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The Interpreter

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Welcome to The Interpreter newsletter, by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, who write a [column by the same name](#).

On our minds: What's really going on here?

Are Potemkin coups a thing?



President Trump has tried to condition a large segment of the American public not to believe

anyone other than him, with evident success. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Everybody is wondering about President Trump's intentions, and [how far he will go](#). Is the president of the United States attempting a poorly executed [self-coup](#) to stay in power? Offering calculated bluster to save face for the cameras? Or is he genuinely deluded about the fact that he lost the election? All of those possibilities are bad. But the first one would definitely be the worst of the unpleasant options.

So it was a relief to come across this [Twitter thread](#) from Erica de Bruin, a professor at Hamilton College who literally [wrote the book](#) on how to prevent coups. She thinks that the things President Trump is doing are incredibly worrying, "but they are not a coup."

"It is exceedingly rare to try to attempt a coup without the backing of the regular military," Dr. de Bruin wrote. "I do not think that anyone that studies the U.S. military believes it would support a coup." The military is a highly professionalized and diverse institution. So while President Trump and other members of the Republican Party could imply, threaten, or even agitate for a coup, without the military on board it would be unlikely to actually happen.

And as I wrote [last week](#), successful coups require coordination among powerful elites. (No one wants to participate in a failed coup, so people only join if they think the plot is likely to succeed. And they only think it's likely to succeed if they see the other crucial power players getting on board.) So even if, say, ICE is deeply loyal to Mr. Trump, that would not necessarily mean they would be willing to participate in an armed coup on his behalf if it meant going against the regular armed forces.

But that is at best only moderately good news. Because whether this is deliberate misinformation or genuine inability to accept reality, it will almost certainly damage public trust in the institutions and legitimacy of the U.S. government.

Damaging public trust is incredibly harmful in and of itself. Research [shows](#) that when people see institutions as untrustworthy or illegitimate they are more likely to support vigilante violence. And Lilita Mason and Nathan

Kalmoe, political scientists who study Americans' support for political violence, found that people were more likely to support violence when they believed that their political opponents were dangerous to the United States, evil, or behaving "like animals." It is easy to see how the narrative of election theft might increase that kind of moral disengagement.

In January, the presidency is scheduled to leave Mr. Trump, whether or not he willingly concedes that he lost the election. But his refusal to accept that the people have spoken may continue to poison American democracy long after he is gone.

P.S. Last week, when I wrote about Naunihal Singh's research on coups, I misstated his affiliation. He is now at the Naval War College, not the Air War College.

What We're Reading

- [Las Vegas](#) isn't just Las Vegas.
- Welp. [When protections for minorities increase, support for democracy decreases.](#)
- [Macho, Macho \(authoritarian\) Man](#)
- [The Curse of the Buried Treasure](#)

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