

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

BIDEN'S INAUGURATION, TRUMP'S IMPEACHMENT, AND  
THE POLITICS AHEAD

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## PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. Joe Biden is now the 46th president of the United States and Kamala Harris the 49th vice president. But, in the tumultuous 11 weeks since the presidential election, former President Trump refused to concede, an insurrectionist mob took over the U.S. Capitol, and many elected Republicans in Congress voted to contest the Electoral College results.

On this episode, Elaine Kamarck, Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management, reflects on Inauguration Day, on the difficult presidential transition and the violence of January 6th, and the outlook for impeachment of the former president and President Biden's agenda.

Also on this episode, George Ingram, Senior Fellow in Global Economy and Development, delivers a new Sustainable Development Spotlight on how the new Biden-Harris administration can re-engage the U.S. in global leadership in a world where the idea of American exceptionalism has been seriously eroded.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter, @policypodcasts, to get information about and links to all our shows, including Dollar & Sense: The Brookings trade podcast; The Current; and our Events podcast. First up, George Ingram with his Sustainable Development Spotlight.

INGRAM: I am George Ingram, a Senior Fellow in the Global Economy and Development program, here with the Sustainable Development Spotlight, a regular segment to highlight work from the Brookings Center for Sustainable Development.

President-Elect Biden said his administration would re-engage the U.S. in global

leadership. The question is how and what will that look like? The world of 2021 that awaits the Biden-Harris administration is not the straightforward frame of post-World War II U.S.-Russia competition or the dominant position the U.S. briefly held in the post-Cold War period, the 1990s.

Economic, social, and political disruption rocked by COVID-19, along with retrenchment from global leadership by the Trump administration, have unmasked and accelerated what has been an evolving alteration in the international order and the position of the United States in that system. The disruption to the international order is forcing a re-assessment of what is meant by U.S. global leadership. Maybe leadership in a multipolar, multi-active world means listening and partnering rather than driving the train.

To understand how the U.S. can best maneuver in this increasingly complex world, it is important to recognize a few basic dynamics. One is that the United States and the West's success in winning the Cold War was built on not primarily our military prowess -- an important backstop for sure -- but on values and results.

Inherent flaws in the Soviet system contributed to victory by the West, but more fundamental were basic American values and accomplishments. People around the world who'd been inspired by the ideals upon which this nation was founded, individual rights and liberty, they've been awed by our accomplishment and seen America as the can-do country.

A second factor is these values and way of life prevailed in the Cold War not just through U.S. leadership -- the actions and policies of the United States Government -- but more broadly through American leadership, the panoply of American assets and actions that have carried American values, products, and influence, including our culture, around the world.

The third dynamic is revised geopolitics. The U.S. is no longer the stand-alone, dominant

global power as it was at the end of World War II and then again at the close of the Cold War. The U.S. now shares a multipolar stage with many other actors -- an assertive China, a panoply of traditional and emerging mental powers, and a host of powerful and influential private organizations and even movements.

The abject failure of United States Government policy response to the pandemic, along with the diffusion of global power and the Trump administration's aversion of U.S. global engagement, is accelerating the rethinking of the notion of American exceptionalism. America is the shining city on the hill. It's the model of enlightened governance.

This mythology was reinforced by victory of World War II and the expanding middle class and shared economic prosperity of the 1950s and '60s but has since been eroded by failed wars and the several decades of growing economic inequality in America. People are left wondering -- if America, with all its resources and expertise, cannot contain COVID-19, maybe it's not so great. Maybe it's not so exceptional.

There are alternative medium-term outcomes to the international image and understanding of America, especially given the mob attack on the Capitol and efforts to reverse the outcome of the presidential election. One perception is of American democracy in crisis. It's fragile and weak, and its international leadership is undependable and untrustworthy. The other is American democracy is strong and resilient. It's able to withstand direct attack, even by our president.

Reasserting U.S. global engagement will be our principal task confronting the Biden-Harris administration. The President-elect has stated that America is back and will resume its seat at the head of the table. While it appears from reaction to the U.S. election in other countries that America will be welcomed back, it is less certain that it can just assume the head position.

As it enters the room, America must be seen as a team player, along with restoring order and competence to domestic policies and politics.

There are a number of components to this international playbook that will contribute to rebuilding U.S. global participation. It starts with elevating development, along with diplomacy, both long and sufficiently valued and resourced as tools central to advancing U.S. national security. The Biden-Harris team has started the process admirably in announcing experienced and respected officials to handle international affairs, including Tony Blinken as Secretary of State and Samantha Power, the administrator of USAID.

Beyond immediate actions of rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and the WHO, among other actions the new administration can take to restore the U.S. role in the world and contribute to development are: 1) Propose to the Congress to make good on our financial arrears to international and multilateral organizations; 2) Collaborate on a solution to the burgeoning debt problem of developing countries; 3) Support revision of the governance of international institutions, so they are better fit for purpose (Phonetic) and more representative of the 21st century international order; 4) Encompass the SDGs and development policies and programs.

Equally important as taking policy actions is the task of selling them to the American people. A prominent lesson of history of other well-meaning administrations is that political and popular support do not automatically follow good policy. Big decisions need to be explained to the American people repeatedly and in clear, simple terms. If President Biden and his team are to pursue a foreign policy of the middle class, they will need to carve out the time to explain how it benefits the country and its citizens.

DEWS: And, now, here's my interview with Elaine Kamarck, Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings.

Elaine, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

KAMARCK: Thanks, Fred. Nice to be here.

DEWS: I was checking the archives and I noticed that the last time we talked on the Brookings Cafeteria was 2 days after the presidential election, so on November 5th. And, now we're the day after the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as President and Vice President, and, oh my, what a journey it has been.

KAMARCK: Wow. It's been a lot more consequential than I think any of us could have anticipated.

DEWS: Well, let's start with the most current events, which was the inauguration. Again, today is Thursday, January 21st. The inauguration ceremony was on Wednesday, January 20th. Can you reflect on what you saw and what you felt yesterday during the inauguration activities?

KAMARCK: Well, first, it was beautiful. It was beautifully done, beautifully choreographed. It was different than any other inauguration, because there were no crowds, either at the west Capitol nor on the inaugural parade route. But, I think a lot of Americans tuned in to watch this, and it was beautifully, beautifully televised. You've got to give credit to all the cameramen and women and every network for how beautifully done that was.

And, I think that, given COVID, that was exactly the inauguration that we should have had. I mean, modeled, it said to the country, hey, we are in a crisis here. We are in a pandemic. We are not going to have superspreading events, which, of course, President Trump insisted on having through much of COVID. So, I think it was all in all a beautiful, beautiful day.

DEWS: Now, President Biden gave an inaugural address that some people said was the best they'd ever heard. Others said it was good. What did you think about the address?

KAMARCK: Well, I thought it was a great inaugural address. I thought it was inspiring

and beautifully delivered. And, I think there was a sad aspect to it, too. There have been other inaugural addresses where presidents have had to talk about unity, but we've never had an inaugural address where a president had to talk about truth and the importance of truth.

And, I think, as my colleague Bill Galston wrote yesterday, he had to talk about truth because truth is essential to democracy, and we have never had an inauguration following a president who simply denied the truth for 4 years and about everything, whether it was the pandemic or whether it was his own election. I mean, I'm glad Biden did it. He had to do it. But, it was very sad that he had to devote part of his inaugural address to truth.

You wrote a piece also on FixGov blog, that I'll link to in the show notes, a few days before the inauguration, situating Joe Biden in the context of other presidents facing enormous crises as they entered office -- Abraham Lincoln in 1861 obviously facing the secession crisis and Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 facing the collapse of the U.S. economy. How do you think Joe Biden met the moment as compared to those other two presidents?

KAMARCK: Oh, I think he met the moment really well. And, in fact, the other two presidents -- Franklin Roosevelt met the moment extraordinarily well. Abraham Lincoln actually didn't. I mean, even though we remember phrases from that inaugural address, that inaugural address was an attempt to keep the southern states in the Union, and it failed. He even says in that inaugural address that he won't interfere with the right of the southern states to slavery. Looking back on it it's kind of amazing. So, his address failed.

FDR's succeeded spectacularly, and we'll see if Biden's succeeds as well. Because, it's not just the inaugural address, it's what comes right afterwards. And, frankly, what came right after Lincoln's was the firing on Fort Sumter, and the Civil War began. What came right after Roosevelt's was the bank holiday and the incredible energy of the first hundred days. So, you

have to, I think, look at these inaugural addresses in combination with what comes after.

DEWS: Well, in a moment here I'm going to ask you about what you think will come after for the new Biden administration. Let me stay on the inauguration for one more moment, and then we're going to go back in time a little bit.

At the inauguration, 22-year-old Youth Poet Laureate of the United States, Amanda Gorman, delivered a poem that she wrote called *The Hill We Climb*. I was stunned by it. I know others were. What were your impressions of her poem?

KAMARCK: First of all, to have that depth and beauty of poetry coming from somebody who's 22 years old, I was stunned, as was the whole country. And, it's an example of the fact that younger generations sometimes help us turn the pages. The contrast to Trump that that poem and the young woman who gave it and the contrast to Trump who was nothing but an old man wallowing in old angers and resentments and conspiracies, and the freshness -- her freshness compared to what we've just been through, I think, made the poem stand out even more.

DEWS: Yeah. So, just for listeners, if you did miss the inauguration, definitely go listen to Joe Biden's speech, but make a point to watch Amanda Gorman recite her poem, *The Hill We Climb*.

Elaine, let's go back a little bit. How about 2 weeks?

KAMARCK: Mm-hmm.

DEWS: January 6th an insurrectionist mob, egged on by President Trump and others, stormed the U.S. Capitol. I asked Darryl West about his feelings on this in last week's *Brookings Cafeteria* podcast, and we talked about ways to tackle the polarization problem in the United States. I want to hear from you. What did you think about that event as it was happening, and what are your reflections on it since and again in the context of the inauguration 2 weeks later?



KAMARCK: The most interesting thing about that event is it's one of those events that has gotten worse with time. In other words, sometimes we'll see a demonstration that turns violent or something like that in the United States and it's a 1 or 2-day news story.

This story, the more time, the more video, -- because these days everything is captured on video -- the more video that's come out about that, the more investigations that have come out about that, it got worse and worse and worse with time. And, this was not, as some people, I think, initially thought -- and some people wanted to argue -- this was not a peaceful demonstration that went awry.

It looks like this was planned. It looks like there was some sort of command and control structure to it, that there was some reconnaissance going on. This was really different than a demonstration that just got out of hand because of a few rowdy people in it. And, I think that as that realization has grown on the American people, this has sunk in even more seriously than it had on the days it was happening in the days afterwards.

And, then, of course, we had the contrast to the inauguration now. This inauguration took place with 21,000 National Guard troops around it, and I think everybody has repeated the same statistic, that we had more military at this inauguration than we do in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq right now. So, it's a way to put this in context.

But, also, the second wave of this insurrection did not appear, and that, I think, was really a very, very, helpful sign for the United States, that maybe some of the people who participated in this are saying to themselves -- What do we really hope to accomplish here? And, in fact, to the extent that there was any public support for Trump, for whatever their platform is, they diminished it. They didn't enhance it. So, I think they've had to go back to the drawing board and figure out what they're doing.

DEWS: Well, I think it's clear -- and as you said, the insurrection had planning of forethought. It didn't just spontaneously erupt on January 6th.

KAMARCK: Right.

DEWS: And, I think we can take it all the way back to the immediate post-election time, the last time you and I talked, when we still weren't sure that Pennsylvania was going to go for Joe Biden. So, we talked on the Thursday of that week, and I think it's Saturday, the 7th, that Pennsylvania's results were known. And, yet Donald Trump refused to concede.

So, then started the whole many weeks of resistance to the transition. The GSA administrator didn't certify the results. And, now, we're on day one of the Biden administration. So, thinking back, Elaine, to those early days following the election, when we knew the results were in Joe Biden and Kamala Harris's favor, to today, it was a terrible transition. So, how does that bad transition affect the Biden administration from today moving forward?

KAMARCK: Well, a terrible transition can be very, very, dangerous, okay. And, we saw that in the transition in 2000 between Clinton and Bush, where the transition was late in coming and a lot of very important cues were missed. So, it can be very dangerous.

Now, we lucked out in one thing on this terrible transition, which is that, first of all, it had only been 4 years between Biden being actually in the White House as Vice President and being the President-elect. So, while a lot of things change, a 4-year hiatus isn't as dangerous as an 8-year or a 12-year hiatus.

Secondly, because Biden is maybe the most experienced president we've had in many, many, many years, and as is his team, they didn't have the same amount of catch-up to play as, say, the Trump team did. I mean, the Trump team came in knowing virtually nothing as did Trump about the federal government, and it showed. And, this team, they knew a lot. So, while I

think they're probably going to be behind in some areas, it's probably not as disastrous, because of who Biden is and who his team is.

DEWS: So, I've got a lot of questions (Inaudible) on in my head, and trying to sequence them right is a challenge here, because there's so much going on. So, I want to stay on the events of the last 11 weeks with the President refusing to concede, with all the lawsuits, with many members of the GOP in the House and Senate refusing to recognize Joe Biden's victory, and with the event of January 6th in the House chamber, initially voting against recognizing the electoral votes, the insurrection, coming back in, refusing to recognize the electoral votes again.

So, we have a large faction of elected Republicans who still have not really recognized that Joe Biden won legitimately. And, I'm wondering -- do there need to be consequences for GOP members of the House and a few in the Senate that we've heard about for those actions, for that behavior, or do we just have to leave that up to their own constituents?

KAMARCK: There are definitely ways of censuring people in the House and in the Senate. And, for instance, even before all of this happened the Republican caucus had removed Congressman Steve King from his committee assignments because he was just simply too extreme for them, which is saying something. So, there are ways of censuring people.

It'll be interesting to see what they do. Usually, the punishment comes from one's own political party. Now, the most interesting piece of this whole interregnum has been Senator Mitch McConnell's words and behavior. He clearly got fed up with Donald Trump. After weeks of silence during which he let the Trump campaign file lawsuits and get recount and all that stuff, which was their right, okay, he finally said, as did, frankly, Lindsey Graham, that enough is enough.

And, in recent weeks, especially following the insurrection on January 6th, basically he's

been reported telling people that he hopes he never sees Donald Trump again. And, he is very open to hearing the arguments on convicting him once the trial starts in the Senate.

So, this is a dramatic change, and what nobody can sort of figure out yet, and I guess we'll see, is, does Mitch McConnell think he's going to do the Republican Party a favor by basically cutting the ties with Donald Trump and relegating Trump to the extreme fringes of the party, or is he going to try to have it both ways going forward?

McConnell is one of a group of 16 senators that we've identified enough in a Brookings piece about counting the Senate. Those senators go into two categories, right. Not only did they vote against the Trump position in counting the electoral college -- so, they broke with Trump on that vote -- but, they've also just been re-elected -- they were re-elected in 2020, which means that they don't have a lot to fear from Trump supporters in a primary going forward. They won't be up for re-election till 2026. That's a lifetime in American politics.

Some of them, like Susan Collins, ran a full 18 points ahead of Trump in her state. So, she doesn't have to worry about the Trumpees. So, this party has got some real internal soul searching to do in terms of how it wants to define itself going forward vis-à-vis Donald Trump. And, I think we're seeing the beginnings of that right now. If McConnell leads the way to voting conviction against Trump, it'll be quite an extraordinary moment in American politics.

DEWS: Well, it's interesting that you cited 16 senators, but it would take 17 senators on the Republican side if all 50 senators who caucus with the Democrats voted to convict Trump. It would take 17 Republicans to convict Donald Trump. So, it seems like a razor-thin (Inaudible).

KAMARCK: Oh, very razor thin. But, there are three others who don't fall into that 16. So, first of all, Mitt Romney, who voted to convict Trump last time on charges that I think one could argue were even less compelling than this time. You've got Lisa Murkowski who really

seems to have had it with Trump as well. Ben Sasse falls into both of those categories. So, you maybe have two more rather, not three. But, you maybe have two more.

And, who knows. Remember, when we went into the House vote on impeachment, we went in counting five or six Republican House members who were going to vote for impeachment. In the end, there were 10 Republican House members who voted for impeachment. So, who knows what will happen as this goes on.

Let me just say that one of the things I think is going to really influence the conviction vote is what we find out about the January 6th riots. To the extent that they were kind of spontaneous and people getting out of control and that's the argument, then it may not be as compelling. If, in fact, it looks like an actual insurrection, that people close to Trump or associated with Trump were behind, were financing something, I think this could be very, very serious.

DEWS: Again, it's Thursday as we're taping this, airing on Friday. And, Speaker Pelosi hasn't, as of this taping, sent the article of impeachment to the Senate at which point it would trigger a nearly immediate trial in the Senate. So, by the time this airs and by the time you listen to it, the Senate trial could be underway.

But, it seems to be very fraught with danger, impeaching a president who's already left office, especially one like Donald Trump. Do you think that there could be significant consequences for our politics if, in an impeachment trial in the Senate, Trump is not convicted?

KAMARCK: That's again, hard to say. And, a little bit of this, by the way, is also going to depend on how close he comes to impeachment. It would depend on what that final vote is. Andrew Johnson, who was the first president to be impeached, missed being convicted by one vote in the Senate.

So, even though he technically wasn't convicted, Andrew Johnson never had a comeback. He didn't have a political career after that. He thought, actually, that his actions would win him the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party back then, and that was laughed at on the floor of their convention. So, he was done.

One of the reasons at this point to convict Trump is to then be allowed to have the following vote which bars him from holding future federal office. So, the Republicans are going to have to think long and hard. Do they want to really get this guy out of their party and prohibit him from running again and at least getting some piece of the Republican vote in a Republican primary coming up in 2024? And, I think that's what they're going to have to deal with.

There are people like Ted Cruz, okay, who is probably going to support Trump all the way. And, he's in a funny position, right. He obviously wants to inherit the Trump vote in a Republican primary. But, you can imagine that in his heart of hearts he would really like it if Donald Trump doesn't run again. He can't run again, right?

So, I think there's a bunch of them, Senator Hawley in addition, who think they're going to run for president in 2024. They know that there will be, even in 2024, a chunk -- I mean, not necessarily a majority but a chunk of the Republican primary electorate that's going to be loyal to Trump. And, so, they've got to make that calculation going forward.

DEWS: If Donald Trump is not barred from holding office again, we're all going to have to bone up on Grover Cleveland real fast (Inaudible).

KAMARCK: (Laughs)

DEWS: But, let's talk about Joe Biden again. He's the president of the United States. Kamala Harris is vice president. And, you talked about this a few minutes ago, Elaine. But, talk about in some more detail what you're looking for in these early days of the Biden

administration, what kinds of things they need to do, what will signal success where you might be looming roadblocks to their agenda?

KAMARCK: The biggest roadblock, of course, is going to be their very narrow margins in the House and in the Senate. And, again, it's been a long time since we had a president who was as much a creature of the Congress as Joe Biden is. Even Obama wasn't really particularly good at this, at horse trading with Congress. George Bush wasn't particularly good at this. I mean, you really have to go back to Lyndon Johnson to have somebody who was really talented.

So, even though the margins are small, I think if anybody can do it, Biden can probably do it. He can probably overcome those margins. And, his first instinct will be to look for a bipartisan deal. Now, if he doesn't, if he can't find that, there are other fallbacks, particularly on the COVID relief bill, like reconciliation.

But, I think his first instinct is going to be to look for a bipartisan deal, and that, by the way, is job number one. He has got to tackle COVID. Between getting emergency money out there and getting vaccines into people's arms, he's absolutely got to do that. All sorts of other things will flow from simply the ability to get us to the end of this pandemic.

DEWS: When Darryl West was on the program last week, we talked a lot about political polarization. And, so, I'd like to get your thoughts on what you think we can do to address polarization in America and even address political violence.

KAMARCK: Well, to address political violence, I think the FBI has now completely woken up to the incredible danger out there posed by malicious and white supremacy groups and neo-Nazi groups. And, let's hope that in this era they will pursue that with all the vigor that they pursued the civil rights groups in the 1960s when they were convinced that Martin Luther King was a communist and they were looking so carefully at the civil rights groups.

So, let's hope that law enforcement takes this very, very seriously. I'm sure they'll find ways to spew hatred on the internet, et cetera, but let's keep them from having guns and being able to do the violence that we saw on January 6th. So, that's, I think, the first thing.

Biden said it and he said it very, very eloquently, right. He talked about not all politics needs to be a shouting match. And, what we're about to see is an answer to the following question: How much of this polarization was exacerbated by Donald Trump himself?

Donald Trump was a very unusual president. Presidents don't usually spend 4 years playing only to their base. Presidents generally try to reach out across the aisle. They try to broaden their base. Donald Trump made absolutely no attempt at this. And, in the course of his presidency, he actually exacerbated the divisions between Americans as opposed to trying to bring people together, which most presidents, Democrats and Republicans before him, have had exactly the opposite.

So, I guess the short answer to your question -- that was a little meandering -- but the short answer is, I think simply the absence of Trump himself will take down the temperature in our dialogue, and then I think social media has to look at themselves very hard and say -- how much nonsense are we going to tolerate? Are we going to become just a platform for blatant lies and distortions or are we going to try to do something about it?

DEWS: Feels like a lot of work ahead of us all. Elaine, a kind of a really broad question about the events of the last 11 weeks from the election to now, the election that Donald Trump refused to concede. We didn't have, by all accounts, a smooth transition or arguably a peaceful transition. What do you think America lost because of what's happened?

KAMARCK: Boy, I think they lost the sense that our democracy was really, really strong and can survive anything. I think America saw our democracy come close to falling apart, and



that has freaked out a lot of people. And, I think that we lost our complacency. If we lost anything, we lost our complacency about the strength of our democracy. And, hopefully, over the next 4 years we can get that back.

But, you've got to point where the problem is. The problem is a Republican Party, a big chunk of which has gone off the rails. And, until we get back to a place where we have two solid, small (Phonetic) the Democratic parties in this country, we're going to always have to worry about the state of our democracy.

DEWS: Well, given that Elaine, let me end this way. Are you hopeful that this will maybe be a lesson learned that we'll take from this, something to build on and improve our democracy?

KAMARCK: I am hopeful. And, I'm hopeful for basically one reason. I think there's a generational aspect to this. Donald Trump has not been able to make inroads into a younger generation. His supporters, his most virulent supporters tend to be older and older white men who feel that the country is not theirs anymore. And, younger people have simply not flocked to Trump in the same way.

So, I have some optimism just from that. If you're the political party of old people versus the political party of young people, the political party of young people has the better future.

DEWS: And, I think that takes us back to the stirring words of Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, which will go out on here. She said: The new dawn blooms as we free it.

GORMAN: (Audio clip) For there is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it -  
- if only we are brave enough to be it.

DEWS: Well, Elaine, thanks. It's always a delight to talk to you about these issues, and we'll check back in with you soon. Thank you very much for your time and expertise today.

KAMARCK: Great. Thank you, Fred.

DEWS: A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo, to Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews, to my communications colleagues Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration, and finally to Camilo Ramirez and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support. Our podcast intern this semester is David Greenburg.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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