The Selfie Coup: How to Tell If Your Government Is Plotting to Overthrow Itself

We all have an idea of what a *coup d'état* looks like. Jeeps full of soldiers careen through the streets of the capital. Armed groups seize bridges, airports, and broadcasting stations. Protesters are scattered with tear gas or gunfire. Civilian leaders are arrested, exiled, or shot. A general takes to the airwaves, assuring the public that order and calm will soon be restored under his guiding hands.

A coup represents a forceful overthrow of the legal and constitutional order of a state. A coup differs from a revolution, however, in that it is planned and executed by an elite group, with no prerequisite of popular support. Unsurprisingly, many coups are hatched by military officers, given their easy access to serious weaponry and large numbers of soldiers accustomed to obeying their orders. In other cases, one elite civilian group will use a coup to oust another from power, with loyalty of the security forces divided uncertainly between them.

But a coup does not always entail shooting, and it does not always mean a transfer of power. Sometimes, the perpetrators of a coup are already the leaders of a country, in firm control of the government and its entire security apparatus. These leaders came to office legally (more or less) and may continue to command popular support (or at least a "base"). They launch a coup not to overthrow the government, but to throw off constraints on their own power. Through hard experience, the Spanish language has coined a convenient word for the phenomenon: an *autogolpe* (or "self-coup"). But let's give it an English name for the 21st century: The Selfie Coup.

How to Distinguish a Selfie Coup from Creeping Authoritarianism

The most effective way to dismantle a constitution is to do it *slowly*. Today's most skillful would-be authoritarians do not send tanks into the streets. Through the patient application of legal harassment and police pressure, they incrementally tighten their grip on governmental institutions and civil society. Instead of declaring a dissident an enemy of the state, they bring charges of tax evasion or embezzlement or sex crimes. Instead of canceling elections, a proto-authoritarian regime learns to manipulate their outcomes. As for the press, why ban a media outlet when it can be just as easily bought off or stolen? These regimes use some more positive incentives to co-opt potential opponents as well: the seduction of a slice of power, the lubricating effects of corruption. Eventually, even independent state institutions (parliaments, central banks, investigating magistrates, supreme courts, etc.) can be worn down and brought to heel.

Violence may certainly be used: nosy journalists and annoying opposition leaders don't just drop dead in the street for no reason. But these regimes do not need mass violence—or even the largely theatrical shows of force characteristic of most *coups d'état*. Instead, the regime maintains a veneer of legality and constitutionalism even as it slips inexorably toward something very different. Political scientists call this process "creeping authoritarianism." For modern practitioners of the genre, we need look no further than Putin in Russia, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, or the Chavez/Maduro regime in Venezuela.

The advantage of this approach is obvious. Because there is no clear moment of rupture with legality, the authoritarian regime continues to enjoy constitutional legitimacy, and along with it the passive support (or at least acquiescence) of many citizens. If creeping authoritarianism meets with enough pushback from civil society, the rulers can reform and liberalize a bit until the danger has passed. Even if the regime is somehow thrown off, its leaders personally have little to fear. Because the mass of society has moved toward authoritarianism together, responsibility is diffused. A few individuals can be held accountable for intolerable abuses, but the task is much harder when an entire society has been co-opted over time.

A Selfie Coup is different. Whether the perpetrators admit or not, they are making a clear break from the constitutional order. If they fail, they will lose power—and perhaps their freedom or their lives.

If creeping authoritarianism is like boiling a frog in a pan of water, a Selfie Coup is like throwing one on the grill. Opponents in government and civil society will know that they need to stand up—it's now or never.

What Makes a Leader Pull the Trigger on a Selfie Coup

If pulling off a Selfie Coup is so much dicier than plugging away with creeping authoritarianism, then why would anyone try it? The answer, almost invariably, is a collision of extreme risk tolerance with heightened insecurity.

The practitioners of Selfie Coups are not typically cowards. Faced with a crisis in which maintaining legality could lead to a setback, they choose instead to risk total disgrace (and even death) to hold on to power at all costs. They are, however, afraid. And they have many things to be afraid of.

Louis-Napoléon: Ticking of the Electoral Clock

Often, a Selfie Coup is driven by a sense that time is running out on a leader. This was the case for Louis-Napoléon of France. Riding on the name recognition of his legendary uncle, Louis-Napoléon managed to get himself democratically elected as the first president of the Second Republic in 1848, with a whopping 74% of the vote. At first, he pledged his loyalty to the new constitution and vowed to be a servant of the people. There was only one problem: the constitution limited him to a single four-year term. By 1851, the president and his entourage were restlessly looking for a way to stay in power. But they failed to force a constitutional amendment through the National Assembly. On December 2, 1851, the anniversary of his uncle's self-coronation as Emperor of France, Louis-Napoléon declared parliament dissolved and launched a Selfie Coup of his own. The army and police seized key points across France, killing hundreds of protesters and driving others (like Victor Hugo) into exile. The operation's code name ("Rubicon") did not exactly hide Louis-Napoléon's imperial intentions. But it also underlined the all-or-nothing nature of his gamble. Exactly one year later, he declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. He would rule France for another 29 years, before defeat in war and a domestic rebellion sent him fleeing for his life to England.

Yeltsin: Breaking a Deadlock

Paralyzing, unresolvable conflict with another governing institution—otherwise known as a "constitutional crisis"—is another frequent catalyst for a Selfie Coup. Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected president in Russia's history, felt that his plans for reform and privatization were blocked by a parliament still dominated by former Communists. As the country fell into economic crisis in the early 1990s, the parliament attempted to strip Yeltsin of his emergency powers and threatened him with impeachment. Yeltsin sought to bypass parliament and called for a popular referendum expressing confidence in his leadership, which he won. But the zero-sum tug-of-war for power was not a difference that could be split. The deadlock over constitutional structure and economic policy grew increasingly bitter, until Yeltsin ordered Russian army tanks to bombard the seat of parliament in October 1993, resulting in hundreds of casualties. The relative unpopularity of parliament, coupled with the support of the armed forces, allowed Yeltsin to prevail in the struggle. Russia's new constitution would enshrine presidential dominance and a correspondingly weak parliament. Like some other Selfie Coups, Yeltsin's would be portrayed as a victory for democracy and the popular will, especially by Western supporters of Yeltsin's economic reforms. But the damage to Russia's long-term prospects for constitutional government and an effective separation of powers was severe. Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, would later build his authoritarian rule on these ruins.

Mussolini: Staying a Step Ahead of the Law

A Selfie Coup can also be driven by fear of legality itself. In Italy, Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party came to power in 1922 through a combination of street violence and legal means. But the first few years of his rule required a coalition with other parties, and at least the acquiescence of Italy's political establishment. In 1924, Fascist operatives kidnapped and murdered Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist politician, after he protested electoral fraud and violence. The resulting investigation threatened to rock Mussolini's government, with centrists withdrawing support and Fascist hotheads urging more extreme measures to quell opposition. Mussolini responded with a speech declaring the end of democracy in Italy. "I alone assume political, moral, and historical responsibility for all that has happened," Mussolini told Parliament. "If Fascism has been a criminal association," he declared, with daring though appalling candor, "then I am the chief of that criminal association." While others have speculated about the effect of a leader shooting someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue, Mussolini proved that both crime and coverup could be not just tolerated, but celebrated—at least among the supporters of a fascist. He would thereafter rule Italy as a dictator, dragging his country into a ruinous defeat in World War II before his overthrow by a military coup in 1943 and summary execution by partisans in 1945.

Hitler: Sending a Message

Mussolini's Selfie Coup was at least partially triggered by the need to outmaneuver extremists in his own political movement. In this respect, he was emulated by his disciple Adolf Hitler in Germany, although as usual, Hitler added an even more sinister twist. By 1933, Hitler's Nazi Party had successfully followed the path Mussolini paved to power—a combination of street thuggery, electoral politics, and a coalition with other right-wing parties. As Reich Chancellor and leader of the largest party, Hitler had considerable power, but it was not yet absolute. He took advantage of an act of vandalism against public property (the alleged arson of the Reichstag by a Dutch Communist) to assume emergency powers and crack down ferociously on his left-wing opponents. But he was still in a precarious position on the right, distrusted by some members of the conservative establishment and the army, and challenged by a rival power center in his own party, the three-million-strong *Sturmabteilung* (SA) paramilitary organization. The SA's leader, Ernst Röhm, was a long-time Hitler supporter but was disappointed in the lack of power granted to the SA after the Nazi takeover. Hitler, in turn, began to fear that Röhm was plotting a coup against him and, more importantly, had the means to pull it off. With a pistol in hand and accompanied by his own *Schutzstaffel* (SS) security forces, Hitler flew to a meeting with Röhm and personally placed him under arrest. After Röhm declined an opportunity to commit suicide, Hitler ordered him shot on the spot by two members of the SS. But the purge did not stop there. In what became known to

history as the "Night of the Long Knives" (*Nacht der langen Messer*), Hitler's loyalists murdered hundreds of people and arrested thousands more. While the timing of the massacre may have been spontaneous, the list of targets was clearly prepared in advance. What is striking is that the victims were almost all on the political right, including many active or passive supporters of Hitler's regime. Those killed included not only high-ranking members of the SA, but a former top Nazi party leader, a former right-wing chancellor and his wife, and close associates of the vice-chancellor, who had been instrumental in arranging Hitler's appointment and who was himself arrested. It was as if Hitler, having once decided to pull the trigger on his own personal Fifth Avenue, decided he might as well run amok across the entire Tri-State area. Former rivals, potential opponents, and the subjects of long-nursed grudges were all wiped out. That most of these people (other than perhaps Röhm) posed no plausible threat to Hitler was almost the point. The Night of the Long Knives made clear that Hitler would tolerate no deviation whatsoever from slavish loyalty to his personal leadership. The fear this act instilled went a long way toward explaining why the vast majority of Hitler's underlings remained devoted until the moment of his suicide in April 1945, long after Germany had been reduced to rubble, having committed innumerable in his name.

Palpatine: Subduing a Galaxy

But we need not rely on history alone to see examples of the Selfie Coup. Those who have endured George Lucas' *Star Wars* prequels already experienced one in the figure of Palpatine, whose machinations unleashed an ennealogy (and counting) of galactic misery. Like Mussolini and Hitler, Senator Palpatine did much to engineer the disorder that he leverages into the galactic Chancellorship. Like Louis-Napoléon, Chancellor Palpatine faced an inconvenient term limit in that job, which required the creation of an emergency. Much as Hitler did in the Night of the Long Knives, Palpatine pretended to be in personal peril, then ordered an acolyte to kill a key ally (Count Dooku) before storming back to the capital to seize dictatorial powers. Like Mussolini in the Matteotti episode, Palpatine faced the imminent exposure of his plot but escaped the consequences by radicalizing his regime and co-opting Anakin Skywalker to kill a key opponent. Like Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, Palpatine destroyed the stronghold of his only viable adversaries (the Jedi Temple). Then, like all successful perpetrators of a Selfie Coup, the newly crowned Emperor Palpatine put an end to all remaining constraints and legalities. The Galactic Republic is dead, long live the Galactic Empire!

The *Star Wars* prequels may fail as cinema, but the hard labor of watching them should have given us all the tools needed to identify the signs of an impending Selfie Coup. So, is one coming to a galaxy near you?

Will Donald Trump Pull the Trigger on His Own Selfie Coup?

Based on these criteria, Donald Trump is a reasonably likely candidate to attempt a Selfie Coup. However, it is important to note that this is not his preference. He would rather win his re-election campaign—by whatever means. Trump clearly admires authoritarian leaders and seeks to emulate them. But his most ardent crushes are on creeping authoritarians (like Putin, Erdogan, and Orban) or the products of established authoritarian systems (like Xi Jinping of China or Kim Jong-Un of North Korea). None of these men has risked a Selfie Coup—because none of them had to do so to stay in power.

Donald Trump finds himself in a different situation in 2020. He faces an array of crises, each of which could cause him to take the risk of a Selfie Coup.

First, Donald Trump *needs* to stay in power. And not just for reasons of ego or psychology, although those are formidable motivations. Trump has many reasons to feel highly insecure, and they are not just in his head. He is barely one toe ahead of the law—and he knows it. He has needed threats, firings, pardons, and a phalanx of lawyers just to make it this far. Whether for his past financial dealings and tax filings, campaign-finance violations in the Stormy Daniels affair, obstruction of

justice in the Russia probe, profiteering from the presidency, his connection to the Epstein/Maxwell case, to name just a few entanglements, Trump could face criminal indictment on the day he leaves office. In fact, the traditional immunity of a sitting president from criminal prosecution could be his primary motivation for clinging to office. Even if it is not, financial pressure on his business empire may also press him to continue. Without the power of the presidency to gather favors and dissuade creditors from banging on his door, the entire Trump Organization could find itself in deep financial trouble—and that is before considering the devastating effect of COVID-19 on the hospitality business in which Trump is so heavily invested. To paraphrase Mussolini, if the Trump Organization and the Trump administration both turn out to be criminal associations, then Trump is the head of both. He has ample cause to view the end of his rule with dread.

Unlike Louis-Napoléon, Trump does not face an imminent constitutional term limit. If re-elected, he could remain in office until January 2025—although that hasn't stopped him from frequently musing that his supporters might demand him to serve longer, notwithstanding the 22nd Amendment. The more pressing problem is that voters seem increasingly inclined to deny him a second term at the ballot box. Trailing Joe Biden by 8-15 points in most polls, and unable to contain the coronavirus epidemic or its economic fallout, Trump will be hard pressed to close the gap through conventional means.

And even if he can somehow succeed in eking out another narrow Electoral College win, Trump may be looking at institutional deadlock in a best-case scenario. The GOP has little hope of recapturing the House, and increasingly fears losing control of the Senate. Key state governments are in hostile hands and can continue to make trouble for him, particularly in New York. Like Boris Yeltsin in 1993, Trump may prefer a decisive showdown with his opponents over a grinding and inconclusive political and legal struggle.

One thing Trump does not seem to have to worry about is a split in his own movement. Despite all his troubles, Trump's Republican support remains solid. Nevertheless, any sign of insufficient devotion seems to trigger a vengeful, career-ending response—as Jeff Flake, Bob Corker, James Mattis, Jeff Sessions, and others can attest. Like Hitler in 1934, Trump may be inclined to inflate mild dissent into mortal threats—and to use the opportunity to settle long-standing scores. The idea of striking with impunity at a long list of enemies might alone be insufficient motivation for a coup, but Trump may nevertheless consider it a bonus.

All these factors suggest that if pushed to the wall, Trump may well try a Selfie Coup. Surely respect for the Constitution or the rule of law would not hold him back. The only thing that might restrain him is fear—of humiliating failure and further punishment. Nothing in Trump's history suggests that he suffers from an excess of physical courage. But in all other contexts, he is a confirmed risk taker, whose reaction to a losing bet is usually to double down.

Trump's recent responses to Black Lives Matter demonstrations suggest that, under the guise of a polarizing electoral strategy, he is also probing the option of leaving constitutional legality behind. The unanswered question is whether he could command sufficient force to succeed in the attempt. His theatrical clearing of demonstrators from Lafayette Square, for a Bible-waving photo op, was also a test of how far the military would follow him into domestic politics. The sight of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, plodding after the President in battle fatigues was not reassuring. But the resulting backlash among current and retired military personnel forced a reversal. Milley felt compelled to make a televised apology. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who had also accompanied Trump's march across Lafayette Square, belatedly disavowed the use of active-duty troops to quell demonstrations. The military thereby signaled that it would not automatically back Trump in a constitutional crisis, let alone a Selfie Coup.

In response to this check, Trump next mobilized paramilitary forces under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to crack down on demonstrators. The first target chosen was Portland, Oregon, a progressive bastion remote from the nation's media centers. Operating over the objections of local authorities, and showing little concern for legality, these squads began snatching suspected protestors off the streets and detaining them without charges, and using military tactics against a "Wall of Moms." Although these forces seem to have once again provoked a backlash of

local opposition, Trump's purpose was not to win any hearts or minds in Portland. Rather, while primarily showcasing a law-and-order election message, he was simultaneously auditioning DHS's reliability as a source of muscle in a street fight for power. The department and its leaders seem more than willing to play this role. So far, however, DHS seems unable to subdue the nation's 26th largest city or defeat protestors armed with swim noodles and leaf blowers. But what seems comic one moment could turn tragic the next. Using language that recalled the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Trump proceeded to announce a "surge" of Justice Department forces to Chicago and other cities, ostensibly to combat street crime. Trump still has time to test and build up these units before November, and to find others, including civilians, willing to exert force on his behalf.

How to Prevent a Selfie Coup

Trump currently has little reason to fear a failed Selfie Coup more than a lost election. In either case, he is looking at the prospect of prison and financial ruin. So, if he thinks a Selfie Coup is his only escape and might work, he can be expected to try it. The same is not true for the individuals and institutions whose support he would need to succeed. The Republican Party would survive Trump's defeat, even by a landslide. But it might not—and should not—survive complicity with a coup. The same is true of any government agency or business or media organization that lends its support to a break with legality. Trump administration members who have not yet committed serious crimes should be reminded that they still have a lot to lose. If these consequences are made sufficiently clear in advance, the threat of a coup will dissipate.

The only way Trump could pull off a successful Selfie Coup would be to take an unprepared country by surprise. "It can't happen here" will not cut it anymore. The more aware civil society is of this possibility, the more likely it can prepare its defenses in time.