

A realist's case against despair

Opinion by **E.J. Dionne Jr.**

September 13, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. EDT



What in the world happened to hope?

It's hard to remember a gloomier time in our public life. So much of the analysis we read, the news we consume and the hot takes that fly by us on social media suggest that the exits from this dreadful era are blocked. We're led to believe that our country faces inexorable decline and that those who see the possibility of reform and redemption are deluded.

We owe much of this pessimism to the presidency of Donald Trump, and not just because of his blindingly obvious failures. Unlike most incumbents in our history, he has bet his political survival on the proposition that the country is living through a dystopian nightmare that only he can dispel.

Trump talks relentlessly about a crisis of crime and violence, says that our electoral system can't be trusted, and argues that those who are against him are enemies of the country itself. He promises yet more division if he is reelected, threatens his political foes with prosecution, and hints now and again that he would like to be our leader for life.

It is former vice president Joe Biden, the challenger, who has the sunny view. The heart of his argument is that there is nothing wrong with our country that can't be cured as long as we throw Trump out of office.

From the first day of his campaign to this moment, he has made the same case: We can view four years of Trump as an aberration that we can put behind us. But eight years would set us on a course from which there would be no return.

What's striking is that many who are Biden's strongest supporters and Trump's most fervent foes are deeply skeptical of the old warhorse's optimism.

There is, first, the fear that even if Biden wins the popular vote — this now seems nearly inevitable — he might lose the electoral college. And if Biden prevails there, too, it is easy to imagine Trump trying to cling to power by discrediting the result with a pack of lies about the voting process.

This, in turn, means that Trump's most fervent loyalists will never accept a Biden victory. The new president will thus take over a nation torn asunder, and the most somber pessimists predict that armed militias could threaten public order.

Less apocalyptic is the potential, thoughtfully outlined last week by my Post colleague Annie Linskey, "for post-election clashes" within the broad coalition Biden has assembled. In this view, moderates and progressives in the party will wage war over specific issues such as the shape of a future health-care program, and on the larger question of how adventurous Biden's overall agenda should be. And nobody is expecting Republicans to make Biden's job any easier.

In the face of all this grimness, I would offer a practical case for hope.

It is equally plausible from current polls to predict a close outcome or a Biden landslide. Which is to say Biden's lead could shrink or grow. An overwhelming Biden victory, which becomes more likely if he performs well in the debates, would obviate many of the problems outlined above. In particular, a Biden sweep would make Trump's fraud claims look absurd to many of his own voters.

A big Biden win would help Democrats take control of both the Senate and the House, creating a real opportunity to govern effectively. Okay, never underestimate the Democrats' capacity to tear each other apart. But confronting a pandemic and an economic catastrophe would concentrate minds. Every Democrat, from center to left, would understand that blowing it this time would cause irreparable damage to themselves and to the country.

And while the differences across the party's wings are real, they're also exaggerated. Between single-payer health care and simply expanding Obamacare, there's a lot of room for compromise. Ditto on how to combat climate change and expand access to education and training. And the economy is in sufficiently dire shape that boldness, in both a short-term recovery plan and a long-term investment strategy, could look simultaneously like realism to centrists and a "New New Deal" to progressives.

Finally, as Adam Serwer argues in a powerful and historically informed essay in the Atlantic, a majority may well exist for a new Reconstruction Era on behalf of racial justice. We're a better country than Trump thinks we are.

Hope is not a feeling. It's a virtue. We have good reason to practice it right now — and no alternative but to embrace it.

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