

Thoughts on Coming Apart and the Coming Great Reset



**Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer**

Kit Webster

June 14, 2024

Are We Doomed?

All things are already said, but, since no one is listening, you always have to start over. - Andre Gide

I am not young enough to know everything. - Oscar Wilde

The last round of thoughts on the Trump conviction is at the bottom of this post, by the ever-thoughtful Neil Howe.

Markets

[Updated Charts](#)

> Very close - days, maybe a couple of weeks - from yet another top in the stock markets. All other markets behaving as expected.

> BIG

In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia reached an understanding with the US that it would trade its oil in dollars in return for the US's protection. That agreement was the foundation of the dollar as the world's reserve currency.

That understanding just expired. Saudi Arabia will now trade in multiple currencies. This has implications, both for the dollar's status and for the perception of the US as a reliable protector and the availability of assurances from other powerful countries. The US and Saudi Arabia remain aligned, but it is becoming more complicated.

> Are We Doomed?

(I seem to be HT-ing CH a lot lately. He sent me an article that I had missed from the *New Yorker*, that stimulated these thoughts.)

As always, any good discussion begins with the definition of terms - who is "we" and, doomed in what way? I'll address that later.

The article in the *New Yorker* was inspired by the anxiety around artificial intelligence. There was also the usual framing-from-history-with-interesting-stories. It mentioned nuclear risk, sustainability and pandemics. A guy who has systematically ranked existential risks "believes that A.I. is the most perilous, assigning to it a one-in-ten chance of ending human potential or life in the next hundred years. (He describes his assessments as guided by 'an accumulation of knowledge and judgment' and necessarily not precise.) To nuclear technology, he assigns a one-in-a-thousand chance, and to all risks combined a one-in-six chance." (I'm not sure what a one-in-six chance means in this context, but will move on.)

The article ends on a who-knows-but-life-is-for-living note.

I'll take a different approach.

If "we" is you, the answer is, yes. You will die.

If "we" is the United States, the answer is, highly likely. All previous empires in history have fallen and we are not in great shape - things are heading in the wrong direction.

If "we" is our prosperity and culture, the answer that I have argued for the past thirty years is, yep. We are in the process of bringing ourselves down. Pretty soon, now, actually.

If "we" is homo sapiens, the answer is, maybe. Volcanoes, asteroids, pandemics and nuclear war are out there waiting for us. All are low probability events, but all of their probabilities are non-zero. Global warming is probably not existential, although it can be damaging. (Of course, in hundreds of millions of years, the sun will explode. Not only do you need to define your terms, you need to define your timeframes.)

What about AI?

AI will likely be significantly life changing in a reorganizing-and-redefining-economic-relationships kind of way, although there is the interesting question that I am asking myself of whether we can create the electricity and the grid to support AI. AI will probably only be existential if we create a quasi-sentient AI being that decides to eradicate us. Not likely, but not impossible.

Now to the "doomed" bit. Doomed can run the gamut from, things get worse, to, the end of something.

It is human nature to look for the end. Part of this is the nature of cycles in essentially all things. All things do really come to an end. History has demonstrated, from the Dark Ages to the Great Depression, that things can be very bad, but the real issue is the next cycle. So far, things have gotten better in the next cycle, with detours along the way.

So, if "doomed" means, are we in a cycle that will end, the answer is, yes.

If "doomed" means, will there be another cycle, the answer is, highly likely.

If "doomed" means, will the next cycle be better than this one, the answer is, who knows, but, so far, so good.

As always, the devil is in the details. The Aztecs were wiped out - no more cycles for them. The Mongols and Persians, among others, fell from the pinnacle, not to begin to gain former glory (so far, at least). They had new cycles of a much different kind. The glory that was Rome is of another day.

My point is that cycles can resume somewhere else. The US took on the British mantle and Britain is now a shadow of its former self.

Cycles come in terms of economics, freedom, health with multiple cycles in various places interacting with each other.

The good news for China is that it is ascendant. The bad news is that demographics, all things being equal, will take it down - relatively quickly in the grand scheme of things.

The good news for the US is that we once bestrode the narrow world like a Colossus. The bad news is that we are squandering our birthright.

So, are we doomed?

Yes. Things will not, in multiple dimensions, continue as they once did. Some things will get "better" and some things will get "worse."

Is there hope?

Yes. Humans are extraordinarily creative.

In the article, one person of approximately my age noted that he had the privilege of living when he did. I share that sense of awe and wonder at the sheer luck of the timing of my existence - you should share in that feeling.

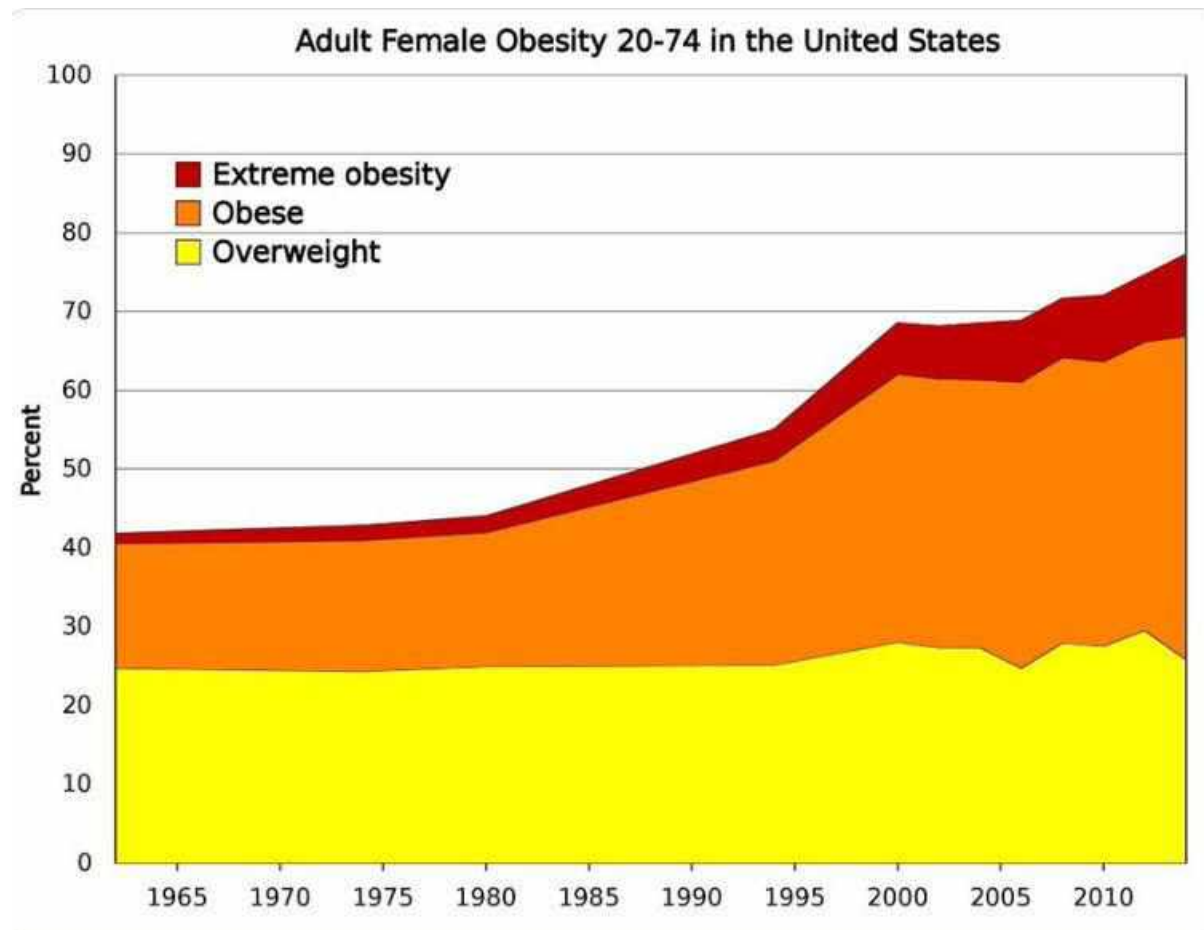
The problem with being at the peak is that there is only one way to go from there - at least for a while, but, perhaps, permanently.

And there we are.

Life is for living.

Short Takes

Body positive is the new normal



> There are a sufficient number of illegals now in the US to begin to become a political force in some cities - think about it.

> We have another holy icon to go along with the N-word.
It is a felony in the State of Washington to deface a Pride symbol.

In related news - Lime scooters will now be remotely shut down if you drive them over Spokane's Pride crosswalk



The Babylon Bee ✓ @TheBabylonBee · 5h

Man Charged With Blasphemy For Not Removing Sandals While Using
Rainbow Crosswalk buff.ly/42TsKxK



The *New York Times* as tabloid / click bait generator

Here's a *Times* headline: "Behind one of the cruelest and most persistent myths in rock 'n' roll history."

It's about Mama Cass.

For those of you who are just now comfortably beyond puberty, Cass was a singer in the group, The Mamas and the Papas, from the late 60s. Excellent voice and very body positive. I enjoyed most of the songs they sang and still have a few on my playlist.

The "cruelest and most persistent myth?" That she died choking on a ham (Beth insists it was bologna) sandwich.

The truth? She had a heart attack at age 32.

So, instead of a meme about being overweight, which was cruel, she actually probably died from being overweight.

You're welcome.

Hunter Biden was convicted on all counts. (Yawn.) But you do have to give him credit for being the poster child for toxic masculinity.

> In another exercise in moving the goal posts, the Biden administration is proposing rules to ban medical debt from credit reports, rendering credit reports less useful for everyone. Put yourself in the place of a lender who now has no idea how much debt their applicant owes. More populist stupidity. We are living in a period in which it is being decreed that all thermometers read 70 degrees, all the time, and all weather forecasts be sunny. In the end, it will simply be more difficult to get credit.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

The fact that elite schools are once again requiring SATs indicates that there is hope that sanity will return and goal posts will return to their proper places - someday.

> It's gonna get worse, but here we are - from X

ICE, in conjunction w/ the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, arrested 8 Tajikistan nationals w/ suspected ISIS ties in NYC, LA, and Philly in recent days. I'm told all 8 crossed the southern border illegally, received "full vetting", and had no initial derogatory information that flagged. I'm told derogatory info/potential national security concerns flagged later on - apparently after release into the US.

Source was unable to say when and where they crossed illegally into the US.

Actions have consequences.

> Lies, damned lies and statistics

FBI reported a decrease in violent crime, only

- 40% of local law enforcement agencies are no longer transmitting that information to the FBI, and
- Many cities are not prosecuting crime.

Kinda like the credit report of the future - nobody knows what is actually going on.

> The *New Yorker* cartoons in their daily email were on fire last Wednesday



“Whoa, don’t ask constitutional questions you don’t want to know the answers to.”



"Team Trump is up by thirty-one in felonies, but it's still anyone's game."

For whatever difference it makes in the second act of the soap opera -

The Economist has launched its presidential election model, and it forecasts that Donald Trump has a two in three chance of winning reelection based on current polls. Things are a little less bleak for Joe Biden in 538's model, which also launched this week. They say the race is a dead heat.

Oh, alrighty then -

"The hastily constructed pier was never designed to handle the Mediterranean Sea's rough waters." *The Wall Street Journal* details what went wrong with Biden's \$230 million Gaza pier

News you can use -

2nd-grade teacher who was arrested for being drunk in class is no longer facing charges because "it is not illegal to teach drunk."

I'm generally staying away from the stupid parts of the election on both sides, but Trump rose to the occasion this week. I have thought that his most amazing move last election was to ensure that the Republicans lost the Senate battle in Georgia, and therefore control of the Senate - that was 4-D chess that I have still been unable to decipher. This time around, he did not reach those heights (?), but called Milwaukee, where the Republicans are holding their convention, and which is in Wisconsin, a swing state, a "horrible city." He is truly a marvel. Meanwhile, Biden continues to deteriorate before our very eyes.

> I want to be clear about something. I am 78 years old - not that far behind Biden. I am watching my body deteriorate and am terrified of having my mind deteriorate. I have seen it happen to friends and relatives. It is sad, even tragic, and I have deep sympathy for Biden as a person. It has to be hell to mumble and wander and freeze on the world stage. He is almost becoming a tragic figure. However, having Biden run for president of our country is an indescribably incompetent, cynical and stupid thing to do. The lives of hundreds of millions of Americans, not to mention billions of humans, are being radically impacted for the sake of power politics. It is an act of desperation to counter the other act of desperation of running Trump because of fear for the future of the country. If you read this story about another country, you would smile at the follies of human nature and those silly foreigners, but in this case, it is us we are talking about.

It Ain't Easy Being Green

Washington Post

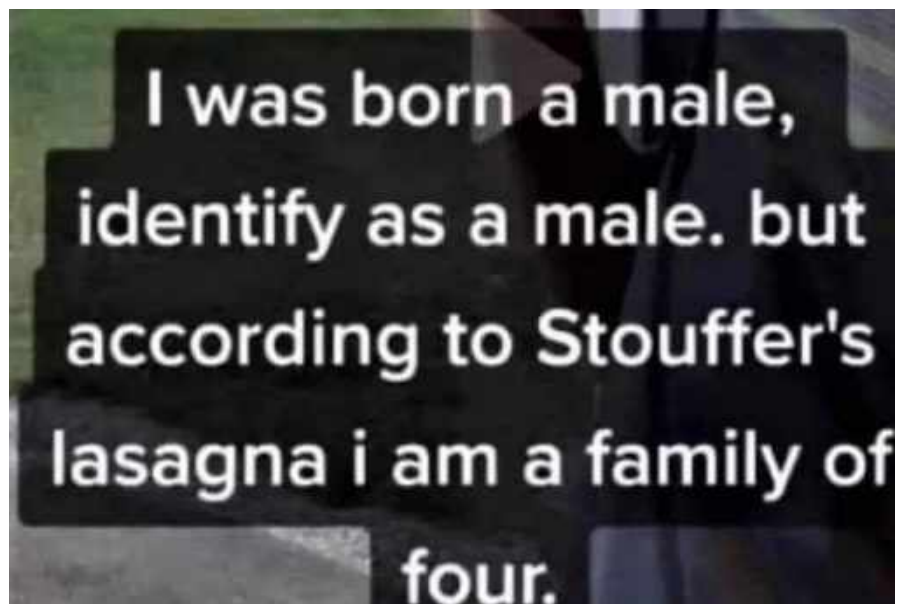
For all the steps Paris organizers have taken to put on the greenest Olympics ever, their boldest measure - the one they've touted again and again - pertains to the dorms in the Athletes' Village. The rooms don't have air-conditioning. Because of other cooling measures, organizers have assured, the athletes won't need it.

But in a farcical turn, when the Games start next month, an Olympic Village designed to showcase sustainability will be more of an energy hog than organizers had hoped.

That's because portable air-conditioning units will be everywhere. Wheeled in. Shipped in. Ordered by visiting countries that want their athletes to sleep well and perform at the highest level - even if it means a larger carbon footprint. Worried about what potentially could be the world's hottest year on record, wealthier nations have effectively undercut Paris's marquee sustainability measure, signaling that, yes, they care about environmental aims - but not if it risks the comfort of their athletes. Some of those athletes are accustomed to

temperatures cooler than what the dorms might have provided and raised concerns to their national Olympic committees.

Miscellany





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Trump Conviction Pushes Up the 2024 Election Stakes

While the guilty verdict may actually help Trump, it darkens the post-election outlook for America.

[NEIL HOWE](#)

JUN 10

Did you feel the political thermometer rise after the Trump conviction? When I heard the news, and the partisan reaction to it, the air seemed to tingle like after a lightning bolt. Once again, Americans had to pry their eyes open and feel both anger and anguish at the sight of the precipice they're moving toward. We still can't make out what lies over the edge: an election? a war? total chaos? After the conviction, it is clear that the electorate is more polarized than ever. ("How in the heck can you be undecided at this point?" [asked focus group moderator Frank Luntz](#) a week ago of the small number of swing voters he interviewed.) It is also clear that the winning side in November, whichever side that is, will be regarded by the other half of America as unlawful usurpers. Paint your own scenario for what happens next.

As I contemplated all this, the first question I asked myself was, Cui bono? After toting up all the pluses and minuses, I figured it's Trump who benefits most by pushing up the stakes. Which is probably why the conviction happened.

The consensus "expert" view of the conviction (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) is that New York County District Attorney Alvin Bragg started with a flimsy legal case and succeeded in getting jury convictions on all counts due only to the incompetence of Trump's lawyers. They stupidly insisted on fighting every one of the prosecutor's witnesses and failed to focus the jury's attention on the weak legal core of Bragg's case. Or maybe they weren't so stupid. Maybe instead, say the experts, their skill was hobbled by the irrational pique of Trump himself, who may have demanded that his lawyers wage a "deny everything" campaign against Bragg—and who, in addition, expressed contempt for the judge and openly snoozed in front of the jury. It's almost as though Trump didn't care how the verdict came out.

Almost as though Trump didn't care? Hmmm. Let's ponder that. Now I'm not insisting that Trump actually preferred the guilty verdict. But I do suspect he was situationally indifferent. He could see advantages either way. Sure, if the jury had declared him innocent (or reached no verdict at all), he could avoid the "felon" taint and still rage against the crooked Joe Biden administration for rigging the justice system. And in normal times, this outcome would have seemed hugely preferable.

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What if Pontius Pilate Had Declared a Mistrial?

But we do not live in normal times. Consider: How much has Trump ever really shirked the "felon" taint? This is the candidate who generates millions by selling t-shirts showing his mug shot (care of Fulton County, Georgia, Sheriff), below which appear the words, "NEVER SURRENDER." Who mimics [Tony Soprano](#) and compares himself to [Al Capone](#). Who used to invent sociopathic biographies for his WWE wrestlers just to prove how brutal they were. Who was recently defended by one supporter, in [a memorable focus group exchange](#), as "the antihero, the Soprano,

the ‘Breaking Bad,’ the guy who does bad things, who is a bad guy but does them on behalf of the people he represents.”

To be sure, this is the profane, violent side of Trump’s deliberate self-abnegation. Yet there is also the spiritual, Christian side. After all, was not Jesus himself a felon? [In revivalist rallies across America](#), Trump assures his followers that as his enemies move from insult to slander to legal charges and (perhaps) even to prison time, he will bear the thorns, the scourging, and (perhaps) even the crucifixion—all for their sake. The stone that the builders rejected will become the cornerstone: Scorned as he may be, Trump tells his followers, he is all that stands between their own vulnerable lives and Joe Biden’s “crooked system” along with all of its “sick,” “rigged,” and “disastrous” policies.

In this dualistic, utterly polarized political environment, exoneration in the courtroom may not be in Trump’s best interest. It could dampen the passion that fuels his movement, since a “not guilty” verdict might suggest that the system is not as corrupt as Trump always insisted it was. Or let’s invert the metaphor: Could the twelve apostles have preached a persuasive gospel if Pontius Pilate had let Jesus off—let’s say by overruling the Sanhedrin and declaring a mistrial? Trump has painted himself into a drama in which backing down or backing out is simply not an option.

Democratic leaders and core voters appear to be feeling pretty satisfied about the trial. And maybe even pretty clever: The verdict was perfect (guilty on all counts), and so was its timing (early enough for sentencing before the GOP convention, but late enough so that no appeal can be ruled upon until after the election). When he ran for the county district attorney post back in June, 2021, Bragg campaigned heavily on the promise that he would “hold Trump accountable” for any or all of his sundry misdeeds. (New York Attorney General Letitia James promised the same thing when she ran for her office in 2018.) Promises made, promises kept. President Biden congratulated the court and the jury for reaffirming the rule of law, while also telling Republicans that it’s “reckless” and “dangerous” to say the verdict was rigged “just because they don’t like the verdict.” Besides, he added helpfully (or tauntingly), Trump was free to file an appeal. Surely believing that he has won this round, Biden once again billed himself as the defender of a system that works.

Trump, meanwhile, is making his own calculations. He realizes there is little possibility he will actually go to jail or prison. Judge Juan Merchan is unlikely to recommend prison and, even if he does, the courts would almost certainly stay the sentence until his appeals are exhausted. And if the courts were even to mention parole, well, Trump would embrace that as well: He would call himself a “political prisoner.” During the last few weeks, in fact, he seems so eager to pin this label on himself that he’s not even waiting for any court to do so. (And it must be profitable since Amazon is selling [a dozen t-shirt variants](#).)

Photos from [realdonaldtrump](#) and [Team Trump](#)

That leaves Trump free to galvanize his MAGA base around an either-or proposition: Either he is vindicated by his followers on November 5 and the country is saved; or he is victimized by the Democrats' corrupt "lawfare" subterfuge and the country is ruined, perhaps irretrievably. While Biden thrives off the perception that the system can still be trusted, Trump thrives off the perception that the system is so broken that it needs replacing—enabling Trump to showcase his own conviction as evidence for just how broken it is.

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How to Fire Up Your Core

By defying the court outright, and by not cravenly crawling toward [some misdemeanor escape hatch](#), Trump was telling his supporters: I'm all in, be all in with me. We conquer or die together. Like Hernán Cortés setting off from Veracruz (forgive me for grabbing yet another metaphor), he has burned his ships on the beach so that no one can contemplate retreat. If we lose, sure, we all live under tyranny—but I go to prison. Now that's how a candidate fires up his core.

Within 24 hours of his conviction, [the Trump campaign raised a record \\$53M](#) in on-line cash, mostly from small donors. It was enough to crash the website for an hour and boosted [the inflow for May to \\$141M](#), more than double what it was for April. The amount of money is unimportant. What matters is the zeal behind it. This is Trump's rank and file, the redzone troops who will be organizing rallies, pushing doorbells, talking to neighbors, and putting signs on roadways. A bit more surprisingly, big money donations by billionaires to GOP PACs [have also ramped up since the conviction](#). These include (likely) seven- or eight-figure checks from the likes of Pershing Square CEO Bill Ackman, Blackstone CEO Steve Schwarzman, energy magnate Harold Hamm, and casino tycoon Miriam Adelson. This doesn't count the growing number of [Silicon Valley owners and executives](#).

Meanwhile, getting out in front of this partisan wave are a flush cross-section of Trump allies, supplicants, and insiders—from House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) to Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Mike Lee (R-UT), and J.D. Vance (R-OH) to Steven Bannon and Stephen Miller. They are calling for scorched-earth political combat—for "[fighting with everything in our arsenal](#)" (Johnson) or for "[fighting fire with fire](#)" (Rubio). That includes [blocking all administration initiatives](#) in the Senate (Lee together with seven other senators), [defunding "lawfare"](#) by state prosecutors (Johnson again), or asking local GOP attorneys general [to bring criminal charges](#) against Democrat office-holders all across the country (Miller).

Yet it's not just the MAGA core. In order to avoid getting run over by this tribal juggernaut, hardly any Republican leader, no matter how centrist, is willing to go on record supporting the Trump conviction. None, at least, who are currently in office or running for office.

Consider the seven senators who dared to find Trump guilty in the 2021 impeachment trial. Of the four still in office, three have condemned the verdict, including such

suburban moderates as Bill Cassidy of Louisiana (“[I disagree with the verdict](#)”), Susan Collins of Maine (“The district attorney... brought these charges precisely because of who the defendant was [rather than because of any specified criminal conduct](#)”), and Mitt Romney of Utah (“Political malpractice... [Democrats think they can put out the Trump fire with oxygen](#)”). Minority leader Mitch McConnell, who almost voted for impeachment, declared that “these charges [never should have been brought in the first place](#).” Even former VP Mike Pence, thrown by Trump into political purgatory for his “betrayal,” [has denounced the hush-money verdict](#). As for Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska (the fourth GOP senator who voted against Trump in the 2021 impeachment trial and remains in office), she is still equivocating. So is Nikki Haley. Both can be expected to fall in line in short order, especially after they contemplate the fratricidal fury engulfing Larry Hogan, the GOP candidate for Senate in Maryland, [after he dared to suggest](#) (before the conviction was announced) that all Americans “respect the verdict.”

What Do Voters Think?

OK, I know what you’re thinking. So Trump has energized his core, amped up his big-money flows, and unified his party leaders. Great. But how is this going to improve his appeal to the disengaged and moderate voters (many of them Independents), to say nothing of the NeverTrump Republicans, who now have to pull the lever for a “convicted felon”? Trump has to gather 50% in the battleground states, right? Getting more of his core to the polls may help. But presumably he also needs to capture a large share of the lukewarm middle.

Good question. Let’s turn to the surveys. What do they tell us about the impact of the conviction on how Americans will vote?

One level-setting fact must be stressed up front. The intentions of two-thirds of all voters (Democrats and Republicans in about equal measure) are set in stone: [They say literally “nothing” will change their minds](#). And even of the remaining third, most are beyond turning. Only 7% say they are genuinely undecided, and these tend to be the least likely to show up on election day. Indeed, only a small slice of voters have not already interpreted the Trump conviction in a highly partisan manner. [Consider this](#): Of all Democrats, 89% agree that Trump’s conviction represented the “upholding of the rule of law”; and of all Republicans, 87% agree that the conviction represented a “politically motivated effort to keep Trump out of the White House.” Not much guessing about how they’re all going to vote.

Still, you might think, that leaves five to ten percentage points up for grabs. In a typical pre-conviction survey (see, for example, this [CNN poll](#) and this [ABC News/Ipsos poll](#)), about 16% of Trump voters said they would “reconsider” or be “less likely” to vote for Trump and another 4% said flat out they would not vote for him in case he was found guilty.

At first glance, this looks like a punishing setback for Trump. But upon closer examination, his prospects may not have suffered so badly. For one thing, it appears

that the words “reconsider” or “less likely,” for most Trump voters, do not mean actually changing their vote. For another, several post-conviction polls show that a large share of Trump voters [have changed their minds since his conviction](#). Nearly half of those who said they would not vote for him if he were found guilty have now changed their minds: They’ll vote for him after all. Most importantly, at least half of those Trump supporters who now say they won’t vote for Trump have not switched to Biden. The GOP may hope that these dissuaded supporters may quickly come back to the fold—much as they did after Trump’s support was hurt (only temporarily, it turned out) by [the broadcasting of the infamous “Access Hollywood” tapes](#) during the run-up to the 2016 election.

Thus far, we have a couple of direct estimates of how Trump’s conviction has altered the race. Immediately after the verdict was announced, two polling groups ([NYT-Siena](#) and [Echelon Insights](#)) reinterviewed respondents in recent polls to find out how their voting preferences had changed. Both registered a (net) two point gain for Biden. In the NYT-Siena poll of voters in six battleground states, Trump’s advantage shifted from an advantage of +3pp to +1pp. [GOP strategist Mike DuHaime](#) sums up Trump’s current outlook pretty well: “No one plays victim better than he does, so this will solidify 95% of his supporters. The problem is the other 5%. If that 5% leaves, he’s losing 2.5 points in close target states, enough to tip the balance.” When in trouble, Trump’s instinct is always to go with his core, hoping in a pinch that a higher turnout from true believers can compensate for losses in the wishy-washy middle.

So who are these “middle” voters—those who, according to the polls, are most likely to abandon Trump after the conviction? The bad news for Trump is that they appear to be disproportionately the younger and nonwhite (and noncollege) “moderates” who may have voted for Biden in 2020, but who over the last two years have been fueling Trump’s modest but growing lead in the polls, especially in the battleground states. They are pragmatic, bread-and-butter voters. They overwhelmingly think Trump would improve the economy, fix the border, kick butt abroad, and simply run things with a surer hand. Few have any feelings of loyalty to the Republican party or think that Democrats are “out to get us.” So they tend to take Trump’s felony conviction at its negative face value—as a sign of malfeasance or incompetence, pure and simple. If there’s any good news about these voters for Trump, it may be this. First, because they are disengaged, they are the least likely to vote for either candidate. And in case they don’t end up voting for Trump, most will stay home rather than vote for Biden. Second, they tend to be the least informed, especially about Trump’s trials. [Among registered voters under 35](#), only 9% followed the hush-money trial “very closely”—versus 51% over age 65. “Not too closely” shows the inverse: 53% under age 35, versus 13% over age 65. Also, Independents followed the trial much less closely than Republicans or Democrats. Since many of these marginal voters don’t know much about what happened, Trump may be able to re-educate them about what his

conviction really means. If they do not now think of Trump as a legal victim, they may in time be induced to think of him that way.

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Playing the Conviction: Each Side's Winning Strategy

Can the Trump campaign accomplish this? Quite possibly. Trump has to consider himself lucky that his May 30 conviction came from the very weakest of the criminal cases pending against him. I'll not burden the reader here by reviewing [all the brittle links in this case](#): the use of a New York state fraud law to elevate an accounting misdemeanor committed after the 2016 election into a felony "by intent" to violate a federal election law—or is it a New York state tax law?—that was applicable before the election and was never demonstrably violated.

Let's just say this. Even of all those Americans who followed the trial closely, not one in ten thousand would be able to explain exactly what Trump was convicted of. Even the jury had trouble, which is why it had to ask Judge Merchan to repeatedly recap the complicated Boolean algebra of his instructions. Indeed, [the eminent legal scholar Alan Dershowitz](#) confessed that he had no idea. Commenting on the conviction, he said, "I have never seen a case where, even after the verdict came down, we don't know what he was convicted of." The conviction is appealable on multiple grounds, of which [simple violation of due process](#)—the constitutional right of the accused to know specifically what the charges against him are—may be one of the best.

Would Trump be in more danger if the case had been stronger and the charges clearer? We ought to hope so. Consider the Georgia case, which will not be tried until after (perhaps long after) the election. Here Trump is charged with a crime, interfering with an election count, the seriousness of which anyone can grasp. I'd love to be the prosecutor who gets to editorialize, before a jury, on [the hour-long Trump-Raffensperger phone call](#). And most Americans appreciate the difference. When asked last month [by a CNN poll](#), only 28% of Americans said that a guilty verdict in the hush money case would "disqualify" Trump for the presidency. But 43% said a guilty verdict in the Georgia case would disqualify him.

Even here, though, we should not underestimate the power of partisan loyalty: In all of these cases, the vast majority of those who say "disqualify" are Democrats. In the hush-money case, 4% of Trump voters and 7% of Republican-leaning voters [said in April that a conviction would "disqualify" Trump](#). In the Georgia election interference case, those numbers do rise, but not as much as you might expect—to only 5% and 9%, respectively.

Trump's [notorious 2016 boast](#)—that "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters"—may not be literally true. Yet Trump has always been more prescient than other leaders in anticipating the ascendancy of fear-driven partisanship. This dynamic always emerges in a Fourth Turning.

Desperation and vulnerability breed loss of public trust. Loss of public trust breeds tribalism. And tribalism breeds personal loyalty. When voters believe the enemy

leader will steer their country toward hell, they really don't care much about the imperfections—or even the gross incapacity—of their own leader. Is my candidate senile? Is my candidate a convicted murderer? Given the alternative, does it matter? If Team Trump's strategy is to persuade marginal voters that corrupt Democrats bent the law in order to convict him, Team Biden's strategy is to insist that "no one," not even a corrupt politician like Trump, is "above the law." That's not a bad strategy so far as it goes. But it is vulnerable to the Trump campaign's charge that, in this conviction, there is no clarity at all about what "the law" actually says. It's also the sort of abstract campaign theme (along with Trump as a "threat to democracy") that appeals best to those who are comfortable with how the system is working today—that is, older Democratic-leaning voters who will be voting for Biden anyway. It will be less effective in wooing young Independents, who resemble Republicans more than Democrats in the massive share ([roughly half](#)) who say they are "very dissatisfied with how things are going in the nation today." Among these voters, abstract appeals to the supremacy of "the law" and "democracy" may not move the needle much. Though it is too late now, there is one strategy that Biden could have employed that might have very effectively turned the Trump conviction to his advantage. Instead of crowing about the rule of law, he could have held a press conference and publicly recommended that the New York governor vacate the conviction or pardon Trump on the grounds that an abstruse and controversial conviction not be allowed to interfere with the fair election of major party candidates. While partisan Democrats would have gnashed their teeth—Biden is ruining our moment of triumph!—who cares? Biden has their votes under lock and key. What matters is that partisan Republicans would also have gnashed their teeth, because Biden would be knocking down one of their foundational claims about the 2024 election—that it's another "Democratic steal." The MAGA core would not have galvanized. The Republican leaders would not have circled their wagons. But the taint of the jury felony conviction would still be floating around out there.

If Biden had been leading in the polls, perhaps he would have dared to do something as magnanimous as this. But Biden's campaign managers now work in a climate of scarcity, not abundance. Behind in the polls, they probably figured they couldn't risk turning down what the conviction seemed to offer: the slam dunk humiliation of their opponent. Upon learning of the conviction, Biden's top advisors universally celebrated. "There is no way to spin that this is a good day for Donald Trump," exulted Pete Giangreco, a top Democratic strategist.

They may be tragically premature in their mutual high-fiving.

“You’ll Regret This”

Back in 2013, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid used the so-called “nuclear option” to break the filibuster and enable Democratic senators to appoint federal Appeals Court justices with simple majorities. [Senator McConnell told Senate Democrats at the time](#), “You’ll regret this, and you may regret this a lot sooner than you think.”

Regret it they did. And soon. Starting in 2017, McConnell, now himself Majority Leader, started using the nuclear option to enable a simple majority of Republican senators to appoint Supreme Court Justices. In recent years, similar calls have been raised in the Senate to use the nuclear option for legislation as well. This would allow the majority party in the Senate to disregard the other party almost entirely.

With the Trump conviction and its aftermath, we may be witnessing the bipartisan embrace of a much more perilous nuclear option—the use of legal proceedings in partisan jurisdictions and venues to shame, fine, or even imprison political leaders of the other party. Donald Trump himself bears much of the responsibility for setting America down this path by reckless speech and impulsive behavior that so often pushes beyond what is appropriate—if not beyond what is strictly legal. ([Many Trump voters admit as much](#): One in five agree, along with nearly all Biden voters, that Trump’s behavior during the trial was “inappropriate.”) Yet Joe Biden and his fellow Democrats also bear much responsibility by leaning so heavily on judges, laws, and criminal processes to cripple their opponent rather than trusting the electorate to make up its own mind. They appear to regard ordinary voters as such unthinking brutes that certain choices must be forcibly taken off their menu.

It is all too easy to envision how partisan “lawfare” could continue to spread after the 2024 election. Let’s start with the likelihood that the campaign will be bitterly contested and that the outcome will be closely decided. Now let’s consider what comes after.

If Trump is determined to be the winner, much of blue-zone America will reject the legitimacy of a felon convicted of fraud who, they figure, escaped even worse guilty verdicts by fancy legal footwork. Trump, for his part, has repeatedly hinted at [“retribution” against Democratic leaders](#) once he is President. [“It’s a terrible, terrible path that they’re leading us to,”](#) Trump says, referring to his own conviction, “and it’s very possible that it’s going to have to happen to them.” If Biden is determined to be the winner, on the other hand, much of red-zone America will reject the legitimacy of an incumbent who, more overtly than in 2020, will be deemed to have “stolen” the election. “I’m OK with it,” but it could be [“a breaking point for my supporters,”](#) says Trump—who was referring to his own imprisonment but could just as easily be referring to a Biden victory.

Yet if the hush-money conviction has darkened America’s post-election prospects no matter which side wins, it’s not true that the two sides are symmetrically positioned to gain by whatever happens between now and the election. These two candidates are very differently positioned.

Biden is the incumbent whose clarion call is trust in the system. Biden gains if events go well (in the economy, markets, geopolitics) and voters start to regard his opponent as a lawless brigand. Trump is the challenger who insists that “everything is broken.” He gains if events go poorly and if voters come to regard his own incrimination as yet another symptom of America’s brokenness. From lawless brigand, Trump instead

becomes the people's champion. He is thus advantageously, if also ominously, situated to grow politically stronger as the cycle of distrust intensifies. He has no real motive to try to calm the seas. Like a hurricane gaining heat and velocity from its own whirling condensation, Trump's cause is reinforced by the political dysfunction vortexed around his own candidacy.

And this is why he may have been perfectly content with the guilty verdict.

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