

The New York Times

The Closing of Trump's America

Roger Cohen

January 27, 2017

Donald Trump is an ahistorical man. He knows nothing of European history and cares less, as his cavalier trashing of the alliance and union that ushered the Continent from its darkest hours demonstrates.

He knows little enough of American history to have chosen as his rallying cry "America First," a slogan with a past clouded by allies-be-damned isolationism at the start of World War II. (Or perhaps that's why he embraced it.)

The president does not even know the history of the C.I.A., as his self-regarding speech before the hallowed Memorial Wall showed. This was desecration of patriotic sacrifice through advanced narcissistic disorder.

He called the speech a "home run."

Great. Terrific. Phenomenal. Tremendous. Fabulous. Beautiful. How Trump has hollowed out these words. How arid, even nauseating, he has made them. They mean nothing. They are space-fillers issuing with a thudding regularity from his uncurious mind, and in the end of course they are all about him. Emptying words of meaning is an essential step on the road to autocratic rule. People need to lose their bearings before they prostrate themselves.

From Trump's White House there now seeps a kind of ignorance mixed with vulgarity and topped with meanness that I find impossible to wash from my skin. I wake up to its oleaginous texture.

This is worse than had seemed possible: Trump's inexhaustible obsession with the crowd size at the inauguration; his constant untruths; his perverse inability to accept that he won the election, to the point that he wants toinvestigate the popular vote that he lost; his startling lust for torture, walls, banishment and carnage.

"The world is a total mess," he told David Muir of ABC. Funny, I travel the world and that was not my impression a week ago.

The president does not like Muslims. That, too, is clear. It was obvious when he called during the campaign for a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States. It was obvious when he showed contempt for the parents of a fallen Muslim American soldier killed in Iraq. It is obvious now as he attempts to justify a planned suspension of visas for Syrians, Iranians, Iraqis and

citizens of four other majority Muslim Middle Eastern and African countries, as well as a temporary ban on almost all refugees.

A rough translation of “America First” is Muslims last. “It’s not the Muslim ban,” Trump insisted to Muir. No. It’s just a ban on lots of Muslims.

Trump said, in the ABC interview, that the people to be barred “are going to come in and cause us tremendous problems.” He declared: “They’re ISIS.”

There is no credible evidence for this wild claim, a smear on entire populations. (Saudi Arabia, the source of most 9/11 terrorists, is unsurprisingly not on the list.)

In their overwhelming majority refugees are fleeing violence in their homelands, not plotting it against the United States. They do not put their little children in dinghies on the high seas because they have a choice but because they have no choice.

Screening to get into the United States is already rigorous, one reason only a tiny fraction of some 5 million Syrian refugees have come here.

A Cato Institute study of refugees admitted to the United States between 1975 and 2015 found that the chance of an American being killed in a terrorist attack committed by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion.

This is policy fed by anger and prejudice, not reason. The wall announcement has already provoked a damaging clash with Mexico. The proposed visa and refugee measures are not about keeping America safe. They are conceived to nurture an atmosphere of nationalist xenophobia.

Trump has been right to call jihadi Islamist terrorism by its name. But conflating a religion of 1.6 billion people with it is no way to fight it. As for his promise of safe areas within Syria, we will see.

I am lucky enough to live in Brooklyn Heights with a view out over the East River to lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty. So while watching President Donald Trump’s dark inaugural speech a week ago I was able at the same time to glance out at the torch that symbolizes American openness and generosity of spirit.

As Trump’s “AMERICA FIRST,” “AMERICA FIRST” echoed across my living room I thought of Emma Lazarus’ words inscribed on the pedestal of the statue:

“Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Friedrich Trump, a penniless German immigrant, was one of those “huddled masses” back in 1885. Lucky he did not attempt to enter the America taking shape under his grandson.

Over time, but not without struggle, I believe the torch will prove stronger than Trump's fear-filled jingoistic darkness. With the stranger comes renewal. America cannot be itself without it, and Americans will fight for their idea. It is, after all, how they became who they are.