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(Why) America's a Bright Spot in a World Going Dark

America's Silent Majority Woke Up and Roared: We Won't Go Backwards Anymore



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There's been exactly one good thing that happened this miserable, eerie, dystopian decade: America came back to life. Also, I got a dog. But that's more about me, I suppose. It's a remarkable thing — and while I've discussed it comparatively recently, next to a world slinking backwards in fascism's warped embrace, I want to dig in a little — because it's something that the world, right about now, is admiring: America's emerging, again, as a world leader.

So: how did it happen? And will it continue? Because, of course, even America's hardly out of the deep, dark woods yet.

When they write the textbooks about the early 21st century, they'll go like this. Around the turn of the century — earlier, in some nations — the world fell into the classic political-economic downward spiral that the great John Maynard Keynes discovered. His remarkable discovery came in the ashes of World War II. Why had the world headed to such a bitter, brutal, all-encompassing war? Keynes found that the global economy had gone wrong — and nations beset by stagnation, debt, hyperinflation, the panoply of economic maladies, had turned to fascism, in despair, rage, and fury. The

dogs of war were thus unleashed, even if that metaphor's a little unfair to my tiny buddy Snowy.

Once that cycle begins, Keynes found, it's hard, if not next to impossible to stop.

Sudden descents into impoverishment, downwards falling living standards colliding with expectations of upwards mobility — these provide a widespread loss of faith and trust. In everything. Institutions, governments, each *other*. Neighbours and friends and colleagues turn on one another, at the behest of demagogues, who point the finger at scapegoats, in bids to gain absolute power, often on atavistic crusades for “pure” blood and “lebensraum,” living room for the “master race” — which, as we'll see, encompasses many tragedies in history.

It was a startling discovery. Keynes had uncovered something like an Iron Law of History. Fall into this trap — and the only way out is through, on the other side. But in the way stand mouldering graves. Keynes' fundamental goal therefore was to prevent this vicious spiral from ever emerging again. And even more remarkably, the world back in those days, in the ashes of the World War, was *listening* to minds like his. Hence, institutions like the World Bank and IMF and UN came to be — all these foundations of modernity, and we can surely debate if they've done their job, but that's not quite the point here — were created to prevent the vicious spiral of fascism from ever recurring. By thwarting the foundational ill of poverty dead in its tracks.

Now. Don't get lost in “yeah, but!” See the point. The world was rebuilt based on Keynes' great discovery. For the first time in human history — all of it — we had genuinely *global* institutions. Later, they'd come to be demonized as “globalist” — but only a fool, or a privileged Westerner obsessed with fantasies of racial genocide, really, would think of a bank for the world that invests in its poorest to prevent eruptions of violence that lead to war as a *bad* thing.

Our entire world was remade on Keynes Iron Law: poverty breeds fascism, and once sudden, sharp declines in living standards come to happen, then it's too late. The only cure is prevention.

Now that's a lot of context. Sorry about that. But I want you to really and fully understand *why* what America just did is so remarkable. *It broke the chains of history*. I said that recently, but now I want to dig into it.

What happened in America? Well, the classic setup for fascism did. First, incomes began to stagnate — way back in the 70s. By the 2010s, the once-famous American middle class was, for the first time in history, a minority. Alarm bells went off for folks like me. Along came Trump, as if right on cue, scapegoating Mexicans, Latinos, women, the LGBTQ, and so forth, for the woes of the “real” American. And for a while, America was spellbound.

But then *something remarkable happened*. The midterms did. And there, Americans rejected Trumpism, resoundingly. By now, we can interpret pretty accurately what Americans voted for in the midterms, and when you think about what that is, it's somewhat special. Why do I say that?

Americans in the midterms voted for something seemingly...just...ordinary...by yesterday's standards. The age-old combination, at least in Americans terms, of economic conservatism, and social liberalism, if you want to put it in the most concise way. But these aren't yesterday's terms. On the ballot was every flavor, and I mean every last possible Baskin-Robbins meets Five Guys toppings extravaganza of lunacy — theocracy, authoritarianism, conspiratorialism, outright violence, bigotry, hate, all wrapped up in a gleaming, shining bow of overt fascism.

That's not a joke. The Trumpist candidates openly flouted all the above. From bigotry to outright supremacism. From denying election results to endorsing violence. To regurgitating the Big Lies over and over again, and embellishing them more and more absurdly each time.

And America chose...the ordinary, humdrum combination of social liberalism and economic conservatism...*over* all that. At the crucial juncture — where democracy could break for good, and take the future with it, or the average person could pull it back from the brink. Facing that choice, Americans overtly, vehemently rejected fanaticism, extremism, Trumpism — and chose the combination of moderate views that they'd grown up with, more or less.

That is a major, *major* accomplishment. It's hard to overstate how much so. You see, even when Americans voted conservative, they rejected the Trumpist slate so much so that Trump is now a spent figure — even his announcement of running again for President was met with outright scorn. Americans said: *enough is enough*. We need to

get back to reality again, to fixing this country, to trying to have a future. The spell was *broken*.

Now. Put that in the context of the Iron Law of History that Keynes discovered. Once the vicious cycle starts, it's almost impossible to stop. Hence, the foundation of huge institutions, spanning the globe, to prevent the cause of violence at its root — perhaps one of the greatest leaps in human history, which had never seen anything like a “world bank” or “international fund” before.

But social laws aren't like laws of physics. Laws of physics are precise and inviolable. Social laws? *They can be broken*. And when they do, *history changes*.

What America's just taught us is something, therefore, remarkable. That it's possible to pull back from the brink of fascism. That Keynes' Iron Law isn't inviolable. A society *can* go sane again.

Let me add a little detail to that picture. It might seem like nothing special — Americans voting for economic conservatism and social liberalism. But let's examine a little more deeply what a Big Deal it really is. The fanatics and lunatics on the Trumpist side offered a *completely different agenda*. No plan, no vision, nothing — beyond hate, scapegoating, and violence. The conflict *was* the point. Americans were to get their kicks from picking on groups the Trumpists defined, basically, as “subhumans,” in the classic fascist mold — and that was all politics was *for*.

But in endorsing both social liberalism and economic conservatism, Americans *profoundly rejected all that*. They said: hey, this is ridiculous. Really — it's garbage. We need a) a plan to fix the economy, b) civility in our society again, c) less hate, not more, and d) more rights for people, not fewer. All of that can be summed up in a single line. Americans said to Trumpism: *we're not going to go backwards*.

Consider how women's rights won across the country, undermining the legitimacy of the Trumpist Supreme Court, which now looks not just childish, but something that the American people largely have *contempt* for. Consider how that put a sudden stop to the agenda of taking away whole other groups' rights — LGBT, minorities of all kinds. It was commonly thought that the Supreme Court would come for gay marriage shortly — before the midterms, anyways. Now? It might still try, but only at the price of losing

whatever tiny shreds of credibility it has left with Americans, who sent a very loud, clear message: *we won't go backwards*.

At the same time, endorsing economic conservatism sent a loud, strong message, too — one against fanaticism. What did Trumpists offer Americans, economically speaking? To be precise, *nothing*. They had no economic agenda — none — just as Trump didn't, beyond building walls that didn't work and scapegoating friends like Europe. Americans rejected that approach wholesale, for and because of what it was: nihilism. They said: we need an actual plan to fix this economy. We all know it's broken — and just hating on some poor innocent folks? *That's not going to cut it*.

And so in the economic context, Americans went back to what they know best, which is old shibboleths like “fiscal responsibility” and so forth. That's OK. It's true that at this juncture in history, nations need investment like never before — otherwise, good luck, and enjoy the mega-storms and fires and floods that take down every last critical system societies have. It's even true that Biden's approach to the economy — building chip factories, planning to make America a net exporter again — *is smart*. Americans wanting an actual plan for the economy — not just vitriol and hate — is a good thing, and if attitudes keep heading in this direction, soon enough, they'll come around to the notion of investment, too.

Now. Let me connect all those dots. Why is it that the vicious circle of fascism is so hard to stop once it starts? Well, because it whirls like a gyre, gathering a momentum and force and fury all its own. And pretty soon, almost nothing can withstand it.

Let me be even more precise. I've discussed some of the institutions already, that get perverted — the process goes like this. Economy stagnates, falls into a depression. People grow scared, confused, then angry, furious. Demagogues point at powerless scapegoats. Society soon enough gets consumed in a kind of glorious, thrilling mania of ritualized purification — “Make Us Great Again!!” But there's one institution in all this that's absolutely critical: the development of a silent majority.

You've heard the term before, but perhaps now, you're in a position to really understand it at a visceral level. What happened in Germany? Well, as the Nazis rose, *the majority was famously silent*. This is what Arendt's insights, her obsession, really, was about: how could a whole country be cowed into silence, amidst such horror? Her

conclusion, famously, was that silence paved the way for assent. Soon enough, social norms changed, and it wasn't enough to be silent — one had to be a willing, eager participant in the project of cleansing, of “lebensraum,” in the crusade for the “master race.”

Look around the world today. What do you see? *Silent majorities*. How did a nation like Iran end up this way? The majority fell silent, after the revolution, and the fanatics did their worst. In China, today, there are protests — and that makes headlines, because the majority is dead silent much of the time. The Islamic world was once very different — until the fundamentalists marched in, as majorities fell silent.

But this problem of a silent majority today goes even further than that, really. It's afflicting some the last place in the world it should: Europe's mature social democracies. In Italy and Sweden, parties with neo-fascist roots are literally in the heights of power — and curiously, those societies are altogether too silent about this Very Big Problem. In Britain, the majority's now turned against Brexit, as the nation faces a shocking, catastrophic fall into Neo-Victorian poverty — almost 20% of kids in London going hungry — and yet, there's pin drop silence from it. The scale of the problem of the silent majority is *immense*.

How does a majority end up silent? It ends up *silenced*, is the answer to that question. It was another set of great minds of the 20th century, Orwell and Brecht, who gave us the answer to that question. If you want to silence a majority — intimidate it. Punish those who speak out. Have ears and eyes everywhere. Control every last interaction. Make even thinking the wrong thing a crime. Build a Stasi, an SS, a Gestapo. Divide society up into the “humans” and the “subhumans,” and make it the former's job to enslave and oppress the latter. Reward those who do with fine uniforms and absurd titles and a little bit of gold tassel here and there. Elevate the most violent, brutal, and ignorant. Flood the zone with propaganda and Big Lies. Take away everyone's voice. *Job done*.

That's the formula that's been employed in time-honored tradition around the world. Morality polices beat women for not wearing the right thing, or not saying the right thing, or being in the wrong place. In Britain, if you're critical of Brexit, bang, you're blacklisted — the Big Lie that it's Great is still the only thing that can be spoken, even if people know it *is* one. In Europe, silent majorities are watching in horror as the far

right takes control of their polities, drowning out voices of sanity in an explosive deluge of hate and ignorance.

This, too, is why control of the web is so contested at the moment. What, really, is the point of buying up global comms platforms, even if it bankrupts you — and them? It's hardly “free speech” — it's taking *away* voices. Letting the most hateful and ignorant and violent intimidate the rest is precisely the principle by which majorities go silent. If you wanted to give the far right a Really Big Christmas Present, well, you'd give it a way to create silent majorities everywhere, which is where Twitter's heading right about now.

Now. That's a lot. So let me tie it all up. America's majority *did* indeed go silent. Remember how a hush fell across the nation as Trump's abuses escalated? Maybe not you and me, but certainly, society grew quiet, to the point that there was a deafening silence. I don't mean street protests and the like — I mean that people who should have spoken up *didn't*. Silence in the face of terrible abuses became the norm. People looked the other way at things like “family separations,” ignoring the fact that even the last living Nuremberg Prosecutor called these crimes against humanity. That's not condemnation — it's context.

Because it's for precisely that reason that what happened next is so remarkable. America woke up. It roared. Enough is enough. We will not not go backwards.

You see, it's perfectly understandable, and even OK, in a way, that America developed a silent majority — that's what Keynes' Iron Law *predicted*. The surprising part, the singular part, is that the majority *stopped* being silent. That old Law was broken — and history *changed*. Doesn't happen often. Almost *never* happens. For it to happen to a nation like America, which sets the course for democracy globally — it's a Big, Big Deal.

Now. None of that is any guarantee. About what happens next. It doesn't mean that Americans have to or will or are going to inevitably *keep on* breaking history's chains. Could they go and elect a figure like DeSantis? Sure, anything's possible, and we'll discuss that in days to come. Trumpism's not done by a longshot — there are still millions upon millions of Americans who back the fanatics and lunatics.

But for now, the accomplishment is real, it's meaningful, and it's *big*. America just changed how history's supposed to work. Its silent majority woke up and roared. We won't go backwards. No more hate, no more spite. No more Big Lies — we know they're nonsense. We want a democracy, and that means being a decent, civilized society, to begin with. Lead us forwards — or else get out of the way.

Umair

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