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25 years after 9/11, America’s greatest enemy now comes from within

By **Brett Wagner**, Contributor
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Firefighters participate in the Patriot Day Procession in San Jose on Sept. 11, 2021. The event commemorates the lives lost during the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Don Feria/For the S.F. Chronicle



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25 years after 9/11, America’s greatest enemy now comes from within

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As we pay solemn tribute to the memory of the thousands who lost their lives 25 years ago on Sept. 11 — including hundreds of heroic first responders who rushed into the collapsing Twin Towers and the passengers of Flight 93, who forced their plane to crash in a Pennsylvania field rather than allow their hijackers to crash it into their likely intended target, the U.S. Capitol — it’s vitally important for us to also take a few moments to remember how it felt, as a nation, to come together as one in the spirit of unity and common purpose.

Patriotism swelled in our hearts, for example, as our president addressed us with a bullhorn atop a crumpled fire truck at Ground Zero, rallying our nation to come together in the most fragile moments of crisis.

It seems almost quaint now to speak in these terms. Because the man who currently occupies the White House has never sought to unify us. Rather, at every opportunity, he divides and turns us against one another. So much so that it is now quaint to speak of that, too.

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The man who has twice taken the oath to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution” has repeatedly tried to upend that sacred document — including by helping to perpetrate what is arguably the single worst domestic terrorist attack in our nation’s history.

The deadly siege and looting of the Capitol — our seat of government — including the bludgeoning and ultimate deaths of U.S. Capitol police officers, the desecration of sacred halls with shattered glass, splintered wood and human feces. Rioters armed with blunt objects roamed the halls calling out the speaker of the House by name, and they chanted for the hanging of the vice president. All done, of course, with the laser-focused intent of preventing a peaceful transfer of power.

It was a crime of unprecedented proportion for which the president was never held to account.

And now that same person who told us in the last election that it would be our last is devising ways to steal the midterms.

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First, he declared at the Alaska Summit that his buddy Vladimir Putin, Russia's president and the world's biggest rigger of elections, would henceforth be advising him on how to conduct U.S. elections. He would start by following Putin's advice to eliminate all mail-in voting.

Next, the commander-in-chief summoned all 800-plus of America's generals and admirals and ordered them to begin preparing for urban combat against the "enemy within" on the streets of America's blue cities.

Now talk has turned to deploying Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents on Election Day near polling sites in blue cities, and to, as Steve Bannon openly suggested, sending them into the polling sites, as Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin now appears to be preparing to do.

Meanwhile, the Department of Homeland Security is purchasing millions of dollars worth of Orwellian "shock gloves" for its ICE agents, as if shooting people in the face somehow falls short of satisfying their Dear Leader's innate desire to strike terror in the American people. Thankfully, California legislators are taking steps to ban these gloves' use in the state before the midterms.

Typically, around 40% of Americans vote in person on Election Day. But under the situation now unfolding, those prospective voters would do well to heed the warning signs and resolve to show up — yes, at their polling sites, but during early voting, as roughly 30% of voters already do. Otherwise, they should rightly question if their vote can be reliably cast amidst the potential chaos.

And what of the other 30% who regularly vote by mail?

They, too, have no reasonable expectation that their votes will be counted or that their mail-in ballots will be faithfully processed by the U.S. Postal Service, as required by law. Because the president has made clear his intention to upend that process by any means necessary.

Forget the courts. If you've been relying on them or Trump

faithfully abiding by any court ruling, you haven't been paying attention. The 6-3 conservative supermajority on the Supreme Court has made clear its complicity by slow-walking its proceedings and refusing to rule on the merits of a case until it's too late. And Trump, of course, has shown no reluctance to flout the rule of law.

Take red states where voters register by party affiliation, and where Republican governors have eagerly sent their voter rolls to the president. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to determine that something nefarious may be afoot.

And what of states like California, where our Democratic elected officials refuse to capitulate to the president's demand to hand over voter rolls? The postmaster general stated on the postal service website that ballots will only be delivered to states that have provided that data. No mention of court rulings or pending cases to the Supreme Court, just an explicit affirmation that it's moving forward with implementing the president's executive order.

California's secretary of state has promised ballots will be mailed by Oct. 5. But what will become of them if the postal service follows through on its own whistle-blown plan to simply withhold their delivery? And will those withheld ballots then be exploited for nefarious purposes?

As a political scientist who has participated in war-gaming scenarios involving election fraud at the Democratic Central Committee Campaign Training Academy, I would suggest that anything at this point is possible. Meaning, I would suggest the California secretary of state consider alternative options for getting mail-in ballots to voters, given that dropping them into the proverbial mailbox, at this point, would be folly.

In any event, any registered voter in possession of a mail-in ballot should plan to deliver it in person as early as possible to a secure drop box, as the California secretary of state suggested.

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Every registered voter should prepare to take personal responsibility to vote in person on the earliest possible day of early voting or deliver a mail-in ballot, also as early as possible, to a secure drop box.

As the patriots aboard Flight 93 said before laying down their lives for their country: “Let’s roll!”

Brett Wagner, now retired, served as a professor of national security decision-making for the U.S. Naval War College and adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Sep 11, 2026

Brett Wagner

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