

I woke up to a country I didn't recognize

I am stunned. Although I spent the last week cautioning people from assuming a Clinton victory, although I told myself it's never over until the ballots are cast, I realize now that I never actually entertained the possibility of a Trump victory. I had too much faith in the basic decency of the American people, in the strength of our institutions, in the essential goodness of the American experiment. I understand now that I was naïve.

It is possibly the only thing I understand.

I haven't seen exit polls or autopsies. I have not read commentary or watched spin. Right now I am working from the barest electoral facts, which is a majority in the electoral college and a majority of the popular vote. I have no intellectual escape route: For this result to be announced, something has gone terribly wrong somewhere among something I thought I understood. I don't believe that widespread electoral fraud is feasible. I don't believe that polling so consistent can be consistently wrong together. And I don't believe that the American people would elect to the highest office a buffoon who is open about his racism, misogyny, and narcissism. But at least one of those things has happened.

Very soon – already, I suspect – there will begin the quadrennial nodding of heads and reading of bones to discern the “true America”. We'll hear the lessons people should learn from this – what Clinton did wrong, what Trump got right. It will take only a day or so for this to crystallize into paeans about the wisdom of the American voter, where the consensus is that Democrats moved too far too fast for a country not ready for the change. This victory will become, in hindsight, inevitable. And the cycle of bullshit will begin again.

But it will be a darker time. We just held an election that, more than ever before in my lifetime, offered two stark choices: The America of the future, or the America of the past. We had a chance to move past our history, to begin a new covenant that recognizes how our country is changing and celebrates that change, that preserves core American values while accepting new circumstances, that would fashion itself into a beacon for the 21st century. And we had the opportunity to plug our fingers in our ears, scream loudly, and stamp our feet demanding that we somehow travel back to a mythical time that never existed, an America of the past – a time where vast swaths of the population suffered routine indignities and oppression for the crime of being different, when people knew their place and were slapped down for thinking about leaving it, when the accidents of your birth mattered more than the content of your character.

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We were engaged in a battle for the soul of America. And the good guys lost.

I don't know what's coming next. I have one foot over the abyss and am trying right now just to regain my balance. This election has taught me that I do not really understand my nation or its people the way I thought I did, and the way ahead is shrouded. But I do know history. I know that it never ends well when a people chooses an erratic self-absorbed, willfully ignorant, and simply hate-filled leader. I know that it never ends well when a nation decides to scapegoat a fraction of its population to avoid demographic fact. I know that it never ends well when an aging power becomes aware of the fragility of its status and turns inward to root out the supposed enemies sapping its vitality. We've seen this play before.

And perhaps that's the core of my anger and disappointment. Our grand experiment to transcend history, to do better, to *be* better than what came for ... that lies broken on the floor. We are just as scared, as easily manipulated, as damaged as anyone else. We can be swayed by empty slogans and schoolyard bullying and adolescent appeals. Despite falling in line with fevered calls to recognize American exceptionalism, the electorate has rendered America *ordinary*. I wasn't prepared for that.

I hope I will never accept it.