

## **America is not, it turns out, better than this**

Nov 9, 2016 by Dylan Matthews, Vox.com

In 2010, President Barack Obama installed a new rug in the Oval Office, featuring five quotations along its perimeter. Four are from past presidents, the fifth a paraphrase by Martin Luther King Jr. of the 19th-century abolitionist Theodore Parker: “The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, but It Bends Towards Justice.”

Today, Donald Trump won the presidential election. He did not necessarily disprove that adage. But he did remind us that there are kinks in the arc.

Parker and King had a point. Over the span of decades, centuries, the momentum in the US and the rest of the developed world is toward economic abundance, greater living standards, and gender and racial equality. One election, even one as momentous as this, cannot change that.

But lives are lived day to day and year to year, not century to century. The arc of history is of no comfort to the family, protected today by President Obama’s executive action, who will likely face deportation under President Trump. It’s of no comfort to the Muslim child who will face bullying and mockery from white Christian peers under the implicit encouragement of the president of the United States. It’s of no comfort to Jewish Americans bombarded by pro-Trump trolls telling them they belong in ovens. It’s of no comfort to the black teenager who knows that when New York boys who look like him were wrongly accused of rape, Donald Trump demanded New York state kill them.

It’s of no comfort to the innocent Muslims abroad whom Trump has promised to torture, and against whom he’s promised to inflict collective punishment, killing anyone who’s so much as a familial relation to a terror suspect. It’s of no comfort to American allies in Europe, who, whatever else happened — even during the Bush administration — knew that they could count on us to fulfill our NATO obligations, and now have no idea if they can.

**It’s easy to treat election results as abstract, as sports matches where the red team won and the blue team lost but they shake hands at the end and we all get along. It’s never true, but it’s tempting. It relieves us of the enormous weight of being responsible, as an electorate, for our own governance.**

**That is a tremendous burden made weightier by the fact that the stakes really are extraordinarily high. People will see their lives changed forever. People will be ripped from their homes. People will be made to feel like strangers in their own country. Trump’s election is a promise of irreparable harm to the most vulnerable communities in our nation.**

**The sharpest pain of the Trump victory comes from its suddenness. No one, not even Nate Silver or the Republican-favoring RealClearPolitics, saw this coming. Everyone projected a map where Clinton won. If there’d been a split in the models, or if the polls had suggested Trump was actually the favorite, America would’ve had time to prepare. It wouldn’t mitigate the horror of his election at all, but it would have made emotionally processing it less wrenching.**

**But the call for Trump is painful, too, because we were supposed to be past this — and for the last eight years we were past it.**

From 2009 to 2016, things were not perfect, but the bent was decidedly for justice, at least justice as conceived of by Obama and the majorities that elected him. Since Obama took office, LGBTQ Americans have won the right to serve in the military and marry the people they (we) love. Some 20 million people have gained health insurance from the Affordable Care Act, and more than 91 percent of Americans have coverage. The number of US ground troops in Iraq has plummeted

from nearly 150,000 to about 5,000. After a deplorable uptick in deportations early in his presidency, Obama pivoted and issued executive orders protected millions of undocumented immigrants.

Things weren't perfect. The economic recovery was too slow. Too many were still in poverty, still uninsured. And, lord knows, law enforcement in this country remains appallingly indifferent to the lives of black Americans, young men especially. And, forebodingly, much of this agenda was liable to repeal should Republicans take the presidency. As they just did.

But little by little, some great inequities were being chipped away at. Hell, economic inequality even started to fall as Obama raised taxes on the rich and, through Obamacare, launched a major new redistribution program for the lower and lower middle classes.

Moreover, the demographic future of America held the promise of keeping this momentum going. The coalition that elected Obama, underpinned by massive support from black and Latino communities, was only going to keep growing. Even as the white share of the population fell, college attainment would continue to rise, so more Democratic-leaning college grads would be around.

This wouldn't guarantee endless wins, but it would, many hoped, force the Republican party to seriously compete for Hispanic and black votes so that the parties could again reach equilibrium with roughly equal bases. If they didn't do that, their white base would continue to fade and the party would be obsolete.

This is a victory built on racial demagoguery

After the 2012 election, the conservative-leaning analyst Sean Trende raised one potent counterargument. Obama won, he claimed, in large part because a lot of white voters simply didn't show up. If a Republican nominee could mobilize them and get them to turn out, the party could wage a comeback without fixing its problems with black and Latino voters.

This is Trump's electoral strategy in a nutshell. Trump turned off Latino voters to an unprecedented degree. But he also mobilized a shocking number of white voters, particularly less-educated white voters. And that was enough to overcome his extreme unpopularity among black and brown Americans. He turned the electorate a whiter shade of pale than anyone expected, and then reaped the dividends.

I don't know the way out. I don't know that anyone does.