

Why Are We Here?

A Dispatch from the Nadir



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“You don’t want to hear the truth - I know you’re upset, but we just going to upset you more.”

-Fannie Lou Hamer, 1968

It wasn’t the Electoral College. It wasn’t gerrymandering, or even voter suppression. America was undone this week by the disease that sits in our national DNA – white supremacy. From its very beginnings our country has either embraced white supremacy or made compromises to accommodate it. Right there in the first Article of our Constitution is the 3/5 Compromise, the agreement to count enslaved Black people as 3/5 of a person to accommodate the interests of those whose livelihood was premised on extracting free labor from enslaved Black people.

The compromises of our first Constitution led this country on an inexorable path towards fracture and potential destruction. The Civil War was the result. 600,000 Americans dead. A nation divided. A President assassinated. And then in Reconstruction, the hope and promise of a new America.

But the betrayal of Reconstruction - sanctioned and legalized by the Supreme Court - was

yet another compromise with the forces of white supremacy. Black people once again bore the brunt of that compromise – in sharecropping, convict leasing, lynching, wealth theft, and degradation. The historian Rayford Logan described this period “the nadir.” Generations of Black people to this day bear its effects. I was warned by writer Isabel Wilkerson after Trump won the 2016 election, that we were entering another nadir. She was right.

Her words set me to studying the nadir. And I am reminded that despite the very real challenges we faced, it was also during the nadir that the Harlem Renaissance was born, that Black people built institutions - like the NAACP, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (the first Black labor union), the Schomburg Center, sororities and fraternities, clubs and Black churches and colleges, that sustained us and birthed those whose children would become the activists and lawyers of the Civil Rights Movement. Fueled by the hard work, creativity and vision of their parents and grandparents, those descendants demanded in the courts and in the streets, that this country turn away from the corrosive poison of white supremacy.

Great progress was made. But we have been in the throes of a backlash to those advances for 50 years.

And so, we are here because far too many in this country have believed that a healthy democracy can accommodate white supremacy. Last night Americans learned what I have insisted for some time – we can either compromise with white supremacist ideology or have a healthy democracy. Not both.

To my dismay a majority of white voters chose to accommodate white supremacist ideology and its attendant patriarchy, rather than pursue inclusive democracy. Indeed given Mr. Trump’s explicit, coarse, ugly expressions of racism and misogyny, we must accept that a majority of white Americans in fact have chosen *to embrace* white supremacy rather than the promise of a multi-racial democracy. The choice between darkness and light in this election could not have been clearer. And the choice that was made by a majority of white voters is unmistakable.

There will be a great deal of analysis about the past decade and about this election. But I believe that we must begin with hard truths about the power of racism and its grip on this

country. It lives in our national DNA. And until we are prepared to take aggressive measures to contain it, we will never be able to protect and secure democracy in America from its devastating effects.

And so, there are five things I believe we must prioritize in our thinking:

- The U.S. will now be run by a white supremacist authoritarian President and a political party that has chosen to accept that brand as its identity;
- There will be real danger for marginalized people in this country, for migrants, for the press, for universities, for foundations, and for those living in states and cities disfavored by this regime;
- The rule of law failed. Trump should never have been permitted to run for President again. The failure to impeach and convict him after January 6th set us on this path. Every senator who voted against his conviction bears responsibility for what will happen to this country. Every hesitation in prosecuting Trump for crimes that were easily ascertainable in 2021 was mistaken. We were at DEF CON 1, and instead treated it as a non-emergency. Refusing to impeach and convict Trump, and refusing to prosecute him for crimes already revealed the weakness of our democratic institutions. The Supreme Court's refusal to honor the explicit provisions of the 14th Amendment designed to protect against the return of insurrectionists to elected office was the nail in the coffin;
- Our spirits will be assaulted in the coming months – by coarse and crude language, by open displays of violence, of privilege, and of unchecked power. We may feel as if we are occupied by a hostile force. This feeling will combine with our grief to weaken and exhaust us. We must hold onto the things that refresh our spirits – time with family, music, art, nature, hobbies, food. We must protect our core;
- The consequences for the world will be vast - in global environmental degradation, in unchecked imperial expansion across the globe, in famine, wars, and economic devastation. You can leave this country (and I fully support those who take that course), but you will not escape the effects that the fall of the U.S. to authoritarians will visit on the globe.

Now we must plan and regroup. As Black people, we will have particular conversations and

strategies we must employ to ensure our survival in this country – a 400-year project that remains perilous. We will fight and we will survive.

If this is the nadir, then it is planting time. Building our own institutions, theories and strategies, making art and seeding ideas that can be carried forward in the coming years. Yes, the harvest will come. But for now, we plant.

For white people who reject white supremacist ideology and believe in democracy, for Asian Americans, Muslim-Americans, Native Americans and for Latinos (a majority of whom voted against their own interests - a feature of white supremacy), for members of the LGBTQ community - this will be incredibly difficult for you as well. I encourage you to determine now that you will not acquiesce, and think about how to preserve and protect your own integrity, safety and communities.

We will all work together across race and class and religion I believe, in this effort. Perhaps not this week. But we will. In the coming weeks I encourage all of us to reach out across race, sex, religion, and send a text or note to those friends, colleagues and acquaintances who you know stand on the side of, decency, democracy and equality. Hold onto those bonds. They want to see those bonds broken most of all.

Most importantly we must resolve that we will not acquiesce in our commitment to protecting our dignity, our dreams, our families, and our future. We will need to fight. Not every battle, but enough of them that we have a platform on which to build.

Yes, this is America. It always has been. I remain committed to imagining and creating a new America. A true multi-racial democracy centered around equality and justice. I believe it lies just over the hill. I do not need to see it in my lifetime to know that it can happen. That it will happen. But I – we - do need to do the work to lay its foundation. And there's no turning back.

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