

OUR COLUMNISTS

# THE NAÏVETÉ BEHIND POST-ELECTION DESPAIR

*What sort of reply can one offer to a person who has already decided that the world ends here?*

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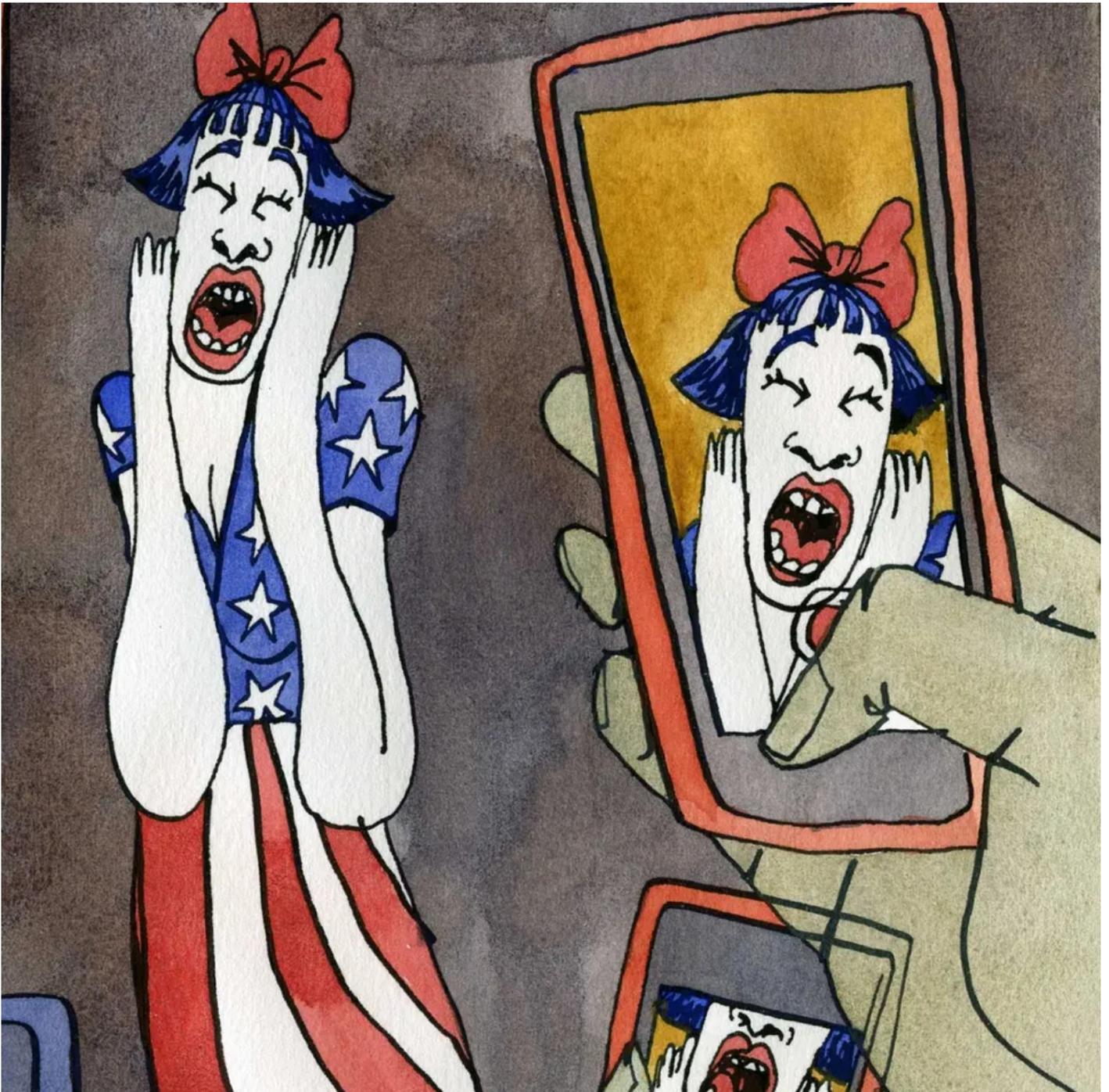


Illustration by Trevor Shin

... **P**ostmortem is meant to make sense of tragic occurrences and yet, at bottom, it is designed to soothe. “What went wrong?” is a perfectly sane response to something gone wrong, and the postmortem helps relieve that question of its daunting open-endedness. Secure in its knowledge, forensic in its detail, it is an account of past events which comes complete with quiet warning for the future. Contrary to the title of the long-running TV program, people prefer solved mysteries—or at least a passable theory of the case. There’s a reason we too often recall that first line Joan Didion dispensed in “The White Album”: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” If the best thing is for the worst to not have happened, then the next best thing is to be told how and why it did in terms that are familiar, dulling shock with explication.

This genre of opining—in social posts, op-eds, newsletters, network appearances, essays, and podcast episodes, by professionals and amateurs and amateurish professionals alike—has flooded forth since Donald Trump won, and won decisively, yet another purported contest for our nation’s soul. Alongside the self-styled punditry, pop-culture enthusiasts have petitioned for anything that may pass as counterprogramming, namely in requests for the superlative “comfort watch.” A comfort watch, unburdened foil to the “guilty pleasure,” is not necessarily so-named for what it *is* but, rather, for what it provides; it is called upon to relieve the viewer of her frontal lobe and all activity therein when the going gets too unappealing to bear. As the election postmortems have turned toward expected idioms—comfort idioms, if you will, such as “identity politics,” “gender war,” “working class”—streaming services may well register an uptick in views of feel-good sitcoms such as “The Office,” “Parks & Recreation,” and “30 Rock.” Tapping into both of these complementary modes of coping at once, Steve Burns, the founding host of the children’s program “Blue’s Clues,” posted his own post-election digest to TikTok last Wednesday. The video shows Burns brandishing two coffee mugs—one for each of you, the gesture implies—before leaning against a paddock fence; ambient noise from the autumnal landscape supplies the only sound, other than an audible exhale from Burns, who is otherwise silent, staring into the distance, every now and again glancing into the lens, nodding with a slight purse of his lips. The video concludes just shy of a minute. “Didn’t even say anything. Just cried,” one comment reads. The verified account for Calm, an app delivering guided meditations, left a note on the video punctuated with a blue heart emoji. A user going by Emilee wrote, “I bet you didn’t think you’d still be raising us all these years later, Steve, but thank you for still

being here.”

There is no telling Emilee’s age, or that of the tens of thousands of other users who’ve left comparably teary replies, but their tokens of gratitude smack of something millennial. My generation, particularly those on the junior end, has earned a reputation for arrested development, for allegedly tossing aside ritual benchmarks of adulthood, thumbing our noses at its expected stability by turning it into a feckless gerund—“adulging.” Yet diagnosing the generation with a widespread inability to deal seems far too pat to explain the current outpouring, given the prevalence of temper tantrums thrown by the middle-aged. (Anyone privy to the goings-on on Facebook can attest that this condition is not delimited by age.) Not the provenance of any particular cohort, the perceived puerility of our era might better be attributed to the social Internet’s having made itself the mirror through which our self-image is rapidly reconstituted. That some portion of the Internet would find succor in a fifty-nine-second TikTok video of a former children’s-television host standing in silence says as much about which forms of expression receive promotion online as it does about the emotional maturity of Web users. The social Internet, as it’s been carved up by the leviathans of tech, gamifies displays of feeling, rewarding the appearance of emotional reciprocation while providing relatively little in exchange. It creates the conditions that have encouraged liberals to fall apart on the Internet over a political loss that has seemingly dispossessed them of the ability to imagine moving onward. “What do we do now?” is a common refrain, tossed off like a rhetorical question. As one post on X, formerly Twitter, read, capturing the mood, “sorry but how is anyone meant to do anything anymore. how are people meant to just carry on like this isn’t one of the worst days in western history.”

It's not the surprise that unsettles me—on the contrary, it is irritating how swiftly the yes-no-maybe-so band of professional prognosticators has reassembled, with the benefit of hindsight, to deliver the stern news that the election results were always inevitable. Nor do I mean to take issue with the fear—the intentions of the President-elect are indeed ghastly every which way, and the future is, as it ever was, unknown. What I have found disconcerting is a manner of expression that would have you believe the reelection of Donald Trump is something singular, revealing—finally!—America's previously unseen heart of darkness. And “dark” is precisely the favored image—“dark times,” “dark days,” untroubled by this nation's habitual ascription of “dark” and “light”—the same “metaphorical shortcuts” placed under inspection in Toni Morrison's landmark study “Playing in the Dark.” The recourse to symbolism, a form of saying without saying, treats as collective a sentiment that is, in fact, rather alienating—for what sort of reply may be proffered to the person who has already decided that the world ends here? There is a certain performativity to this, by which I don't mean the degraded, present-day usage of the term but the one that the philosophers J. L. Austin and Judith Butler intended when they defined it—a speech act that creates reality. Public displays of hopelessness reinforce stuckness, the sense that there is nothing to be done. It doesn't help that a number of voters who'd hung their hopes on Harris are now directing their ire toward fellow-voters (Latinos and Muslims and antiwar protesters, oh my!) in lieu of Democratic leadership. Despite the fact that we've seen this very outcome before, we have once again managed to interpret a U.S. election as exceptional.

Certainly, the Democratic campaign for President did little to help its partisans understand America in the “context of [...] what came before,” as the losing candidate's axiom went. In August, I attended the Democratic National Convention, where a multiracial roster of stars boasted of the Party's near-bicentennial vintage—never mind how the Party that contributed to the nadir of U.S. race relations had occupied itself until the nineteen-fifties or so. The speeches impressed in their continuity of message, if continuity is impressive, and dissipated like vapor, premised as they were on the negatory message that this candidate was neither Trump nor Biden. The most affirmative and venturesome case made regarded the right to abortion—and thank goodness—which some Democrats have historically been skittish about defending by its name—to all of our detriment, I would say. Other issues with teeth were left outside of the arena and, the campaign surely hoped, therefore out of mind. You would never know, for instance, that the past four years had seen two of the largest protest movements in U.S. history—you would not know what those movements were protesting, for the D.N.C. appeared to be uninterested in letting their causes be heard. Those in attendance, with “U.S.A.!” chants at the ready, seemed fine with that. There are certain Americans who, becalmed by competency, articulate their politics as

a search for the grownup in the room. They do so while seemingly unaware of what putting politics in such terms implies about themselves. I fear that their helpless daze will chart a path toward retreating from the shows of grit that were required of us before this election and will now be needed as surely as ever.

Four years ago, the events of 2020, sourcing rage in part from Trump's win in 2016, facilitated a political awakening among a class of people unaccustomed to think of themselves as political outside of a ballot box. These people, professedly shaken alert by the murder of George Floyd, and what felt like the brutal, bipartisan apathy of the state, were supposed to be seizing the moment to find community, to read those anti-racist books they bought, to cling to a future worthy of their present striving. Why does it seem as if these same Americans—having pinned their dreams on a candidate who bent over rightward, whose promises hinged on not moving backward while glossing over the realities of the present—are once again at a complete loss for orientation in the world, as though the teat has been taken away? Grow up, I want to say, perhaps uncharitably. Now is the time for an adult politics, a politics that is hardy and literate, drawing its reserves not from the lulling precincts of self-care but from urgent struggles ongoing. Go! And, if not, by God, get out of the way. ♦