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A Hard Truth

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I think that the past is all that makes the
present coherent, and further, that the past
will remain horrible for exactly as long as we
refuse to assess it honestly

–– James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

As an American residing in Europe, I watched President Donald Trump's inauguration with a sense of dread. I could not help but reflect on how we got to this moment, and how unfortunately unsurprised I was. There is a certain painful irony in feeling a sense of déjà vu when watching a familiar historical cycle repeat itself for the first time in your life, knowing very well the weight and trajectory of such events in the past. This is the feeling that came over me as I watched the presidential inauguration from my apartment in Brussels. Feeling simultaneously relieved to no longer be living in the US, while equally horrified by the implication of a Nazi salute performed in front of the Presidential Seal.

Many on the right, including supporters of both Elon Musk and Trump, have mobilized to produce various desperate rationalizations and explanations in an attempt to convince us that what we saw was not actually what we saw. I would recommend looking back at the epigraph at the start of this essay, and I would ask one thing of the reader: Please, reflect on how many people passively allowed Hitler and the Nazi party to rise to power in the 1930s, and how many more made these same excuses right until the very end of the vicious cycle we once again find ourselves beginning to descend into. Today's iterations of yesterday's extremisms have new characteristics and tools, but this does not discredit their extremism or cruelty, or blur the similarities between now and then.

I say this as someone whose family perished in, resisted, and survived the Nazi occupation in Poland, and whose ancestors were the property of white slave owners

in our United States. I feel it is imperative to express just how critical this moment in American politics is. My perspective is that of a student of the political sciences and the global political history that shapes my field of research. This is the moment when we decide to either passively watch as we lose the progress we have made as a society or do something about the looming threat to our imperfect union. We often take hindsight for granted and assume that we would be better than those before us, that we would learn from the mistakes of our past. What we must realize is that we are just as susceptible to falling into that cycle of violence and divisiveness as we were then; potentially even more so, with mass media algorithms neatly sorting us into echo chambers and feedback loops that many do not even realize they are in.

As you look back at the epigraph from Baldwin, please assess the past as you assess the present—honestly. There is no use engaging with those who would make excuses for a Nazi salute, for they have just subconsciously answered the question: "What role would you have played in the early days of Nazi Germany?" The avid support Musk's action is receiving from those on the extreme right, who are celebrating this moment as a great victory, speaks for itself. It is the reactions of these extremist groups in particular that give us a good idea of the gravity of the situation. President Trump's pardoning of the January 6th insurgents sets a very clear precedent and sends a very loud message that if you commit violence in his name, he will protect you.

Before moving ahead to the next section, a slight point of divergence between my mother's views on this matter (also published in this special set of reflections) and my own: I do not believe in a hierarchy of evil; I do not believe in lesser evils trumping (no pun intended) greater evils. Evil is evil, and evil on the scale that our species is capable of committing is the unique product of humankind. But I also believe that evil does not form in a vacuum; I know my history too well to submit to that kind of thinking. Evil is cultivated and born from the ambitions of those who see an opportunity to exploit the real pain of those around them who do not accurately understand the sources of their suffering. I believe—and thousands of years of recorded human history prove—that greater evils are the eventual culmination of all the "lesser evils" people chose over taking the initiative and the time to fix broken systems. In my admittedly young perspective, all this does is postpone disaster and place the burden of substantive change on future generations. These further-removed generations, like many of us today, lack the collective memory and experience to adequately understand and confront the problems that continue to be left unresolved. This brings me to the 2024 election.

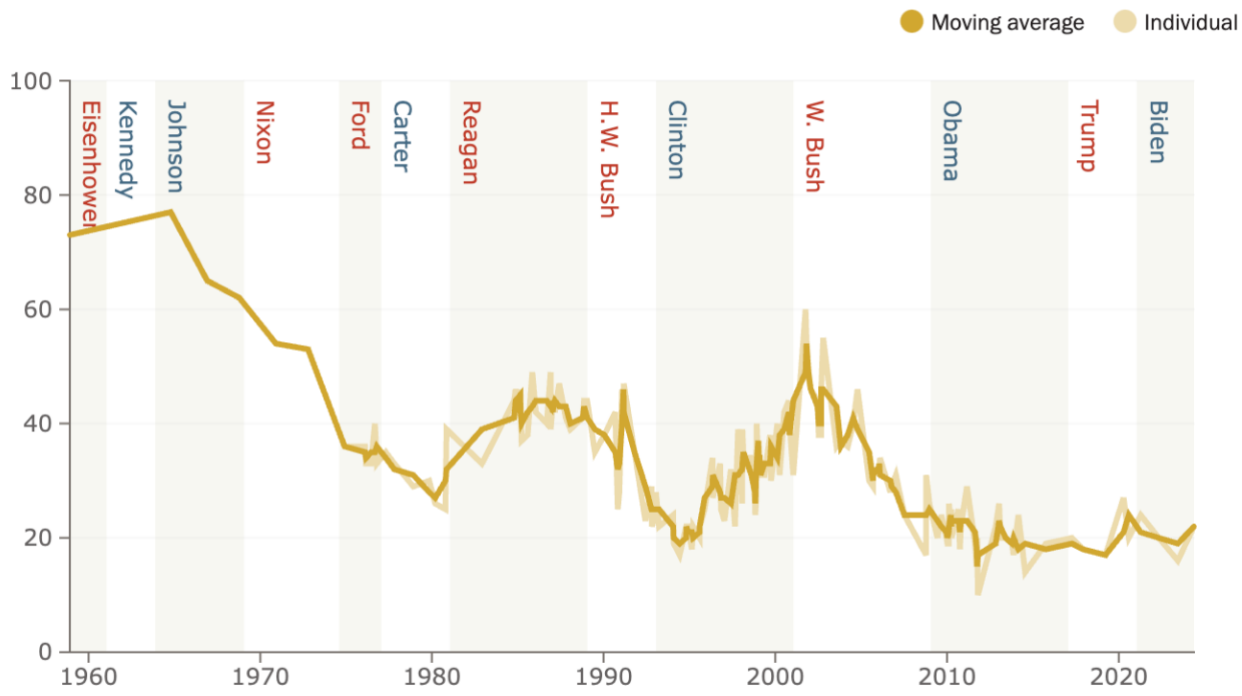
Trump's divisive return marks the most obvious historical sign of a power in decline, but we would be remiss to assume that it is the first. For decades, we have witnessed willful ignorance and a shift toward performative and hollow politics overshadow the growing necessity for substantive policies that address the struggles of the American people. That Trump succeeded in capitalizing on this problem is not in and of itself a controversial point to make. Of course, there is no real alternative on

offer to a populist like Trump, as populism is a simple marketing tactic akin to fast food: Easy to get but ultimately bad for your health.

It is important to understand that none of this would have been possible had the many administrations before Trump not squandered the trust of the American people. Americans' faith in their government is reaching an all-time low (*see* Figure 1). After countless meaningless wars where young Americans and foreign civilians died en masse for the interests of our industries and a handful of corporate and political elites, after allowing the militarization of our society with the Patriot Act and persecuting Americans like Edward Snowden for exposing that our own government has been spying on us, is it really any surprise that the people's trust in their government has been substantially eroded? Moreover, is it any surprise that it was so easy for someone like Trump to capitalize on this disillusionment for his own political gain?

Public trust in government near historic lows

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1. Pew Research Center chart tracking voter trust over sixty years from Eisenhower to Biden. Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

In our two-party system, election wins represent a majority of a minority–*if* a party wins the popular vote *and* electoral college–while more Americans each year choose not to vote at all. While some consider the vast number of uncast ballots as an effective vote for the greater evil in the context of this election, as a political scientist I feel this is far too nuanced an issue to reduce the phenomenon to this one explanation. There are multiple, nuanced reasons why fewer people voted in this election and there is also a limit to how many times a party of half-measures and performative policies without solid red lines can convince independent voters that they are the necessary alternative. Instead, our polarized system has convinced countless Americans that there is no real alternative at all, and that they are therefore better off sitting out the process entirely. It is a sad truth; a hard truth, but a necessary one.

There is less interparty dialogue and consensus with each administration, and our political system has come to a point where each party prescribes performative solutions akin to band-aids applied to gaping wounds. There is no real effort to connect with or address the struggles that many Americans face regardless of political affiliation, such as predatory insurance schemes from housing to health care, a rising cost of living which many wages are not able to keep up with and risks to reproductive health, among many other things. It is time to understand that this system is fundamentally broken, and that the partitocracy we have been living in for decades is now on course for a transition towards what looks to be a fascistic oligarchy in the making.

The Democratic party is equally to blame for its incessant use of half-measures both domestically and internationally. One cannot call another a Nazi and then attend said "Nazi's" inauguration like business as usual. One cannot call for a calming of hostilities while sending weapons to a regime which massacres civilians with prejudice and naively expect those standing in solidarity with the victims of genocidal apartheid to support their electoral bid. Caught up in towing their party line and appealing to their financial backers, the Democrats have, unsurprisingly, lost young voters. Half-measures do not work, and the Democrats have lacked the backbone to stand for anything that would constitute real progress. Where the Democrats lack the initiative to take a decisive and substantive stance against the rise of a literal fascist movement, the Republicans are too morally weak to care as their party is hijacked by ultranationalists and tech oligarchs. They would rather sit comfortably and watch everything crumble around them so long as they get to reap the benefits.

Let us be honest for the first time in a long time about the danger that we face today, and let us abandon this two-party system that feeds off and perpetuates our division. It serves no one *but* the parties until even they themselves are ruined and lose their identity and dignity along with the faith of the American people. It is this

selfishness and profiteering from the polarization of the American people that has brought us here, and it will be exactly this which spells our demise if we refuse to honestly confront what is happening and why. We have an opportunity now to engage these issues head-on and create real solutions for ourselves and the Americans of the future who do not yet have a voice. Let us not squander it.

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