

To the History Department Community:

In light of yesterday's events in Washington, I wanted to reach out to you all, check on everyone's well-being, share a few thoughts, and see how we might move forward as a community. Apologies in advance for the length.

I imagine that many of you spent yesterday as I did, watching television or internet feeds, feeling sick with anger and foreboding, and wondering seriously about the state of our democracy and its foundational institutions. Like many, I struggled to put into words what I was witnessing, not because our nation has never seen civil unrest before, but because in this case it was being incited by our President with the clear aim of subverting peaceful democratic processes through illegitimate means. Insurrection, sedition, riot, coup: all capture aspects of what was an attack on the seat of government, even if none of them quite encapsulate the remarkable and disturbing scenes that we witnessed. I also watched into the evening as Congress reconvened and its shaken members themselves tried to make sense of the day. Among other things, I was struck, as I hope many of you were, by our representatives' constant invocations of our history. We are all grasping for a sense of that history, not just to put yesterday's events in context but also to locate the boundaries of what is decent, normal, permissible, legal, and right. At few times in my life have I felt more acutely the power of historical knowledge and habits of mind to center and steady an existential political conversation, to sharpen our moral judgement, to serve as a compass in our search for a path forward.

I entered my first semester as History Department Chair three and a half years ago in a similar moment of crisis. In the Fall of 2017, I found myself writing a letter to the department community about the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which occurred just two weeks before classes began, a rally that commenced with an ominous torch-lit march through the University of Virginia's campus by neo-Nazis and other white supremacists and, on the following day, culminated in the violent defense of Confederate symbols and the death of a counter-protester. None of us were naïve enough to think that such ideas had disappeared from American society, but I certainly hoped that they had come to occupy a benighted fringe of the political spectrum well beyond the pale of the acceptable. The open parading of these ideas was deeply disturbing, and when our President refused to condemn the white nationalists who took to Charlottesville's streets, and even suggested that some among them were "very fine people" - a sentiment he echoed yesterday - I think we all sensed that a door on reprehensible and retrograde attitudes that we all thought closed had been reopened.

Now I find myself writing another such letter at the beginning of my final semester as Chair, and there is a powerful causal link between the two. As many commentators, including politicians on both sides of the aisle, have been quick to point out, yesterday was the culmination of four years of presidential disregard for facts, decency, and the health of our civil institutions. The President and his allies sowed the wind, and yesterday we reaped the whirlwind. But let's also recognize just how suffused yesterday's events were with the ideologies and symbols of white supremacy, in admixture with nativism, antisemitism, and toxic masculinity. Let's keep at the forefront of our minds just who the President felt compelled to deputize in his efforts to subvert a legitimate election. Let's also recognize the deep history behind racially coded concerns about voter fraud in our society and understand the full meaning of such charges and who they are aimed at. I want to particularly acknowledge our faculty and students of color, and the particular anxiety and trauma that may have come with yesterday's events.

If there is a foundational tenet to good historical reasoning, it is a loyalty to the facts. Historians by necessity build interpretations from those facts, narratives that are shaped by their own

commitments and worldviews, and we argue fiercely over the quality of these competing interpretations of the past. But we cannot make stuff up or insist on the efficacy of our interpretations in the absence of any evidence to support them. Another source of my nausea yesterday, then, was how the insurrection at the Capitol revealed a deeply troubled relationship between our current political moment and the truth, and how certain factions and forces in our society have willingly departed from a loyalty to the facts when it serves their political and financial interests. We need to forcefully stand against such trends in our society; the facts are always important checks on our ideological certitudes, and, as we learned yesterday, they are critical to holding our civil society together, even as we might disagree politically. Taking such a stand, it seems to me, is a basic responsibility of an institution such as ours, in which all of our scholarly and creative enterprises are fundamentally evidentiary.

I have been troubled too by the swirl of equivalencies that has emanated from yesterday's events. Some of these are explicitly historical: invocations of the American Revolution and 1776, references to the British siege and destruction of the Capitol during the War of 1812, and comparisons to the Elections of 1876 or 2000. Such touchstones can help us make sense of our current crisis, but we need to invoke them carefully and with a heightened sense of the differences as well as the similarities, lest we facilely normalize the unprecedented. Moreover, one of the pathologies of our current partisan polarization is the sense that there are two equivalent sides to everything, that the Women's March and Black Lives Matter are no different than Stop the Steal. Some of the sloppiest thinking I heard among those making sense of yesterday's events was precisely along these lines. To be sure, yesterday's events should force all of us to think deeply and critically about the line between legitimate protest and seditious acts of violence, but if we are to come together as a union, we need to escape the funhouse distortions of these bipolar partisan frames, which are currently some of our gravest impediments to clear historical and ethical thinking.

Finally, amidst yesterday's events, I could not help but think about our position in the world and how important it is to view ourselves as others view us. Such is a core value of our department and our discipline: to see ourselves not merely as citizens of a nation but as members of a diverse global community whose lives, experiences, histories, and perspectives shape our sense of ourselves. We should worry that our allies are distraught and our enemies ecstatic as images of our democracy teetering proliferate. We should also recognize that our national turn inward over the last four years is related to our increasingly dysfunctional relationships to the truth and our growing incapacities to act with empathy towards others. The less we know about each other, the less we know about ourselves, and the more that ignorance prevails.

As we did in the wake of Charlottesville, I hope that we can begin this semester with some conversation. I encourage all of you – faculty, staff, and students – to chime in with your comments, questions, concerns, or ideas. I know that this is a challenging time to have difficult conversations, but let's explore how we can do so in the coming weeks. I know that my colleagues and I are committed to nurturing the vital relationship between historical knowledge and responsible citizenship, which we need now more than ever. I look forward to hearing from you, and please stay tuned for more from the department.

Best,
Paul