

## America's history has many shameful and frightening moments. The strong reactions they spurred offer a glimmer of hope for today.



*With Year Two of the Trump presidency beginning, [Ron Pruessen](#) recalls earlier American voices of despair and disappointment. As Mark Twain famously suggested, history may not exactly repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme a lot.*

As a historian of the United States, I've never found my desire for objectivity standing in the way of being stirred by the language and messages of visionary American icons: from Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama. Nor has there ever been a time, however, when insightful skeptics and critics haven't had my attention, as well: John Adams, Randolph Bourne, William Fulbright, among others. As the second year of the Trump presidency begins, it's the anger, sadness, and sometime despair of this latter cohort that has been most regularly coming to mind.

Maybe it was my Brooklyn childhood that bred tangled analytical impulses and sentiments into my bones and brain. This New York borough has often been exuberant and optimistic (about the 1950s Dodgers, the futures of residents who were frequently immigrants [like my father], or today's teeming galleries and clubs). Cynicism and skepticism come naturally too: about the corporate greed that took the beloved "[Bums](#)" to California or the way a phantasmagoric Manhattan real estate market has been the real force driving artists and chefs across the East River in recent days.

Whatever the origins of the occasional pendulum/Brooklyn swing of my moods, it's the half-remembered insights of hawk-eyed Cassandras and stoic fatalists I keep retrieving from my bookshelves and google searches these days. A few examples:

Cranky John Adams, so easy to dislike, but so hard to ignore in the Age of Trump. "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's services when it is violating all His laws," he wrote to Jefferson after both had retired. "Our passions, ambitions, avarice, love and resentment, etc., possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves into our understanding and conscience and convert both to their party." OK, the subtlety and the eloquence have been in short supply over the past year (in many camps) but the second president would recognize the ambition, avarice, etc. – even if he would be simultaneously gob-smacked by their 21<sup>st</sup> century intensification.

Bring on Abraham Lincoln, who could brilliantly drape a sense of tragedy and feelings of depression with a wry, piercing sarcasm that would make him a welcome guest on today's politically-charged late-night talk shows or CNN panels. With racial tensions disgracefully re-stoked by the 45<sup>th</sup> president and his enablers, I'm recalling 16's remarks about slavery in the last year of his life: "While I have often said that all men ought to be free, yet I would allow those colored persons to be slaves who want to be; and next to them those white persons who argue in favor of making other people slaves. I am in favor of giving an opportunity to such white men to try it on for themselves." Or Lincoln's undated words in a notebook: "But, slavery is good for some people!!! As a *good* thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks the good of, *for himself.*"



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Jump forward to the 1920s, to H.L. Mencken and his sharp-toothed survey of the American landscape. "As democracy is perfected," he wrote in 1920, "the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron." These were thoughts prompted by Warren G. Harding's emergence as the Republican nominee, but they have a startling resonance almost a century later. So does Mencken's reflection that American democracy is "the worship of jackals by jackasses."

One more example: Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian who became a prominent public intellectual in the U.S. of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. A vigorous, sometimes extreme anti-communist, he was also eloquently critical of American appetites and self-congratulation – so dramatically on display in recent days. "The man of power," he [wrote](#) early in the Great Depression, "though humane impulse may awaken in him, always remains something of the beast of prey." Likewise the society called home by men of power. As he put it in the midst of the Korean War, "even the sanest of our statesmen have found it convenient to conform their policies to the public temper of fear and hatred which the most vulgar of our politicians have generated or exploited." Sound familiar?

I should make it clear that revisiting such words and voices does not leave me completely mired in melancholy (thanks to my Brooklyn bifurcation?). I find value in revisiting Adams, Mencken, and others because their words help capture the essence of some of the terrible problems (and terrible leaders) we are confronting today. Voices from the past can also offer reminders of the fact that the United States has had other shameful and frightening moments in its history: because those times often spurred strong reactions and some (some) progress, recalling them can offer glimmers of hope. Yes, there is likely to be a hard road to travel before the Trumpian swamp stops expanding – not least because 45's, after all, is really a new swamp inside an old one.

Still, there are positive signs. Mencken was too sweeping in his condemnation of "plain folk" as "jackasses": Trump did lose the popular vote in 2016, after all, and his poll ratings have been down in the 30s for months now. This warrants respect for the complexity of American society and the fact that more solid, if vulnerable ground can surround the swamps. Dour Niebuhr actually [celebrated](#) this during the years that were severely troubled by the Cold War, colonial unrest, and racial tensions. "Any modern community which establishes a tolerable justice," he wrote in 1952, "is the beneficiary of the ironic triumph of the wisdom of common sense over the foolishness of its wisemen." One example resonant with Niebuhr: the effective resistance to those urging the use of nuclear weapons in the Korean War. Sometimes dangerous and poisonous behavior – sometimes – prods the search for and the development of antidotes.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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