

The American Empire Is Falling Apart. But Things Can Always Get Worse

As protests rage over the police killing of George Floyd, inequality and injustice are brutally exposed

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The American empire is in decay, but that doesn't mean things can't get worse. Protests that erupted over the police killing of [George Floyd](#), a 46-year-old black man, continue to rage across the United States.

Each new day sees another chunk of flesh torn from the face the nation shows the world, revealing the bone and blood underneath. The inequalities and injustices of the world's richest country are being brutally exposed.

The capital is literally on fire, but the responses of both the president and the liberal establishment suggest that things will likely get worse before – or if – they get better. If optimistic Americans were hoping that relief could come at the ballot box, they may be disappointed: November's election offers voters a [choice](#) between an old, white neo-fascist and an old, white neoliberal.

Fantasies of redemption are ever present, but there is no easy solution to the problem of Donald Trump, just as there is no easy solution to the coronavirus pandemic or to structural racism. In a world in which the stock markets go up while ordinary people's wealth goes down, the markets have always been happy with the US president. That's the intractable problem. What former President Barack Obama did nothing to reverse, Trump has only accelerated.

Trump tweets while Washington burns

For now, the president lurches further into fascist territory. There are new demonstrations of this almost every hour; whatever I write here will likely be out of date by the time you read it.

Tear gas was recently used to clear protesters from outside the White House, so that the president could stage a [photo opportunity](#) in front of a church, a bible in his hand raised high. Priests and others were [reportedly](#) forced off church grounds by law enforcement officers, turning, in the words of one rector, "holy ground... into a battle ground".

pic.twitter.com/bKvTrqHomS

— The White House (@WhiteHouse) [June 2, 2020](#)

Jesus used force to cleanse the temple of moneymen. Trump and his acolytes, men of money, use force to cleanse the temple of the people. If Nero fiddled while Rome burned, then Trump tweets while Washington suffers the same fate. He smears the protesters. He threatens them and emboldens police.

In a few notable, moving exceptions, police have communed with protestors. For the most part, though, [tear gas and rubber bullets](#) are fired into crowds of people. They have been fired at people sitting on their porches. Police vehicles have been [driven](#) into protesters. Tasers have been utilised, women have been thrown to the [ground](#) and young couples dragged from their cars.

These are just some of many incidents recorded. Many more were not. Each new day brings images of US police forces that could come straight out of a comic-book blockbuster depicting an authoritarian dystopia.

Devoured by capitalism

Put another way, these images could have come straight out of Middle Eastern countries recently occupied by the US military, such as Iraq, or those in which bountiful US support enables the brutal repression of internal dissent, such as Israel/Palestine, Egypt and the Gulf. The imperial war machine, seen before on US streets and well known particularly to the nation's black population, has come back home.

The street-level resistance to this officially condoned repression arrives in the time of [coronavirus](#), with the US recording by far the largest total number of deaths as a result of the disease. Coronavirus had already revealed – as it did in my own country, the UK – existing social and racial inequalities, as well as the extent to which the public sphere has been devoured by capitalism.

Unemployment in the US now stands at more than [40 million](#) people. Cars [queue](#) for miles to access food banks. Black Americans are dying of Covid-19 at [three times](#) the rate of their white counterparts.

Meanwhile, many of the usual suspects continue to make out like bandits. The country's wealthiest hospitals [received billions](#) in government bailouts. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is [billions of dollars](#) richer, even as his warehouse workers [protest](#) their conditions. Corporations that engaged in [coronawashing](#) do much the same thing with black lives: they publicly decry racism while continuing to be part of the problem.

Rather than cede management of the virus to scientists and medical experts, a rage-fuelled, paranoid nationalist Trump has cut ties with the World Health Organization and blamed China for the virus – to the point where a neat piece of [YouTube propaganda](#) produced by the Xinhua news agency comes across as basically true. Trump has put the economy, meaning the country's richest corporations and individuals, before working people.

Allegiance to white, Christian America

Trump's response to the two types of recent American protest bears this out. Before condemning the black and multi-racial protests sparked by police brutality, he was lauding the almost entirely white protests against lockdown.

His recent [polling](#) may not look good, but this is a man who responds to his donors and understands his voting base. The donors, along with his rich voters (and there are plenty of them), like their labour cheap and their taxes low. The base likes their guns loud, their racism at about the same volume and their freedom relentlessly performed. Besides, there are other [polls](#) that will buoy Trump, like the one this week which found that 58 percent of Americans support calling in the US military to supplement city police forces.

The president's chilling bible photo opportunity was designed again to show his allegiance to an America that is white and Christian. Christian ministers of various stripes across the country are appalled by Trump, but in a land that long ago married capitalism and religion, stripping Jesus's life and teachings of their radical, anti-materialist message, the former reality TV star was able to overcome reservations among the Evangelical flock and win the support of a host of key pastors and their followers.

More than that, we know, as Malcolm X once put it, that the most segregated hour in American life is high noon on Sunday, when black worshippers go to one church and white worshippers to another. Trump has some [celebrity endorsers](#) in the black church, but they are his useful idiots. It is white evangelicals who are mobilising to re-elect a man who can't even come up with a [favourite verse](#) in what is supposedly his favourite book.

Redemption fantasies

Throughout his tenure as president and for a good while before that, one question has stood out above all others: is Trump an aberration? Does his election and subsequent administration represent an unholy departure from sacred norms, or is it simply an extreme iteration of how the country has always done business, both at home and abroad?

To me, it seems as though the answer is both. The more dangerous answer is to claim, as the US liberal establishment does, that Trump is an aberration, and that the election of a civil and sensible centrist will make everything OK again.

Late last month, a [parody New York Times front page](#) was circulated on social media. It imagines the day of Joe Biden's inauguration as president next January, with a headline reading "Biden inaugurated, 'Nightmare is over'". Elsewhere on the page, Trump is banned by Twitter for flouting new civility laws, flees Washington in disguise and refuses to attend Biden's inauguration ceremony. A new cabinet featuring Bezos, Pete Buttigieg and Oprah Winfrey is announced.

The front page was shared first in delight by liberals, and then in disgust by leftists. Fantasies of easy American redemption go beyond the president. The country's profound domestic struggles are being presented – just as Trump's 2016 election was – as the work of malign foreign actors.

Magical thinking

A New York Times [article](#) from March about Russian attempts to stoke racial tensions in the US is being breathlessly re-shared on social media, as if evil Vladimir Putin in his Kremlin lair conjured up centuries of slavery, segregation and state-sanctioned violence.

Of course Russia, like China, will prod and push at the soft underbelly of its rival while ruthlessly repressing its own internal dissent – but the narrative of foreign interference is liberal magical thinking, and deeply ironic coming from the land of the CIA coup. For many

Americans, home, [as Gil Scott-Heron sang](#), “is where the hatred is”.

At the same time – and even while the US military remains far more powerful than any other – the US has lost out to its international antagonists, particularly China, to [which it outsourced](#) its industrial capacity at the expense of its working class.

In Syria, the US expended considerable resources fighting the Islamic State, only to cede control to the Russians. In Iraq, Iran’s influence is now greater, even if the devastation of the US invasion will take generations to get over.

The pursuit of unwinnable wars has cost the US dearly, but the fantasy of spreading free-market democracy continues to engage Washington’s policymakers, and the apparently pragmatic need to support dictators around the world remains.

‘It takes time’

Under Trump, of course, US policy on Israel/Palestine has gone from appearing to sit on the fence (while lavishly funding and arming Israel) to full-throated support of apartheid, conceived and delivered by members of the president’s own family and billionaire party funders. The pain of Palestinians suffering under Israeli occupation [shares something](#), then, with the pain of black Americans suffering at the hands of their own state.

[Reporting on](#) Trump’s rise from outsider Republican candidate to president, I became fixated with showing that the US was a fertile breeding ground for the racism, misogyny and division fuelling a chaotic campaign.

The hope and promise of Barack Obama’s election in 2008 had all but evaporated. In Chicago, a slew of notable black residents told me how angry they were with Obama for capitulating to Wall Street, going after teaching unions, keeping Guantanamo Bay open, and doing too little about racial injustice.

In Cleveland, Black Lives Matter organisers reminded me that their movement was founded with a black president and a black attorney general, Eric Holder, in power. But this was not a shortcut to structural change, and in the meantime, conservative white America was organising, with one local Republican Party official telling me that a second civil war may not be a bad thing.

“You always told me ‘it takes time,’” James Baldwin once [said](#), in response to a question about the road to racial justice. “It’s taken my father’s time, my mother’s time, my uncle’s time, my brothers’ and my sisters’ time... How much time do you want for your progress?”

Another civil war?

If there is some hope in this moment, it is that resistance to police brutality and Trump’s growing fascism seems strong on the streets. By contrast, resistance from the Democratic establishment can look an awful lot like someone putting their fingers in their ears and hoping this will all just go away.

In the past few years, the thought among many on the left has been that as the inequities of capitalism are inflicted on more and more people, and as those inequities become more and

more exposed, a transition to socialism or social democracy will become inevitable. What has happened, instead, is that the situation has become worse, with Trump's direction of travel – and the Democrats' thwarting of Bernie Sanders – presenting just two of many examples.

Baldwin wrote that black and white Americans are “bound together forever”, whether they liked it or not. “What is [happening](#) to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. There is no way around this. I am suggesting that these walls – these artificial walls – which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear, must come down. I think that what we really have to do is to create a country in which there are no minorities – for the first time in the history of the world.”

Baldwin's suggestion may yet come to pass. But as the US tears itself apart, there is every chance that the threat I heard from that local Republican Party official will instead be the country's fate, and that America will enter into another civil war – if that hasn't already happened.

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