

MY VIEW



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THE STORMING of the Capitol building has been met with shock and disbelief, followed by existential handwringing about the state and future of American democracy.

While it was certainly a spectacle to see the Capitol overrun by the nationalists Trump has spent years emboldening, we must not be blinded by the hyperbole and sentimentality of how the US sees itself.

This moment only appears exceptional if we romanticise US history as a stable, unimpeachable beacon of democratic values – the “true America” to which Biden referred.

This has never been the case, and the US’s claim to democracy is a complicated one: there’s the Electoral College which locks in a Civil War compromise that inflates the votes of former Confederate

states, regardless of who wins the popular vote.

The US system was never designed to be a democracy in the popular sense. It’s a constitutional republic, something very different to the ideal of democracy that American children are taught to venerate.

The constitution sets in place a complex separation of powers designed to prevent any one person or group taking control, locking political decision-making into lengthy and arduous processes, passing through various Houses, state legislatures, Supreme Courts and so on.

The structural crisis of American society has been held at bay, or at least kept out of electoral politics, by the political elite’s cultural norms of liberal respectability. Donald Trump and his supporters have demonstrated how easily bypassed these norms are, leaving the US political establishment with no response other than moral outrage.

The performance of shock and disbelief only serves to rehabilitate the idea that America can go “back to normal”, but Trump and his flashmob are no mere blip: they are symptoms of a “normal” that has been rotten and decaying for decades.