

Opinion

America is no longer the same country it was under Richard Nixon

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“People have got to know whether their president is a crook. Well, I’m not a crook.”

For those born in the Precambrian period, these words may trigger a memory. Yes, that’s then-U.S. president Richard Nixon famously claiming, as a deflection strategy, that he’d never profited from public service. This was as the pressure cooker of Watergate was beginning to heat up. Watergate would prove that Mr. Nixon was indeed a crook.

November of this year will mark 50 years since that press conference.

Over the past five months, former president Donald Trump has been indicted in four criminal cases. Never in American history has a former president been indicted, never mind one running for the presidency itself.

It’s tempting to think that things have changed little for our American neighbours over the years. In fact, the political culture has changed dramatically, and in a dangerous direction.

As evasive as “Tricky Dick” could be, and as skilled a politician as Mr. Nixon was, one can discern from the press conference [itself](#) that he was already trying to dig out from the damage and shame of what lay ahead.

When the Supreme Court ruled in 1974 that the documents and tapes did not fall under executive privilege, he complied with the ruling and released them. Yes, it’s true that he finally folded only when it became clear that he couldn’t avoid impeachment. But he did not mount a public campaign assailing the court as working at the behest of his political opponents, despite having a famously long list of political enemies. Mr. Nixon understood, in realpolitik, that such a campaign would be a non-starter given the political culture of the day.

Fast forward 50 years, and the scale of change in that political culture is unmistakable. Mr. Trump’s polling numbers against his Republican rivals, and in a potential contest with an aging President Joe Biden in 2024, were undamaged by the criminal charges. In fact, he seems to have gotten a bump out of it. The charges have also been good apparently for merchandise sales, with the Trump campaign itself peddling mugs and T-shirts with his mugshot.

American politics has always had a carnival democratic pulse. Even the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates were open-air contests with people coming in and out, blankets, some imbibing no doubt. It's never been the Oxford debating society.

With a run of nearly 250 years, the "American experiment" has endured much: huge expansion, wars with its neighbours (both south and north), a civil war, a devastating depression, participation (late to the task) in two world wars and, finally, leading the West in the Cold War.

But for all that, as we watch the carnival from north of the 49th, one can't help but register that something more fundamental is now afoot.

What we are witnessing is a transformation in the latent political culture itself, more severe and dangerous than anything Mr. Nixon could have inflicted on the nation.

As was widely reported, Mr. Trump recently claimed, "In 2016, I declared: I am your voice. Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. ... I am your retribution." This summer he followed up with: "Every time the radical left, Democrats, Marxists, communists and fascists indict me, I consider it actually a great badge of honour. ... I'm being indicted for you."

Well, I guess as a good (former) Catholic I should recognize the doctrine of vicarious atonement when I see it, although I confess I hadn't previously associated that doctrine with the former president.

Be that as it may, we are witnessing something new and disturbing to our south. A political culture is emerging that is increasingly at home with regarding the activities of the judiciary as just politics in disguise.

In this environment, it is not inconceivable that Donald Trump will win the presidency. And, *in extremis*, that he will be sworn in on Jan. 20, 2025, from behind bars, by the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; a transfiguring political spectacle if there ever were one.

Mr. Nixon's press conference 50 years ago marked a moment. Even Mr. Nixon couldn't avoid the fact that Americans needed to know that their president wasn't a crook. This reflected a political reality on the ground floor of the culture – that the authority and legitimacy of the law in a democratic republic still held a powerful place in the public imagination.

Watergate proved that to be true. Mr. Nixon resigned.

A Trump victory will prove Mr. Nixon mistaken – not because Mr. Nixon erred, but because America changed.