

Donald Trump and the Damage Done

A little part of it in everyone.

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A few days before Barack Obama left office, he invited a small group of conservative writers, all Never Trumpers, for a conversation in the White House's Roosevelt Room. The mood was dark.

The president was worried about the future of the Republican Party. We worried about the future itself. Someone mentioned the possibility of global thermonuclear war as a plausible outcome of a Trump presidency.

Nearly four years on, it's worth comparing what was predicted about the Trump administration versus what actually happened.

Among the predictions: The stock market would never recover. We'd stumble into war with North Korea or Iran. The free press would be muzzled. Vladimir Putin would rule Donald Trump through blackmail. Trump-appointed judges would dismantle the rule of law and overturn the verdict of elections. Trump would never leave office.

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None of this came to pass. Bad things happened under Trump. But nothing so bad that it couldn't be stopped by courts (such as his attempt to end the DACA program), prevented by Congress (his desire to ease sanctions on Russia), undermined by underlings (his effort to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria), exposed by the press (the child-separation policy), corrected by civil servants (his coronavirus misinformation), rejected by voters (his presidency) or dismissed by the very judges he appointed (his election challenges).

Yes, there were serious missteps in the handling of the Covid crisis. But those who would blame Trump for tens or hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths ought at least to acknowledge that a pandemic of this magnitude would have gravely challenged any president. [Deaths in the United States from Covid-19](#) (91 per 100,000 people) are slightly worse than in France (87) but better than in Britain (97), Spain (102) and Italy (107), all of which imposed harsher lockdowns and had more engaged leaders.



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All of this has convinced many of my fellow conservatives, including those who were initially hostile to Trump, that there's more than a touch of derangement to those of us who oppose him — a mixture of justified distaste for the man and his manners and unjustified fears about the consequences of his governance.

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Trump, as they see him, wasn't Mussolini II. He was mostly just Archie Bunker II — a blowhard easily kept within the four corners of our constitutional system.

But the catastrophe of Trump's presidency doesn't mainly lie in the visible damage it has caused. It's in the invisible damage. Trump was a corrosive. What he mainly corroded was social trust — the most important element in any successful society.

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I was reminded of this again reading an [extraordinary essay](#) in The Washington Post by former Secretary of State George Shultz, who turned 100 on Sunday. His central lesson after a life that spanned combat service in World War II, labor disputes in steel plants, the dismantling of segregation and making peace with the Soviets: "Trust is the coin of the realm."

"When trust was in the room, whatever room that was — the family room, the schoolroom, the locker room, the office room, the government room or the military room — good things happened," Shultz wrote. "When trust was not in the room, good things did not happen. Everything else is details."

What Shultz attests from personal experience is extensively documented in scholarly literature, too. In [high-trust societies](#) — think of Canada or Sweden — people tend to flourish. In low-trust societies — Lebanon or Brazil — they generally don't.

Trump's presidency is hardly the sole cause of America's declining trust in our institutions, which has been [going on for a long time](#). In some ways, his was the culmination of that decline.

But it's hard to think of any person in my lifetime who so perfectly epitomizes the politics of distrust, or one who so aggressively promotes it. Trump has taught his opponents not to believe a word he says, his followers not to believe a word anyone else says, and much of the rest of the country to believe nobody and nothing at all.



He has detonated a bomb under the [epistemological foundations](#) of a civilization that is increasingly unable to distinguish between facts and falsehoods, evidence and fantasy. He has instructed tens of millions of people to accept the commandment, *That which you can get away with, is true.*

Apologists for this president might rejoin that there are also examples of this form of politics on the other side of the aisle, notably in the person of [Bill Clinton](#). That's true. But it only causes one to wonder why so many of the same conservatives who vehemently objected to Clinton on moral grounds vehemently support Trump on the absence of moral grounds.

It may take Americans decades to figure out just what kind of damage Trump did in these last four years, and how to go about repairing it. The good news: no global thermonuclear war. The bad: a different kind of radioactivity that first destroys our trust in institutions, then in others, and finally in ourselves. What the half-life is for that kind of isotope remains unmeasured.

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