

The America We Thought We Knew Is Gone

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Hillary Clinton supporters react to early poll results on election night at the Javits Center in New York on Nov. 8, 2016.

Angela Weiss/AFP/Getty Images

Because countries are not people, it's tricky to translate whatever "loving one's country" means—it's quite abstract—into the language of heartbreak. It sounds melodramatic. What can heartbreak mean as a civic matter? And yet it is what I feel.

A corrupt but weak president—this has been my comfort, his weakness—has been given a gift that will make him strong. After upholding the travel ban, weakening labor unions, and allowing crisis pregnancy centers to misrepresent themselves to women seeking help, [Justice Anthony Kennedy announced](#) he was retiring before the midterm elections. That decision empowers a reality-television star who lost the popular vote by millions to reform the Supreme Court for at least a generation—a court that rather than rebut his claim to power has affirmed it. In his own branch, he asked James Comey for a loyalty oath and lamented not getting one from Jeff Sessions, whom he has repeatedly condemned for recusing himself in the Russia investigation, saying he never would have hired him as attorney general had he known. There is every reason to think he will do the same for a Supreme Court nominee. When Neil Gorsuch—who took the seat Mitch McConnell withheld from

Merrick Garland—seemed to distance himself from the man who offered him the robes, Donald Trump [reportedly considered](#) pulling the nomination. Trump has said he will pardon himself if he needs to, a controversial stance that would likely need approval from the high court. Now he has been given a way to assure it. He holds the power over the person who can rubber-stamp him into invulnerability.

The capitulation of two branches of government to a terrifying third, elected by a minority, is not how our government was envisioned. That is frightening. It is also, depending on the America you want to live in, painful.

The problem isn't simply that Trump—who styles himself a “law and order” president—values neither: He [objected to the Central Park Five's going free](#), despite the DNA evidence proving their innocence. He *wanted* their false imprisonment. It isn't just that he [advocates against due process](#), tars asylum applicants as criminals, and characterizes even their children as an “infestation.” It isn't simply that he sees black men as intrinsically guilty, the same as brown refugees. It's that he shouts about law and order while upholding the immunity of the rich and the cruel: He pardoned Joe Arpaio, who tortured undocumented immigrants in unlivable tent cities he openly called [concentration camps](#), and, in pardoning Dinesh D'Souza, has [signaled](#) he will pardon his cronies if they are convicted for illegally helping him.

This is open corruption, and it has been openly embraced.

That fills me with grief, but my grief can't make it untrue. And if this benthic sadness has any value, it's that clarity. There is no more equivocating to do. You don't have to equivocate about Trump's corruption—or Wilbur Ross', or Scott Pruitt's. You don't have to parse whether a “falsehood” is really a “lie.” It is simply true that the president is corrupt and that his supporters celebrate his corruption. That twisted power has enfeebled the institutions that depend on the very things the president would call weak—honesty and honor and service. As those institutions collapse, so does a polity capable of reasoning without them.

For instance: Confused by the fever that's seized it, the country has spent days debating the “civility” of a restaurant owner who asked Sarah Huckabee Sanders to leave, after she had defended the president's policy of putting children in cages as a “deterrent” to other migrants. He called sitting members of Congress “crazy” and pettily insulted that same restaurant's cleanliness. But Trump's own discourse somehow doesn't factor into this earnest discussion of civility.

It is as strange as it is dangerous that everyone—supporters and antagonists alike—now excises Trump from this discussion about how people should treat each other. Even more shocking, though, is that this impulse to cordon Trump off, either by forgiving or excepting him, has extended to the courts, where language *must* matter if the institution is to function. In upholding Trump's ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries—which Sean Spicer spent days as Trump's press secretary insisting was not a ban—the Supreme Court dismissed his many, many public statements that declared an intent to discriminate based on religion. (Note that the

justices did [the exact opposite](#)—citing evidence that some members of the Colorado Civil Rights Commission expressed “bias” against the baker’s religious belief—to rule in the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case.)

The result is that Trump, a man who has repeatedly said that he only responds to consequences, has faced none. His lies meet with no institutional resistance. Quite the contrary. His decision to say outrageous, incorrect, inflammatory things has paid off handsomely: His supporters believe them, and those in power will not acknowledge that he has said anything at all. The combined effect has rendered him immune to every standard we, as a country, once shared.

This is frightening enough to make denial attractive.

But it is important now to deny nothing, and to instead reiterate that he *did* say these things, even if the court has plugged its ears. It falls to us to state what the Supreme Court of the United States would not: His intent *was* to discriminate on the basis of religion—he *campaign*ed on a “Muslim ban.” That is not equivocal. It is clear. There’s even a [tweet from a before-times Mike Pence](#) saying, “Calls to ban Muslims from the U.S. are offensive and unconstitutional.” It is necessary to point out what’s true, because (and this is the painful lesson of this week) our [institutions won’t](#). Trump’s call for a “Muslim ban” happened—it’s not our imagination! That the court ignored this neatly proves that the organs of democracy intended to prevent presidential abuse are the ones in denial, and show no sign of waking up.

This is the sadness I’m feeling. It is deep *because* it is clear. There is no longer doubt.

The word *hypocrisy* bobs up in these discussions, but the issue—as many have pointed out—is not hypocrisy, because those who are failing us do not aspire to intellectual or moral consistency in the first place. There is no negotiating with, or appeasing, or even engaging a party that feels no responsibility to the truth. Lying is more than “uncivil.” It corrodes relationships and trust, and the damage it does is permanent. I know it’s fashionable these days to wear one’s cynicism on one’s sleeve: We predict every promise will be broken because expecting honesty is laughably naïve. This makes reality easier to live with and joke about. But it’s a symptom of national rot. Being lied to, constantly, is *not* the price of being governed. That we have naturalized this—that we expect nothing less, in fact—shows how far we’ve already gone down a bad, bad road. This was already an unhealthy country in many ways. But at least lies were still resented. Now they are celebrated.

The country we thought we shared is changing faster than anyone expected. I wrote last week about the [cognitive mismatch](#) I felt at the relative normalcy outside my window as our government punished parents by taking their children away—in many cases, permanently. One week later, I cannot unsee how much even my window has changed and will change. The party ruling our country has demonstrated there is no principle it will respect, no norm it will endure. My rights as a woman are in danger. Civil rights are in danger. And the republic is in danger.

I am sad, above all, because the damage being done now no longer feels like it can be stemmed—let alone reversed—with a single election. This will last decades. The downturns my generation has already weathered—the 2008 crisis that hinged on obscure derivatives traded by a privileged few, robbing wealth from millions—were only the beginning. Education is now a luxury. Pensions barely exist. Health care is under threat. Retirement is, to those my age, a cruel joke. We've been waiting. For recovery, for relief, for some semblance of an American dream we can access.

It is clear, now, that there was nothing to wait for. In the time we've been waiting, the rich have only gotten richer and angrier and [whiter](#), but it will never be enough for them. The good-faith ideological battle some thought right and left were waging turned out to be no such thing: Modern conservatism was never about small government. Or personal liberty—for women and people of color, anyway. It wasn't about fiscal responsibility: The GOP passed a tax plan that has blown up our national debt, which is projected to reach 78 percent of America's GDP [by the end of this year](#), the highest it's been since 1950. And Republicans are still not happy. They will pretend that this crisis they created will require "sacrifices," gutting services poor Americans desperately need, like health care. The poor and disadvantaged will die.

Meanwhile, those in power will celebrate how much they deserve their wealth and how little anyone else deserves. And they will grab for more. You'd think they'd be happy: America now has the highest income inequality in the industrialized world. But even that is not enough. The greed is insatiable. And it is a greed not just for wealth but for domination—for permanent entitlement. What they want is to be served. At restaurants. On golf courses. In corporate offices. There is no form of protest they will respect: loud or silent, formal or spontaneous, civil or rude. Written petitions or marches on the streets. They don't care. Those in power have been very clear about what they *do* care about. "We have more money and more brains and better houses and apartments and nicer boats," Trump said Wednesday in a speech to his supporters, because he cannot help but say what he really means. "We are the elite."

That vicious little "we" excludes most of America. Those in power have cut off diplomatic relations with the country they're meant to govern, and the party they're meant to govern with. The point-of-no-return polarization that pundits still feebly warn against is already here. It is sad. It is true.

I started by talking about love. The country I believed in, which aspired to true equality of opportunity, and welcomed immigrants, and strove to make the American dream available to everyone, failed often. The ideal was never the reality, but at least there was an agreed-upon goal, one worth working toward in common. Even that is gone. The most vital trust that our government, as a whole, will protect the interests of the people has been violated.

So, yes: Today, I am sad. But there is power in calling things what they are. Other feelings will come.

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