

Patrick Lawrence

‘A stricken civilization’

It often happens that, on greeting a friend or an acquaintance after a long absence, one sees things that otherwise would have gone unnoticed: The hair is grayer or there is less of it, weight has been gained or lost, an anxiety or depression that wasn't there before is newly evident around the eyes. This happens to most of us at one or another time, I imagine. And so it can be when one returns to one's home country after a lengthy stay abroad.

I share this thought on my arrival in the United States after many months away—first in Europe, then in Mexico. And what I will loosely call my old friend leaves me shocked. My old friend has lost faith in itself. My old friend has no plan. My old friend evinces a streak of self-destructiveness I had earlier suspected but never seen. My old friend America is failing.

It is I who am the anxious and depressed one now. To state the most obvious of causes, there is the frightening incompetence of President Trump and those with whom he has surrounded himself. Mainstream media, which I do not often take seriously other than as propaganda, call this administration “an experiment in recklessness” (*The New York Times*) or “a clown show” (Bloomberg News). Joe Biden hastened the pace of America's decline by several magnitudes. Donald Trump confronts us with a yet-starker reality: Eighty days into his second term, Americans must accept there seems little chance of reversing this slide into, as I say, sheer self-destruction.

This brings me to a second point, the other thing I note after a time away.

Attentive readers anywhere will know all about the incoherence of the Trump regime's countless executive orders, which issue forth from the White House like the insistent shouts of a spiteful child who has not attained the age of reason. The press and broadcasters report daily on these directives, along with the latest surprises in Trump's more or less nonsensical, more or less dangerous foreign policies. What goes unreported is the astounding indifference, or apathy, or numbness—I do not know what to call it—of the American public. They cannot accept the must-be-accepted the Trump regime imposes upon them.

Americans have long been subjected to propaganda operations—I would say since the defeats in Indochina fifty years ago this month—that have encouraged what I will call for simplicity's sake a turn away from the public sphere, the privatization of the collective consciousness. But what one witnesses since Trump took office 20 January is of another order of... of what?... vacancy of mind and spirit. It may be best to think of Americans' beyond-belief detachment from events of national and world-historical gravity as a psychological matter—a fundamental fear of new and large uncertainties, or an inability to face up to what is happening to America under Donald Trump.

Who among us, we Americans, was raised or trained to live amid so precipitous a collapse of the American imperium's fortunes? I know of no one who has been so prepared—no one who does not share my shock, even if, as in most cases, passively. There is an old song from the 1960s whose refrain is, “Mama said there'd be days like this.” No, Mama never warned us of the days of our lives now.

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It used to be said that Donald Trump was distinguished among recent American presidents for never having started a war. I suppose this remains literally true, as he

inherited the Israeli genocide in Gaza from the Biden regime, and it is not in any case a war. But Trump the president of peace now unequivocally supports the Israelis' campaign of terror. He sponsored a ceasefire in the first days of his new term, but then sent his special envoy, another property developer from New York, to negotiate Israel's violation of the same accord he had so recently sponsored. Tammy Bruce, the State Department's new spokeswoman, now echoes Trump when she insists, "Every single thing that is happening is a result of Hamas."

Trump famously returned to office on the promise he would end the war in Ukraine within twenty-four hours; holding to a policy he favored during his first term, he also announced his determination to restore diplomatic relations with Russia, along with all manner of trade and other modes of cooperation. But the war in Ukraine grinds on and Trump has resumed weapons shipments after a brief hiatus. As to bilateral ties with Moscow, the stated intent appears to remain. But so does the Kremlin's key demand, to establish a new security architecture in Europe. And Trump's diplomatic team, led by his vastly overpromoted secretary of state, Marco Rubio, is simply not competent to negotiate the complexities involved in any such accord. They are in way over their heads, suggesting a fundamental unseriousness in the White House.

And now comes the tariff regime, a daring exercise in gambling against the strong odds of inducing a recession—Americans can never use the term "depression" but as an historical reference—that could easily match what the Smoot–Hawley tariffs tipped the nation into ninety-five years ago. A day before I sat to write this commentary Trump declared his stone determination to prosecute his extensive tariff regime. On the day I sit to write he has stepped back in all cases but for China. Anyone who tells you he knows what is next is either fooling himself or attempting to fool you.

It is clear by now that Trump's foreign policies, including the sweeping tariffs just now announced, amount to sheer improvisation. To invoke the comparison I suggested earlier, this president is like a child scrawling with crayons in a coloring book. There is no plan, no design, no "What's next," no map forward. Here is David Sanger, a *New York Times* correspondent in Washington who faithfully reproduces all the liberal orthodoxies (and for once I am on the same page with the liberals):

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As the breadth of the Trump revolution has spread across Washington in recent weeks, its most defining feature is a burn-it-down first, figure-out-the-consequences-later recklessness.

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Sanger adds, "The costs of that approach are now becoming clear." This is so if one refers to the paying-attention minority among Americans. Not otherwise, I would say—a point to which I will shortly return.

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I do not think there has been any point in the American past when a regime has subjected the institutions that are the source of this nation's vitality to such a sustained attack as we now witness. This week the Trump administration declared it would cut roughly \$1 billion from the federal funding it sends in a typical year to Northwestern University, one of America's premier institutions of higher learning. This continues a campaign that began weeks ago with similar (if smaller) cuts to various members of the Ivy League—Columbia, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton. These attacks are in the name of combating a wave of

anti-Semitism on American campuses, but this holds true only by a very irrational definition of anti-Semitism.

The campaign against universities intersects with another wherein students from abroad who exercise their rights to free speech and assembly are deported without even the pretense of due process. So far the Immigration and Customs authorities have arrested and detained some 300 such students. And in the face of court rulings blocking these detentions the regime has simply ignored the judges—a point-blank challenge to the judiciary and the separation of powers.

Taken together with Elon Musk's diabolic operations to dismantle key government institutions in the name of efficiencies, Americans witness as we speak an across-the-board attack on government, seats of higher learning, the judicial system, and altogether the law. I am far from first to say Trump has run the U.S. straight into a constitutional crisis—nor the first to suggest that what is most fundamentally being dismantled is America's capacity to function in the global community.

And again, nobody knows where this sustained attack will lead, or what will replace the shuttered agencies of government, or the tens of thousands of federal employees the crypto-Fascist Musk has fired. However much the damage already done may be remediated at some point in the future—and none is among the possibilities—some of it will prove permanent.

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By the late 1960s, various political factions in Washington, and certainly the liberal media, began to speak and publish in open opposition to the continued prosecution of the wars in Indochina. While the Vietnamese won the Vietnamese war (as I sometimes have to remind veterans of the old antiwar movement), the

shift of opinion in Washington and in American media were important in hastening the war's end.

You are seeing and hearing a variant of this shift in opinion now. *The New York Times* and all the pilot fish that faithfully follow it are ever more explicit in their criticisms of Trump's programs at home and policies abroad. It is a mildly encouraging sign: Parts of "the establishment" appear to be gathering momentum to counter the Trump regime in some substantive fashion.

But I stay with "mildly encouraging" for a reason. The pattern is to treat each of Trump's exercises in destruction—the attacks on universities, the illegal deportations, the abuses of law, the threats to annex Greenland or turn the Gaza Strip into a resort—as discrete wrong turns rather than as part of a larger drift toward a reckoning, a recognition that the American imperium has entered its final phase. The Democratic opposition in Washington indulges in this flinch, as I will call it. Mainstream media, in doing the same, lend what I will call narrative coherence to the profound incoherence of this passage in the American story.

This brings me back to the apparent indifference of the American public. Their government continues its complicity in a genocide that has lately become yet more barbaric. Their judicial system is in serious jeopardy. Their institutions of higher learning are turning themselves into servants of power so as to protect their funding. And most people—nearly all, in truth—have nothing to say. When you walk along a city street or go into a restaurant these days, on either coast or anywhere in between, you will hear those near you speaking of their career prospects, their investments, what they saw on television the previous night and on and on indefinitely. But rarely do you hear a word concerning all I pencil-sketch here.

Last weekend hundreds of thousands of Americans took to the streets across the country in a protest campaign they called “Hands Off!”—as in hands off our Social Security, our health care, our schools, and so on down a long list. I considered spontaneously joining one of these groups in a small town near where I temporarily reside, but then I stepped back: There was no “Hands off Gaza!” or “Hands off Palestinians!” or “Hands off Venezuela!” And there was, to my astonishment, a “Hands off NATO!” plank in this movement’s platform.

This is at bottom an upside-down expression of indifference, in my read. It is the fruit of the long propaganda campaigns noted earlier. And it is the consequence of the major media’s efforts to lend narrative coherence to the incoherence of the American republic that the Trump regime dramatically heightens. What I read in it most of all is the radical absence of any sense of transcendence among Americans—any thought that things could be different than how they are now. Shocking, yes: As noted I have been shocked on my return after time away. But perfectly explainable all the same.

Maybe for the first time in my long years as an American my assumption that the nation can and eventually will do better now dims. Trump has come again and Trump will go again—if he lasts, indeed, the four years of his term, and I consider this a legitimate question. But I do not find among Americans the purpose, the clarity of intent and mind, that restoring America to itself—or imagining it anew—would require. And without this clarity, this determination, a clear consciousness of transcendence, no restoration of this decrepit republic seems possible.

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A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

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That is Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquais poet and political thinker, beginning his 1955 work, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, 1972). Césaire's context—he wrote midway through what we call the independence era—was very different. Without using the word, he, too, wrote of transcendence and its absence. And how bitterly true do these lines seem on my return to America after some time away from it.

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