



## Trump's First Year Has Been a Disaster. Here's Why I Have Hope.

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There are times when I wonder how on earth historians will cover this era in American politics. Maybe they will simply follow Dickens and pronounce that this is the best of times and the worst of times simultaneously. But that wouldn't quite capture the surrealism of the moment, would it?

I don't need to tell you about the worst. We have a president who never really wanted to be president, installed by his shamelessness, the unique awfulness of Hillary Clinton, and an Electoral College black swan. His main activities are tweeting responses to Fox News stories in real time and playing golf. He is openly contemptuous of a Constitution he doesn't even pretend to understand, wants to use the Justice Department to prosecute his political enemies and protect himself, and actually boasts in public about the size of his nuclear "button" (which doesn't actually exist). We have record levels of social and economic inequality, along with unprecedented peacetime debt, and the only serious legislative achievement of an all-Republican federal government is a massive transfer of wealth to the very rich, funded through an increase in the national debt of close to a trillion dollars. We are experiencing the first catastrophes of an era of climate change and the other main achievement is the scrapping of environmental regulations, and opening up the Arctic to oil exploration. Oh, and Neil Gorsuch.

Michael Wolff's new book also confirms what we already knew: that the White House is a smoldering crater of chaos and dysfunction. Wolff claims that *every single* White House source he talked to believes Trump is "incapable of functioning in his job." We have heard these claims about presidents before — but usually from the opposition, not from the White House itself, let alone unanimously. But Wolff's piece in *The Hollywood Reporter* yesterday also confirmed what is obvious about Trump's fast-eroding mental health: "Everybody was painfully aware of the increasing pace of his repetitions. It used to be inside of 30 minutes he'd repeat, word-for-word and expression-for-expression, the same three stories — now it was within 10 minutes." And:

“At Mar-a-Lago, just before the new year, a heavily made-up Trump failed to recognize a succession of old friends.” This addled, lazy, and belligerent man-child is nonetheless engaged in a war of insults and threats against a nuclear-armed dictatorship, with the capacity to kill millions. No head of any nuclear-armed country has ever said in public what Trump has now repeatedly broadcast to the world.

Yet even now, this utterly reckless nuclear brinksmanship, combined with simply unhinged behavior, is not considered sufficient to invoke the 25th Amendment. It will take a further collapse in polling support for the Cabinet or the Senate to take their responsibilities seriously. The base is weaker but hardly disappearing. And if you look at the response of world leaders or global markets or even the Republicans in Congress to this crisis in American governance, there is even a strange complacency, a keeping-calm-and-carrying-on Zen. And this is what makes this so surreal. What is objectively a crisis is subjectively normalized.

Part of this, I'd guess, is because so many other indicators in the world are remarkably good right now. Economic growth is now ubiquitous in the developed world (including even Japan) for the first time in quite a while. In America, we are in a record eighth year of economic growth, bringing peak employment and finally a bump in earnings. Median household income is now the highest in history. The Dow is at 25,000. Medicine has effectively abolished most of the diseases which used to kill us in mass numbers. Illegal border crossings to the U.S. have fallen to record lows. More Americans have health insurance than at any point in history, and Trump has failed to kill Obamacare. Crime rates are at historic lows and keep declining in ways that simply baffle criminologists. Solar energy is finally competitive with fossil fuels. Global conflict continues its long centuries-old decline. ISIS has been destroyed in its own heartland. Anyone with a phone has access to more learning and knowledge than at any point in human history. More people live in democracies today than a dozen years ago. When natural disasters happen, they kill fewer people in a far more populous world. The last decade has seen the biggest decline in global poverty ever. And on and on. All this renders the collapse of the American presidency more tolerable.

And Trump's very incompetence is also a calming factor. There is no wall, and almost certainly won't be. There has been no deportation force and, given good news on border crossings, it appears we don't need one. The president has not defied a court order, and the Mueller investigation into potential treason during the campaign remains active. We have seen no brutal “law and order” police crackdown — in fact, we have proof that we don't need stop-and-frisk at all, and the number of unarmed African-Americans shot dead by the cops has been halved in two years. The Iran nuclear deal still stands; ditto NAFTA; so too the Paris climate accord — despite the U.S.'s symbolic withdrawal. The shift to renewable energy has not paused. We have not seen new tariffs on trade with China, beyond the limits of previous presidents. Obamacare is more popular than ever. Democrats lead Republicans in the generic congressional polls by double digits. Established media — like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* — are seeing huge gains in digital subscriptions. A Democrat won in Alabama. Terror attacks have not prompted massive overreaction, as many of us feared. It seems at times as if Trump is both ubiquitous and yet Trumpism is all but absent. If you squinted and judged only the substantive

change since last January, Trump's tangible record is indistinguishable from any other mainstream Republican's.

Take three stories of the past week. Despite the commander-in-chief's incendiary tweet, transgender troops are currently being openly enrolled in the military for the first time. Bluff called. The much-touted voter fraud commission has been shut down by the president himself. Reality finally defeated paranoia. California now has legal weed, and Jeff Sessions's response has been to defer enforcement of federal law to U.S. Attorneys in the legal pot states. On paper, this looks ominous. But in reality, I cannot imagine U.S. Attorneys in California actually deciding to go to war with a multimillion-dollar industry backed by a clear majority of voters, and serious pushback is already coming from Republicans in legal weed states. Another de facto retreat. In an era in which fentanyl is killing tens of thousands, a fixation on cannabis seems close to insane, when it isn't completely irrelevant.

Should this tempt us toward optimism? I'd say not. Just because a drunk driver hasn't crashed for a quarter of his journey home carries no assurance that catastrophe isn't still eminently possible. But it seems possible, after a year of this insanity, to entertain some measure of hope that it will some day be over, and the country and the world not irrevocably damaged in the process. There may even be hope that the confirmation of everyone's darkest fears about this president's functionality may at some point break through, and perhaps after a drubbing in the fall elections, the GOP might even begin to reassess its reckless gamble. No, I'm not optimistic about this, but hope flickers in the distance. Reality at some point could finally intrude upon the reality show.

### **Our Immigration Flip-flop**

I learned something new about chain migration, as the Trump administration calls it, this week. The ability of a new immigrant to sponsor extended members of her family for permanent residence and eventually citizenship was originally a product of white supremacy! It was designed to keep America from becoming too brown. The *Washington Post* notes:

Liberals in Congress wanted to scrap the restrictive quota-based system that had governed U.S. immigration policy for decades. Conservatives feared that America's ethnic and racial composition would be forever transformed. So in 1965 they compromised: an immigration model that would favor "family unification." By giving priority to the relatives of U.S. citizens, who were mostly of white, European descent, the Immigration and Nationality Act would ensure that future newcomers were overwhelmingly white and European, too.

Of course, it didn't quite work out that way, with family unification compounding the unprecedented racial and demographic shifts of the last half-century. At the time, though, many on the left were in favor of merit-based immigration laws, precisely because they would replace the racist quotas embedded in the hugely restrictionist 1924 law, and allow for people to be admitted based on their abilities rather than on their country of origin. What Tom Cotton and the Republican right now support is what liberals once believed in, and vice versa. More interesting still, the push to end the 1924 quotas was also driven by right-wing Cold War priorities. "You had Truman, Eisenhower, and other prominent national security, foreign policy leaders saying

this is crazy, we have people escaping from behind the Iron Curtain who want a haven in the United States, and it helps our national security to welcome them here,” said Daniel Tichenor, author of *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* and a political scientist at the University of Oregon. “Just like Jim Crow and the suppression of African-American voters embarrassed us abroad, our immigration policies were so blatantly racist it really hurt the world’s perception of the U.S. as a global leader and democracy to be emulated,” he said.

What I love about this nugget is how it exposes our right-left divide as constantly in flux over the decades, and how it reveals the eternal fact of all legislation: that unintended consequences are often as salient as intended ones. In 1965, Senator Ted Kennedy endorsed the bill by claiming that “the ethnic mix of this country will not be upset.” Interesting to see an iconic liberal extol the merits of a more racially homogeneous nation, isn’t it? Fascinating to see President Johnson’s core principle as well: “This [old] system violated the basic principle of American democracy, the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man. It has been un-American in the highest sense, because it has been untrue to the faith that brought thousands to these shores even before we were a country.” And yet now the Democrats are dead-set against any shift to a merit-based system.

I take a couple of conclusions from these wrinkles. It is not an illegitimate thing to worry about huge shifts in the ethnic and racial demography of a country. Iconic liberals once did so. It is also not an inherently illiberal thing to support merit-based immigration or even stricter legal immigration to protect American workers. If the point of a democracy is to allow all merit to be rewarded regardless of class, race, gender or other factors, then allowing immigration entirely on family, and thereby purely genetic and racial grounds, is actually anti-democratic. The argument for putting the interests of American workers first also used to be a liberal idea. The left-wing case for an end to mass immigration, a sizable chunk of which is based merely on family, is therefore real. Not so long ago, in fact, it was close to axiomatic.

### **More Than Skin-Deep**

I spent part of the Christmas break visiting a friend, who’s a career diplomat, in the Dominican Republic. I learned a couple of interesting cultural dimensions to this strangely beautiful half-island. The first is that there is much less social taboo associated with relationships across generations. People in their 20s marry and date people in their 50s and no one seems to notice. It’s something you learn apparently in issuing visas. And indeed it’s perfectly possible to observe “age-inappropriate” couples everywhere you look.

But the second wrinkle is the resilience of racism. One fantasy I’ve long clung to is that higher levels of interracial dating and marriage will ease racial prejudice. As we all become various shades of mocha or brown, sharp racial hierarchies will slowly dissolve and appear irrelevant — as, of course, they should. And yet in this little country of various shades of brown, racial categorization seems even more important. You see this on civil Dominican documents. Large numbers of rather obviously brownish Latinos put themselves down as “white” when asked to reveal their race, just as they refer to themselves as *blanco* in their everyday lives. And what seems rather ludicrous to an average America is, in fact, a critical element of social life in the

DR. The more the colors blend, the more obsessive humans can get about defining them, and the hierarchies they imply. Just as there is an element of internalized racism among African-Americans with respect to skin color, with light-skinned always being seen as somehow preferable, so too the Dominicans seem to have absorbed this hierarchy as well — with scarcely any Northern Europeans in the ethnic mix at all. Part of this, of course, is linked with a contempt for Haitians, who are seen as black and thereby inferior, and from an ethnic mix that originated from distinctions between colonizers and slaves. But you also see this phenomenon elsewhere in the world. In Thailand, for example, there is a huge whitening industry, with the latest fad being the whitening of, yes, dicks. The whitening of skin and appearance appears across the globe. Darkening, with the exception of a suntan, is rare.

What's really going on here? Have nonwhites internalized the notion that whiteness is somehow superior, even without a white majority or minority in their own populations? It's hard to see this as a rational response to colonialism — because presumably throwing off European control would lead to a celebration of one's own culture and race, rather than continued psychological enslavement to the former colonizers. Maybe it has something to do with the West's disproportionate cultural and economic power and wealth, which is associated in some minds with race. Or else it is simply a massive fraud still being perpetrated by parts of the Old World. It remains, for example, an extraordinary cultural fact that somehow Britain's upper classes retain an enduring appeal in terms of style and schooling and culture across the globe. Why would the fusty old British monarchy retain such a pull? How is it that even the Japanese try to style themselves after British toffs, or the scions of Arab billionaires want to send their sons to British boarding schools? What kind of bullshit is this — that a tiny, rainy island of pale people with bad teeth should somehow command cultural clout beyond any other comparable population.

I remain confused, partly perhaps because I come from England and saw, in my college days, what the British upper class really is like, and like many deemed beneath it, found it deeply underwhelming. But the endurance of this phenomenon is as real as it is dismaying — hence even my gobbling up of every single moment in Netflix's *The Crown*. Something in the human psyche is, it appears, impossible to fix. And that something somehow clings to the resilient tribalism of skin color — even in the idyllic islands of the Caribbean.

See you next Friday.