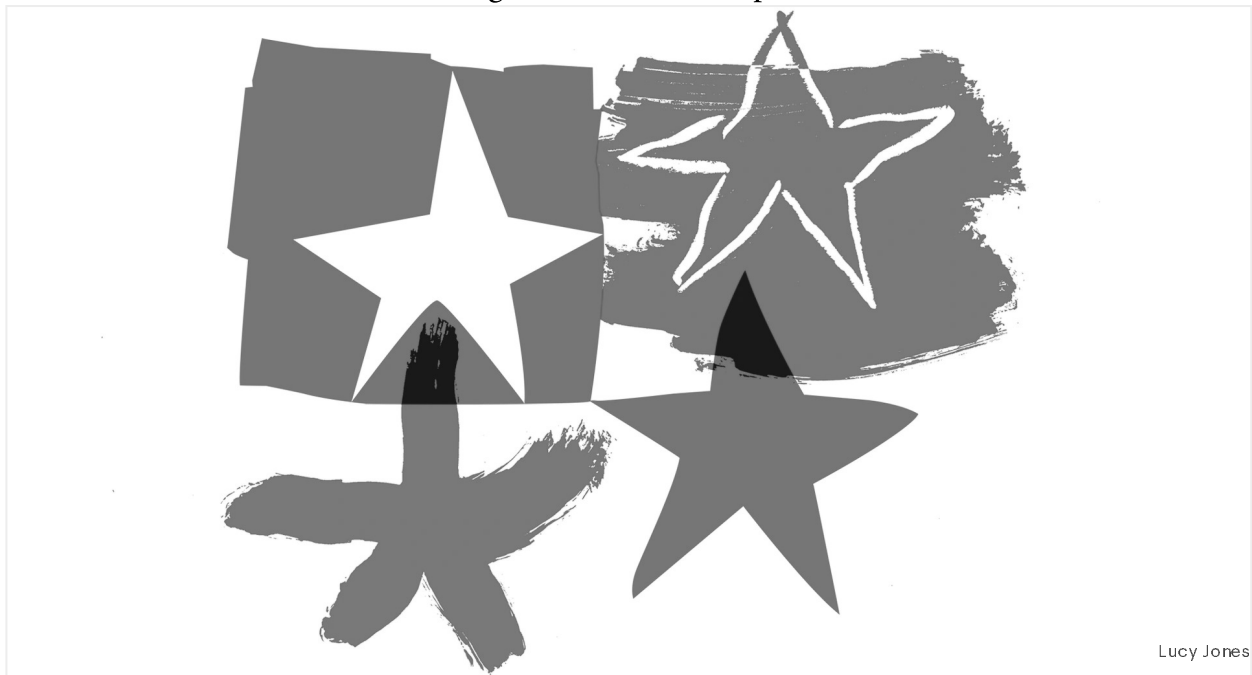


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## How America Fractured Into Four Parts

People in the United States no longer agree on the nation's purpose, values, history, or meaning. Is reconciliation possible?



Lucy Jones

*Story by* George Packer

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**N**ATIONS, LIKE INDIVIDUALS, tell stories in order to understand what they are, where they come from, and what they want to be. National narratives, like personal ones, are prone to sentimentality, grievance, pride, shame, self-blindness. There is never just one—they compete and

constantly change. The most durable narratives are not the ones that stand up best to fact-checking. They're the ones that address our deepest needs and desires. Americans know by now that democracy depends on a baseline of shared reality—when facts become fungible, we're lost. But just as no one can live a happy and productive life in nonstop self-criticism, nations require more than facts—they need stories that convey a moral identity. The long gaze in the mirror has to end in self-respect or it will swallow us up.

Tracing the evolution of these narratives can tell you something about a nation's possibilities for change. Through much of the 20th century, the two political parties had clear identities and told distinct stories. The Republicans spoke for those who wanted to get ahead, and the Democrats spoke for those who wanted a fair shake. Republicans emphasized individual enterprise, and Democrats emphasized social solidarity, eventually including Black people and abandoning the party's commitment to Jim Crow. But, unlike today, the two parties were arguing over the same recognizable country. This arrangement held until the late '60s—still within living memory.

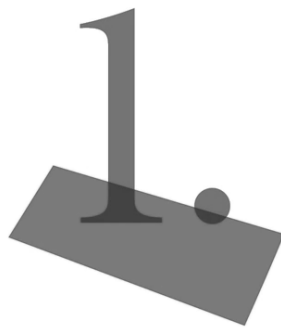
The two parties reflected a society that was less free than today, less tolerant, and far less diverse, with fewer choices, but with more economic equality, more shared prosperity, and more political cooperation. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats played important roles in their respective parties. Americans then were more uniform than we are in what they ate (tuna noodle casserole) and what they watched (*Bullitt*). Even their bodies looked more alike. They were more restrained than we are, more repressed—though restraint and repression were coming undone by 1968.

Since then, the two parties have just about traded places. By the turn of the millennium, the Democrats were becoming the home of affluent professionals, while the Republicans were starting to sound like populist insurgents. We have to understand this exchange in order to grasp how we got to where we are.

[ *George Packer: Can civics save America?* ]

The 1970s ended postwar, bipartisan, middle-class America, and with it the two relatively stable narratives of getting ahead and the fair shake. In their place, four rival narratives have emerged, four accounts of America's moral

identity. They have roots in history, but they are shaped by new ways of thinking and living. They reflect schisms on both sides of the divide that has made us two countries, extending and deepening the lines of fracture. Over the past four decades, the four narratives have taken turns exercising influence. They overlap, morph into one another, attract and repel one another. None can be understood apart from the others, because all four emerge from the same whole.



Call the first narrative “Free America.” In the past half century it’s been the most politically powerful of the four. Free America draws on libertarian ideas, which it installs in the high-powered engine of consumer capitalism. The freedom it champions is very different from Alexis de Tocqueville’s art of self-government. It’s personal freedom, without other people—the negative liberty of “Don’t tread on me.”

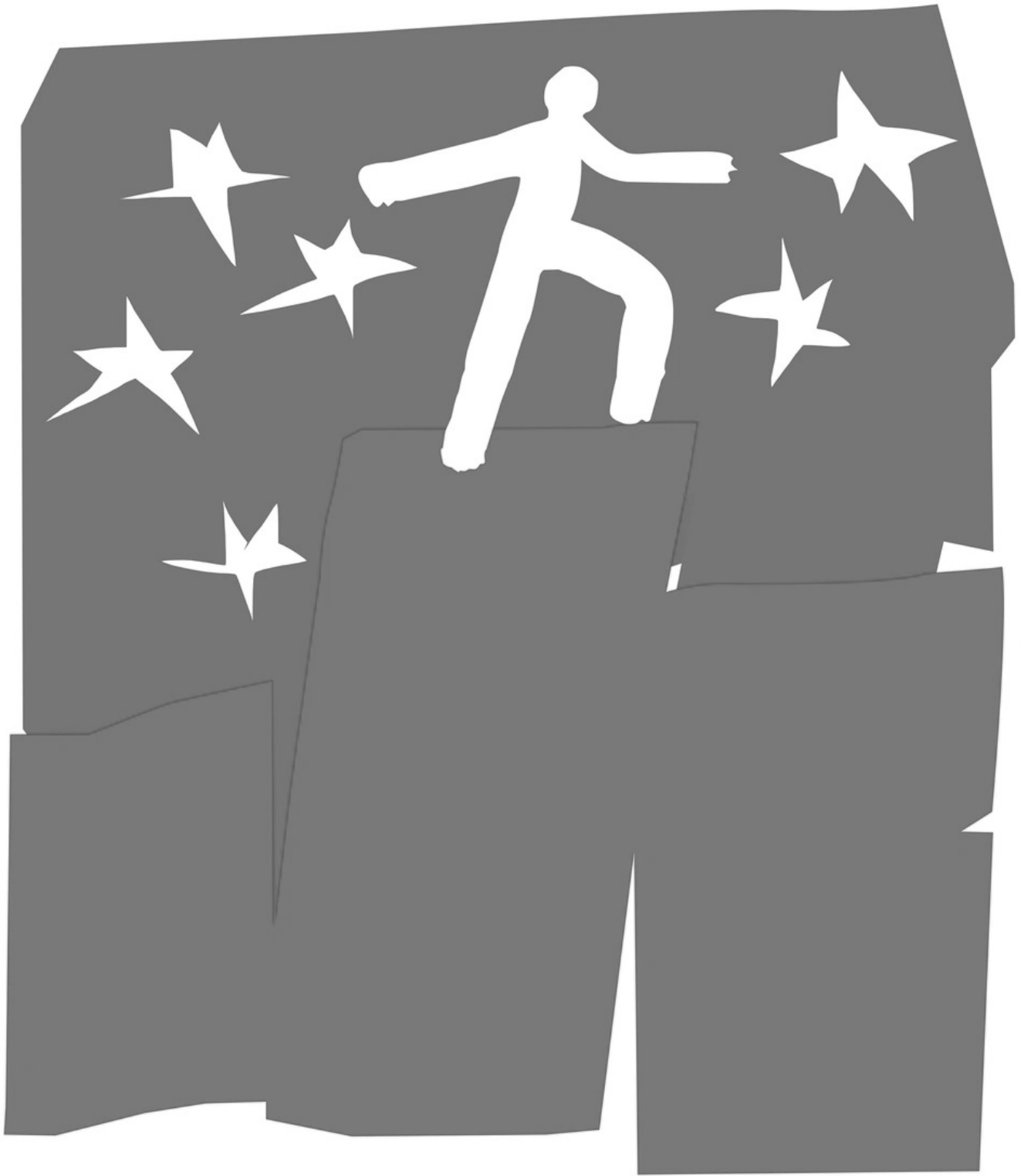
The conservative movement began to dominate the Republican Party in the 1970s, and then much of the country after 1980 with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. As the historian George H. Nash observed, it uneasily wove together several strands of thought. One was traditionalist, a reaction against the utopian plans and moral chaos of modern secular civilization. The traditionalists were sin-fearing Protestants, orthodox Catholics, southern agrarians, would-be aristocrats, alienated individualists—dissidents in postwar America. They were appalled by the complacent vulgarity of the semi-educated masses. Their hero was Edmund Burke, the avatar of conservative restraint, and their enemy was John Dewey, the philosopher of American democracy. The traditionalists’ elitism put them at odds with the main currents of American life—the one passage of American history that most appealed to them was the quasi-feudal Old South—but their writings inspired the next generation of conservatives, including William F. Buckley Jr., who

introduced the first issue of *National Review*, in 1955, with the famous command to “Stand athwart history, yelling Stop.”

Adjacent to the traditionalists were the anti-Communists. Many of them were former Marxists, such as Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, who carried their apocalyptic baggage with them when they moved from left to right. Politics for them was nothing less than the titanic struggle between good and evil, God and man. The main target of their energy was the ameliorative creed of Eleanor Roosevelt and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., good old liberalism, which they believed to be a paler communism—“the ideology of Western suicide,” Burnham called it. The anti-Communists, like the traditionalists, were skeptics of democracy—its softness would doom it to destruction when World War III broke out. If these hectoring pessimists were the sum of modern conservatism, the movement would have died of joylessness by 1960.

The libertarians were different. They slipped more easily into the American stream. In their insistence on freedom they could claim to be descendants of Locke, Jefferson, and the classical liberal tradition. Some of them interpreted the Constitution as a libertarian document for individual and states’ rights under a limited federal government, not as a framework for the strengthened nation that the authors of *The Federalist Papers* thought they were creating. Oddly, the most influential libertarians were Europeans, especially the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, whose polemic against collectivism, *The Road to Serfdom*, was a publishing sensation in America in 1944, during the most dramatic mobilization of economic resources by state power in history.

What distinguished libertarians from conventional, pro-business Republicans was their pure and uncompromising idea. What was it? Hayek: “Planning leads to dictatorship.” The purpose of government is to secure individual rights, and little else. One sip of social welfare and free government dies. A 1937 Supreme Court decision upholding parts of the New Deal was the beginning of America’s decline and fall. Libertarians were in rebellion against the mid-century mixed-economy consensus. In spirit they were more radical than conservative. No compromise with Social Security administrators and central bankers! Death to Keynesian fiscal policy!



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Despite or because of the purity of their idea, libertarians made common cause with segregationists, and racism informed their political movement from the beginning. Their first hero, Senator Barry Goldwater, ran for president in 1964 as an insurgent against his own party's establishment while opposing the civil-rights bill on states'-rights grounds.

The first two strands of the conservative movement—elitist traditionalism and anti-communism—remained part of its DNA for half a century. Eventually the American people made their preference for taking pleasures where they wanted clear and the first faded, while the end of the Cold War rendered the second obsolete. But libertarianism stretches all the way to the present. James Burnham is mostly forgotten, but I've met Ayn Rand fanatics everywhere—among Silicon Valley venture capitalists, at the office of the Tampa Bay Tea Party, on a road-paving crew. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan (who read *Atlas Shrugged* in high school) brought Rand's pitiless philosophy of egoism to policy making on Capitol Hill. Libertarianism speaks to the American myth of the self-made man and the lonely pioneer on the plains. (Glorification of men is a recurring feature.) Like Marxism, it is a complete explanatory system. It appeals to supersmart engineers and others who never really grow up.

How did Free America become the dogma of the Republican Party and set the terms of American politics for years? Like any great political change, this one depended on ideas, an authentic connection with people's lives, and timing. Just as there would have been no Roosevelt revolution without the Great Depression, there would have been no Reagan revolution without the 1970s. After years of high inflation with high unemployment, gas shortages, chaos in liberal cities, and epic government corruption and incompetence, by 1980 a large audience of Americans was ready to listen when Milton and Rose Friedman, in a book and 10-part public-television series called *Free to Choose*, blamed the country's decline on business regulations and other government interventions in the market.

But it took the alchemy of that year's Republican nominee to transform the cold formula of tax cuts and deregulation into the warm vision of America as "the shining city on a hill"—land of the Pilgrims, beacon to a desperate world. In Reagan's rhetoric, leveraged buyouts somehow rhymed with the spirit of New England town meetings. Reagan made Free America sound like the promised land, a place where all were welcome to pursue happiness. The descendants of Jefferson's yeoman farmers, with their desire for independence, became sturdy car-company executives and investment bankers yearning to breathe free of big government.

In 1980, the first year I cast a vote, I feared and hated Reagan. Listening to his words 40 years later, I can hear their eloquence and understand their appeal, as long as I tune out many other things. Chief among them is Reagan's half-spoken message to white Americans: Government helps only *those people*. Legal segregation was barely dead when Free America, using the libertarian language of individualism and property rights, pushed the country into its long decline in public investment. The advantages for business were easy to see. As for ordinary people, the Republican Party reckoned that some white Americans would rather go without than share the full benefits of prosperity with their newly equal Black compatriots.

The majority of Americans who elected Reagan president weren't told that Free America would break unions and starve social programs, or that it would change antitrust policy to bring a new age of monopoly, making Walmart, Citigroup, Google, and Amazon the J.P. Morgan and Standard Oil of a second Gilded Age. They had never heard of Charles and David Koch—heirs to a family oil business, libertarian billionaires who would pour money into the lobbies and propaganda machines and political campaigns of Free America on behalf of corporate power and fossil fuels. Freedom sealed a deal between elected officials and business executives: campaign contributions in exchange for tax cuts and corporate welfare. The numerous scandals of the 1980s exposed the crony capitalism that lay at the heart of Free America.

The shining city on a hill was supposed to replace remote big government with a community of energetic and compassionate citizens, all engaged in a project of national renewal. But nothing held the city together. It was hollow at the center, a collection of individuals all wanting more. It saw Americans as entrepreneurs, employees, investors, taxpayers, and consumers—everything but citizens.

In the Declaration of Independence, freedom comes right after equality. For Reagan and the narrative of Free America, it meant freedom *from* government and bureaucrats. It meant the freedom to run a business without regulation, to pay workers whatever wage the market would bear, to break a union, to pass all your wealth on to your children, to buy out an ailing company with debt and strip it for assets, to own seven houses—or to go homeless. But a

freedom that gets rid of all obstructions is impoverished, and it degrades people.

Real freedom is closer to the opposite of breaking loose. It means growing up, and acquiring the ability to participate fully in political and economic life. The obstructions that block this ability are the ones that need to be removed. Some are external: institutions and social conditions. Others are embedded in your character and get in the way of governing yourself, thinking for yourself, and even knowing what is true. These obstructions crush the individuality that freedom lovers cherish, making them conformist, submissive, a group of people all shouting the same thing—easy marks for a demagogue.

*Rather than finding new policies to rebuild declining communities, Republicans mobilized anger and despair while offering up scapegoats.*

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Reagan cared more about the functions of self-government than his most ideological supporters. He knew how to persuade and when to compromise. But once he was gone, and the Soviet Union not long after him, Free America lost the narrative thread. Without Reagan's smile and the Cold War's clarity, its vision grew darker and more extreme. Its spirit became flesh in the person of Newt Gingrich, the most influential politician of the past half century. There was nothing conservative about Gingrich. He came to Congress not to work within the institution or even to change it, but to tear it down in order to seize power. With the Gingrich revolution, the term *government shutdown* entered the lexicon and politics became a forever war. (Gingrich himself liked to quote Mao's definition of politics as "war without blood.") His tactics turned the goal of limited and efficient government into the destruction of government. Without a positive vision, his party used power to hold on to power and fatten corporate allies. Corruption—financial, political, intellectual, moral—set in like dry rot in a decaying log.

The aggressive new populism of talk radio and cable news did not have the "conservative orderly heart" that Norman Mailer had once found in the mainstream Republicans of the 1960s. It mocked self-government—both the



political and the personal kind. It was rife with destructive impulses. It fed on rage and celebrity culture. The quality of Free America's leaders steadily deteriorated—falling from Reagan to Gingrich to Ted Cruz, from William F. Buckley to Ann Coulter to Sean Hannity—with no bottom.

While the sunny narrative of Free America shone on, its policies eroded the way of life of many of its adherents. The disappearance of secure employment and small businesses destroyed communities. The civic associations that Tocqueville identified as the antidote to individualism died with the jobs. When towns lost their Main Street drugstores and restaurants to Walgreens and Wendy's in the mall out on the highway, they also lost their Rotary Club and newspaper—the local institutions of self-government. This hollowing-out exposed them to an epidemic of aloneness, physical and psychological. Isolation bred distrust in the old sources of authority—school, church, union, bank, media.

Government, which did so little for ordinary Americans, was still the enemy, along with “governing elites.” But for the sinking working class, freedom lost whatever economic meaning it had once had. It was a matter of personal dignity, *identity*. Members of this class began to see trespassers everywhere and embraced the slogan of a defiant and armed loneliness: *Get the fuck off my property. Take this mask and shove it.* It was the threatening image of a coiled rattlesnake: “Don't tread on me.” It achieved its ultimate expression on January 6, in all those yellow Gadsden flags waving around the Capitol—a mob of freedom-loving Americans taking back their constitutional rights by shitting on the floors of Congress and hunting down elected representatives to kidnap and kill. That was their freedom in its pure and reduced form.

A character in Jonathan Franzen's 2010 novel, *Freedom*, puts it this way: “If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life.” The character is almost paraphrasing Barack Obama's notorious statement at a San Francisco fundraiser about the way working-class white Americans “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment, as a way to

explain their frustrations.” The thought wasn’t mistaken, but the condescension was self-incriminating. It showed why Democrats couldn’t fathom that people might “vote against their interests.” Guns and religion *were* the authentic interests of millions of Americans. Trade and immigration *had* left some of them worse off. And if the Democratic Party wasn’t on their side—if government failed to improve their lives—why not vote for the party that at least took them seriously?

Free America always had an insurgent mindset, breaking institutions down, not building them up. Irresponsibility was coded into its leadership. Rather than finding new policies to rebuild declining communities, Republicans mobilized anger and despair while offering up scapegoats. The party thought it could control these dark energies on its quest for more power, but instead they would consume it.

The new knowledge economy created a new class of Americans: men and women with college degrees, skilled with symbols and numbers—salaried professionals in information technology, computer engineering, scientific research, design, management consulting, the upper civil service, financial analysis, law, journalism, the arts, higher education. They go to college with one another, intermarry, gravitate to desirable neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas, and do all they can to pass on their advantages to their children. They are not 1 percenters—those are mainly executives and investors—but they dominate the top 10 percent of American incomes, with outsize economic and cultural influence.

They’re at ease in the world that modernity created. They were early adopters of things that make the surface of contemporary life agreeable: HBO, Lipitor, MileagePlus Platinum, the MacBook Pro, grass-fed organic beef, cold-brewed coffee, Amazon Prime. They welcome novelty and relish diversity. They

believe that the transnational flow of human beings, information, goods, and capital ultimately benefits most people around the world. You have a hard time telling what part of the country they come from, because their local identities are submerged in the homogenizing culture of top universities and elite professions. They believe in credentials and expertise—not just as tools for success, but as qualifications for class entry. They're not nationalistic—quite the opposite—but they have a national narrative. Call it “Smart America.”

[ *From the November 1996 issue: Nicholas Lemann on America's cartoon elite* ]

The cosmopolitan outlook of Smart America overlaps in some areas with the libertarian views of Free America. Each embraces capitalism and the principle of meritocracy: the belief that your talent and effort should determine your reward. But to the meritocrats of Smart America, some government interventions are necessary for everyone to have an equal chance to move up. The long history of racial injustice demands remedies such as affirmative action, diversity hiring, and maybe even reparations. The poor need a social safety net and a living wage; poor children deserve higher spending on education and health care. Workers dislocated by trade agreements, automation, and other blows of the global economy should be retrained for new kinds of jobs.

Still, there's a limit to how much government the meritocrats will accept. Social liberalism comes easier to them than redistribution, especially as they accumulate wealth and look to their 401(k)s for long-term security. As for unions, they hardly exist in Smart America. They're instruments of class solidarity, not individual advancement, and the individual is the unit of worth in Smart America as in Free America.

The word *meritocracy* has been around since the late 1950s, when a British sociologist named Michael Young published *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. He meant this new word as a warning: Modern societies would learn how to measure intelligence in children so exactly that they would be stratified in schools and jobs according to their natural ability. In Young's satirical fantasy, this new form of inequality would be so rigid and oppressive that it would end in violent rebellion.

But the word lost its original dystopian meaning. In the decades after World War II, the G.I. Bill, the expansion of standardized tests, the civil-rights movement, and the opening of top universities to students of color, women, and children of the middle and working classes all combined to offer a path upward that probably came as close to truly equal opportunity as America has ever seen.

After the 1970s, meritocracy began to look more and more like Young's dark satire. A system intended to give each new generation an equal chance to rise created a new hereditary class structure. Educated professionals pass on their money, connections, ambitions, and work ethic to their children, while less educated families fall further behind, with less and less chance of seeing their children move up. By kindergarten, the children of professionals are already a full two years ahead of their lower-class counterparts, and the achievement gap is almost unbridgeable. After seven decades of meritocracy, a lower-class child is nearly as unlikely to be admitted to one of the top three Ivy League universities as they would have been in 1954.

This hierarchy slowly hardened over the decades without drawing much notice. It's based on education and merit, and education and merit are good things, so who would question it? The deeper injustice is disguised by plenty of exceptions, children who rose from modest backgrounds to the heights of society. Bill Clinton (who talked about "people who work hard and play by the rules"), Hillary Clinton (who liked the phrase *God-given talents*), and Barack Obama ("We need every single one of you to develop your talents and your skills and your intellect") were all products of the meritocracy. *Of course* individuals should be rewarded according to their ability. What's the alternative? Either collectivization or aristocracy. Either everyone gets the same grades and salaries regardless of achievement, which is unjust and horribly mediocre, or else everyone has to live out the life into which they're born, which is unjust and horribly regressive. Meritocracy seems like the one system that answers what Tocqueville called the American "passion for equality." If the opportunities are truly equal, the results will be fair.

But it's this idea of fairness that accounts for meritocracy's cruelty. If you don't make the cut, you have no one and nothing to blame but yourself. Those who make it can feel morally pleased with themselves—their talents, discipline,

good choices—and even a grim kind of satisfaction when they come across someone who hasn't made it. Not “There but for the grace of God go I,” not even “Life is unfair,” but “You should have been more like me.”

*The winners in Smart America have lost the capacity and the need for a national identity, which is why they can't grasp its importance for others.*

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Politically, Smart America came to be associated with the Democratic Party. This was not inevitable. If the party had refused to accept the closing of factories in the 1970s and '80s as a natural disaster, if it had become the voice of the millions of workers displaced by deindustrialization and struggling in the growing service economy, it might have remained the multiethnic working-class party that it had been since the 1930s. It's true that the white South abandoned the Democratic Party after the civil-rights revolution, but race alone doesn't explain the epochal half-century shift of working-class white voters. West Virginia, almost all white, was a predominantly Democratic state until 2000. If you look at county-by-county national electoral maps, 2000 was the year when rural areas turned decisively red. Something more than just the Democrats' principled embrace of the civil-rights movement and other struggles for equality caused the shift.

In the early 1970s, the party became the home of educated professionals, nonwhite voters, and the shrinking unionized working class. The more the party identified with the winners of the new economy, the easier it became for the Republican Party to pull away white workers by appealing to cultural values. Bill and Hillary Clinton spoke about equipping workers to rise into the professional class through education and training. Their assumption was that all Americans could do what they did and be like them.

The narrative of Free America shaped the parameters of acceptable thinking for Smart America. Free trade, deregulation, economic concentration, and balanced budgets became the policy of the Democratic Party. It was cosmopolitan, embracing multiculturalism at home and welcoming a globalized world. Its donor class on Wall Street and in Silicon Valley

bankrolled Democratic campaigns and was rewarded with influence in Washington. None of this appealed to the party's old base.

The turn of the millennium was the high-water mark of Smart America. President Clinton's speeches became euphoric—"We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history," he said in his final State of the Union message. The new economy had replaced "outmoded ideologies" with dazzling technologies. The business cycle of booms and busts had practically been abolished, along with class conflict. In April 2000, Clinton hosted a celebration called the White House Conference on the New Economy. Earnest purpose mingled with self-congratulation; virtue and success high-fived—the distinctive atmosphere of Smart America. At one point Clinton informed the participants that Congress was about to pass a bill to establish permanent trade relations with China, which would make both countries more prosperous and China more free. "I believe the computer and the internet give us a chance to move more people out of poverty more quickly than at any time in all of human history," he exulted.

You can almost date the election of Donald Trump to that moment.

The winners in Smart America have withdrawn from national life. They spend inordinate amounts of time working (even in bed), researching their children's schools and planning their activities, shopping for the right kind of food, learning to make sushi or play the mandolin, staying in shape, and following the news. None of this brings them in contact with fellow citizens outside their way of life. School, once the most universal and influential of our democratic institutions, now walls them off. The working class is terra incognita.

The pursuit of success is not new. The Smart American is a descendant of the self-made man of the early 19th century, who raised work ethic to the highest personal virtue, and of the urban Progressive of the early 20th, who revered expertise. But there's a difference: The path now is narrower, it leads to institutions with higher walls, and the gate is harder to open.

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Under the watchful eye of their parents, the children of Smart America devote exhausting amounts of energy to extracurricular activities and carefully constructed personal essays that can navigate between boasting and humility. The goal of all this effort is a higher education that offers questionable learning, dubious fulfillment, likely indebtedness, but certain status. Graduation from an exclusive school marks the entry into a successful life. A rite endowed with so much importance and involving so little of real value resembles the brittle decadence of an aristocracy that's reached the stage when people begin to lose faith that it reflects the natural order of things. In our case, a system intended to expand equality has become an enforcer of

inequality. Americans are now meritocrats by birth. We know this, but because it violates our fundamental beliefs, we go to a lot of trouble not to know it.

A common refrain, in places like southeastern Ohio and southern Virginia and central Pennsylvania, is that the middle class no longer exists. I once heard a woman in her 60s, a retired municipal employee in Tampa, Florida, who had made and then lost money in real estate, describe herself as a member of “the formerly middle class.” She meant that she no longer lived with any security. Her term could apply to a nonunion electrician making \$52,000 a year and to a home health aide making \$12 an hour. The first still belongs financially to the middle class, while the second is working-class—in fact, working-poor. What they share is a high-school degree and a precarious prospect. Neither of them can look with confidence on their future, less still on their children’s. The dream of leaving their children better educated and better off has lost its conviction, and therefore its inspiration. They can’t possibly attain the shiny, well-ordered lives they see in the houses of the elite professionals for whom they work. The espresso maker on the quartz countertop, the expensive art hanging on the living-room walls, the shelves of books lining the children’s bedrooms are glimpses of a foreign culture. What professionals actually do to earn the large incomes that pay for their nice things is a mystery. All those hours spent sitting at a computer screen—do they contribute something to society, to the family of an electrician or a home health aide (whose contributions are obvious)?

So these two classes, rising professionals and sinking workers, which a couple of generations ago were close in income and not so far apart in mores, no longer believe they belong to the same country. But they can’t escape each other, and their coexistence breeds condescension, resentment, and shame.

As a national narrative, Smart America has a tenuous sense of the nation. Smart America doesn’t hate America, which has been so good to the meritocrats. Smart Americans believe in institutions, and they support American leadership of military alliances and international organizations.

But Smart Americans are uneasy with patriotism. It’s an unpleasant relic of a more primitive time, like cigarette smoke or dog racing. It stirs emotions that



can have ugly consequences. The winners in Smart America—connected by airplane, internet, and investments to the rest of the globe—have lost the capacity and the need for a national identity, which is why they can't grasp its importance for others. Their passionate loyalty, the one that gives them a particular identity, goes to their family. The rest is diversity and efficiency, heirloom tomatoes and self-driving cars. They don't see the point of patriotism.

Patriotism can be turned to good or ill purposes, but in most people it never dies. It's a persistent attachment, like loyalty to your family, a source of meaning and togetherness, strongest when it's hardly conscious. National loyalty is an attachment to what makes your country *yours*, distinct from the rest, even when you can't stand it, even when it breaks your heart. This feeling can't be wished out of existence. And because people still live their lives in an actual place, and the nation is the largest place with which they can identify—world citizenship is too abstract to be meaningful—patriotic feeling has to be tapped if you want to achieve anything big. If your goal is to slow climate change, or reverse inequality, or stop racism, or rebuild democracy, you will need the national solidarity that comes from patriotism.

That's one problem with the narrative of Smart America. The other problem is that abandoning patriotism to other narratives guarantees that the worst of them will claim it.

In the fall of 2008, Sarah Palin, then the Republican nominee for vice president, spoke at a fundraiser in Greensboro, North Carolina. Candidates reserve the truth for their donors, using the direct language they avoid with the press and the public (Obama: "cling to guns or religion"; Romney: the "47 percent"; Clinton: "basket of deplorables"), and Palin felt free to speak openly. "We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to

visit,” she said, “and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hardworking, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation. Those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us.”

What made Palin alien to people in Smart America prompted thousands to stand in line for hours at her rallies in “Real America”: her vernacular (“You betcha,” “Drill, baby, drill”); her charismatic Christianity; the four colleges she attended en route to a degree; her five children’s names (Track, Bristol, Willow, Piper, Trig); her baby with Down syndrome; her pregnant, unwed teenage daughter; her husband’s commercial fishing business; her hunting poses. She was working-class to her boots. Plenty of politicians come from the working class; Palin never left it.

She went after Barack Obama with particular venom. Her animus was fueled by his suspect origins, radical associates, and redistributionist views, but the worst offense was his galling mix of class and race. Obama was a Black professional who had gone to the best schools, who knew so much more than Palin, and who was too cerebral to get in the mud pit with her.

Palin crumbled during the campaign. Her miserable performance under basic questioning disqualified her in the eyes of Americans with open minds on the subject. Her Republican handlers tried to hide her and later disowned her. In 2008, the country was still too rational for a candidate like Palin. After losing, she quit being governor of Alaska, which no longer interested her, and started a new career as a reality-TV personality, Tea Party star, and autographed-merchandise saleswoman. Palin kept looking for a second act that never arrived. She suffered the pathetic fate of being a celebrity ahead of her time. Because with her candidacy something new came into our national life that was also traditional. She was a western populist who embodied white identity politics—John the Baptist to the coming of Trump.

Real America is a very old place. The idea that the authentic heart of democracy beats hardest in common people who work with their hands goes back to the 18th century. It was embryonic in the founding creed of equality. “State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787. “The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter,

because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.” Moral equality was the basis for political equality. As the new republic became a more egalitarian society in the first decades of the 19th century, the democratic creed turned openly populist. Andrew Jackson came to power and governed as champion of “the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers,” the Real Americans of that age. The Democratic Party dominated elections by pinning the charge of aristocratic elitism on the Federalists, and then the Whigs, who learned that they had to campaign on log cabins and hard cider to compete.

The triumph of popular democracy brought an anti-intellectual bias to American politics that never entirely disappeared. Self-government didn’t require any special learning, just the native wisdom of the people. “Even in its earliest days,” Richard Hofstadter wrote, “the egalitarian impulse in America was linked with a distrust for what in its germinal form may be called political specialization and in its later forms expertise.” Hostility to aristocracy widened into a general suspicion of educated sophisticates. The more learned citizens were actually less fit to lead; the best politicians came from the ordinary people and stayed true to them. Making money didn’t violate the spirit of equality, but an air of superior knowledge did, especially when it cloaked special privileges.

The overwhelmingly white crowds that lined up to hear Palin speak were nothing new. Real America has always been a country of white people. Jackson himself was a slaver and an Indian-killer, and his “farmers, mechanics, and laborers” were the all-white forebears of William Jennings Bryan’s “producing masses,” Huey Long’s “little man,” George Wallace’s “rednecks,” Patrick Buchanan’s “pitchfork brigade,” and Palin’s “hardworking patriots.” The political positions of these groups changed, but their Real American identity—their belief in themselves as the bedrock of self-government—stayed firm. From time to time the common people’s politics has been interracial—the Populist Party at its founding in the early 1890s, the industrial-labor movement of the 1930s—but that never lasted. The unity soon disintegrated under the pressure of white supremacy. Real America has always needed to feel that both a shiftless underclass and a parasitic elite depend on its labor. In this way, it renders the Black working class invisible.

From its beginnings, Real America has also been religious, and in a particular way: evangelical and fundamentalist, hostile to modern ideas and intellectual authority. The truth will enter every simple heart, and it doesn't come in shades of gray. "If we have to give up either religion or education, we should give up education," said Bryan, in whom populist democracy and fundamentalist Christianity were joined until they broke him apart at the Scopes "monkey trial" in 1925.

Lucy Jones

Finally, Real America has a strong nationalist character. Its attitude toward the rest of the world is isolationist, hostile to humanitarianism and international engagement, but ready to respond aggressively to any incursion against

national interests. The purity and strength of Americanism are always threatened by contamination from outside and betrayal from within. The narrative of Real America is white Christian nationalism.

Real America isn't a shining city on a hill with its gates open to freedom-loving people everywhere. Nor is it a cosmopolitan club to which the right talents and credentials will get you admitted no matter who you are or where you're from. It's a provincial village where everyone knows everyone's business, no one has much more money than anyone else, and only a few misfits ever move away. The villagers can fix their own boilers, and they go out of their way to help a neighbor in a jam. A new face on the street will draw immediate attention and suspicion.

By the time Palin talked about "the real America," it was in precipitous decline. The region where she spoke, the North Carolina Piedmont, had lost its three economic mainstays—tobacco, textiles, and furniture making—in a single decade. Local people blamed NAFTA, multinational corporations, and big government. Idle tobacco farmers who had owned and worked their own fields drank vodka out of plastic cups at the Moose Lodge where Fox News aired nonstop; they were missing teeth from using crystal meth. Palin's glowing remarks were a generation out of date.

This collapse happened in the shadow of historic failures. In the first decade of the new century, the bipartisan ruling class discredited itself—first overseas, then at home. The invasion of Iraq squandered the national unity and international sympathy that had followed the attacks of September 11. The decision itself was a strategic folly enabled by lies and self-deception; the botched execution compounded the disaster for years afterward. The price was never paid by the war's leaders. As an Army officer in Iraq wrote in 2007, "A private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war." The cost for Americans fell on the bodies and minds of young men and women from small towns and inner cities. Meeting anyone in uniform in Iraq who came from a family of educated professionals was uncommon, and vanishingly rare in the enlisted ranks. After troops began to leave Iraq, the pattern continued in Afghanistan. The inequality of sacrifice in the global War on Terror was almost too normal to bear comment. But this grand elite failure seeded cynicism in the downscale young.

The financial crisis of 2008, and the Great Recession that followed, had a similar effect on the home front. The guilty parties were elites—bankers, traders, regulators, and policy makers. Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve chairman and an Ayn Rand fan, admitted that the crisis undermined his faith in the narrative of Free America. But those who suffered were lower down the class structure: middle-class Americans whose wealth was sunk in a house that lost half its value and a retirement fund that melted away, working-class Americans thrown into poverty by a pink slip. The banks received bailouts, and the bankers kept their jobs.

The conclusion was obvious: The system was rigged for insiders. The economic recovery took years; the recovery of trust never came.

Ever since the age of Reagan, the Republican Party has been a coalition of business interests and less affluent white people, many of them evangelical Christians. The persistence of the coalition required an immense amount of self-deception on both sides. As late as 2012, the Republican National Convention was still a celebration of Free America and unfettered capitalism. Mitt Romney told donors at the infamous fundraiser that the country was divided into makers and takers, and those 47 percent of Americans who took would never vote for him. In fact, the takers included plenty of Republicans, but the disorganization of life in the decaying countryside was barely noticed by politicians and journalists. Christians who didn't attend church; workers without a regular schedule, let alone a union; renters who didn't trust their neighbors; adults who got their information from chain emails and fringe websites; voters who believed both parties to be corrupt—what was the news story? Real America, the bedrock of popular democracy, had no way to participate in self-government. It turned out to be disposable. Its rage and despair needed a target and a voice.

When Trump ran for president, the party of Free America collapsed into its own hollowness. The mass of Republicans were not free-traders who wanted corporate taxes zeroed out. They wanted government to do things that benefited *them*—not the undeserving classes below and above them. Party elites were too remote from Trump's supporters and lulled by their own stale rhetoric to grasp what was happening. Media elites were just as stupefied. They were entertained and appalled by Trump, whom they dismissed as a

racist, a sexist, a xenophobe, an authoritarian, and a vulgar, orange-haired celebrity. He was all of these. But he had a reptilian genius for intuiting the emotions of Real America—a foreign country to elites on the right and left. They were helpless to understand Trump and therefore to stop him.

*Trump's populism brought Jersey Shore to national politics. The goal of his speeches was not to whip up mass hysteria but to get rid of shame. He leveled everyone down together.*

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Trump violated conservative orthodoxy on numerous issues, including taxes and entitlements. “I want to save the middle class,” he said. “The hedge-fund guys didn’t build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky.” But Trump’s main heresies were on trade, immigration, and war. He was the first American politician to succeed by running against globalization—a bipartisan policy that had served the interests of “globalists” for years while sacrificing Real Americans. He was also the first to succeed by talking about how shitty everything in America had become. “These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they *are* forgotten,” he said at the 2016 Republican National Convention. “But they’re not going to be forgotten long.” The nationalist mantle was lying around, and Trump grabbed it. “*I am your voice.*”

Early in the campaign, I spent time with a group of white and Black steelworkers in a town near Canton, Ohio. They had been locked out by the company over a contract dispute and were picketing outside the mill. They faced months without a paycheck, possibly the loss of their jobs, and they talked about the end of the middle class. The only candidates who interested them were Trump and Bernie Sanders.

A steelworker named Jack Baum told me that he supported Trump. He liked Trump’s “patriotic” positions on trade and immigration, but he also found Trump’s insults refreshing, even exhilarating. The ugliness was a kind of revenge, Baum said: “It’s a mirror of the way *they* see *us*.” He didn’t specify who *they* and *us* were, but maybe he didn’t have to. Maybe he believed—he was too polite to say it—that people like me looked down on people like him.

If educated professionals considered steelworkers like Baum to be ignorant, crass, and bigoted, then Trump was going to shove it in our smug faces. The lower his language and behavior sank, and the more the media vilified him, the more he was celebrated by his people. He was their leader, who could do no wrong.

Trump's language was effective because it was attuned to American pop culture. It required no expert knowledge and had no code of hidden meanings. It gave rise almost spontaneously to memorable phrases: "Make America great again." "Drain the swamp." "Build the wall." "Lock her up." "Send her back." It's the way people talk when the inhibitors are off, and it's available to anyone willing to join the mob. Trump didn't try to shape his people ideologically with new words and concepts. He used the low language of talk radio, reality TV, social media, and sports bars, and to his listeners this language seemed far more honest and grounded in common sense than the mincing obscurities of "politically correct" experts. His populism brought *Jersey Shore* to national politics. The goal of his speeches was not to whip up mass hysteria but to get rid of shame. He leveled everyone down together.

Throughout his adult life, Trump has been hostile to Black people, contemptuous of women, vicious about immigrants from poor countries, and cruel toward the weak. He's an equal-opportunity bigot. In his campaigns and in the White House, he aligned himself publicly with hard-core racists in a way that set him apart from every other president in memory, and the racists loved him for it. After the 2016 election, a great deal of journalism and social science was devoted to finding out whether Trump's voters were mainly motivated by economic anxiety or racial resentment. There was evidence for both answers.

Progressives, shocked by the readiness of half the country to support this hateful man, seized on racism as the single cause and set out to disprove every alternative. But this answer was far too satisfying. Racism is such an irreducible evil that it gave progressives commanding moral heights and relieved them of the burden to understand the grievances of their compatriots down in the lowlands, let alone do something about them. It put Trump voters beyond the pale. But racism alone couldn't explain why white men were much more likely to vote for Trump than white women, or why the same was



true of Black and Latino men and women. Or why the most reliable predictor for who was a Trump voter wasn't race but the combination of race and education. Among white people, 38 percent of college graduates voted for Trump, compared with 64 percent without college degrees. This margin—the great gap between Smart America and Real America—was the decisive one. It made 2016 different from previous elections, and the trend only intensified in 2020.

[ *Read: The president is winning his war on American institutions* ]

The issues Trump had campaigned on waxed and waned during his presidency. What remained was the dark energy he unleashed, binding him like a tribal leader to his people. Nothing was left of the optimistic pieties of Free America. Trump's people still talked about freedom, but they meant blood and soil. Their nationalism was like the ethno-nationalisms on the rise in Europe and around the world. Trump abused every American institution—the FBI, the CIA, the armed forces, the courts, the press, the Constitution itself—and his people cheered. Nothing excited them like owning the libs. Nothing convinced them like Trump's 30,000 lies.

More than anything, Trump was a demagogue—a thoroughly American type, familiar to us from novels like *All the King's Men* and movies like *Citizen Kane*. “Trump is a creature native to our own style of government and therefore much more difficult to protect ourselves against,” the Yale political theorist Bryan Garsten wrote. “He is a demagogue, a popular leader who feeds on the hatred of elites that grows naturally in democratic soil.” A demagogue can become a tyrant, but the people put him there—the people who want to be fed fantasies and lies, the people who set themselves apart from and above their compatriots. So the question isn't who Trump was, but who we are.

In 2014, American character changed.

A large and influential generation came of age in the shadow of accumulating failures by the ruling class—especially by business and foreign-policy elites. This new generation had little faith in ideas that previous ones were raised on: All men are created equal. Work hard and you can be anything. Knowledge is power. Democracy and capitalism are the best systems—the only systems. America is a nation of immigrants. America is the leader of the free world.

My generation told our children's generation a story of slow but steady progress. America had slavery (as well as genocide, internment, and other crimes) to answer for, original sin if there ever was such a thing—but it *had* answered, and with the civil-rights movement, the biggest barriers to equality were removed. If anyone doubted that the country was becoming a more perfect union, the election of a Black president who loved to use that phrase proved it. “Rosa sat so Martin could walk so Barack could run so we could all fly”—that was the story in a sentence, and it was so convincing to a lot of people in my generation, myself included, that we were slow to notice how little it meant to a lot of people under 35. Or we heard but didn't understand and dismissed them. We told them they had no idea what the crime rate was like in 1994. Smart Americans pointed to affirmative action and children's health insurance. Free Americans touted enterprise zones and school vouchers.

Of course the kids didn't buy it. In their eyes “progress” looked like a thin upper layer of Black celebrities and professionals, who carried the weight of society's expectations along with its prejudices, and below them, lousy schools, overflowing prisons, dying neighborhoods. The parents didn't really buy it either, but we had learned to ignore injustice on this scale as adults ignore so much just to get through. If anyone could smell out the bad faith of parents, it was their children, stressed-out laborers in the multigenerational family business of success, bearing the psychological burdens of the meritocracy. Many of them entered the workforce, loaded with debt, just as the Great Recession closed off opportunities and the reality of planetary destruction bore down on them. No wonder their digital lives seemed more real to them than the world of their parents. No wonder they had less sex than previous generations. No wonder the bland promises of middle-aged liberals left them furious.

Then came one video after another of police killing or hurting unarmed Black people. Then came the election of an openly racist president. These were conditions for a generational revolt.

Call this narrative “Just America.” It’s another rebellion from below. As Real America breaks down the ossified libertarianism of Free America, Just America assails the complacent meritocracy of Smart America. It does the hard, essential thing that the other three narratives avoid, that white Americans have avoided throughout history. It forces us to see the straight line that runs from slavery and segregation to the second-class life so many Black Americans live today—the betrayal of equality that has always been the country’s great moral shame, the heart of its social problems.

But Just America has a dissonant sound, for in its narrative, justice and America never rhyme. A more accurate name would be Unjust America, in a spirit of attack rather than aspiration. For Just Americans, the country is less a project of self-government to be improved than a site of continuous wrong to be battled. In some versions of the narrative, the country has no positive value at all—it can never be made better.

In the same way that libertarian ideas had been lying around for Americans to pick up in the stagflated 1970s, young people coming of age in the disillusioned 2000s were handed powerful ideas about social justice to explain their world. The ideas came from different intellectual traditions: the Frankfurt School in 1920s Germany, French postmodernist thinkers of the 1960s and ’70s, radical feminism, Black studies. They converged and recombined in American university classrooms, where two generations of students were taught to think as critical theorists.

Critical theory upends the universal values of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationality, science, equality, freedom of the individual. These liberal values are an ideology by which one dominant group subjugates another. All relations are power relations, everything is political, and claims of reason and truth are social constructs that maintain those in power. Unlike orthodox Marxism, critical theory is concerned with language and identity more than with material conditions. In place of objective reality, critical theorists place subjectivity at the center of analysis to show how supposedly universal terms

exclude oppressed groups and help the powerful rule over them. Critical theorists argue that the Enlightenment, including the American founding, carried the seeds of modern racism and imperialism.

The term *identity politics* was born in 1977, when a group of Black lesbian feminists called the Combahee River Collective released a statement defining their work as self-liberation from the racism and sexism of “white male rule”: “The major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives ... This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity.” The statement helped set in motion a way of thinking that places the struggle for justice within the self. This thinking appeals not to reason or universal values but to the authority of identity, the “lived experience” of the oppressed. The self is not a rational being that can persuade and be persuaded by other selves, because reason is another form of power.



Lucy Jones

The historical demand of the oppressed is inclusion as equal citizens in all the institutions of American life. With identity politics, the demand became different—not just to enlarge the institutions, but to change them profoundly. When Martin Luther King Jr., at the March on Washington, called on America to “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’” he was demanding equal rights within the framework of the Enlightenment. (In later years, his view of the American creed grew more complicated.) But in identity politics,

*equality* refers to groups, not individuals, and demands action to redress disparate outcomes among groups—in other words, *equity*, which often amounts to new forms of discrimination. In practice, identity politics inverts the old hierarchy of power into a new one: bottom rail on top. The fixed lens of power makes true equality, based on common humanity, impossible.

And what is oppression? Not unjust laws—the most important ones were overturned by the civil-rights movement and its successors—or even unjust living conditions. The focus on subjectivity moves oppression from the world to the self and its pain—psychological trauma, harm from speech and texts, the sense of alienation that members of minority groups feel in their constant exposure to a dominant culture. A whole system of oppression can exist within a single word.

By the turn of the millennium, these ideas were nearly ubiquitous in humanities and social-science departments. Embracing them had become an important credential for admittance into sectors of the professorate. The ideas gave scholars an irresistible power, intellectual and moral, to criticize institutions in which they were comfortably embedded. In turn, these scholars formed the worldview of young Americans educated by elite universities to thrive in the meritocracy, students trained from early childhood to do what it takes to succeed professionally and socially. “It is a curious thing, but the ideas of one generation become the instincts of the next,” D. H. Lawrence wrote. The ideas of critical theorists became the instincts of Millennials. It wasn’t necessary to have read Foucault or studied under Judith Butler to become adept with terms like *centered*, *marginalized*, *privilege*, and *harm*; to believe that words can be a form of violence; to close down a general argument with a personal truth (“You wouldn’t understand,” or just “I’m offended”); to keep your mouth shut when identity disqualified you from speaking. Millions of young Americans were steeped in the assumptions of critical theory and identity politics without knowing the concepts. Everyone sensed their power. Not everyone resisted the temptation to abuse it.

Just America emerged as a national narrative in 2014. That summer, in Ferguson, Missouri, the police killing of a Black 18-year-old, whose body was left to lie in the street for hours, came in the context of numerous incidents, more and more of them caught on video, of Black people assaulted and killed

by white police officers who faced no obvious threat. And those videos, widely distributed on social media and viewed millions of times, symbolized the wider injustices that still confronted Black Americans in prisons and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces—in the sixth year of the first Black presidency. The optimistic story of incremental progress and expanding opportunity in a multiracial society collapsed, seemingly overnight. The incident in Ferguson ignited a protest movement in cities and campuses around the country.

What is the narrative of Just America? It sees American society not as mixed and fluid, but as a fixed hierarchy, like a caste system. An outpouring of prizewinning books, essays, journalism, films, poetry, pop music, and scholarly work looks to the history of slavery and segregation in order to understand the present—as if to say, with Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The most famous of this work, *The New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project, declared its ambition to retell the entire story of America as the story of slavery and its consequences, tracing contemporary phenomena to their historical antecedents in racism, sometimes in disregard of contradictory facts. Any talk of progress is false consciousness—even “hurtful.” Whatever the actions of this or that individual, whatever new laws and practices come along, the hierarchical position of “whiteness” over “Blackness” is eternal.

Here is the revolutionary power of the narrative: What had been considered, broadly speaking, American history (or literature, philosophy, classics, even math) is explicitly defined as white, and therefore supremacist. What was innocent by default suddenly finds itself on trial, every idea is cross-examined, and nothing else can get done until the case is heard.

Just America isn’t concerned only with race. The most radical version of the narrative lashes together the oppression of all groups in an encompassing hell of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, plutocracy, environmental destruction, and drones—America as a unitary malignant force beyond any other evil on Earth. The end of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015 and hugely influential in establishing the narrative of Just America, interprets global warming as the planet’s cosmic revenge on white people for their greed and cruelty.

[ *Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Letter to My Son"* ]

There are too many things that Just America can't talk about for the narrative to get at the hardest problems. It can't talk about the complex causes of poverty. Structural racism—ongoing disadvantages that Black people suffer as a result of policies and institutions over the centuries—is real. But so is individual agency, and in the Just America narrative, it doesn't exist. The narrative can't talk about the main source of violence in Black neighborhoods, which is young Black men, not police. The push to “defund the police” during the protests over George Floyd's murder was resisted by many local Black citizens, who wanted better, not less, policing. Just America can't deal with the stubborn divide between Black and white students in academic assessments. The mild phrase *achievement gap* has been banished, not only because it implies that Black parents and children have some responsibility, but also because, according to anti-racist ideology, any disparity is by definition racist. Get rid of assessments, and you'll end the racism along with the gap.

I'm exaggerating the suddenness of this new narrative, but not by much. Things changed astonishingly quickly after 2014, when Just America escaped campuses and pervaded the wider culture. First, the “softer” professions gave way. Book publishers released a torrent of titles on race and identity, which year after year won the most prestigious prizes. Newspapers and magazines known for aspiring to reportorial objectivity shifted toward an activist model of journalism, adopting new values and assumptions along with a brand-new language: *systemic racism, white supremacy, white privilege, anti-Blackness, marginalized communities, decolonization, toxic masculinity*. Similar changes came to arts organizations, philanthropies, scientific institutions, technology monopolies, and finally corporate America and the Democratic Party. The incontestable principle of inclusion drove the changes, which smuggled in more threatening features that have come to characterize identity politics and social justice: monolithic group thought, hostility to open debate, and a taste for moral coercion.

Just America has dramatically changed the way Americans think, talk, and act, but not the conditions in which they live. It reflects the fracturing distrust that defines our culture: *Something is deeply wrong; our society is unjust; our*



*institutions are corrupt.* If the narrative helps to create a more humane criminal-justice system and bring Black Americans into the conditions of full equality, it will live up to its promise. But the grand systemic analysis usually ends in small symbolic politics. In some ways, Just America resembles Real America and has entered the same dubious conflict from the other side. The disillusionment with liberal capitalism that gave rise to identity politics has also produced a new authoritarianism among many young white men. Just and Real America share a skepticism, from opposing points of view, about the universal ideas of the founding documents and the promise of America as a multi-everything democracy.

But another way to understand Just America is in terms of class. Why does so much of its work take place in human-resources departments, reading lists, and awards ceremonies? In the summer of 2020, the protesters in the American streets were disproportionately Millennials with advanced degrees making more than \$100,000 a year. Just America is a narrative of the young and well educated, which is why it continually misreads or ignores the Black and Latino working classes. The fate of this generation of young professionals has been cursed by economic stagnation and technological upheaval. The jobs their parents took for granted have become much harder to get, which makes the meritocratic rat race even more crushing. Law, medicine, academia, media—the most desirable professions—have all contracted. The result is a large population of overeducated, underemployed young people living in metropolitan areas.

The historian Peter Turchin coined the phrase *elite overproduction* to describe this phenomenon. He found that a constant source of instability and violence in previous eras of history, such as the late Roman empire and the French Wars of Religion, was the frustration of social elites for whom there were not enough jobs. Turchin expects this country to undergo a similar breakdown in the coming decade. Just America attracts surplus elites and channels most of their anger at the narrative to which they're closest—Smart America. The social-justice movement is a repudiation of meritocracy, a rebellion against the system handed down from parents to children. Students at elite universities no longer believe they deserve their coveted slots. Activists in New York want to abolish the tests that determine entry into the city's most competitive high

schools (where Asian American children now predominate). In some niche areas, such as literary magazines and graduate schools of education, the idea of merit as separate from identity no longer exists.

But most Just Americans still belong to the meritocracy and have no desire to give up its advantages. They can't escape its status anxieties—they've only transferred them to the new narrative. They want to be the first to adopt its expert terminology. In the summer of 2020, people suddenly began saying "BIPOC" as if they'd been doing it all their lives. (*Black, Indigenous, and people of color* was a way to uncouple groups that had been aggregated under *people of color* and give them their rightful place in the moral order, with people from Bogotá and Karachi and Seoul bringing up the rear.) The whole atmosphere of Just America at its most constricted—the fear of failing to say the right thing, the urge to level withering fire on minor faults—is a variation on the fierce competitive spirit of Smart America. Only the terms of accreditation have changed. And because achievement is a fragile basis for moral identity, when meritocrats are accused of racism, they have no solid faith in their own worth to stand on.

The rules in Just America are different, and they have been quickly learned by older liberals following a long series of defenestrations at *The New York Times*, *Poetry magazine*, Georgetown University, the Guggenheim Museum, and other leading institutions. The parameters of acceptable expression are a lot narrower than they used to be. A written thought can be a form of violence. The loudest public voices in a controversy will prevail. Offending them can cost your career. Justice is power. These new rules are not based on liberal values; they are post-liberal.

Just America's origins in theory, its intolerant dogma, and its coercive tactics remind me of 1930s left-wing ideology. Liberalism as white supremacy recalls the Communist Party's attack on social democracy as "social fascism." Just American aesthetics are the new socialist realism.

The dead end of Just America is a tragedy. This country has had great movements for justice in the past and badly needs one now. But in order to work, it has to throw its arms out wide. It has to tell a story in which most of us can see ourselves, and start on a path that most of us want to follow.

ALL FOUR OF the narratives I've described emerged from America's failure to sustain and enlarge the middle-class democracy of the postwar years. They all respond to real problems. Each offers a value that the others need and lacks ones that the others have. Free America celebrates the energy of the unencumbered individual. Smart America respects intelligence and welcomes change. Real America commits itself to a place and has a sense of limits. Just America demands a confrontation with what the others want to avoid. They rise from a single society, and even in one as polarized as ours they continually shape, absorb, and morph into one another. But their tendency is also to divide us, pitting tribe against tribe. These divisions impoverish each narrative into a cramped and ever more extreme version of itself.

All four narratives are also driven by a competition for status that generates fierce anxiety and resentment. They all anoint winners and losers. In Free America, the winners are the makers, and the losers are the takers who want to drag the rest down in perpetual dependency on a smothering government. In Smart America, the winners are the credentialed meritocrats, and the losers are the poorly educated who want to resist inevitable progress. In Real America, the winners are the hardworking folk of the white Christian heartland, and the losers are treacherous elites and contaminating others who want to destroy the country. In Just America, the winners are the marginalized groups, and the losers are the dominant groups that want to go on dominating.

I don't much want to live in the republic of any of them.

It's common these days to hear people talk about sick America, dying America, the end of America. The same kinds of things were said in 1861, in 1893, in 1933, and in 1968. The sickness, the death, is always a moral condition. Maybe this comes from our Puritan heritage. If we are dying, it can't be from natural causes. It must be a prolonged act of suicide, which is a form of murder.

I don't think we are dying. We have no choice but to live together—we're quarantined as fellow citizens. Knowing who we are lets us see what kinds of change are possible. Countries are not social-science experiments. They have organic qualities, some positive, some destructive, that can't be wished away.

Our passion for equality, the individualism it produces, the hustle for money, the love of novelty, the attachment to democracy, the distrust of authority and intellect—these won't disappear. A way forward that tries to evade or crush them on the road to some free, smart, real, or just utopia will never arrive and instead will run into a strong reaction. But a way forward that tries to make us Equal Americans, all with the same rights and opportunities—the only basis for shared citizenship and self-government—is a road that connects our past and our future.

Meanwhile, we remain trapped in two countries. Each one is split by two narratives—Smart and Just on one side, Free and Real on the other. Neither separation nor conquest is a tenable future. The tensions within each country will persist even as the cold civil war between them rages on.

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*This essay is adapted from George Packer's new book, Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal. It appears in the July/August 2021 print edition with the headline "The Four Americas."*



**GEORGE PACKER** is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He is the author of Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal, Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century, and The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America.

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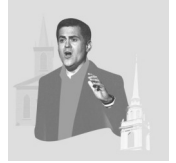
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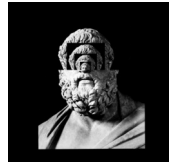
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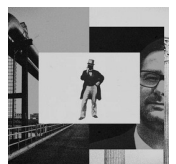
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