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THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS



No. 8

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**A Nation of Contradictions: A Global Citizen's Reflections
on Trumpism and its Aftershocks in the US**

The United States has always been a nation of schisms and contradictions, but this has perhaps never been truer than it is today, in 2021. In terms of overall GDP, the US is by far the wealthiest country in the world,¹ yet the gap between the haves and have-nots is immense here, and the country's homeless population is massive, and was estimated at approximately 580,000 people in 2020.² The US is universally considered a 'developed' country, as well as a country mostly governed by the rule of law, yet we have the second highest number of gun-related deaths of any country in the world, bested only by Brazil,³ with more than one mass shooting happening per day so far this year in the US.⁴ And although the country's dominant religion, Christianity, is at its core a religion based on principles of compassion, the United States is the only country in the Americas that continues to carry out the barbaric practice of capital punishment.⁵ These are just a few of the many contradictions and schisms that shape life in the US today, a country of extremes, where we often find some of the best *and* worst aspects of humanity at one and the same time. The goal of this essay is to provide, for people living outside the United States, a quick overview of political life in the US in 2021, highlighting some of the major tensions, paradoxes, and developments, and to speculate briefly on what might lie ahead – particularly in light of Trumpism and its powerful and ongoing aftershocks.

In terms of my positionality as a writer, I should note that I am a US citizen and currently reside in the US, although I was born outside the country, in Kuwait. My mother is from the US state of Tennessee, my father from Egypt. I have lived approximately half of my life in the US (in Tennessee, New Jersey, California, and, currently, New Mexico). I've spent the other half of my life in various countries on three different continents: Asia (Kuwait, the UAE, and India), Africa (Egypt), and Europe

- 1 Cf. *World Population Review*: Richest Countries in the World 2021; <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/richest-countries-in-the-world> [08.07.2021].
- 2 Cf. *National Alliance to End Homelessness*: State of Homelessness. 2020 Edition; <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2020> [08.07.2021]. For an overview of how the US homeless population has changed over time, see *Statista Research Department*: Estimated number of homeless people in the United States from 2007 to 2020, 23.03.2021; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/555795/estimated-number-of-homeless-people-in-the-us> [08.07.2021].
- 3 Cf. *World Population Review*: Gun Deaths by Country 2021; <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-deaths-by-country> [08.07.2021].
- 4 Cf. *Chris Boyette/Jay Croft/Hollie Silverman*: Gun Violence in 6 States This Weekend Brings US Mass Shootings to 272 So Far This Year, in: CNN, 14.06.2021; <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/12/us/us-mass-shootings> [08.07.2021]. On a personal note, I've lived in seven different countries in my life, at least two of which would generally be considered as economically 'developing', yet nowhere have I felt less safe than in the US, and this is largely due to the enormous number of people who own and carry guns here. This, in turn, means that all police officers and even private security carry guns, so that there are, in fact, guns everywhere here, even if they are often concealed.
- 5 Cf. *Amnesty International*: Death Penalty in 2020. Facts and Figures, 21.04.2021; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/death-penalty-in-2020-facts-and-figures> [08.07.2021].

(France and Germany). My perspective is therefore more global than local, and I cannot deny that my experiences living around the world mean that I view the US through a fairly unique lens – that of a global citizen. I am also a long-term meditation practitioner, and I earned my PhD in Comparative Literature with a dissertation on poetry as spiritual practice, so I am particularly interested in the spiritual and religious components of US political life, and the contradictions and paradoxes therein (it is impossible to escape Christianity, and especially evangelicalism,⁶ when discussing the US). Finally, with regards to my own positionality, I should note that I do not claim to be an expert on politics. The present essay reflects my personal opinions of the current social and political landscape – and opinions, as we all know, are fragile and volatile things, and should not be mistaken for absolute truths.

Perceptions of Reality, Part I: Trumpism and the 2020 Elections

For myself and for many people in the US, the four years of the Trump administration were a harrowing experience. I, who had so often prided myself on the inner peace I'd developed on the meditation cushion – on my ability to maintain a sense of serenity even in the midst of difficult and intense circumstances – found myself becoming worked up and angry over and over again during the years that Trump was in power. I had lived in countries with no real democratic institutions to speak of, and I knew just how valuable such institutions can be – so it was hard for me to watch as Trump slowly but systematically attempted to dismantle many of the core components of US democracy. The democracy was extremely strained under the pressure, but it did not buckle. Yet it remains to be seen what the long-term effects of the 'stress test' of the Trump years will be, and whether these effects will be positive or negative for US democracy on a broader scale.

Perhaps the greatest damage that Trump inflicted was on independent media, and more specifically on public perceptions of the media. With his constant cry of 'fake news' regarding any story – no matter how well researched or fact-checked – that went against his own (often delusional) narratives, Trump succeeded in casting doubt on *all* the media, thereby allowing him to instill his own version of reality into people's minds, opening the floodgates for a host of conspiracy theories about any number of topics.⁷ In a typical move for someone who seems to be a textbook case

6 For a succinct examination of the phenomenon of evangelical Christianity in the US and how it blurs the lines between politics and religion, see: What Is an Evangelical Christian?, in: The Economist, 01.03.2021; <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/03/01/what-is-an-evangelical-christian> [08.07.2021].

7 This is, of course, remarkably similar to the way that the far-right anti-Islamic 'Pegida' (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) movement in Europe has portrayed the press. The group has revived the term *Lügenpresse* ('lying media') from the expression's ugly National Socialist origins.

of Narcissistic Personality Disorder,⁸ Trump repeatedly accused (and continues to accuse) the media of spreading lies in order to be able to spread lies more effectively himself. Nowhere was this clearer than in his spurious claims that the 2020 election was ‘stolen’ from him, even though he lost the popular vote by over 7 million votes and the (more important) electoral college vote by a margin of 306 to 232.⁹ Indeed, even though Trump’s legal team was at no point able to produce any evidence that votes had somehow been stolen or miscounted, and even though at least 86 judges – no less than 36 of whom were appointed by Republican presidents, and some by Trump himself – dismissed Trump lawsuits challenging the election results in various states,¹⁰ a very significant number of Republicans in the US continue to believe that Trump was the actual winner of the 2020 election. The violent and historically unprecedented attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, seems to have done little to change public opinion, with many prominent Republican congresspeople (whose own lives were threatened in the attack) now downplaying the event’s significance. Indeed, a Quinnipiac poll published in May 2021 found that two thirds of Republicans believe that Joe Biden’s victory was not legitimate.¹¹ Trump has therefore largely succeeded in his campaign of casting doubt on the election results.

And although the US judiciary held firm in the face of Trump’s baseless claims, Republican state legislatures across the country have, one by one, been seizing this opportunity – by capitalizing on the environment of mistrust and suspicion that Trump created – to restrict voting rights and limit voter access to the polls for future elections, essentially making it harder for minorities and people of color (who generally vote overwhelmingly Democratic) to vote. As of June 30, 2021, no less than 17 US states – all of them with Republican state legislatures – have recently passed laws making it harder for people to vote.¹²

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- 8 Cf. *Henry Alford*: Is Donald Trump Actually a Narcissist? Therapists Weigh In!, in: *Vanity Fair*, 11.11.2015; <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/11/donald-trump-narcissism-therapists> [08.07.2021].
 - 9 Cf. *David Wasserman/Sophie Andrews/Leo Saenger/Lev Cohen/Ally Flinn/Griff Tatarsky*: 2020 National Popular Vote Tracker, in: *The Cook Political Report*; <https://cookpolitical.com/2020-national-popular-vote-tracker> [08.07.2021].
 - 10 Cf. *Rosalind S. Helderman/Elise Viebeck*: ‘The Last Wall’: How Dozens of Judges across the Political Spectrum Rejected Trump’s Efforts to Overturn the Election, in: *The Washington Post*, 13.12.2020; https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/judges-trump-election-lawsuits/2020/12/12/e3a57224-3a72-11eb-98c4-25dc9f4987e8_story.html [08.07.2021].
 - 11 Cf. *Quinnipiac University*: 85% of Republicans Want Candidates to Agree with Trump, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds – Americans Support Early Cut to Federal Jobless Benefit, 26.05.2021; <https://poll.gu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3810> [08.07.2021].
 - 12 Cf. *Janie Boschma*: Seventeen States Have Enacted 28 New Laws Making It Harder to Vote, in: *CNN*, 30.06.2021; <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/30/politics/voter-suppression-restrictive-voting-laws> [08.07.2021].

Given the US Supreme Court's current conservative 'super-majority' (6 to 3), it seems very unlikely that it will overturn any of these new laws, though it is still possible that the US Congress (which is currently controlled by the Democrats) will take action.¹³

Trump's ability to shift not only the public's opinion but also the public's perception of reality itself has been remarkable, and here in the US we can only be grateful that his attempts to strong-arm election officials (for example, in Georgia¹⁴ and Arizona¹⁵) and coerce ostensibly non-partisan officials in the US Department of Justice¹⁶ were met with resistance. In this respect, at the very least, the US has continued to distinguish itself from totalitarian states.

Perceptions of Reality, Part II: The Politicization of Science

All the same, Trump's rhetoric and actions continue to reverberate across the country in perhaps unexpected ways. Although Republican skepticism about climate change has been gradually declining, particularly among younger Republicans,¹⁷ it is still no surprise, given the party's business-oriented ideology and Trump's pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, that climate change remains a relatively minor concern for a large number of Republicans:¹⁸ indeed, climate change skepticism among Republicans was a phenomenon long before Trump entered the political arena. Moreover, the tendency to view nature as an inanimate resource to be exploited for economic gain – rather than, for example, as a kind of nurturing mother who provides for us and who we must, in turn, look after – dates back to the Scien-

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- 13 Very recently, on July 1, 2021, the US Supreme Court rejected the first challenge against more restrictive voting laws. See *Pete Williams: Supreme Court Upholds Restrictive Arizona Voting Laws in Test of Voting Rights Act*, in: NBC News, 01.07.2021; <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-upholds-restrictive-arizona-voting-laws-test-voting-rights-n1272892> [08.07.2021].
 - 14 Cf. *Andy Sullivan/Michael Martina: In Recorded Call, Trump Pressures Georgia Official to 'Find' Votes to Overturn Election*, in: Reuters, 03.12.2021; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump/in-recorded-call-trump-pressures-georgia-official-to-find-votes-to-overturn-election-idUSKBN2980MG> [08.07.2021].
 - 15 Cf. *The Associated Press: Records Show Pressure by Trump, Allies on Arizona Officials Not to Certify Election Results*, in: NBC News, 03.07.2021; <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/records-show-pressure-trump-allies-arizona-officials-not-certify-election-n1273034> [08.07.2021].
 - 16 Cf. *Mark Hosenball: Justice Dept Watchdog to Probe Seizure of Democrats' Communications Data*, in: Reuters, 12.07.2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/white-house-denounces-trump-attorney-generals-reported-actions-democrats-phone-2021-06-11> [08.07.2021].
 - 17 Cf. *Cary Funk/Meg Hefferon: U.S. Public Views on Climate and Energy*, in: Pew Research Center, 25.11.2019; <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/11/25/u-s-public-views-on-climate-and-energy> [08.07.2021].
 - 18 Cf. *Brian Kennedy/Courtney Johnson: More Americans See Climate Change As a Priority, But Democrats Are Much More Concerned Than Republicans*, in: Pew Research Center, 28.02.2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/28/more-americans-see-climate-change-as-a-priority-but-democrats-are-much-more-concerned-than-republicans> [08.07.2021].

tific Revolution that took place in Europe starting in the 16th century, as the US ecofeminist philosopher and historian of science Carolyn Merchant has convincingly argued, and thus predates the Republican Party by several centuries.¹⁹

What *has* been more surprising, however, given the massive degree of death and disruption caused by COVID-19, is Trump's ongoing ability to impact public perception of the pandemic, and even public perception pertaining to the importance of vaccines. Trump's disdain of masks and his frequently downplaying of the severity of the pandemic – even as he was hospitalized and put on a respirator after contracting the coronavirus – are well-known, and need no repetition here. In the first few months of 2021, at the beginning of the US's large-scale COVID-19 vaccination efforts, it seemed that politics had little to do with vaccination rates, with both Democratic states (such as New Mexico²⁰) and Republican states (such as West Virginia²¹) leading the way in terms of percentage of total state population vaccinated. However, now that the initial mass rush of people eager to get the vaccine has ebbed, partisan fault lines – and, presumably, Trump's impact – are very clearly coming into view. As of July 3, 2021, every single one of the top *twenty* US states in terms of percentage of the total population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 were states that voted for Joe Biden, a staggering figure.²² As for the bottom twenty states on the table (i.e., the states with the lowest percentage of total population vaccinated), all but two (Georgia, traditionally a Republican stronghold; and Nevada, frequently a so-called 'battleground' state) were states that voted for Trump.²³ These differences cannot be explained in terms of states' capacities to administer the vaccines, but rather in terms of a reluctance on the part of the general population to be vaccinated. And the only clear explanation for this reluctance is political, and more spe-

19 See Carolyn Merchant's trailblazing book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York 1990), the first edition of which was published in 1980. It may very well be that, when history looks back on the modern era of politics in the United States, the greatest failure will have been not anything related specifically to taxes or economics, but rather the failure to act swiftly and decisively enough on the looming – and, indeed, already present – disaster of climate change.

20 Cf. *Nina Shapiro*: New Mexico Leads the U.S. in Covid-19 Vaccine Rollout, in: *Forbes*, 15.04.2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ninashapiro/2021/04/15/new-mexico-leads-the-us-in-covid-19-vaccine-rollout> [08.07.2021].

21 Cf. What We Can Learn from West Virginia's Vaccine Distribution Efforts. Interview with Drew Massey by Sarah McCammon, in: *NPR*, 28.03.2021; <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/28/982034998/what-we-can-learn-from-west-virginias-vaccine-distribution-efforts> [08.07.2021].

22 For vaccination rates by state, see *Audrey Carlsen/Pien Huang/Zach Levitt/Daniel Wood*: How Is the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign Going in Your State?, in: *NPR*, 05.07.2021 [updated on weekdays]; <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/01/28/960901166/how-is-the-covid-19-vaccination-campaign-going-in-your-state> [08.07.2021]. For a list of which states voted for which candidate in the 2020 US presidential elections, see <https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/2020>.

23 *Ibid*. Incidentally, the above-mentioned state of West Virginia, a fairly reliable Republican stronghold which, early on, was touted as of the success stories of the nation's vaccination campaign, is currently near the bottom (42nd) on the list of 50 states in terms of percentage of total population vaccinated.

cifically: Trump's repeated assertions that cast doubt on the severity of the pandemic, his well-documented reluctance to ever wear a mask,²⁴ and the frequent discrepancies between his words and his actions in terms of mask-wearing and other issues related to COVID-19.²⁵ As president, Trump essentially took what should have been simple matters of common-sense medical and scientific guidance (e.g., "wear masks") and turned them into political issues (e.g., something along the lines of, "I'm not going to wear a mask, and you don't have to either, because the government shouldn't be telling people what to do"). Mask-wearing became a highly politicized issue in the US; and it seems that vaccinations, too, have become politicized. We've long had climate-change deniers in the US, mostly among the ranks of more conservative Republicans. Now, it seems, thanks in no small part to Donald Trump, we have COVID-deniers too, despite the over-600,000 people who have died from the virus in the country.²⁶

Trumpism and Social Tensions

Trump's presidency also saw many long-simmering societal tensions come to the fore. The MeToo movement has brought gender rights and sexual harassment to the forefront in a way that has never before happened in the US, despite Trump's frequent mockery of it.²⁷ Indeed, it may be that Trump's antagonistic stance toward

24 Cf. *Amy Davidson Sorkin*: At the White House, Trump Takes Off His Mask and Sends a Dangerous Message, in: *The New Yorker*, 06.10.2020; <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/at-the-white-house-trump-takes-off-his-mask-and-sends-a-dangerous-message> [08.07.2021].

25 See, for example, *Darlene Superville/Aamer Madhani*: Gulf between White House's Words, Trump's Actions on Masks, in: *AP News*, 18.09.2020; <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-donald-trump-us-news-ap-top-news-joe-biden-41dc3fc8f146db80754c8f5b2a474c98> [08.07.2021] and *Libby Cathey*: Despite New Mandatory Mask Rules, Trump Insists It's Everyone's 'Personal Choice', in: *abc News*, 29.06.2020; <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/mandatory-mask-ruletrump-insists-personal-choice/story?id=71519019> [08.07.2021].

26 Cf. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*: Freedom from the Virus. Interpretive Summary for July 2, 2021; <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview> [08.07.2021]. And to give just one small but telling example of the politicization of the virus from my own personal experience: During one of the peaks of the pandemic in the US in the summer of 2020, I saw a family of four (two adults, two children) walk into a New Mexico supermarket where I was buying groceries: none of the four were wearing masks, despite state guidelines, and all four of them were wearing matching t-shirts with the words 'Freedom Fighters' stitched prominently on the front. Just a few months later, in the fall of 2020, I had a conversation with an avid – and educated – Trump supporter who asserted that COVID-19 had caused fewer deaths than the common flu.

27 Cf. *Betsy Klein/Allie Malloy/Kate Sullivan*: Trump Mocks the #MeToo Movement at a Rally, Again, in: *CNN*; 11.11.2018; <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/10/politics/trump-rally-mocks-me-too> [08.07.2021].

the movement, coupled with the allegations of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape that he himself has faced,²⁸ have, paradoxically, helped strengthen and galvanize the ongoing movement.

Racial tensions also came to the fore during Trump's presidency in very tragic and dramatic fashion. The killings by police of Black people such as Daunte Wright, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and George Floyd (the harrowing list of names goes on and on, and the deaths continue at an astonishing pace²⁹) has brought not only police brutality but also various issues related to social justice into the national spotlight in an unprecedented manner. George Floyd's murder in particular, and the unfathomable brutality of it, was a galvanizing moment for the country: the now-former policer officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck, cutting off his air, for over *nine* minutes. Trump's barbaric response to the protests surrounding Floyd's murder – among other things, he called on state governors to crack down on the protests, and tweeted that if the protesters had come near the White House, they would have been met with “the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons”³⁰ – was what one would expect from a totalitarian dictator, not the sitting president of the United States. His not-so-subtle courtship of the neo-fascist white supremacist ‘Proud Boys’ group also added fuel to the flames.³¹ If nothing else, however, his presidency served to highlight the existing racial fault lines in the country, and made it abundantly clear that the US still has a long way to go in terms of racial and social justice.

28 See, for example, *Meghan Keneally*: List of Trump's Accusers and Their Allegations of Sexual Misconduct, in: abc News; 18.09.2020; <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/list-trumps-accusers-allegations-sexual-misconduct/story?id=51956410> [08.07.2021] and *Linda So*: Trump May Soon Have to Answer Rape Allegations under Oath, in: Reuters, 23.02.2021; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-carroll/trump-may-soon-have-to-answer-rape-allegations-under-oath-idUSKBN2ANOYP> [08.07.2021].

29 Newsweek magazine reports that at least 229 Black people were killed by police in the US in the 365-day period following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 – an astonishing and extremely disturbing number. See *Khaleda Rahman*: Full List of 229 Black People Killed by Police Since George Floyd's Murder, in: Newsweek, 25.05.2021; <https://www.newsweek.com/full-list-229-black-people-killed-police-since-george-floyds-murder-1594477> [08.07.2021]. It should also be noted that these kinds of killings are nothing new in the US – they are simply being documented and reported on more prominently now. Indeed, police violence is a leading cause of death among young Black men in the US, with about 1 in every 1,000 Black men dying at the hands of police. For more on this, see *Frank Edward/Hedwig Lee/Michael Esposito*: Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race-Ethnicity, and Sex, in: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, No. 34, Vol. 116, 2019, pp. 16793–16798; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1821204116> [08.07.2021].

30 Cited in: *Alex Rogers*: Trump's Response to Police Killing Threatens to Further Deepen Unrest in America, Democrats and Republicans Say, in: CNN, 01.06.2020; <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/31/politics/trump-george-floyd-protests> [08.07.2021]

31 Cf. *Ted Hesson/Kristina Cooke*: Explainer: President Trump Asked the Proud Boys to ‘Stand by.’ Who Are They?, in: Reuters, 30.09.2020; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-extremists-explainer/explainer-president-trump-asked-the-proud-boys-to-stand-by-who-are-they-idUSKBN26L3Q1> [08.07.2021].

Trumpism: Unintended Positive Side Effects?

There may, however, be some unintended positive side effects from the Trump presidency and its aftermath, at least from the perspective of those of us who would like to see a more just, more equitable, and more compassionate society emerge in the US. Indeed, Trump's divisive presence drew a record number of US citizens – over 158 million – to the polls in the 2020 election, an encouraging sign for democracy in the US, which generally has much lower voter turnout than most other developed countries.³² And although Trump frequently touts that he received more votes than any Republican presidential candidate in US history, the truth remains that 7 million more Americans voted against him than for him. While there was certainly enthusiasm for the Biden-Harris ticket, it seems that many of the people who voted for Biden were driven to the polls primarily due to their disdain for Trump.

It also seems very likely that Trump's subsequent self-centered claims that the election was 'rigged' or 'stolen' cost the Republican Party control of the US Senate. These groundless claims appeared to depress the Republican turnout in Georgia's two run-off Senate elections in early January 2021, about two months after the US presidential elections. Democrats won both of those races, giving Democrats very narrow control of the US Senate: the chamber is now split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats, with Vice President Kamala Harris casting the decisive tie-breaking vote.³³ It was also the first time in 21 years that any Democrat (let alone two) had won election to the US Senate in Georgia. Furthermore, in a landmark moment, one of the two newly elected Senators, Reverend Raphael Warnock, became not only the first Black US Senator of the state of Georgia, but also the first Black US Senator of any former state of the US Confederacy.

Thanks to the influence of Donald Trump, the Republican Party is increasingly coming to resemble a *far-right* party, rather than simply a more business-oriented conservative party. Trump abandoned many of the core principles of conservatism (for example, the principle of 'fiscal discipline', i.e., not accruing large amounts of national debt³⁴) in favor of a self-serving personality-based brand of populism, one

32 Cf. *Drew Desilver*: In past Elections, U.S. Trailed Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout, in: Pew Research Center, 03.11.2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/03/in-past-elections-u-s-trailed-most-developed-countries-in-voter-turnout> [08.07.2021].

33 Cf. *Kendall Karson/Meg Cunningham/Quinn Scanlan*: Against the Odds, Georgia Democrats Make History with Senate Runoffs, in: abc News, 07.01.2021; <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/odds-georgia-democrats-make-history-senate-runoffs/story?id=75095109> [08.07.2021].

34 The US national debt rose by approximately \$7.8 trillion during Trump's four years in office, an increase of nearly 40%, despite Trump's 2016 campaign promise to "get rid" of the national debt; the annual deficit he ran was the third-largest of any president in US history, and while his 2020 COVID-19 stimulus package was partially responsible for this, this deficit was primarily the result of his massive 2017 tax cut, which overwhelmingly benefitted corporations and the wealthiest US citizens. See *Jason Lemon*: Under Donald Trump's Watch, the National Debt Increased by \$7.8 Trillion, in: Newsweek, 14.01.2021; <https://www.newsweek.com/under-donald-trumps-watch-national-debt-increased-78-trillion-1561627> [08.07.2021].

that was also lacking in all empathy and compassion. And while I certainly don't believe that the emergence of far-right populism is a positive sign for the US, it *is* still creating powerful divisions within the Republican Party, shifting the party as a whole further away from the political center, and may very well lead to serious fissures and splits within the Republican Party. If Trump follows through on his promises (or rather, threats) to support more extremist Republicans in various state primaries at the expense of more moderate, centrist Republicans who are – at least occasionally – willing to speak out against him, it could cost the Republican Party seats in both the House of Representatives and (more acutely) the Senate: while more extreme far-right Trump-supported candidates could indeed win their Republican primaries, they would have a much harder time winning district-wide and (especially) state-wide elections, something the Republican leadership in congress is very aware of.³⁵ However, only the congressional elections in 2022 and again in 2024 will tell whether or not the Republican Party has truly slipped further from the political center.

Trumpism: The Greatest Disappointment

For me, personally, the most disappointing aspect of Trump and Trumpism has *not* been the more conservative policies he has implemented (such as his massive 2017 tax cuts favoring the wealthy): we have had plenty of very conservative US presidents in the past, and many of Trump's policies were far from surprising in this regard. Rather, what has disappointed me the most has been the utter and complete lack of compassion and empathy that Trump has exhibited, and the complete willingness of his supporters to overlook this, and even to condone it. The tone of political debate became much more caustic, bitter, insulting, and demeaning under Trump's presidency. He repeatedly vilified and insulted his opponents – both in interviews and over Twitter – in the most childish of ways. He became, to put it simply, the national Bully in-Chief.

And yet, 74 million US citizens – most of whom would self-identify as 'Christians' – voted to reelect him. Here is one of the core contradictions of US political and religious life (some would call it 'hypocrisy'). In a country saturated in Christianity, a religion founded on principles of compassion and kindness, 74 million people were willing to turn a blind eye to those principles and vote for someone who blatantly violated the most basic tenets of Christianity on a daily basis. Christian Republic parents, many of whom would never in a million years allow their own children to behave like Trump (naming, blaming, and shaming everyone who disagrees with him,

35 See, for example, the following analysis of the delicate tightrope walk that Republican Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell is currently having to take with regards to Trump's ongoing influence over the party: *Alex Moe/Leigh Ann Caldwell/Sahil Kapur: A Trump-McConnell Power Struggle Creates Landmines in GOP Quest to Retake Congress*, in: NBC News, 22.04.2021; <https://www.nbc-news.com/politics/congress/trump-mcconnell-power-struggle-creates-landmines-gop-quest-re-take-congress-n1264216> [08.07.2021].

and repeatedly throwing temper tantrums on Twitter), still voted for his reelection. For me, that was perhaps the most bitter lesson of the 2020 elections: in the US, politics still trumps (pun intended) moral, ethical, and spiritual values. Compassion is a word that is useful for people while they are at church, but it appears to have no bearing whatsoever when they are at the ballot box. If values such as compassion – which, I would argue, is not simply a specific religious value, but a universal *human* value that is necessary for our survival as a species – can be compartmentalized in this way by such a large percentage of the population, then the US is in for a very bumpy ride in the future.

In ironic reaction to the way the French Workers Party was interpreting and implementing his principles, Karl Marx once famously said, “The one thing that’s certain is that I myself am not a Marxist.”³⁶ I have often thought – and never more so than now – that if Jesus Christ were to come back and join us in the United States today, he would likely say something very similar: “The one thing that’s certain is that I myself am not a Christian.”

Conclusion

The present essay has been partial and personal at best, and offers only the briefest and most summary of sketches of Trump, Trumpism, and the current social and political realities here in the US. I have barely scratched the surface of the complexity of US society, and there are, of course, many more topics to discuss (to name just one prominent example, I have left out issues pertaining to the LGBTIQ movement entirely). But these overly brief, and perhaps occasionally overly simplifying, remarks will have to do for now.

During Trump’s presidency and its immediate aftermath, we saw just how fragile US democracy actually is. But we also saw the strengths of that democracy. If I have painted a less than rosy picture of life in the US, it is in part to highlight some of the injustices and inequalities that exist here. There are, of course, plenty of positive aspects, as well. The US is indeed a nation of contradictions: a land of immense abundance and prosperity, as well as brutal poverty; a nation of invention and innovation, but also addiction, violence, and desperation. From 2016 to the present day, Trump has attacked many of the US’s core institutions, but those institutions have largely held firm, and it may be that the new Biden administration will be able to repair much of the damage that was done. We still have a free press in the US, a tradi-

36 “Ce qu’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste” (the English quotation above is my translation from the French). It was Engels who reported Marx’s comment in a letter the former wrote to the German politician and Marxist theorist Eduard Bernstein. Cited from: *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels: Werke*, Vol. 35 (Briefe Januar 1881 – März 1883), Berlin 1967, p. 388. For a comprehensive examination of Marxism and the modern French labor movement, see *Bernard H. Moss: The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers, 1830–1914*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1976.

tion of journalism based on investigation and the verification of sources, despite many news outlets abandoning such principles, and despite Trump's blanket attacks on the veracity of *all* journalists. And when networks such as Fox News spread the baseless allegations of rigged voting machines that Trump's legal team put forward, there is, at the very least, the possibility of legal and financial consequences for them through the US court system.³⁷ And the US judiciary, at least in theory, remains independent, and Republican- and Democrat-appointed judges across the country were willing to stand up time and again to Trump's false claims of voting fraud, and uphold the rule of law. This is, as we say here in the US, nothing to sneeze at. Trump's presidency, if nothing else, has helped me – and, I believe, many others – see more clearly just how valuable the nation's democratic institutions are, flawed as they may be.

It is comforting to imagine that we as humans might one day – even if only in the very distant future – transcend the nation-state entirely, and leave things such as jingoism behind us in order to more fully realize our common humanity.³⁸ But until that day, the nation-state is what we have, and here in the US, I do see some encouraging signs. People are increasingly willing to take to the streets to channel and express their outrage about the injustices that continue to inform US society. That outrage was also very successfully channeled into the recent (2020) elections, which is exactly what healthy democracy requires. And, putting all politics aside, we now have a president and a vice president who put a premium on empathy and compassion, and who are at least attempting to de-escalate the sharp political tone that was set by the previous administration. Regardless of the specific policies that are put into place, and whatever specific pieces of legislation that are passed, it is hard to see the US moving in a positive direction without exactly that: a sense of compassion, of empathy, of letting the Other (the political Other, the religious Other, the racial Other, etc.) know, “I see you, and I acknowledge you, despite our differences.” This, in my view, is what the United States most desperately needs right now.

37 See, for example, the latest news about the lawsuit that the Dominion Voting Systems company filed against Fox News: *Alison Durkee*: Dominion Subpoenas Giuliani, Sidney Powell, Mike Lindell in Lawsuit against Fox News, in: *Forbes*, 01.07.2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2021/07/01/dominion-subpoenas-giuliani-sidney-powell-mike-lindell-in-lawsuit-against-fox-news> [08.07.2021]. It remains to be seen whether this lawsuit, or any of the others, will be successful.

38 As George Bernard Shaw once succinctly put it: “Patriotism: Your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it”.

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Imprint

Kareem James Abu-Zeid: A Nation of Contradictions: A Global Citizen's Reflections on Trumpism and its Aftershocks in the US (= The Critical Stage. Young Voices on Crucial Topics, No. 8, edited by Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha and Janina Hecht), Karlsruhe 2021

ISSN 2198-6738

ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT)

www.zak.kit.edu/thecriticalstage

Editorial Team: Janina Hecht, Julia Stübe
Design: Tina Gerken; Picture: MANÜ / photocase.com

THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS

Ever since the outbreak of the revolutionary movements that in Europe have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, diverse forms of protest seem to be on the increase worldwide. At their core, these protests are driven by citizens’ calls for more social participation, more democracy, and – above all – more transparency in individual states. Young people in particular are at the forefront of these protests, as has been exemplified by the Occupy movements in New York, Frankfurt, and elsewhere. A further defining feature is that most of the protesters belong to a well-educated middle class – a middle class that refuses to accept the prevailing social imbalances and the resulting lack of opportunities, most notably with regard to employment.

The international series “The Critical Stage. Young Voices on Crucial Topics” deals with these developments and poses questions such as: Can this growing level of resistance be defined as a homogeneous global phenomenon? Or are these protest movements more regional in nature, and determined by the respective state systems within which they are located? What specific demands can be identified, and how could these demands be incorporated into political decision-making processes? Does the underlying reasoning extend beyond the political sphere to other areas as well?

Designed as an ongoing online publication, “The Critical Stage” aims to bring together the various standpoints of protest movements from around the world. The series gives a voice to representatives from a wide variety of individual movements. Young journalists, film directors, artists, researchers, and members of diverse protest groups share their views on the inequities in many of the world’s political systems, and on the various modes of resistance that are being formed in response to these conditions.