

Coming to grips with the Trump nightmare

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Hillary Clinton supporters can certainly appreciate the adjective that flavors the expression “in the cold light of day.” As voting results mounted after midnight on Election Day earlier this month, dawn brought dismaying and chilling realizations. [Ron Pruessen](#) reviews some of his own efforts to come to grips with a nightmare scenario.



“I have lived the last month with a sense of suffering a vast and indefinite loss,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in 1854, trying to digest the horror of seeing an escaped slave transported from Boston under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Law. Although he “did not know at first what ailed me,” he continued, “At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country....”

Many Americans (within what turned out to be the majority of the electorate) would not have needed Thoreau’s processing time after November 8, 2016. There was immediate despair about losing both a particular election and their sense of their country’s identity.

As someone who has been writing and speaking about the presidential election campaign since early in the year (and openly hopeful about a Hillary Clinton victory), I certainly felt both dismay and shock. Like Thoreau, I’ve been trying for the past few weeks to understand the roots of my feelings. I think I now understand them better – though perhaps because I am far from Walden Pond, my take on my own state of mind has reconnected with earlier views I seem to have devalued immediately before and after the election. In my case, I feel more as if I have found (re-found) my country rather than lost it – as I have been reminded of concerns felt all (almost all) through 2016.

Not that this means I am less troubled by the election results. No. If anything, it means instead that the problems I have long seen have become that much more serious than I had feared.

At the least, it is deeply distressing to know that Trump’s vitriol and gall would actually appeal to 60 million voters. I [did](#) write early on in this election cycle about the anger and fear that existed in the United States and I [did](#) argue that the wellsprings of these emotions deserved both recognition and serious respect. Increasing economic inequality and less-satisfying middle class jobs, anxiety about two lost wars and terrorism, racial tensions and gun violence: since such grave problems had simply not been solved over the past decade, why wouldn’t citizens look for new ideas?

The hunger for more effective performance was perfectly reasonable, in other words – but Trump as the preferred option? That’s the real source of dismay for me and [more](#) than 60 million other American voters (since the popular vote count is showing Clinton ahead by at least 2 million votes). I [did](#) seriously contemplate the possibility of a Trump victory early on, fearing that a P.T. Barnum-like demagogue could reap power the way the “vulgar greasy genius” reaped cash in the 19th century (to use Vernon Parrington’s description of the earlier circus master). I [did](#) write about the historic problem confronting a party that had controlled the White House for eight years, even in the face of hard-won successes and initiatives. It’s possible to criticize the immaturity of fickle voters – but the record is the record (and it’s hardly as if political [leaders](#) are incapable of immaturity, either). I [did](#) also write about Hillary Clinton’s handicaps. Attention to her flaws has been intensive because she is such a known quantity after decades in the public eye. Those flaws may be more than counter-balanced by her strengths, but there were distinct vulnerabilities waiting to be exploited. Re-exploited, in fact, since Obama had effectively noted them in 2008. Of course the Republicans would mine the vein in 2016.

Given all the things I [did](#) anticipate, what has puzzled me is why I felt Thoreau-like shock and dismay on November 9. I had obviously let my skeptical/worried guard down in the final weeks of the campaign. That was all too clearly

evidenced by one late opinion piece that wondered whether Trump would be a Samsung Galaxy 7 political phenomenon, a model so frighteningly flawed that it would be driven from the electoral marketplace. Yes, I *did* – embarrassingly – write that.

Why had I detoured into optimism – and then, alas, into despair? In my virtual Walden Pond ruminations since then, I have come to see a couple of explanations:

First, I let myself be overly influenced by poll tabulations and their pervasive media echoes. Even the late-in-the-day James Comey/FBI hand grenade about more Clinton emails seemed to leave a small, but sufficient margin for the election day result I wanted.

Second, I can see in retrospect that my embracing of poll indicators was generated by a degree of desperation. Intellectually, I know that polls have become increasingly unreliable – but there was an emotional/psychological driver that let me tuck away the more objective perspective. Call it a “hope against hope” dynamic – or, more accurately, “hope against fear.” A Trump victory was so frightening to contemplate that the very thought of it triggered a gut-level resistance to fully recognizing the danger until it actually became a reality. There was a severe “loss aversion” impulse that stymied a more sensible reading of the evidence.

“Loss” was – and is – a key issue here. If I do not share Thoreau’s sense of having lost my country, I do feel that we are on the threshold of losing something of great value. In particular, the modicum of decency and the modicum of progress we have seen under Obama (and some of his predecessors) are at great risk. The United States has always been a country of great achievements and terrible failures, even if the spirit of “manifest destiny” and “that magical place called America” (Obama’s words) consistently lead to a blinkered celebration of only the positive. As both a historian and a citizen, I have never been able to ignore a past that includes slavery, genocidal violence against Native Americans, imperial expansion, Jim Crow racism, Vietnam, the Iraq War, etc., etc. But as a historian and a citizen, I have also seen the evolution(s) that have taken place even in my own lifetime. Just two examples:

Popular resistance to a repetition of Vietnam tragedies did temporarily weaken after 9/11, but it had desirable influence for decades before that – and the terrible consequences of Bush’s foray into Iraq seemed to have reinforced the “syndrome” again. Obama may be tip-toeing dangerously with respect to Syria and/or drones, but tip-toeing is not galloping.

If we are still seeing hateful acts and even violence spawned by resistance to the idea of equality irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality, we have still moved beyond the Fugitive Slave Law that so horrified Thoreau – and the grievously deep and wide repressiveness that began to more seriously crack only after the 1950s.

Is satisfying if incomplete evolution now at risk of interruption or, worse yet, reversal? Given the character and record of Donald Trump and at least a considerable number of his supporters, how can we not worry about losing ground that it took so long to win? There is irony, perhaps, in seeing how the fear and anger of some of Trump’s supporters are mirror-imaged in those of us who dreaded his victory. Irony, yes – but neither amusement nor comfort.

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