

CULTUREGAP

A month after the most divisive election in modern history, America remains polarised in the wake of a president who symbolised a flawed and often inequitable democracy.

WORDS AMANDA SMITH

TORN IN THE USA

It began with a few horns and turned into an eight-hour symphony. People erupting into the streets, parks and tourist attractions, abandoned by COVID-19. Although most wore face masks, there was no silencing the crowd. Not today.

“Bye Don!”, “You’re fired!” and “Love trumps hate” signs, held proudly in the air, amid American and Pride flags. The pops of champagne bottles met a sea of applause.

The news of America’s new president-elect traded social distancing for hugs with strangers, street parties with jazz bands occupying intersections, DJs on apartment steps, and “revolutions” on every corner.

Filled cars driving past were just as much a part of it. Ecstatic passengers hung out of windows, gifting the crowd enormous smiles and parting, celebratory fists in the air. Others stood peacefully watching from apartment windows, with “Make America Kind Again” bedsheets draped down the fire escapes.

After almost a year, buried in our apartments, robbed of physical human connection by COVID-19, for New Yorkers, this was doubly cathartic. The blazing sun felt symbolic, as though something had shifted, beyond the season. That things were going to get better.

I overheard someone say on the street: “I can’t think of any moment in my life when this many people share so much joy together.” This perfectly describes the intoxicating energy in New York City on November 7, 2020.

We could all agree. That day, one month ago, New York was resuscitated. But inside the joyous crowds, there was also hatred.

A knee-high Donald Trump character was set alight, igniting a loud cheer. There was the “hanging” of a life-size version of Trump, as the crowd chanted “not my president”. Trump paraphernalia was doused in fake blood. And the mob hurled eggs and screamed “New York hates you” at any Trump supporters who dared show their faces.

This President’s well-known shortcomings undoubtedly merit strong opinions. He’s a combative, arrogant, narcissist who thinks and speaks without a filter. He berates individuals, from the White House, in public ral-

lies and through 3am Twitter tirades. He inspires division and hate, instead of unifying people. He’s shattered and dismantled the political system as we know it. And his four-year term has left American citizens with more questions than answers. And much more anger.

“I don’t know how Trump still got such quite a high popular vote,” says New Yorker Daphne Lee. “I think we still have more nut jobs in this country than we imagined. Someone literally said to me: ‘If Biden wins, people who die from communist totalitarianism around the world will be more than COVID’. People think we need a dictator to fight communism or something.”

Fellow New Yorker Tarene Fung says he thought it might have been a joke when he heard that some old high school classmates had a Make America Great Again party.

“These are all teachers, too,” he says. “They’re moulding the young minds of my extremely diverse neighbourhood. If you want to support Trump, fine, but have a logical stance and be able to back up why. But no one can because there is none.”

Vin Tee, an American who lived in Sydney, believes “Trump is a symptom of a deranged society”. He says the fact that the presidential race was so close “says a lot”.

In New York, a city that welcomes all, it’s not OK to be impartial about Trump.

If the election has revealed anything, it’s how divided America still is today. Throw in COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter (BLM), and we’re at risk of reverting to a culture of segregation. But one month on from election day, Trump’s reign and demise continues to split the country in two.

It’s also challenged and hijacked Australian dreams to live in the US.

“The nation is fractured and showing the signs of the strain. It’s interesting to see how many people see Trump as a strong leader,” Victorian expat Bryan Taylor says.

“Yet, it’s fractured either way. Both sides have demonised each other to the point where, unless a viable third party comes up and the electoral college is removed, the country will grow further apart. It isn’t a functioning democracy. Modern America is failing its own citizens.”

Comedian Michael Rapaport’s stinging rhetoric, cursing Trump on Twitter, re-



ceived more than 24,700 shares and 76,300 likes. “Pack your bags, you’re out” was the nicest thing he said, amid the profanity that went viral, further stoking the social media cauldron.

Media personality Kathy Griffin revoked her apology for posting a ghoulish, image of herself holding a model of Trump’s decapitated head. In fact, she re-shared the post. After publicly condemning Trump for his hateful rhetoric, Griffin is playing the same games she’s fighting. Excused as art aimed at “making noise”, hers is a theatrical display that symbolises an enraged culture.

From a macro perspective, the line is blurring between ultraconservative Trump followers and the Far Left, when it comes to fuelling division. While everyone has a right to their own voice, what’s this really telling us about where the US is, as a functioning society?

Victor Hanson, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution – a conservative public policy research think-tank based in California – believes part of the Trump rage is coming from structural societal issues.

“When you’ve got an \$80,000 student debt and a worthless degree, you can’t get a good job or buy a house, get married or have kids... they shift all their angst onto the system,” he says. “These are the most disenfranchised people.”

University of Connecticut Department of Sociology lecturer Jordan McMillan talks about the phenomenon of what’s unfolding from the perspective of

how we’re socialised. She’s interested in how inequality is produced and reproduced through social institutions.

“It’s a kind of mental gymnastics,” she says. “It’s easier to double down on a few things that align with your values and throw out the rest of what a leader says, rather than admit you made a mistake and change your mind. People don’t like to be seen to be wrong.”

“We’re essentially responding to the environments in which we were raised. We’re socialised into an identity and deviating from that can be really confusing. So, we double down on what we know.”

McMillan says Americans are conditioned into thinking there are just two identities: Liberal and Conservative. Democrat or Republican. “But what people don’t realise is this isn’t the case. For example, ‘leftist’ is different from Liberal,” she says.

“But unless you have access to the tools to tap into, to start to be critical of yourself, it’ll probably be a long time until you question what you’ve always thought.”

“America isn’t racist because of Trump. Sure, Trump is racist, and he incites violence, but America’s race problems have existed since white settlement. We seem to believe that racism was fixed but it’s not.”

She says it’s important for Americans to be able to discern between the two stances: on the one hand that all of America’s racial problems are because of Trump; and the other that we’ve lived in a system of oppression since our ancestors were here.

“There’s a lot of talk about how we need



OPINION



Logical thought offers Australia plenty of capital

Mark Dapin

Many years ago, I wrote a newspaper column jokingly arguing that Canberra was not a world-class city and offering unsolicited (and largely useless) advice about how the national capital might improve.

Surprisingly, that was all it took. Canberra immediately began to become more exciting and interesting.

This is known as “the power of the press”.

During lockdown, I grew to crave my once-regular research trips to the National Library of Australia and the Australian War Memorial, my two favourite Canberra institutions.

As soon as it became (almost) certain that I could travel interstate without fear of having to stay there for the rest of my life, I arranged trips to the cities I had missed the most – Canberra and Melbourne.

Unfortunately, because I am an idiot and had forgotten how to buy tickets, I booked both journeys for the same days.

Luckily, I realised this (that is, my partner noticed) the night before I was due to leave for Canberra, so I only lost a small amount of money.

They put me up in a hotel called The Avenue (which is opposite an apartment block called “The Avenue”, and you can probably guess the confusion this caused). On the ground floor of The Avenue is the Marble & Grain steakhouse and bar which, with its polished timber furniture and shiny brass bar rails, looks exactly like a bar should. I went down there every night to drink beer and look out of the window at people walking past. People who I didn’t know. People who weren’t my immediate neighbours. People who I’d never even seen before. That alone was bliss.

It was a joy to be back in a hotel. I had forgotten some of the things I’d missed the most – like the sheet turned over to reveal chocolates on the bed; like those thumb-sized bottles of shampoo and body wash, purpose-designed to be stolen; like rain showerheads that are bigger than my head; like the unbelievable convenience of having a bed, a bar, a restaurant and a gym all in the same building.

I worked for a few hours a day in the National Library and used my breaks to visit the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). I’m not usually much moved by portraits, but I could barely drag myself out of the NPG. It had been almost a year since I had looked at a new (to me) painting.

I was surprised how many of the portraits depicted people I had met, and mildly annoyed that there wasn’t a picture of me.

After all, I was the man who transformed the nation’s capital with a single newspaper column.

The NPG exhibition “Pub Rock” documented the Australian pub rock scene in the 1970s and 1980s (I guess the clue was in the title). I love pubs and rock, and was shaken almost to tears by mosh-pit memories and the realisation that it was nine months since I’d been to a gig. I could’ve grown a baby in that time. If I were a woman.

But, for me, the highlights of the pub-rock exhibition are Howard Arkley’s sulky portrait of Nick Cave (which I didn’t know existed) and Lewis Morley’s controlled and confronting nude group shot of Sherbet, of all people.

Outside the galleries, my favourite sight was the view of the Australian War Memorial from Old Parliament House. The Art Deco memorial building, framed by Mount Ainslie, manages to appear both sombre and uplifting, which is a lot to ask of a view.

I must have been feeling emotional, because I was also moved by the general feeling of Canberra. Walking among the grand old civic buildings, I was gripped by a sense that “public service” was inherently a good thing (once again, I suspect, the clue is in the title). I don’t know my Australian history as well as I should (considering I’m a historian) but it seems to me that Canberra signifies, in part, an attempt to build a capital city – and, by extension, a nation – on rational lines.

And my adopted nation has never seemed so rational as today, when we’re among the few virtually COVID-free nations in the world. Once again, anyone can travel to Canberra without risk because everyone, more or less, has acted rationally.

I don’t mean to sound big-headed, but I suspect the fact that we have (maybe) beaten the pandemic is also due to my relentlessly rational columns.

So, come on, Canberra. Surely it’s time for a portrait of Mark Dapin to grace the wall of the NPG. You owe me.

to meet in the middle and, while this is nice in theory, there’s no halfway when it comes to issues of human rights. What I think’s going on with people celebrating exuberantly is the excitement that the conversation is closer to being acknowledged.”

What is often accepted as “democracy” is deeply inequitable. The “vote blue, no matter who” mindset is a push towards change. It’s an understanding that the idea of democracy itself is flawed. “Therefore, social upheaval is equality in process,” McMillan says. “And, getting on board with Joe Biden is easier, mentally and emotionally.”

Whether it’s Bernie Sanders, a Democratic Socialist or Joe Biden, a Centrist Democrat, it’s the Democrat’s call to arms to unite that fed into the “anything and anyone but Trump” movement.

The sociological concept “collective effervescence” might begin to help explain the violence-provoking behaviour on the streets. When big groups come together, this can inspire behaviour that individuals might not otherwise partake in, alone.

“Whether it’s a Trump rally with all the supporters arming themselves, or the people in the streets, cheering as they burn effigies, the energy is stronger because of the group process. They almost create their own atmosphere,” McMillan says.

A “herd mentality” that generates a powerful sense of belonging, and, therefore, confirms an identity. “It’s a sort of electricity is shared within a group of like-minded people,” she says.

Yet, the Donald Trump effigies didn’t

only light up the east and west coast. It happened in other countries, such as Mexico and the UK. Political figures are traditionally set afire in Lewes, England, and a giant inflatable “baby” Trump was a spectacle in recent years.

Society and culture are polarised by politically manipulated media (and yes, social media). We are told to discern between “fake news” and what’s real. Told to address how we use it and respond to it.

Families and relationships are being torn apart by this 2020 vote.

The degree to which Trump is hated by many is not necessarily the point here. But the phenomenon does serve as an opportunity to delve into the reasons why one individual evokes such deep rage. To look beyond the foibles of the character and see what it reveals in us all. Trump has jolted the world awake and given people the chance to recalibrate, not just the political system, but society as a whole.

It’s time to start conversing with our neighbours. Find out what they think actually makes America great.

While there’s only one Trump, he isn’t the first in history to shake up the system. And he won’t be the last. As experts such as McMillan remind us, this stands as an opportunity to reach a hand-out to those who see the world in different ways. To have now, quite difficult conversations, to drop the finger-pointing and find our common human ground again.

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New Yorkers took to the streets to celebrate Joe Biden’s election victory. Photograph: David Dee Delgado/Getty Images