There was a loser on election night. It was America

We still do not know who won the presidential election. But we do know who is the loser: the United States of America

We have just experienced four years of the most divisive and dishonest presidency in American history, which attacked the twin pillars of our democracy — truth and trust. Donald Trump has not spent a single day of his term trying to be president of all the people, and he has broken rules and trashed norms in ways that no other president ever dared — right up to Tuesday night, when he falsely claimed election fraud and summoned the Supreme Court to step in and stop the voting, as if such a thing were even remotely possible.

'Frankly, we did win this election,' Trump declared, while millions of ballots remained to be counted in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona and Nevada.

'We'll be going to the US Supreme Court,' Trump added, without explaining how or on what basis. 'We want all voting to stop.'

We want all voting to stop? Really?

But if Joe Biden wins — and we may not know for days — it may be by just a sliver of votes in several key battleground states. Although he'll likely win the popular vote, there will be no landslide, no overwhelming majority telling Trump and those around him that enough was enough: Be gone with you and never bring that kind of politics of division back to this country again.

'Whatever the final vote, it is already clear that the number of Americans saying, "Enough is enough" was not enough,' said Dov Seidman, an expert on leadership and author of the book 'How: Why How We Do Anything Means Everything.'

‘There was no blue political wave,’ he noted. ‘But, more importantly, there was no moral wave. There was no widespread rejection of the kind of leadership that divides us, especially in a pandemic.’

We are a country with multiple compound fractures, and so we simply cannot do anything ambitious anymore — like put a man on the moon — because ambitious things have to be done together. We can’t even come together to all wear masks in a pandemic, when health experts tell us it would absolutely save lives. It would be so simple, so easy and so patriotic to say, ‘I protect you and you protect me.’ And yet, we can’t do it.

Trump’s white minority America

This election, if anything, highlighted the fault lines. The president, using many different dog whistles during the campaign, presented himself as the leader of America’s shrinking white majority. It is impossible to explain his continued support, despite his unprecedented poisonous behaviour in office, without reference to two numbers.

Nothing has happened, even if Biden wins, that suggests Republicans will fundamentally rethink this political strategy that they perfected under Trump.

The US Census Bureau projects that by the middle of this year, non-whites will constitute a majority of the nation’s 74 million children. And it is estimated that by sometime in the 2040s, whites will make up 49 per cent of the US population, and Latinos, Blacks, Asians and multiracial populations 51 per cent.

Among many whites, particularly white working-class males without college degrees, there is clearly a discomfort with the fact, and even a resistance to it, that our nation is in a steady process of becoming ‘minority white.’ They see Trump as a bulwark against the social, cultural and economic implications of that change.

What many Democrats see as a good trend — a country reckoning with structural racism and learning to embrace and celebrate increasing diversity — many white people see as a fundamental cultural threat.

Trumpism has conquered the GOP

And that is fuelling another lethal trend that this election only reinforced.

‘Many Republican senators and congressional representatives — like Lindsey Graham in South Carolina and John Cornyn in Texas — won by hugging Trump,’ said Gautam Mukunda, author of ‘Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter.’ ‘That means that Trumpism is the future of the GOP.’

‘The tactically unique thing about Trumpism is that it never even tries to get the support of the majority of Americans. So the GOP will continue with the strategy of using every legal, but democratically deeply harmful, way to control power even though most Americans vote against them — like the way they just crammed through two Supreme Court justices.’

That means all the stresses on the American system of government will continue to grow, Mukunda added, because in our antiquated electoral system, Republicans theoretically can control both the White House and the Senate despite the desires of a large majority of the American people. ‘No system can survive that kind of stress,’ he concluded. ‘It will break at some point.’

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The loss of the working class

But Democrats have a lot to rethink, said Michael Sandel, a professor at Harvard and author of ‘The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good.’

‘Even though Joe Biden emphasised his working-class roots and sympathies,’ Sandel told me, ‘the Democratic Party continues to be more identified with professional elites and college-educated voters than with the blue-collar voters who once constituted its base. Even so epochal an event as a pandemic, bungled by Trump, did not change this.’

I confess that the hardest conversations I had Tuesday night were with my daughters.

‘Democrats need to ask themselves: Why do many working people embrace a plutocrat-populist whose policies do little to help them? Democrats need to address the sense of humiliation felt by working people who feel the economy has left them behind and that credentialed elites look down on them.’

Again, while Biden made small inroads with working-class voters, there

seems to be no huge shift. Maybe because many working-class Trump voters not only feel looked down upon, but they also resent what they see as cultural censorship from liberal elites, coming out of college campuses.

The better angels of our nature

As Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review, wrote in an 26 October essay, 'Trump is, for better or worse, the foremost symbol of resistance to the overwhelming woke cultural tide that has swept along the media, academia, corporate America, Hollywood, professional sports, the big foundations, and almost everything in between.'

'To put it in blunt terms,' he continued, 'for many people, he's the only middle finger available — to brandish against the people who've assumed they have the whip hand in American culture. This may not be a very good reason to vote for a president and it doesn't excuse Trump's abysmal conduct and maladministration.'

I confess that the hardest conversations I had Tuesday night were with my daughters. I so badly want to tell them that all is going to be OK, that we've been through bad patches as a country before. And I hope that will turn out to be the case — that whoever wins this election will draw the right conclusion that we simply cannot go on tearing one another apart.

But I could not, in all honesty, tell them that with any confidence. I am certain 'the better angels of our nature' are still out there. But our politics and our political system right now are not inspiring them to emerge at the scale and speed that we so desperately need.

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