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▶▶ How Joe Biden Can Heal America

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Late on the night of January 6th, in the aftermath of the first violent occupation of the US Capitol in more than 200 years, 145 members of the US Congress implicitly validated the insurrection by voting to disallow Pennsylvania's certified electoral votes. The political logic underlying this shockingly cynical display is that [polls subsequently revealed](#) that almost half of Republican voters supported the siege on the Capitol while [earlier polls](#) indicated that 78 per cent of Republicans—almost 60 million Trump voters—did not believe that Biden's election was legitimate.¹ Plainly, this cannot be dismissed as a fringe phenomenon.² How can it be that a substantial fraction of the American population has become disconnected from the basic reality on which democratic governance depends? This essay seeks to provide an answer and, on that basis, to suggest the outline of a policy agenda to fulfill Joe Biden's pledge to heal America.

Once outrage subsides—and as Joe Biden assumes a Presidency for all Americans—politicians, commentators and ordinary folks need to think more dispassionately about the deep roots of what we have come to call “Trumpism”, but which actually is something far more profound. It exists in various manifestations and at various stages of

evolution throughout the Western democracies. We have to suspend the urge to be dismissive or judgmental and try to comprehend why roughly a third of US adults appear to have lost their minds and opted to live in a “post-truth” mental space. These are not by any means all racists or deplorables. They have their biases. We all do. But the great majority are decent and otherwise sensible people. What has driven them—and many of similar disposition in other countries—crazy?

Leaving aside the traditional moderate Republicans, the Trump base comprises three principal groups (with considerable overlapping among them): (1) those whose economic situation or prospects have declined, and with it their social status, (2) the Christian right, including particularly the large number for whom opposition to “abortion on demand” is the litmus test, and (3) those who believe the America they cherish is being taken away from them. Many of this third group are outright or closet racists who sympathize, overtly or covertly, with white nationalism/supremacy. Many others sincerely reject that label, but harbour a deep nostalgia for America the great in deed and values, a zeitgeist brilliantly captured by the “MAGA” logo. All three of the foregoing groups are motivated to varying extents by

a politics of grievance.

Modern, secular, urban America has little sympathy for any of these groups, whereas rural, small-town America is where they congregate either by choice or necessity. That accounts entirely for the stark geographic divide of the Red and Blue States and counties. (Even in the reddest States, the capitals, largest cities and university communities are majority Democrat and in the bluest States the rural, small-town vote trends Republican.) The pattern is replicated in the left-right divide in Canada and other Western countries. So, while aspects of the US political divide reflect American idiosyncrasies, the larger contours of the polarization have become common in Western culture.

▶▶ Mass Delusion

“Modern” life—the product of technology, secularism, and global integration (including migration of non-Europeans into white-majority countries)—constitutes an assault on, and an existential threat to, the economic circumstances, beliefs and identities of those who comprise the Trump base and dominate the new GOP. Psychologists have shown that the perception of existential threat can quickly overwhelm one’s rational faculties and produce bizarre rationalizations of beliefs which, to the rest of us, are verifiably false. The perceived source of the threat may be denied—e.g. that Biden won the election—in order to resolve cognitive dissonance, after which arguments based on conventional reason and evidence are to no avail. QAnon has become the apotheosis of this selective madness and its influence is spreading. What is really disconcerting is that the madness has morphed into a mass delusion. (There is of course plenty of precedent for mass delusions including the Salem witch hunts, investment bubbles, Nazism, etc.) In this case, the delusion has been exponentially amplified by social media, the polarization of the mainstream media, and an exceptionally effective agitator in Donald Trump. It remains to be seen whether Trump himself in exile, or [Josh Hawley](#), or some other charismatic opportunist will pick up the mantle of leadership. But someone will, and that person could well be the GOP Presidential nominee in 2024.

▶▶ The Roots of Madness

Joe Biden’s commitment as President is to heal America. But America cannot be healed until its leaders—and this includes its intellectual leaders in academia and the media—acknowledge the roots of the madness that has seized the minds of perhaps a third of its citizens. This means that the Biden Administration has first to acknowledge and then address, as much as it can, the underlying anxieties. Somehow, enough have to be led back from the irrational brink that the remainder (who will always be there) become marginalized. Acknowledgement of the root anxieties

is simply an acknowledgement of a psychological reality, not an endorsement. But here is where the politics become tricky since the argument I am making cannot be communicated in such blunt terms to either side. To most Republicans, it would be insulting; while to most Democrats, appalled by the stubbornness of Trump’s support, it would come across as rationalizing the irrational. But the alternative, as Joe Biden recognizes, is a deepening schism that threatens to tear the United States apart.

In policy terms, the group that Biden can most readily address comprises those whose economic circumstances—or especially their future prospects—have declined and consequently, also their social status. Many belong to the “white working class without a college degree” who, whether due to temperament or lack of credentials, have become alienated from the so-called knowledge-based economy. Fortunately this is a group that is now needed to rebuild America’s public infrastructure, including particularly the greening of the energy system as the whole world undertakes a decades-long transition from fossil fuels to clean electricity. Some version of a Green New Deal is actually for them, and also for the non-white blue-collar population. This would be the 21st century analogue of the factory floor that created America’s shared post-war prosperity. It is also a domestically-focussed jobs strategy that could mitigate the temptation to resort to self-defeating trade protectionism. It is a strategy that would leave the US economy more competitive, not less.

▶▶ Creating A Greener Future...for All

Can the US afford it? Of course [it can](#). Borrowed money has never been cheaper and low interest rates can be locked in for 10 years or more. The ratio of US government debt to the size of the economy (GDP) is less than half that of Japan and Japan has managed the burden without dire consequence for decades. The Republican deficit scolds—who are without peer as hypocrites—need to be ignored.³ Those who would worry about the burden of debt on future generations need to be reminded that a massive public investment in infrastructure and the greening of the economy will yield benefits precisely for those future generations.



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A bigger challenge will be to create policies that address the anxieties of those who yearn for a former America far more congenial to their culture and values. The rabble that invaded the Capitol or marched in Charlottesville was only the tip of a huge, largely silent cultural iceberg who genuinely believe themselves to be the custodians of American values and the source of its once and future greatness. Many are at least closet racists, a relic of America's original sin. But their grievance also has roots in an "us against them" tribalism that manifests in various ways in all human societies, including within racially homogeneous groups that are divided by some characteristic other than skin colour—e.g. caste in India, class in England, wealth in America. Fortunately, overt racism in the US is declining for demographic reasons: (a) as the south becomes more diverse, led by cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, Birmingham, New Orleans, Houston and Dallas and (b) as the younger generation everywhere becomes colour blind.

But this process is too slow for President Biden. He needs a transition strategy. The symbolic battleground is immigration policy. The fact is that the US, like any country, has the right and obligation to control its borders and the Obama administration was already disciplined in that regard. Trump simply amped up the rhetoric and illustrated his "toughness" with outrageous examples tailored for news clips. Joe Biden has to thread a needle. For progressives, he must obviously stop the border wall (while beefing up electronic surveillance); protect the Dreamers once and for all; and stop hounding non-violent illegals. At the same time, he should adopt a point-system for new immigrants (as Canada does); strike deals with Mexico and Central American governments to stem the flow of desperate migrants; and invest in immigration courts and facilities to provide speedy and humane adjudication of refugee claims. Because it is likely that the US will face a new surge of would-be immigrants from the south once Trump is gone, President Biden will need to make clear that the rule of law, administered fairly, will govern US immigration policy going forward. And he will have to provide both resources and rhetoric to back that up. Finally, white nationalism will be mitigated by the economic strategy noted above which will affect every corner of the country and bring new jobs and prosperity and respect to rural America—tangibles that can supplant delusions. Literally thousands of projects will provide a steady stream of opportunities to illustrate concretely, and locally, that Joe Biden really is the President for all Americans, Red and Blue, rural and urban, white and non-white.

The group most difficult to reach will be the evangelical right. Biden has few options and his dilemma would become far worse if the Supreme Court were to overturn or otherwise restrict *Roe v. Wade*. But he cannot bend an inch on the right of women to control their bodies, at least to the extent guaranteed by *Roe v. Wade*. In the longer run, the tide is running against religious fundamentalism, globally and in the US. But as that tide wanes, the secular religion of wokeness is waxing, manifested by identity

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politics and, at the intellectual leading-edge, by cancel culture. This has only intensified America's bitter and polarizing culture war. I believe that President Biden has to stand squarely in the middle between the contending cults of intolerance—Christian fundamentalism on the right and Identity fundamentalism on the left. The message has to be one of tolerance and mutual respect for views and behaviours that are within the law. The substantive inequities and injustices that have motivated movements like Black Lives Matter and equal rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity clearly need to be overcome. What the progressive left needs to accept is that the prospects for legislative remedy at the State and federal levels can be improved by a President who is prepared to lower the emotional and rhetorical temperature but not the policy commitment. The left needs to cut President Biden some slack. That should work in the short term, but contemporary fundamentalisms are symptomatic of an underlying search for a deeper meaning in life beyond consumerism and self-obsessed individualism. This unresolved search is the counter-point to the single-minded pursuit of economic growth in America and is found, to varying degrees, in all highly affluent societies. But that is an issue for another day.

▶▶ Healing America

The foregoing will of course not be the only items on the agenda of the Biden Administration and events have a way of derailing any strategy and creating new priorities in their wake. With that proviso, the new President's overarching objective must be to rebuild a center that can hold while allowing America to heal. The challenge is that the current political incentives facing many individual members of Congress are to exploit polarization, including the false belief that Biden's election was illegitimate. For now, militant non-co-operation by Republicans can be expected although Senator McConnell has lost the blocking power that he exercised so cynically to thwart Barack Obama.⁴

Fortunately, President Biden takes office with three aces in his

hand—the first being the relief of a majority of Americans that the Trump Administration has ended; the second being a Democratic majority in Congress for at least the next two years; and the third is the opportunity to preside over the suppression of COVID and the recovery of the economy and normal life. Both in deed and in rhetoric Joe Biden can be the hero who finally lifts the plague. To do so he has to bring to bear all the resources and persuasive powers of his office, first to bend the curve and then to roll out the vaccine at a rate that beats expectations.⁵ If that is accomplished, Joe Biden will have the political capital in abundance that he will need to heal America.

►► Endnotes

¹ A Pew Research poll published more than a week after the assault on the Capitol found that 75% of Trump voters continued to believe that Biden did not win the election even after the violence and the vote of most Republican Senators to certify Biden's victory.

² If merely 43,000 of the votes cast on November 3rd in Arizona, Georgia and Wisconsin had been Republican instead of Democrat, the world would have been faced with four more years of Donald Trump.

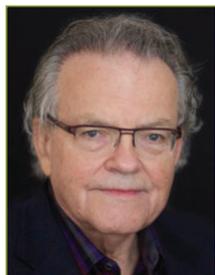
³ In fact the GOP bluff should be called. If the deficit is a concern, then the Trump corporate tax cut should be reversed. While Americans have been convinced by GOP propaganda that they are over-taxed, the truth is that total US tax as a percentage of GDP is the lowest among all highly developed countries. Apart from the military, the generally poor quality of public services in America is

the result of this political choice.

⁴ The Senate rules require a supermajority of 60% to end debate on most issues so Democrats are far from being able to bulldoze legislation through Congress. Outright repeal of the supermajority rule is unlikely but there is precedent for employing a procedural tactic—the so-called “nuclear option”—to avoid filibuster and pass a bill with a simple majority. As the name implies, there are likely to be practical limits on resort to the nuclear option. One may hope that since Senators are elected Statewide they have to balance a spectrum of interests and are less likely than House members to adopt extreme positions. Some may even be willing to put America first.

⁵ President Biden has promised 100 million doses in his first 100 days. That should be achievable, but it is a far slower average rate of inoculation than will eventually be necessary. For example, to vaccinate 80% of the US population, assuming two doses are needed, will require about 530 million doses. At a million doses a day (Biden's initial target) that would not be completed until June or July 2022. To complete the task by September this year, in time for school, requires that the vaccination rate eventually be ramped up to 3-4 million a day.

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