

FAITH AND RECKONING AFTER TRUMP

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The Biden Reprieve

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On September 4, 476 CE, the Roman Empire fell when the Germanic King Odoacer deposed Emperor Romulus Augustulus. But if truth be told, the end of the empire occurred some three hundred years earlier when Commodus ascended the throne after the death of his father, Marcus Aurelius, thereby bringing to a close the *pax Romana*. Unfortunately for them, many Romans at that time failed to read the signs of the times, which pointed to an eventual collapse. They instead went about their daily chores incorrectly reassured that the sun would not set upon their world.

Multiple factors played a role in the empire's ultimate collapse. These include (1) an unequal distribution of wealth, as illustrated by the heavy tax burden borne by the working population; (2) a change in climate, prompting the Late Antique Little Ice Age (global cooling of about 3.6° F) triggering a migration crisis from the Eurasian steppe, which the empire had failed to properly and justly administer; (3) the Antonine Plague (160–180 CE) followed by the Plague of Cyprian (249–262 CE), which decimated the population, weakening its institutions; (4) the rise of usurpers during chaotic times seeking to seize the throne; (5) a rise in abuse of power manifested as politically sanctioned cruelty and unchecked corruption; and, finally, (6) internal divisions leading to civil wars. It has been surmised that one other important factor contributed to the empire's eventual downfall. According to some historians,

like Edward Gibbon, Christianity played a part in hastening the empire's demise.¹

Will future historians, centuries from now, look to 2016 as the beginning of the end of the United States empire? This country and its political structures may very well endure for many more decades, if not longer. Still, we must wonder if what is transpiring before our very eyes will find its complete manifestation at some future date with the demise of what has come to be known as the most powerful and wealthiest empire the world has ever known. Like the previous Mediterranean empire, the United States also faces (1) an unequal distribution of wealth (plutocrats like Trump paying \$750 in taxes); (2) a refusal to consider the implications of climate change; (3) a broken immigration system; (4) a colossal failure to effectively confront the Covid-19 plague, which has wreaked economic pain throughout the nation; (5) a rise in abuse of power (children in cages); (6) an attempt by President Trump, with support of some of the most powerful congressional leaders, to usurp his office by ignoring and challenging the 2020 election, even to the point of inciting mobs to storm the Capitol; and (7) the demonization of political opponents by domestic white supremacist terrorist groups salivating for a civil war. And most important for those of us contributing to this book, the role Christianity is playing to hasten the fall of this current empire.

After four years of ineptitude (almost 400,000 deaths from Covid at the end of Trump's term), four years of blatant racism ("very fine people on both sides"), four years of weakening democratic principles (storming the Capitol), four years of tacit support of white supremacist terrorist groups ("stand back and stand by"), and four years of lies, bullying, and self-enrichment, many progressives who hoped the national nightmare would be fully and unconditionally repudiated by means of an electoral landslide were sadly disappointed. Trump received eight million more votes than in 2016! CNN commentator Van Jones best captured this sentiment on election night when it became obvious the race was going

1. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (London: Jones and Company, 1828), 482.

to be tighter than what pundits had predicted. “There’s the moral victory and there’s the political victory, and they’re not the same thing,” Van Jones told his television audience. “I think for people who saw babies being snatched away from their mothers at the border, for people who are sending their kids into schools where the N-word is now being used against them, for people who have seen this wave of intolerance, they wanted a moral victory tonight. We wanted to see a repudiation of this direction for the country, and the fact that it’s this close, it hurts. It just hurts.”²

Failure to repudiate has emboldened and invigorated a scorched-earth politics where power is maintained through gaslighting and the demonization of the other—and let democracy be damned. Politicians who did not face a down-ballot bloodbath for their complicity with four years of acrimonious presidential antics faced no consequences for their kowtowing. Fear of tweets from Trump and the threat of a primary challenge from their right flank in some future election was enough to keep them in line. Already, with the new year in 2021, Trump began calling for primary challengers in 2022 against “disloyal” Republican politicians like Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, or South Dakota Senator John Thune. And thanks to the cash-flush PAC he established by soliciting donations to “Stop the Steal,” he has the muscle to make his threats more than simple bluster.

Yes, Joseph Biden did win the election with almost 81.3 million votes, the most ever cast for a presidential candidate in the history of the United States. And while Trump lost the popular count by some seven million votes, still, he garnered millions more votes than in 2016. Even after four years of Trumpishness, more people than in 2016, when Trump was still a relatively unknown quantity, made the conscious decision to vote for more of the same. There was no repudiation of the past four years; instead, election results indicated a more expanded and tighter embrace of Trump and his policies.

What does it mean that almost half of the population made a

2. Jessica Chasmar, “Van Jones Says ‘A Lot of Democrats’ Are Hurting Right Now,” *Washington Times*, November 4, 2020.

preferential option for Trumpism? Yes, many may profess to be sick of his tweets, or put off by his boorishness. Still, at the end of the day, a major portion of the US population—for whatever reason—found his unapologetic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism acceptable enough. There is nothing he said or did that deterred them from supporting and voting for a morally corrupt and morally bankrupt individual. Trump truly proved he can stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody without losing voters! This is not political gasconading, but reality, as we count the increased death of Black people at the hands of law enforcement, brown people on our nation's southern borderlands, and, of course, those whose Covid deaths can directly be traced to the failures of the government to provide an adequate response to the pandemic.

The Trump presidency will best be known for exposing extraordinary national fissures, culminating in the January 6 storming of the Capitol. Although Trump may be responsible for stoking the flames of division, capitalizing on centuries of racial hatred, we do well to remember he is not the cause of this nation's angst, but merely the symptom. When, during the campaign, Biden reflected on the impact of Trump's character upon the national ethos, he would often state: "It's not who we are, not what America is."³ But contrary to Biden's cogent assertions, this is exactly who we are and what America is. Those who stormed the Capitol are not a fringe element of America—they *are* America. *We the people* are the problem. Trump is simply mirroring and reflecting who the United States truly is. Not only did he refuse to wear the mask, which could have spared him the coronavirus; he also refused to wear the mask of political correctness, which could have spared him the accusations of white supremacist tendencies, a mask worn by so many previous presidents. Trump signifies the unconscious desire of many to embrace a failed state. Many Americans, especially white Americans, are willing to vote against their best interest because they have bought into a racial zero-sum rule that believes that whatever advances and gains are made by communities of

3. Matt Flegenheimer, "Biden Says Trump Is 'Not Who We Are.' Do Voters Agree?" *New York Times*, November 3, 2020.

color must come at their own expense. What propelled Trump to the highest echelons of political power and what will prevent Biden from making major advances in expanding the concept of a more perfect union is what has plagued the development of this nation since its inception: white supremacy.

Comparing our country to other leading industrial nations, according to measures of human flourishing, the United States ranks among the worst. The wealthiest nation known to human history is nonetheless a failed state when it comes to the welfare of its citizens. A World Bank study ranked the United States twenty-seventh when it came to education and health care.⁴ Specifically in education, the United States ranked twenty-eighth out of seventy-one countries in math scores and twenty-fourth in science.⁵ The CIA reported that the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality while ignoring other well-being qualifiers, positioned the United States as fortieth among 150 countries.⁶ Not surprisingly, we are the only country in the Western hemisphere without a national paid parental leave benefit. We are also the only industrial country without universal health care, spending more on substandard care (\$9,892 when the world's median is \$4,033) than any other country.⁷ Compared to other nations, whether developed or developing, the United States continues to place at or near the bottom when measuring mortality and life expectancy.⁸ We work more hours for less pay and less leisure time.

4. Stephen S. Lim et al., “Measuring Human Capital: A Systematic Analysis of 195 Countries and Territories, 1990–2016,” *The Lancet* 392, no. 10154 (October 6, 2018): 1217–34.

5. Drew Desilver, “US Students’ Academic Achievement Still Lags That of Their Peers in Many Other Countries,” Pew Research Center, February 15, 2017.

6. Mark Abadi, “Income Inequality Is Growing across the US—Here’s How Bad It Is in Every State,” *Business Insider*, March 15, 2018.

7. Gerard F. Anderson, Peter Hussey, and Varduhi Petrosyan, “It’s Still the Price, Stupid: Why the US Spends So Much on Health Care, and a Tribute to Uwe Reinhardt,” *Health Affairs* 38, no. 1 (January 2019): 87–95.

8. Jorge L. Ortiz, “‘A Distinctly American Phenomenon’: Our Workforce Is Dying Faster Than Any Other Wealthy Country, Study Shows,” *USA Today*, November 26, 2019.

As the voting came to a close, the nation was entering a dark Covid winter. December proved to be the deadliest month for coronavirus deaths, as one American died of the infection every thirty-three seconds. As this book was nearing completion, an additional 100,000 had died since inauguration day, bringing the total count to half a million. The reality of a third-world health care system became apparent as citizens negotiated a deficiency of virus tests, protective masks, and ventilators, coupled with the utter failure of the initial vaccine rollout. Although twenty million were supposed to be vaccinated by New Year's Day, the actual number was only 2.1 million.⁹ Complicating an effective response is the fact that, among industrial countries, we are among the few that lacks any federal law requiring paid sick days, thereby forcing the infected who live from paycheck to paycheck to show up for work and thus contribute to the spread of the virus. Because potential lost income trumps a required self-imposed quarantine, flattening the pandemic curve became an arduous task. The lack of paid sick leave, along with inadequate or no health insurance, helps explain why on the eve of the election, the United States, with just 4.25 percent of the world population, accounted for 19.5 percent of global Covid infections and 19.1 percent of Covid deaths, representing just shy of a fifth of the planet's total fatalities.¹⁰

The United States' dismal standing in the world did not start with Trump. And while it is true that he exacerbated the situation, the fact remains that the current failure of the state to safeguard the welfare of its citizens reflects a lack of political will constant during both liberal and conservative administrations, Democrats and Republicans alike. The question before us is whether Biden, who is seventy-seven years old and has been a moderate during his entire political life, is the best candidate to bring forth the chal-

9. Ellie Kaufman, Annie Grayer, Sara Murray, and Andrea Kane, "US Officials Promised 20 Million Vaccinated against Coronavirus by the End of the Year. It's Going Slower Than That," *CNN*, December 28, 2020.

10. "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," *New York Times*, November 3, 2020.

lunge of de-Trumpification. To his credit, Biden recognizes his limitations, seeing himself “as a bridge [to] . . . an entire generation of leaders . . . they are the future of this country”¹¹ (even though his cabinet tended to feature older political hands). While his humility is refreshing after four years of bluster, still, with a divided government and divided electorate, both undergirded by white supremacist tendencies, we are left wondering if the next four years will offer a temporary reprieve rather than a transformative moment.

If election reform is not enacted to allow the selection of presidents by means of the popular vote rather than the slavocracy-based Electoral College system, which privileges whites; if taxpayers of color in Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico are not given senatorial voice; if voter suppression tactics (i.e., voter purges, felony disenfranchisement, gerrymandering, and voter ID requirements) are not repealed; if tax laws are not passed which equitably spread the nation’s debt obligations; if salaries are not legislatively raised to living wage standards; if universal health care and universal education are not implemented; if student-loan debts are not forgiven; if the institutionalized racism of law enforcement agencies are not dealt with; if a just and humane immigration policy is not enacted; and if the climate crisis humanity faces continues to be ignored—just to name a few of the most pressing issues—then all that was accomplished by the 2020 election will offer only a reprieve from Trumpism. Politicians historically lack the will to bring about such progressive policies. Most of the electorate, as demonstrated by many who split their votes between both parties, may rebuke Trump, but not the failed political state they inhabit.

On January 6, during the perfunctory receipt of the certified Electoral College votes, the Capitol was stormed by domestic terrorists, leading to the destruction of property, the death of rioters as well as members of law enforcement, and the bruising of our democracy. Such scenes of violence over election results, urged on

11. Eric Bradner and Sarah Mucha, “Biden Says He’s a ‘Bridge’ to a New ‘Generation of Leaders’ While Campaigning with Harris, Booker, Whitmer,” *CNN News*, March 9, 2020.

by the losing candidate who refused to concede defeat, are typical of failed states. How can this rupture be reconciled? Can it be? Or is the best we can hope for a domestic détente? If the moral obligation of people of faith (and those who profess no faith, which nevertheless has proven to be more faithful than the faith of white Christian nationalists) is to bring about healing through a transformative moment in solidarity with the least of these, then resistance to the status quo continues as *la lucha* for justice. Let this book that you hold in your hands launch a conversation truly seeking a more perfect union. Martin Luther King Jr. said that the “arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I argue the opposite. The moral universe could care less, and if left to itself will gravitate toward injustice. If we want the arc to instead bend toward justice, then it is up to us to do the bending.