

Trump Beleaguered

March 1

For two-and-a-half years, Trump has torn apart not just the U.S., but the American nation. It was a nation that had some vestige of shared collective identity, no less palpable or real for being imaginary. Though one's background identity, one's race, sex or gender, class, and so on, have always mattered -- how could they not? -- there was this other part of collective identity that was being *American*, part of the American nation. This sense was always probably most pronounced for those who were not at the very bottom nor perhaps at the very top of the economic and racial pyramid. And it has ebbed and flowed over time.

Since the late 1800s and recovery from the Civil War, shared American national identity was probably strongest during World War Two, including for Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans (though certainly not for Japanese-Americans). Since then and until Trump, albeit with hiccups and confrontations, especially during the late 60s and 70s, at least some sense of this has remained -- evening if waning more recently. That is, that thing that Benedict Anderson called a collectively felt national community. Not that this superseded other identities -- gender and sex, race, class, religion, age, region of the country, and so on. But rather that being American provided a complement to these. This included a potential way, at least in part, to counterbalance if not counteract these identity differences and polarization.

Born in 1954 in Connecticut, I grew up in that world. I felt it since a child during the 1960s and onward, including overland across all the states of the U.S., excepting Alaska, from the 1970s through the early 90s. I felt it while living in a New Haven black ghetto, and in working-class encounters in a number of places and guises. There was something about the U.S. -- the nation of Americans if not the government of the United States -- that made it seem, at least potentially, a decent and good and even wholesome collectivity -- notwithstanding all its awful invasions both abroad and militarily at home. I both hoped for and was very skeptical of this claim to nationalism, to the idea that America was in some sense "good."

My white class status at the time was highly liberal and progressive for its day, but I was also highly dissatisfied with this and wanted to live with and among

people who were as different from my critique of privilege that I could then imagine. Hence my intensified interest in anthropology. I criticized the great ills of the U.S. during the 1970s and 80s, became a Marxist and a feminist and anti-racist wanted to work with and among people of color or otherwise as diverse and different from my background as possible. A few years ago I documented and very critically analyzed American imperialism historically through the early 21st century (see the target article in CA : Home page (under the photo banner) → Books & publications → Selected articles and reports → “Provincializing America”).

Amid all of its badness, there was still, even though I was in important ways staunchly anti-American, something potentially positive about America, or at least something that in comparative terms, compared with many other countries, to be aspired to. Some could-be-progressive sense that most Americans were or at least could mostly be good-at-heart people, not because but in spite of their collective capitalist power as a nation and as a country. This including at least *ultimately* or *potentially* across lines of race and class. In hindsight, I’m sure my perception was influenced by my race and class position at the time – but much less so when I was off in the field in one or another country, or engaged in serious critical reading and thinking.

That sense of loosely coherent and positive American-ness was shredded by Trump – and was presaged, in retrospect, by those who hated Obama. I remember a lecture I attended in early fall well before the November 2016 election. A conservative gay Republican, very smart, warned forcefully that if by some wild chance that nobody then expected Trump DID become POTUS, it would be a true disaster. A disaster for America of a magnitude that would be hard (and **was** hard, at that time) to imagine. An awkward shudder went through the audience. As if they contemplated for the first time that this ridiculous unthinkable possibility -- might actually happen. I remembered being politically scared in the U.S. -- in a certain kind new way -- for the first time. for the first time.)

Up until election night, I assumed along with Nate Silver and everyone else that Hillary was a shoo-in for election – the first woman President. Obama’s legacy would kind of be vouchsafed, as rocky and jagged as it was. Against this was the worry that Clinton had her own potential lean -- albeit much softer – toward autocracy. All this changed with the returns. The nation I had been living in suddenly felt like a foreign land. It was very much an owl-of-minerva

sensation: I had never had felt very American and had often done fieldwork or fantasized living elsewhere. But now that I knew that an importantly potential good part of Americanness was lost, gone, I viscerally felt for the first time as if by negative definition what is *had* meant to have better ideals and ethics put forward by the government and in the nation, compromised though they be.

I continued to sense for the next half-year after the election that some inchoate part of potentially good America was lost. Then I left for a full summer off the grid in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea. When I left in late spring 2017, Trump's post-election lock-step with the Republicans was not at all firm. The Republicans themselves had a lot of ambivalence. Waves of deep structural opposition against Trump's Presidency still seemed viable. During my weeks away and cut off during that first summer he was President, I seriously thought I would return to find impeachment hearings or other signs of Trumpian meltdown. But while I was gone, things only got worse.

A lot worse. Following his inauguration through 2017 and most of 2018, Trump's grip of fear and bludgeondry simply increased. I was flabbergasted and sickened by the falsehoods and maliciousness and total support of Trump pumped out by FOX News, One America, and Breitbart News. Sean Hannity had the most popular cable news program in the country, as well as talk radio. He was all but very seriously inciting actual violent revolution – from the Right. Trump, in the mix, had completely conquered the Republican Party -- and was making further inroads across the country. He gained simply more and more strength.

By fall 2018, I seriously started reading books about fascism, especially Italian fascism. Except that Mussolini was an imperial expansionist, the glory of Italian conquest abroad. Against this, Trump is an arch nationo-isolationist. He tolerates the military but has no love of it.

Leading up to the November 2018 mid-term elections, I perceived a see-saw of progressive hope and fear. Hope among us that the Democrats could actually take both houses of Congress. And fear of a backlash of the kind that's Trump election had so unexpectedly brought in the '16 election – fear of another election night surprise catastrophe, leaving Trumpist Republicans in charge of the whole government. I felt sickened by Kavanaugh's bludgeoning of Blasey-Ford – what a heroic woman, not to mention the Senate then approving him for life on the Supreme Court.

In the mix between hope and fear, the 2018 mid-term elections seemed half-a-loaf. The Democrats still stood for that shredded imagined collective America, America as a *nation* across class and race, at least potentially and in principle. But they seemed just an upstart force against Trump's Leviathan Thugs.

More practically, Pelosi outmaneuvered DJ decisively on key issues, including the government shut-down and the State of the Union. For the first time, he has had to *kowtow*, a primal moment of primate subordination. Pelosi had gotten the House of Opposition in order. Now the Democrats are both united and running rampant: the early days of the Democrat Hats-in-the-Ring testing and zesting ground. But it somehow seems quite interesting in the mix that Bezos, the richest man in America and the world, is practically at legal war with Trump.

Looking back, against all progressive odds, Trump's bullying mushroomed pretty consistently for two-and-a-half years, from late spring 2016 through November 2018. Even the mid-term elections did not by themselves ensure that Dems could really assert themselves against executive plus senatorial plus judicial power. But the way Pelosi played it did effect a structural check on his power. And at least for a spell, the country's political fulcrum tilted an alternate direction.

Perhaps predictably, Republicans now continue to centralize while the Democrats ramify out. Media is changing, too. FOX news no longer simply echoes apologies for Trump. But CNN just hired an apparent hatchet woman for Trump to be director of CNN 2020 election reporting. This on the ideology of creating better media balance at CNN between Red and Blue.

Today in Congressional hearings was the exposé of Trump's presidential cesspool by Cohen. On the same day, Trump walked away failed from North Korea. In response, the Republicans merely doubled down.

It remains to be seen if Democrats will centralize enough to win the Presidency in 2020. Or whether, on a more outside chance, that they will win or try to win it by energizing a smaller but more zealous base. As seems always to have been the case for the past several decades, a small number of swing states will spell the difference on way or the other.

The stakes are both whether the next Presidency is Red or Blue, and also whether civil polarization in the U.S. gets yet more strident. Along with this is whether polarizations in America either line up or splinter across and among different axes of inequality – class, race, sex, religion. I think Marx of the 18th Brumaire and wonder where we stand. Time will tell. But at least the game is on. Not that there is some *other* “great America” that should be trumpeted by either assertion or negation. In that sense, Foucault was right. But Marx was also right. As if in our current digitized capitalism, $I = P$, where I is information, and P is power.