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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Reflections on The Trump Years

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Culture shock. I have long encouraged students to take a semester abroad not just to learn about another country but to experience culture shock. The shock, I explain, is useful. It forces us to realize that some assumptions that are so ingrained that we consider them facts of human existence are, in reality, culturally contingent and learned. Living abroad helps Americans understand what it means to be an American.

It never occurred to me that I could experience profound culture shock, every day for four years, in my own country. It has been exhausting, disturbing – and edifying. My confidence has been shaken.

I should have known better. I had been struck by Donald Trump’s comments on the MSNBC show, *Morning Joe*, almost a year before he was elected. The host, Joe Scarborough, pushed back on Trump’s praise of Russian President Vladimir Putin, reminding the candidate that Putin “kills journalists, political opponents and ... invades countries, obviously that would be a concern, would it not?” Trump retorted, “Well, I think that our country does plenty of killing, too, Joe.”¹

My response to this exchange was complicated, and it remains so today. While I know, and teach, the truth of Trump’s assertion, I was shocked, and, to be honest, offended to hear it emerge from the mouth of a presidential candidate. Why? If I teach it, and if it is the truth, why shouldn’t I be happy that an American politician was saying it?

Since that day in 2015, Trump has said and tweeted a great deal. Much of it has been profoundly offensive on its face, much of it blatant or dangerous lies, much of it meaningless verbiage. But on occasion he strikes at the core of the idea of American exceptionalism. Trump’s idea of ‘greatness’ is simply global domination. He has no interest, and apparently no awareness, of the concept of exceptionalism.

Do I believe in American exceptionalism? The Trump years have taught me that at some level I do, even though intellectually I dismiss it. This has led me to question what it means to teach American history. I am struggling with how to teach young Americans (the vast majority of my students are American) the norms that I have, for so long, taken for granted.

These norms are aspirations. That the United States aspires to become more equal. That it aspires to be an example for the world. That the president aspires to unite more than to divide.

As I wrote those sentences I was aware that they are naïve. As a historian they make me uncomfortable. Much of my professional life has been an attempt to shed light on the arrogance and falsity of American exceptionalism.

But the Trump years have led me to accept that I remain deeply – profoundly – wedded to the idea of the United States’ aspirations. The norms are in my bones.

¹ Philip Bump, “Donald Trump isn’t fazed by Vladimir Putin’s journalist-murdering,” *Washington Post*, 18 December 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/18/donald-trump-glad-to-be-endorsed-by-russias-top-journalist-murderer/>.

As a professor of U.S. history, where does this leave me? If norms have to be taught, are they norms? Who gives me the right to determine “American norms”?

Culture shock. In my own country. I lecture about the wrong-headedness – and the peril – of American leaders assuming that Filipinos or Vietnamese or Iranians wanted to become like Americans. I have contempt for this arrogance. I did not fully grasp, before the Trump years, the arrogance in my own thinking. I had assumed I knew what ‘American’ meant. I now have to assimilate the reality that not only many of the Republican elite but also many, many millions of Americans have a very different idea.

Again, I am aware of how naïve that sounds. I look back and think that I should have been more aware of the chasm when Barack Obama was president. But Obama did not shake my norms. Therefore I saw the polarization of his era in political terms -- matters of policy, tribal party identification, and racism. The objections to Obama – birtherism and other forms of racism, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell’s obstructionism culminating in the debacle over Obama’s nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court – disturbed me deeply. But I filed them under politics.

This feels different. Visceral. Shattering. Closer to a religious divide than to a political one.

This scares me.

It is exacerbated by the changing media universe. These changes were occurring well before Trump became president, but he has exploited them brilliantly, to his advantage but to America’s disadvantage.

Two overlapping problems threaten democracy: the absence of a shared set of facts, and “truth decay,” to use Barack Obama’s phrase.² The dangers of these trends have been exposed in the tragedy of the polarized response to the COVID-19 pandemic. And – starkly, terrifyingly -- in the 06 January insurrection at the Capitol.

This is the legacy of the Trump presidency: he hammered again and again and again at the fault lines in American democracy until the tectonic plates opened, and the mob stormed the capitol.

Any consideration of Trump’s domestic or foreign policies pales in comparison to his brutal, egotistic mauling of democracy. Four years ago, I was worried about what the Trump presidency would mean, but my imagination failed to envision his vulgar, racist, divisive, norm-shattering chaos. I realize now how smug I had been before the Trump era. To say that I had been confident the United States would not go the way of Latin American or East European authoritarian countries is an understatement: the idea never crossed my mind. Now I can envision it. I had looked at Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union as something that happened in another world. Yes, I have read Paul Kennedy³: I accept that in the broad sweep of history the United States must decline. But I never imagined it would be accelerated by a president like Donald Trump, who would show the world with willful delight that the stability of the United States cannot be taken for granted. President-elect Joe Biden may staunch this wound, but irreparable damage has been done.

Perhaps I am wiser now. Culture shock is useful. But in this case, it has come at a horrendous and unacceptable price.

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² Barack Obama interviewed by Scott Pelley, “60 Minutes,” CBS, 16 November 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/barack-obama-60-minutes-interview-trump/>.

³ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987: Random House)