Yet another day of Senate hearings on what happened during, leading up to, and in the aftermath of the Jan 6th Capitol Riot – yesterday’s was with FBI director Chris Wray, and today’s is with intelligence and security officials. I hope that the hearings today will be more successful in getting real answers to the key questions of why hard intelligence data on violent white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters and others that have been on their radar for months (if not years) was not acted on in advance of Donald Trump’s January 6th rally on the Ellipse, and to the question of why it took so long for the National Guard forces to be put in place to supplement the Capitol Police Force on that day. Yesterday’s questioning by senators of Director Wray was mostly unenlightening; he said that it is very difficult to distinguish between online chatter that is just emotional “blowing off steam,” and language that indicates serious planning of violent acts to be carried out. He could not speak to the matter of any one or more individuals in positions of power who had taken any steps to prevent the activation of the Guard in preparation for any possible violence around the Capitol on that day.

As I sit here on my couch with my laptop, I am hearing the testimony of Major General William J. Walker of the U.S. Army (in charge of the D.C. National Guard), who has just testified that he called to request permission from his superiors (the secretary of the Army and the Secretary of the Defense) at the Pentagon to activate the Guard at 1:49 on that day – but was not given a green light to send them in until after 5 PM! He also testified that the chief of the Capitol Police, Steven Sund, had spoken with him prior to Jan. 6th about the possible need for National Guard backup, but when Walker told him that he needed the request for the Guard help in writing, Sund told him that he was “not allowed” to request this help.

It may seem inconsistent of me to decry the wild spread of right-wing conspiracy theories on social media (QAnon, et al), and yet feel that in this case that there must have been some kind of coordination or cooperation to allow these insurrectionists to run amok at our Capitol on the day that the Electoral College votes were to be certified – and also, that there were efforts in high places both at the time and afterwards to keep those who were responsible for the slow federal
law enforcement response covered up. Could it really be just a matter of confusion, incompetence, and unfortunate coincidences? It is difficult to believe that there was not pressure being exerted on some people in the chain of command to treat these potentially violent Trump supporters with kid gloves – or worse, to get out of their way and not interfere with them at all! [Learned later in the day: the Army’s deputy chief of staff for operations, Lt. Gen. Charles A. Flynn, brother of disgraced former National security advisor, Michael Flynn, was among those who did not want to authorize use of the National Guard on 1/6 because he “didn’t like the optics.”]

I suppose, as with the 9/11 attack, there will be people studying and trying to ferret out what really happened on 1/6 for months and maybe years. And as with the incident of 9/11, there will probably never be universal agreement. We could simply be grateful that the damage done on Jan 6th was not worse, and move forward with the resolve to take better precautions in the future (as was done for the Inauguration on Jan 20th). But somehow this does not seem good enough. It seems there must have been a moral rot somewhere that allowed this horrible day to happen the way it did, and we need to be able to see and understand it all better in order to prevent such a thing from happening again.

Meanwhile, there is good news! Two pharmaceutical companies, Merck and Johnson and Johnson, have agreed to work together to manufacture millions of doses of the new J & J vaccine (which has the advantage of needing only a conventional type of refrigeration and being a single-dose vaccine) – and now it looks like there will be enough supply to vaccinate every American resident (those 16 and older) by the end of May! Whether there will be enough medical personnel, latex gloves, needles, etc. at hand to allow this to succeed is an additional question. But this is indeed something to be happy about. And yet, the governors of Texas and Mississippi have just declared that all their states’ public spaces are now going to be fully open for business and that there will no longer be any mask mandates – this when Texas is near the bottom of the list of vaccination rates (#48) in the nation, and when new and in some ways more dangerous versions of the virus are gaining strength.

Human beings are strange animals. Capable of amazing intellectual discoveries and inventions, of great feats of love and courage – and of the most brazen lies, stupidity, hate and cruelty. How can anyone not be both an optimist and a
pessimist when it comes to humanity? You cannot be solely one or the other without keeping your eyes closed to one end of the spectrum of human behavior.

Last week Mark and I began watching a new film (streaming on Hulu), *The United States Versus Billie Holliday*, which is remarkable musically, in that the woman who plays Holliday, Andra Day, does an unbelievable job of singing in a way that sounds like the actual Billie Holliday. We have not finished watching the film yet, but one major plot element – the opposition of certain people in the federal government to Holliday’s public singing of the song “Strange Fruit,” prompted me to educate myself on the subject of lynching and the law in the history of our nation. In the film and in other sources, it can sound confusing when someone says or writes that “lynching has never been outlawed” in our nation. What?! Isn’t lynching a form of murder – and isn’t murder against the law in every corner of this nation? But when you dig down, you discover that the problem was not that lynching, as a form of murder, was considered “legal” in any corner of America, but rather that in some parts of this country there was no will to enforce the law when groups of white people gathered together to violently take the life of black people for whatever reason, acting, as it were, as a “law unto themselves.” Because so many places in America (especially, but not solely, in the South) were in the hands of white officials who either approved of, or at least were not willing to take a stand against, white supremacists who had their own notion of how to enforce “order,” anti-lynching activists came to call for making lynching a federal crime. That way, the decision of whether to prosecute suspects in the case of a lynching would not be in the hands of local jurisdictions.

But a bill to make lynching a federal crime was never approved. As late as this past June, in the wake of the death of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, there was a bill pending in the Senate, the Emmet till Anti-Lynching Act (which had gone back and forth between the Senate and the House, and finally, after some revisions, back to the Senate) to declare lynching a federal crime – but the Senate only wanted to pass it if it could be done unanimously. It was held up by one Republican senator (Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky) who objected to its “overly broad” language.

And then, Monday night, I watched the first episode of a new Netflix series, *Amend: the Fight for America* (hosted by Will Smith), a six-episode history and civics lesson on the 14th Amendment and the fight for equal rights and voting rights in this country. When you look back at our history, you see how recent is the
notion that the ideals of our founding documents should apply to all our citizens. One aspect of the 14th Amendment was the extension of who, among our residents could be considered “citizens” (those born in the United States, or “naturalized” - which is not defined in the amendment’s wording). But this 1868 amendment, which was intended to guarantee equal rights and equal protections under the law to all U.S. citizens, did not yet guarantee Black male citizens the right to vote. That would have to wait until the 15th Amendment (ratified in 1870); and of course no women could vote until 1920; and Native Americans did not get the right to vote in all 50 States in federal elections until 1962! And of course under the norms of Jim Crow in the South the Black vote (and civil rights in general) were suppressed until the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. When you look at it this way, you see that we are a very young country indeed. We have only just started to seriously aspire to be the country that we were all taught about in elementary school as we were growing up. And in some ways, with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 having been mostly eviscerated by a 2013 Supreme Court ruling (on the basis of the “changed” conditions of civil rights around the country), you could even see us as moving backwards. In the last month, state legislators around the country have filed 106 bills to tighten election rules, in an effort to suppress the turnout of minority voters. We need a new federal Voting Rights act!

Apropos of the post-January 6th Senate hearings, there is news that there is very serious intelligence about possible violence planned against the Capitol for tomorrow, March 4th. After all the failures of Jan. 6th, it seems likely that the powers that be will be ready this time, if, indeed, some groups make violent attempts against the Capitol and its lawmakers. One would think that the fencing, the National Guard presence around the Capitol, and the ongoing indictments and incarceration of those who had been involved in the insurrection of Jan. 6th, would be discouraging factors to any parties who have still not given up on their plans to take down our democracy. But I suppose one of the lessons of January 6th is that we can never rest easy: when nefarious characters threaten to commit violent acts, it is best to take them seriously.

As I wind up this “chronicle” for the week, the fatality-number as of today in our nation has reached 517,000. The authorities say that the rate of increase in infections, fatalities and hospitalizations is going down – but, as with the case of domestic terrorism, it is not yet time to “rest easy.” But there is a much greater
hope now – with the slowing of infection rates and the increased rate of people being vaccinated – that we may enjoy something approaching a “normal” summer. How we all long to travel, meet with friends and family, enjoy dining out, see our kids return to school, and so many other once-unremarkable activities! We are tired of living in “interesting times.”

Beale Street on “biker night”: a pre-coronavirus (2017) summer trip to Memphis, TN.