



America never was, yet will be



Roger Cohen

Independence Day! For a naturalized American it is particularly poignant. It recalls the personal declarations of independence that, in a simple but transformational ceremony, subsume countless identities into the liberty, responsibility and possibility of United States citizenship under the law. I recall looking around that courtroom in Brooklyn 13 years ago and thinking simply: Here is America.

This magical capacity for reinvention lies at the root of American greatness. Other nations fetishize the past, rewrite it in blood; America's genius is the facilitation of forgetfulness. To be unburdened of history, for many immigrants, enables the pursuit of happiness.

But not for all: That pursuit, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, was denied to blacks. They were not citizens but slaves. This, as Barack Obama put it, was America's "original sin." It would not be easily expurgated.

I began my July 4 by reading the words of a black poet, Langston Hughes, written in 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression. This, today, is not a good American moment. Truth is under attack. The law is under attack. The press is under attack. Moral depravity seeps from on high in a viscous torrent that infects everything and is hard to cleanse from the skin. It cloyes. The White House stands for white males, above all, not 325 million Americans of every creed and color. I wanted to remind myself, again, of America's spirit.

In his poem, "Let America Be America Again," Hughes writes:

*Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)
The parenthesis punctures the myth.
The American idea is a journey toward
a receding destination, driven by the*

pursuit of perfectibility. The nation was not born of a piece with the Constitution. Its contours were outlined, with sufficient clarity and flexibility to endure, for future generations to usher closer to an ideal of liberty and justice for all.

That is why for a black man, Hughes, writing 83 years ago, "America was never America."

The poem continues:
*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic
oath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.
(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the
free.")*

The tension in the poem derives from its absence of hatred. Hughes, despite the suffering he describes, believes in the unique potential of the United States for reinvention. He states flatly that he was unequal; he was not free. So racism dictated. Yet he dreams of an uplifting reconciliation between American reality and American dream. For me, "sure" is the most beautiful American word. Not yes I'll do it, or maybe, but sure I will. It's forward-leaning and risk-embracing. It signals the space that Europe lacks. It captures America's spirit.

Nowhere else is becoming somebody else so easy. There is space, still, to be free. Sure there is. The divisions between those who

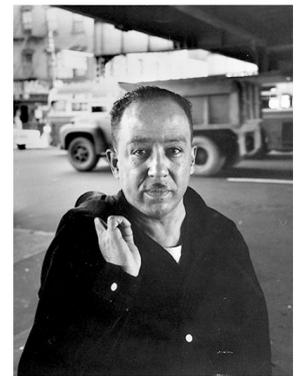
came first and those who came later are fungible.

Or so, on July 4, I want to believe. This will not be another American century. Old structures that worked are giving way to something as yet indiscernible, with its share of menace. All this may induce a sense that the American idea is lost.

But that idea has always been fought for — through slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, the Great Depression, McCarthyism, Vietnam, America healed from these lacerations. It cohered: *E pluribus unum.*

Toward the end of the poem, there are these lines:

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where
every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's,*



ROBERT W. KELLEY/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES
Langston Hughes in Harlem in 1958.

*Indian, Negro, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith
and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose
plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream
again.
Sure, call me any ugly name you
choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the
people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

Hughes, at the last, does not descend into despair. His, as Dan Rather has observed, is "a rallying cry for inclusion." The poem leads to an oath to an unrealized idea, battered but alive.

In this time of smallness and stupidity, it is critical never to shrug at the assault from on high on the American idea, flawed as it has always been. In 1938, three years after the poem was written, Thomas Mann, the German writer, defined democracy as "that form of government and society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man."

Beyond all the current indignities inflicted upon it, America will be. It will be itself again.

Big business reaps Trump's whirlwind



Paul Krugman

The imminent prospect of a trade war, it seems, concentrates the mind. Until very recently, big business and the institutions that represent its interests didn't seem to be taking President Trump's protectionist rhetoric very seriously. After all, corporations have invested trillions based on the belief that world markets would remain open, that U.S. industry would retain access to both foreign customers and foreign suppliers. Trump wouldn't put all those investments at risk, would he?

Yes, he would — and the belated recognition that his tough talk on trade was serious has spurred a flurry of action. Major corporations and trade associations are sending letters to the administration warning that its policies will cost more jobs than they create. Meanwhile, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has begun an advertising campaign to convince voters of the benefits of free trade.

Pathetic, isn't it? Who in the Trump administration is going to pay attention to those letters? What, exactly, does the chamber think it will accomplish by running those ads?

The thing is, big business is reaping what it sowed. No single cause brought us to this terrible moment in American history, but decades of cynical politics on the part of corporate America certainly played an important role. What do I mean by cynical politics? Partly I mean the tacit alliance between businesses and the wealthy, on one side, and racists on the other, that is the essence of the modern conservative movement.

For a long time business seemed to have this game under control: win elections with racial dog whistles, then turn to an agenda of tax cuts and deregulation. But sooner or later something like Trump was going to happen: a candidate who meant the racism seriously, with the enthusiastic support of the Republican base, and couldn't be controlled.

Recently Tom Donohue, the chamber's head, published an article decrying Trump's mistreatment of children at the border, declaring "this is not who we are." Sorry, Mr. Donohue, it is who you are: You and your allies spent decades empowering racists, and now the bill is coming due.

But racist immigration policy isn't the only place where people like Donohue are facing a monster they helped create.

The bill for decades of cynical politics is coming due.

When organizations like the Chamber of Commerce or the Heritage Foundation declare that Trump's tariffs are a bad idea, they are on solid intellectual ground: All, and I mean all, economic

experts agree. But they don't have any credibility, because these same conservative institutions have spent decades making war on expertise. The most obvious case is climate change, where conservative organizations, very much including the chamber, have long acted as "merchants of doubt," manufacturing skepticism and blocking action in the face of overwhelming scientific consensus. Not to put too fine a point on it, it's hard to pivot from "pay no attention to those so-called experts who say the planet is warming" to "protectionism is bad — all the experts agree."

Similarly, organizations like Heritage have long promoted supply-side economics, a.k.a., voodoo economics — the claim that tax cuts will produce huge growth and pay for themselves — even

though no economic experts agree. So they've already accepted the principle that it's O.K. to talk economic nonsense if it's politically convenient. Now comes Trump with different nonsense, saying "trade wars are good, and easy to win." How can they convince anyone that his nonsense is bad, while theirs was good?

But a trade war may be only the start of big business's self-inflicted punishment. Much worse and scarier things may lie ahead, because Trump isn't just a protectionist, he's an authoritarian. Trade wars are nasty; unchecked power is much worse, and not just for those who are poor and powerless.

Consider the fact that Trump is already in the habit of threatening businesses that have crossed him. After Harley-Davidson announced that it was shifting some production overseas because of trade conflicts, he warned that the company would be "taxed like never before" — which certainly sounds as if he wants to politicize the I.R.S. and use it to punish individual businesses.

For the moment, he probably can't do anything like that. But suppose Republicans retain control of Congress this November. If they do, does anyone think they'll stand up against abuses of presidential power? G.O.P. victory in the midterms would put a lot of people and institutions at the mercy of Trump's authoritarian instincts, big business very much included.

But organizations like the chamber and Heritage are still trying to ensure a Republican victory. In fact, until its recent shift in focus to protectionism, the chamber was running ads trying (unsuccessfully, it's true, but still) to build public support for the Trump tax cut in competitive House districts. Compare this with those free-trade ads, which serve no clear political purpose.

The point is that it's not just world trade that's at risk, but the rule of law. And it's at risk in part because big businesses abandoned all principle in the pursuit of tax cuts.

In Germany, a crisis just heating up

SAUERBREY, FROM PAGE 1

collapse of the government, new elections and most likely an improved standing for the A.f.D. Whatever the outcome, it would have meant many more months without reliable German leadership for Europe and a stalled opportunity to build a stronger Franco-German dynamic, arguably the only thing holding the European Union together.

Nor was the C.S.U.'s demand a small one, though on paper, the dispute seems remarkably narrow. It involved the third subpoint to Item 27 in a policy paper signed by the German interior minister, Horst Seehofer, of the C.S.U. But that subpoint contained multitudes: It dealt with so-called secondary migration within the European Union.

According to the Dublin Convention, which regulates which country is responsible for examining an asylum seeker's plea for protection, the first country a migrant enters is in charge. In most actual cases, this is one of the southern European states bordering the Mediterranean. However, many migrants don't stay in those countries but move on to the north of Europe. Germany has the right to send "secondary migrants" back. But in many cases, the legal protections of the Dublin regulation and exemptions, for example for minors, require further examination of each individual case, something that legal scholars argue cannot be done at the border. Also, the countries of first entry often decline to take the migrants back.

Hence the dispute. Mr. Seehofer demanded that Germany send such secondary migrants back anyway, which would have angered countries on Europe's southern periphery and most likely brought the entire fragile edifice crashing down, and with it the principle of free movement within the European Union. Ms. Merkel insisted that a European solution could be found and did just that a few weeks ago, in a meeting with President Emmanuel Macron of France at the Meseberg palace outside Berlin. But Mr. Seehofer was not satisfied.

It's a complex, confusing issue, even for Germans, in part because everyone agrees that the Dublin process is a mess, and the union's failure to fix it is a

sore point even for its defenders.

What is more confounding, though, is the fact that the migration crisis is over in Germany. In 2015 and 2016, the German administration was overwhelmed by the influx on every level. Gyms and airport hangars became housing facilities. Soldiers were trained to administer in hearings for pleas for asylum, because the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees could not cope. That's no longer the case.

This is not to say that the country is not still grappling with the consequences. Europe still lacks a functioning common asylum system. But contrary to what the C.S.U. and A.f.D. assert, the German state is not failing, and order is returning.

For all its shortcomings, Europe has actually managed the crisis quite well, in practice. Its external borders are stronger, and better policed and managed. Cooperation with Libya's border-patrol militias, however ethically suspect, has brought down the numbers crossing from that country to Italy. So has the agreement with Turkey to host

migrants in return for financial aid. In 2015, more than 450,000 pleas for asylum were filed; in 2016, about 745,000. So far this year, there have been only 68,000.

According to figures by the German Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees, only about a quarter of those applying for asylum in Germany in 2018 are already registered in another European country. This means that the C.S.U. risked blowing up the government to push through a regulation that applies to about 100 individuals a day, scattered over all of Germany's points of entry. In a sane and sound political system, threats to blow up governments and force new elections are reserved for the truly momentous disputes; small things are resolved through compromise. That's how Germany worked for decades.

This logic no longer applies. It has been replaced by the logic of escalation.

The sentiment of crisis is perpetuated rhetorically in an attempt to whip up public opinion to then point to public opinion as a justification for radical solutions. And not just by the fringes, but by mainstream politicians. Populism needs an outer threat to function. It requires a sense of urgency to justify its policies. Populism can't let crisis go. It is both its fuel and its outcome.

For the C.S.U., this strategy proved to be both a great failure and a great success. Though Mr. Seehofer and his faction keep claiming to speak for a majority, citizens both in Bavaria and elsewhere have grown increasingly annoyed with their caprices. The C.S.U. has dropped in the polls, in Bavaria and nationwide.

On the political level, however, the strategy worked. Ms. Merkel was forced to react and to compromise much further than she was once willing to. Instead of working on a proactive and more sustainable European solution along the lines of the Franco-German agreements adopted recently at Meseberg, she had to resort to whatever she could get in the short term, paving a completely different path for European migration policy.

The result is not a true "European" fix, as the chancellor claims, but a jury-rigged workaround: more external border controls for Germany, and bilateral agreements between Germany and some countries of first entry to take back secondary migrants. In Germany, the Conservative Union agreed to open "transition centers" at the border, and those camps will not count as German soil.

After days of harsh criticism from the opposition, the media and the Social Democrats, camps are off the table. The coalition agreed on Thursday that the migrants would be hosted in existing police facilities and assured they would not be held for more than 48 hours.

The respite Germany gained this week is offset by the arrival of a frightening political dynamic. Mr. Seehofer succeeded by going nuclear; chances are, he won't be the last. The politics of fear and menace may be here to stay.

ANNA SAUERBREY is an editor on the opinion page of the newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*.

The New York Times
Athens Democracy Forum
September 16-18, 2018

Speakers include:

Kofi Annan
Former Secretary General of the United Nations and Chairman Kofi Annan Foundation

Kishore Mahbubani
Former President UN Security Council

Sergey A. Karaganov
Dean, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Sanja Kelly
Director, Freedom on the Net Freedom House

Ai Weiwei
Artist

Thorbjørn Jagland
Secretary General Council of Europe

Democracy in Danger: Solutions for a Changing World

With emerging democracies backsliding into authoritarianism and others falling prey to populism, there has never been a more urgent need to assess the evolving state of democracy and its impact now, amidst rapid global change.

This September, The New York Times will bring together its senior journalists with international business leaders, policy makers, and a broad variety of experts to debate and discuss the current state of democracy with a focus on new solutions. Delegates from different countries and industries will collaborate to identify concrete actions for governments, businesses and citizens to take to preserve a free society.

Register to attend
athensdemocracyforum.com

In Cooperation With

Gold Sponsor

Silver Sponsors

Official Hotel Partner

Official Airline Partner

For sponsorship inquiries and opportunities, contact Carina Pierre Richard, cpierre@nytimes.com