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"Peaceful ballots" or "bloody bullets": democracy, elections, and violence

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Jim Read on “Peaceful Ballots” or “Bloody Bullets”: Democracy, Elections, and Violence

OCTOBER 31, 2019



Military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) famously asserted that war was the continuation of politics by other means. He was undoubtedly correct. But it makes an enormous difference which methods one employs to pursue a political goal.

What principally distinguishes stable democracies from unstable democracies, dictatorships, monarchies, kleptocracies, and other undemocratic and anti-democratic regimes, is the institution of procedurally fair, rule-governed elections whose results are respected as legitimate even by the candidate or party who lost.

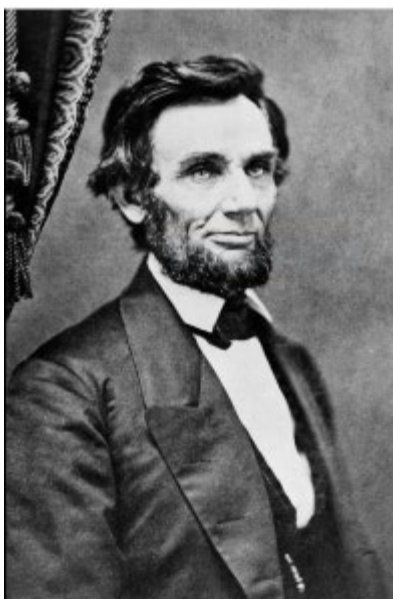
This does not mean that unsuccessful candidates and parties must change their minds and renounce their aims. It means instead that unsuccessful candidates and parties do not resort to violence to reverse their political fortunes, but instead limit themselves to peaceful methods

aimed at persuading voters to change their minds and perhaps win future elections. The winners of an election must also respect the rules. A regime that jails its opponents, suppresses voting rights, and uses or threatens violence against the opposition, cannot reasonably expect the opposition to continue respecting those rules.

In this sense, an election is a substitute for civil war, precisely because the methods one uses to pursue political aims in electoral competition are systematically different than warfare. We often assume that societies fall into civil war when their social and political divisions become too deep to resolve peacefully – the divide over slavery in the United States, for example. But many societies have descended into murderous civil war over differences much less marked than slavery – Yugoslavia in the 1990s, for instance, where Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims had lived and worked side by side in relative peace for decades.

All societies, including the contemporary United States, are marked by social and political conflicts that could produce civil war under the right (or wrong) conditions. What distinguishes a stable democracy is not that its political divisions are small, but that political elites as well as ordinary citizens are committed to peaceful, rule-governed elections as the principal means by which those differences are resolved, or at least contained.

When citizens with deeply-opposed aims can agree to play by the same set of electoral rules, they tacitly recognize that they share at least some common interests with their political opponents, and therefore are not at war.



Lincoln Portrait February 1861

I am currently writing a book on Abraham Lincoln’s defense of majority rule, and his hope that slavery could be gradually and democratically abolished in the United States through “peaceful ballots” rather than “bloody bullets,” as he phrased it in an 1858 speech. American history did not take that path. Slavery was ultimately abolished in the United States in the course of a horrific civil war. The Civil War began five weeks after Lincoln became president, and ended a week before his assassination.

But the tragic irony is that Lincoln above all believed in elections. He did not want a war. He was convinced that even so divisive a question as the future of slavery could be addressed through “time, discussion, and the ballot box,” as he phrased it in

his July 4, 1861 Message to Congress in Special Session. What triggered the Civil War was not the sudden eruption of sharp differences over slavery, for those had existed since the earliest years of the American republic. The immediate cause of the Civil War was a powerful faction’s unwillingness to accept the results of a fair, constitutional election.

I have discovered that, though most Americans know, or think they know, a fair amount about the Civil War, many are surprised when I tell them that the seven states of the Lower South (South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas) seceded from the Union before Lincoln had even taken office. Secessionists’ larger purpose was to defend and perpetuate the institution of slavery. But their immediate purpose in seceding before Lincoln took office, rather than waiting to see what he would do once in office, was to deny the legitimacy of his election. They did not dispute that Lincoln had won the 1860 election according to the constitutional rules. Nevertheless, they argued that Lincoln was an illegitimate president because he had been elected almost entirely by Northern votes, and because they believed Lincoln’s aim of stopping the further spread of slavery was unconstitutional.

Most of all, I would argue, the slave states of the Lower South seceded because their leaders recognized that Lincoln’s aim of abolishing slavery peacefully, democratically, and constitutionally stood a good chance of succeeding in the long run. They wanted to prevent his taking even the first step. By seceding from the Union, they signaled their refusal to accept the legitimacy of Lincoln’s election, even at the risk of civil war. Of course, if the slaveholders’ preferred candidate, John Breckinridge, had won the 1860 election, slaveholders would have stayed in the Union and demanded that Northerners respect the election results.

Yet the states that seceded before Lincoln took office (on March 4, 1861) soon discovered that the secession movement had stalled. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, all of which later joined the Confederacy, had chosen not to secede in response to Lincoln’s election. They decided instead to wait and see what Lincoln would actually do. Lincoln plan was to wait out the crisis peacefully, refusing to recognize secession, but avoiding any military assault upon the states that had declared themselves out of the Union. He made clear that the first shot of the war, if it came, would not come from the Union side.

A Confederate States of America consisting only of the seven pre-emptively seceding states would have been weak and vulnerable. “Peaceful

ballots,” in short, had not delivered the powerful and confident new proslavery nation the secessionists envisioned. Only “bloody bullets” could do it. The principal reason for the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, was political: to put an end to “time, discussion, and the ballot box” in the slave states of the Upper South. In effect, the Fort Sumter assault sent a message to Virginia, North Carolina, and other fence-sitting slave states: Now that Lincoln will march an army against us, whose side are you on? Will you support the abolitionists marching against us, or will you join us, your fellow slaveholders?



Fort Sumter

The secessionists calculated correctly that initiating war would bring other slave states to their side. They were radically incorrect, however, in believing that the war would be a short one because Yankees were cowards. Both sides, in fact, tragically underestimated the other side’s willingness to fight. And in the end, the war destroyed the very institution – slavery – that secessionists sought to perpetuate.

Political scientists agree that the United States is more politically polarized today than at any time since 1860. But there is less agreement on what is causing our pathologically deep divisions. It is not difficult to see how disagreements over slavery could trigger civil war in 1860, even if (as Lincoln believed) civil war might have been avoided. In the contemporary United States, our most contentious divisions – over abortion, immigration, health care policy, race, to name a few– have existed for a long time. Objectively considered, none of these would seem as difficult to manage as divisions over slavery. And yet our current politics is characterized by levels of animosity, distrust, and outright fanaticism that, to me, disturbingly mirror American politics of the late 1850s.

I don’t pretend to know the causes. But I can point to the most characteristic symptom: loss of faith in elections as a fair set of rules by which all parties play and whose results all parties respect as legitimate. Instead, we are heading into the 2020 presidential election at a moment when increasing numbers of Americans, on both sides, act and speak as though they cannot and will not tolerate the other side’s victory – even if the opponents’ victory occurs through regular constitutional processes.

First and most obviously, there is the recent upsurge of civil war talk, especially among some of Donald Trump’s most committed supporters, who vow that any attempt to remove Trump from office – either through impeachment, or in the 2020 election (which they claim Trump can lose only if the election is rigged) – will mean civil war. Trump himself has encouraged this violent talk, repeatedly claimed without evidence that tens of millions of illegal aliens have been voting in U.S. elections, retweeted followers who advocate postponing the 2020 elections, and teased about remaining in office for a third term despite the 22nd Amendment’s clear prohibition.



On the domestic front, Trump has successfully persuaded several Republican-governed states to cancel Republican primaries and caucuses in 2020, even though – indeed, precisely because – he now has challengers within the party. Minnesota’s Republican Party just announced that Donald Trump’s name will be the only candidate on Minnesota’s Republican presidential primary ballot, even though three Republican challengers have announced their candidacy. In 2016 Trump announced to cheering supporters that he would respect the results of the 2016 election – “IF I WIN!” His public commitment to respecting election results is likely to be similarly one-sided in 2020, this time expressed from a position of enormous power.

Faith in and commitment to elections has also been eroded on the other end of the political spectrum. After the 2016 elections, one internet meme among people horrified by Trump’s victory was to demand that members of the Electoral College pledged to Trump cast their vote for Clinton instead. Though this would not have literally violated the Constitution (Electoral College members do occasionally vote contrary to their pledges), in substance it meant calling for a massive rule change in the middle of the game – and moreover, a rule change that its advocates would denounce as corrupt and illegitimate if the tables were turned. This proposal had zero chance of success. It is worth noting, however, because it indicates weakened commitment to shared election rules.

More frequent, and still continuing, is the claim among many of Bernie Sanders’ strong supporters that he lost the 2016 nomination only because the Democratic primaries were rigged, and can only lose the nomination in 2020 if the primaries are rigged again.

This eroding faith in elections occurs against a backdrop of real attempts by Russia, and possibly other foreign governments, to interfere in U.S. elections. These efforts are not limited to opinion-manipulation in the sphere of social media. There have also been efforts to hack into state voting databases. One would expect that the two major parties, whatever else they disagree upon, would readily cooperate on measures to combat this threat. But so far they have been incapable of doing so.

One of the things I find inspiring about Lincoln was that he preserved his faith in elections under circumstances much more difficult than ours – not only in 1860, but also in 1864, when despite a raging civil war, he never considered postponing the 1864 elections. He accepted that he could be voted out of office if the American people lost faith in his leadership.

Our circumstances are very different from Lincoln’s. I don’t regard him as a font of wisdom on every political question we face today. But I do hope we can recommit to the principle of “peaceful ballots” as the legitimate means of resolving deep disagreements. For if we believe only relatively minor disagreements can be resolved democratically, then we really don’t believe in democracy at all.

Jim Read

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