

Topics: The Republican Coup and Treason. From Chapter Five.

“Since you’re realistic, you know what the party’s big accomplishments actually have been. Military adventurism. Economic devastation because of your belief in the evils of regulation. A historic concentration of wealth. Denial of the biggest danger facing the planet. A radically conservative Supreme Court. And you paved the way for the greatest threat to American democracy in my lifetime.”

He had such momentum, I was surprised he stopped.

“Very interesting.” He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “I hit a raw nerve, didn’t I? Whether you know it or not, you winced when I said, *threat to democracy*. Care to explain that worried look?”

“You’re perceptive. I’m impressed. I read something very disturbing in *The Economist* recently. They do an annual ‘Democracy Index,’ and I’m embarrassed to say I’d never noticed it before. I must have breezed right past it.”

“So, why did it catch your eye this year?”

“Because it was nothing but seriously bad news. First, democracy is losing ground. In 2015, 8.9 percent of the world’s population lived in fully functioning democracies. In 2017, it dropped to only 4.5 percent.”

“You’re right. That is bad news.”

“But the worst part is it dropped because the U.S. was downgraded from a ‘full’ democracy to a ‘flawed’ democracy.”

“Thanks to—”

I swallowed hard. “Thanks to my party.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Stephen, and how difficult it is to admit this. But given the coup the G.O.P. pulled off, you can’t be surprised, can you? I mean, you can be *disappointed*, but not *surprised*.”

I did a double-take. “Wait! Did you say *coup*?” I thought we’d gotten to a place where Abe wasn’t doing overstatement and exaggeration any more. Had he gone back to trying to provoke me? His face said, ‘no.’

“We engineered a coup somewhere that overturned a democracy? Seriously?” I wracked my brain trying to recall any military takeovers in the last decade. “Egypt? Thailand? Yemen? Venezuela? It’s inconceivable to me that the Republican Party had anything to do with any of them.”

“You’re right. It didn’t. Think closer to home.”

I tried again and came up empty. “You’re going to have to give me a hint.”

“Fine,” he nodded. He swept his hand in a circle over his head, pointing in every direction. “Capitol Hill. Washington Monument. Arlington National Cemetery.”

I was confused. Abe seemed deadly serious. But this was crazy. “What do you mean? There has *not* been a military coup in the United States.”

He looked at me somberly. “Did I say *military* coup, Stephen?”

The earnestness in his voice was unsettling. He meant it. A Republican *coup*?

“So what other kind is there?”

“I consider *any* illegitimate seizure of power to be a *coup*.”

“The G.O.P. has seized power—illegitimately.”

“Yes.”

I shook my head in disbelief. I looked at him again. He was serious. “How?”

“Coups can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Tanks in the street. Disbanding a democratically elected legislature. Using legitimate laws to game the system for the sake of taking over.”

“So, since Congress still exists, and there was no military takeover, you must be talking about the last one.”

“Correct.”

“So, this *coup* was *legal*.”

“In one sense, yes.”

“Let me get this straight. There’s been a coup. But our key governmental institutions are in place. And no laws have been broken.”

“You weren’t listening. I said the coup was legal ‘in one sense.’ You’re taking too narrow a view. Just because actions are legal doesn’t make them legitimate. My definition of a coup was an *illegitimate* seizure of power.”

“You’re saying, then, that whatever *legal* actions that were part of the coup weren’t *legitimate*.”

“Correct.”

“But if that’s the case, wouldn’t those actions and those laws be challenged in the courts and in legislatures?”

“Yes. And in some cases, they are. But not enough people noticed the coup when it was planned and put into place to stop it. In fact, most people still don’t know it happened. If they did, I can promise you they’d be in the streets over this. That’s why my group decided to take action. We aren’t going to tolerate an attack on democracy that has been pulled off by undermining all the key ethical values we’ve been talking about.” The rising anger in his voice surprised me, but only reinforced his sincerity.

I was still confused. “You have to believe me when I say I’m not being obstreperous. But I’m having trouble grasping the idea that a genuine *coup d’etat*—an illegitimate seizure of power—has been carried out by the Republican Party. A coup that has struck at the very heart of democracy, was *legal*, but millions of Americans haven’t noticed. Not even the Democrats. Nor the British. Nor the French. Nor any other democratic nation. All of whom would surely would issue a call to arms in defense of democracy.”

“Yes. I’d expect they would, if they noticed.”

“Doesn’t that sound simply unbelievable?”

“Not just unbelievable. It’s frightening, shocking, and depressing that the Faux-G.O.P. was able to pull it off. They’re a bunch of miserable, disloyal, unpatriotic, little shits.” He punctuated each epithet by angrily poking his finger in the air. “But you’ve got to admire what such a group of worthless, authoritarian, proto-fascists did.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You know, Abe, you need to get over being so reticent. Tell me what you really think.”

Even he had to laugh at himself.

“But if there’s been a coup, what’s your evidence?”

He chuckled. “It took you long enough to ask. The evidence is in how you were able to impose minority rule in the country.”

Again, I was puzzled. “We don’t have minority rule. There may have been meddling in the 2016 election, but there’s virtually no evidence of voter fraud. Our elections are basically fair.”

“Then how do you explain the fact that most of the policies and goals the G.O.P. champions don’t reflect the will of the majority? Isn’t that supposed to be what democracy is all about? The will of the majority?”

“Right—which is what we have.”

He shook his head. “That’s what we *say* we have. But we *don’t*. Here’s why. Think about what the G.O.P. stands for. Your party is rabidly anti-abortion, denies climate change, demonizes anyone who isn’t a white heterosexual, and passes tax legislation that benefits wealthy individuals and corporations. You can’t stop trying to repeal Obamacare.

“*However*, the majority of Americans opposes all that. Repealing Obamacare is supported by less than a third of the population. Sixty percent think that abortion should be legal. That’s even higher—65%—for Americans under 30. Sixty-two percent support same-sex marriage. Less than a third think that the current distribution of wealth is ‘fair.’ And only 25% liked your tax plan. On his best day, that racist you gave us has an approval rating of, what, 35%? Yet most Republicans in Congress do nothing while he pisses on any number of norms and institutions we *all* know are critical to the good of the country—no matter who’s in power.

Like I said, *minority rule*. ... Tell me what you think this is.”

He pulled out his tablet again and showed me a strange image.



I could tell he had fallen back into ‘setting me up’ mode. “Is this a Rorschach test?”

“Something like that. Humor me.”

I laughed. “Two people dancing?”

“Very good! Actually, two *Republicans* dancing because they’ve been able to gerrymander like crazy to stack the deck. This is the Pennsylvania 7th Congressional District. Just one of many we could look at. You know as well as I do which factors get districts drawn this way. The federal court in Richmond found that the primary purpose of North Carolina’s gerrymandering wasn’t to stop voter fraud, but rather to disenfranchise minority voters. And it wasn’t even subtle. The justices said African Americans were targeted ‘with almost surgical precision.’ Now when you do this sort of thing on a statewide basis, you’ve able to make Republican votes count more than Democratic votes. For example, the gerrymandering in Wisconsin let Republicans win 60% of the seats in the State Assembly with only 48.6% of the votes. The Democrats would have to win more than 53% of the votes to win a majority of seats. In my opinion, the G.O.P.’s REDMAP project might just as well have been called, *The Plot to Overthrow Democracy.*”

I prided myself in having a sense of fair play. I wasn’t the kind of person who thought, “If you aren’t cheating, you aren’t trying.” My feeling was, “If you cheat, it’s because you know you can’t win.” Some of my colleagues were crowing at the success of REDMAP, but not me. When you put it together with everything going on now, the way my party acted wasn’t just unfair, it was—

“You aren’t pushing back, Congressman.” He interrupted my rumination. “I’m pleased. I’ve been relying on your reputation as a facts/data/evidence guy. I was confident that by the time we got to this part of our conversation, we’d agree more than disagree.” He looked at me sympathetically. “But I get the feeling you’re troubled about more than mere promise breaking and cheating.”

I nodded. “OK, but now you humor me. Let’s see how well you know me. You tell me what’s bothering me.”

“Easy. If you’re worried about the way your party is threatening democracy, there’s the ‘Russia

connection.’ Your guy publicly praises a vicious autocrat who has probably ordered the assassination of critics and who tries to undermine democracies. He invaded Ukraine. He’s meddled in Europe’s elections. He tried to influence *our* election. He engaged in *cyber-warfare*. This was an *attack* on Americans.

“Yet your guy downplays any threat from Russia. Hell, even though virtually every security agency has concluded the Russians attacked us, Comrade Pinocchio dismisses it as a hoax! He refused to implement appropriate sanctions. What message do you suppose that sends to the Kremlin? What part of ‘preserve, protect and defend the Constitution’ doesn’t he understand? Christ! Giving the Russians sensitive intelligence! Refusing to take action! If that doesn’t represent a major threat to American democracy, what does? And what do the toadies in your party do? They give him cover!” He looked at me grimly. “How’d I do?”

I took a deep breath. This was the first time I was going to say this out loud. “There’s a time where patriotism is more important than party loyalty—when everyone has to choose a side. I’ve been increasingly worried that we’re there now and that people in my party are choosing the wrong side.

“I believe that a key part of American democracy is separation of powers, our system of checks and balances, and a legal system that’s not politicized. I find this war against the FBI, the DOJ, and the intelligence community—all for nothing more than political gain— deeply troubling ... short-sighted ... suspicious.

“I saw an interesting interview with a former senior official at the FBI. He made a great case about how much damage was probably being done to the thousands of cases the Bureau works on ever day—terrorism, cybercrime, organized crime, human trafficking, and so on. He said, ‘I worry about the impact on a jury of saying the FBI’s prosecutions are politically motivated. What are they thinking now when they listen to an FBI agent testifying in a public corruption case?’ But members of my party don’t seem to care about any of that. And a lot of them are *lawyers*—which means they understand the damage being done.”

“Good point. Troubling. But *suspicious?*”

“On the heels of 9/11, there was no doubt that we had to investigate what happened and find ways to prevent something like that from happening again. When the Russia meddling in the election was first explained to us in Congress, we were stunned. Our primary global adversary interfered with our election. Some Americans may even have helped them. As with 9/11, everyone was on board. Then, slowly, things changed. Some of my colleagues simply dragged their feet. But others began working as hard as they could to derail the investigation.

“Now if this were a different kind of issue, I could dismiss that as party politics. But this was an attack by a foreign enemy. Why would you want to kill that kind of investigation?”

“Excellent question. Your answer?”

“I can think of only three reasons. First, mind numbing, self-interested party loyalty.”

Abe laughed. “Well, there’s no shortage of that on both sides of the aisle. Second reason?”

“You colluded with the attack because you believe the ends justify the means, and there’s evidence somewhere that proves it.”

“You’re trying to protect yourself.”

“Right. Stupid and selfish, I get. But *suspicious*? That must be your third reason.”

I sat quietly for a moment before I could say the words. “This is the one I can’t believe I’m saying out loud. You’re a Member of the United States Congress who wants to see our democracy destroyed and replaced with authoritarianism. You have a stronger allegiance to our enemies than to democracy and to America. You want to stop the rest of us from protecting ourselves from subsequent attacks.”

Abe sat still for a few seconds and took a deep breath. “Treason,” he said grimly. I paused and asked myself if I really meant that. I nodded my head. “Yes.”