Their social credit is in the trash can. I'm saying that maybe their financial credit should be as well.

We have to guard against hypocrisy and stupidity, however. I saw that Northrop Grumman announced a six-month pause on all political donations to both parties. Unless you specifically target the perpetrators, it makes no sense.

I've learned that the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee [Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi] is demanding that Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz be placed on the no-fly list. See, there are many tools available. Republicans are so fond of antiterrorist laws: I say, let's use them against Republicans who advocated violence. We can use civil and criminal RICO statutes to confiscate the money of GOP organizations that fund violent extremism.

I have been activating old friends on the Hill, and people who have access to various people on the Hill, and proposing that you have to saturation-bomb the Republicans legislatively. You can't make it an either/or with impeachment. You can do impeachment and concurrently have in your back pocket the 14th Amendment, which bans anyone from office who incited insurrection against the United States.

Laurence Tribe did not do us any favors when he said that the person otherwise has to be convicted in a court before that amendment can be applied. A plain reading of the 14th Amendment does not say anything about that. It is a pure finding by Congress that they are committing insurrection, and are barred from holding office. The beauty of it is that it requires only a simple majority in each house, whereas impeachment requires two-thirds in the Senate to convict, and knowing Republicans as I do, we may not get two-thirds. The 14th does require, however, two-thirds to lift the ban and reinstate their right to run for office. So there is a bigger hurdle to relieve them of the ban than to punish them.

All of this is necessary because going easy on these people — holding their hands, giving them a cup of tea and trying to understand them — will not work. They take it as weakness and a sign that they will prevail. If people are supporting violent overthrow of the government, I see no reason — morally, politically or practically — why our society should not ostracize them.

Would you suggest that Democrats initiate the 14th Amendment process against the senators and representatives who voted to overturn the election of Biden?

Concurrently against Trump, and against those who were found to have incited. Whether everybody who voted to object to the results deserves being banned for life, I'll leave that to Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi's wisdom. Sarcasm aside, the speaker does not sound amused by any of this, which is refreshing.

You said, "Knowing the Republicans as I do ..." Let's get into that. In 2014, you wrote that the Republican Party had transformed into a death cult. In 2018, you wrote a brilliant and unfortunately prescient essay for the Washington Monthly in which you predicted that

violence and nihilism were waiting at the end of the GOP track. How did this happen with the party? How could the party transform into something so insane?

I suppose it was partly happenstance, and partly my past training as a historian, that I could see this before almost anybody else could. I first wrote about their apocalyptic nature in 2011. Most people looked at me like I was some sort of exotic zoo specimen. Almost no one else was saying this at the time. Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann did say it in a book that came out roughly around the same time. I had the advantage of being in the boiler room, and seeing how the GOP operates. I was kind of an Eisenhower-Gerald Ford Republican. I wasn't caught up in the "movement." I viewed my public service as public service. I wasn't an operative for the party.

I had lived in Europe before working on the Hill, and developed an understanding of what happened there. I began to read philosophers like Sir Isaiah Berlin, who deconstructed conservatism by showing some of these obscure historical figures — everyone knows about Edmund Burke and his supposed moderation — but they forget that the bigger influence on the psychology of conservatives were the radical reactionaries against the French Revolution. Berlin described a kind of violent, anti-modernist, authoritarian, mystical strain in conservatism that often comes to the fore in moments of strain.

He was a philosopher of science, but Karl Popper wrote one of the most impassioned defenses of democracy in an open society in general when he wrote "The Open Society and Its Enemies." He warned that people with this tendency toward absolutism are poison for any kind of rational thinking, and that includes science, as we have recently seen. He condemned extremist systems, whether communism or economic free-market fundamentalism, which translates into CEOs making 500 times what their average employee makes. Popper warned that any system that is deterministic leads to catastrophe.

All of this combined to lead me to conclude that the Republican Party has violent tendencies and a nihilistic outlook — rejection of science, rejection of civil rights, rejection of democracy, rejection of anything that does not allow them to maintain power. They will bring down the country to keep in power.

I observed this over the years from people who are "true-blue constitutional conservatives, patriots who bleed red, white and blue." You get three or four beers in them, and they are singing the praises of Adolf Hitler. It sounds like I am exaggerating, but I've seen it happen.

You mentioned the disparity between CEO and worker salaries. One of the arguments to emerge among people outraged over the Trump personality cult and fascist movement is over cause. Some analysts insist it is primarily hatred of Blacks, immigrants and the liberalization of society, whereas others point to economic precarity and increasing levels of poverty and despair as creating the conditions for these antisocial, anti-government extremist movements to grow. Can we keep in mind the latter analysis, while working to crush the fascists?

The economics did contribute. Although you don't want to fall into the trap of saying, "Oh, these guys' wages are falling behind compared to the 1970s, and that's why they are worshipping

Trump." That was a myth that the New York Times and all the rest of them swallowed. Support for Trump was racism. More careful polling and research, after the fact, made that clear. That being said, economic precarity does create a social ecology where these kinds of movements more readily catch on. Then it becomes symbiotic.

Economic precarity, referring back to Karl Popper, was not the inevitable trend of a mechanical globalism that operated beyond anyone's power to control it. It was powerful people making conscious policy decisions about how our economy is regulated. They systematically regulated for the benefit of the rich, and everybody else had to be on their own. That's how we got 401k's instead of defined benefits. That's how we got banks making synthetic derivatives out of nonexistent things. That's how we got the 2008 crisis. It is a symbiosis of, yes, the economy is poor, but it is not poor because it fell out of the sky in that form. The people we elected made it so.

Yes, and people can reverse it. But this same radicalized insurgency that you identify, and the party they support, is the main obstruction to that reversal taking place.

Right. There is a huge bad-ideas industry that exists in the country. It is all those 501(c)(3) foundations that churn out these policy proposals: The Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the American Legislative Exchange Council.

What happens now with the Republican Party? They've suffered some major defeats. We have an incoming Biden administration. The Democrats will control the House and Senate. It appears that, thanks to Trump and the terrorist siege on the Capitol, their credibility is in free fall. Yet we've been here before. In 2008, political analysts predicted that the Democrats would have a permanent majority. Well, that didn't work out so well. What do you see transpiring in the next few years?

Democrats seem to think that once they elect a Democratic president, they can all go back to sleep. We saw the consequences of that complacency in 1994. We saw it in 2010. During the first term of a Democratic president, you typically get landslides in the midterm against the sitting president. I fear that people could become complacent again. Then, there are many on the progressive left who think that their own gullibility is worldly-wise cynicism. They'll say: "Oh, it's just death by poison or death by hanging — the two parties are really the same." Well, they're not. They're making the same mistake as the far left in Weimar Germany, their delusion that the Social Democrats were the same as the Nazis. Don't kid yourself. Even a decadent status quo is better than living in a combination of Kim Jong-un's North Korea and anarchic Somalia.

People should talk to Trump-supporting parents or uncles and aunts over the age of 65: What did you think you were going to get out of this? What was in it for you? If those rioters succeeded in overthrowing the government and installing Trump as dictator, do you think you'd continue getting your Social Security and Medicare? If a tornado knocks over your trailer, FEMA is not going to give you a check.

Whatever your criticism of the Democrats, they are for sanity. They are for the rule of law. You are better advised to vote for them than for fascists.