



IDEAS

America Is in Denial

Too many Americans are blithely dismissing threats that could prove cataclysmic.

By Mitt Romney



Paul Spella / The Atlantic; Getty

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About the author: Mitt Romney is a Republican senator from Utah.

Even as we watch the reservoirs and lakes of the West go dry, we keep watering our lawns, soaking our golf courses, and growing water-thirsty crops.

As inflation mounts and the national debt balloons, progressive politicians vote for ever more spending.

As the ice caps melt and record temperatures make the evening news, we figure that buying a Prius and recycling the boxes from our daily Amazon deliveries will suffice.

When TV news outlets broadcast video after video of people illegally crossing the nation's southern border, many of us change the channel.

And when a renowned conservative former federal appellate judge testifies that we are already in a war for our democracy and that January 6, 2021, was a genuine constitutional crisis, MAGA loyalists snicker that he speaks slowly and celebrate that most people weren't watching.

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What accounts for the blithe dismissal of potentially cataclysmic threats? The left thinks the right is at fault for ignoring climate change and the attacks on our political system. The right thinks the left is the problem for ignoring illegal immigration and the national debt. But wishful thinking happens across the political spectrum. More and more, we are a nation in denial.

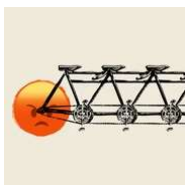
I have witnessed time and again—in myself and in others—a powerful impulse to believe what we hope to be the case. *We don't need to cut back on watering, because the drought is just part of a cycle that will reverse. With economic growth, the debt will take care of itself. January 6 was a false-flag operation.* A classic example of denial comes from Donald Trump: "I won in a landslide." Perhaps this is a branch of the same delusion that leads people to feed money into slot machines: *Because I really want to win, I believe that I will win.*

Bolstering our natural inclination toward wishful thinking are the carefully constructed, prejudice-confirming arguments from the usual gang of sophists, grifters, and truth-deniers. Watching angry commentators on cable news, I'm reminded of H. L. Mencken's observation: "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong."

When entire countries fail to confront serious challenges, it doesn't end well. During the past half century, we Americans have lived in a very forgiving time, and seeing the world through rose-colored glasses had limited consequences. The climate was stable, our economy dwarfed the competition, democracy was on the rise, and our military strength made the U.S. the sole global hyperpower. Today, every one of those things has changed. If we continue to ignore the real threats we face, America will inevitably suffer serious consequences.

What clears the scales from the eyes of a nation? Pearl Harbor did. 9/11 did. A crisis can shake the public consciousness. But a crisis may come too late for a course correction that can prevent tragedy. The only cure for wishful thinking is leadership. Winston Churchill emboldened a complacent Britain and rallied the world. Abraham Lincoln held the Union together. Ronald Reagan shook us from our malaise. Lech Wałęsa inaugurated a movement that brought down the Iron Curtain. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired us to "believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality." And Volodymyr Zelensky's stunning display of courage—"I need ammunition, not a ride"—showed us what real character looks like.

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President Joe Biden is a genuinely good man, but he has yet been unable to break through our national malady of denial, deceit, and distrust. A return of Donald Trump would feed the sickness, probably rendering it incurable. Congress is particularly disappointing: Our elected officials put a finger in the wind more frequently than they show backbone against it. Too often, Washington demonstrates the maxim that for evil to thrive only requires good men to do nothing.

I hope for a president who can rise above the din to unite us behind the truth. Several contenders with experience and smarts stand in the wings; we intently watch to see if they also possess the requisite character and ability to bring the nation together in confronting our common reality. While we wait, leadership must come from fathers and mothers, teachers and nurses, priests and rabbis, businessmen and businesswomen, journalists and pundits. That will require us all to rise above ourselves—above our grievances and resentments—and grasp the mantle of leadership our country so badly needs.
