

America, The Incredible Disappearing Country

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Americans celebrating Independence Day last week did so amidst levels of domestic discord unprecedented in their lifetimes. With the media establishment openly scoffing not merely at the “founding fathers,” who could stand to be removed from their pedestals once in a while, but at the Declaration of Independence [itself](#) and even at the [notion](#) of declaring that independence, Americans who never thought of themselves as patriots were nevertheless placed on the defensive. One need not believe in “my country right or wrong” to bristle at the idea that said country shouldn’t exist. But would-be defenders of the American Way are finding themselves increasingly at a loss for words. What does America actually stand for now that the “freedoms” once guaranteed its citizens are rapidly fading into the rearview mirror?

The New York Times led the parade of mainstream outlets sneering at America on its birthday, posting a sarcastic [video](#) showing the US’ poor performance against other developed countries on metrics like education and healthcare. But as usual, the Times left out the most important parts — the parts that would implicate it as guilty in the full-on plundering of the American dream. The Fourth Estate — the self-appointed watchdog of the people’s freedoms — was bribed with CIA steaks to lie down while craven opportunists dismantled the country and left a second-rate replica in its place. The Times went one better, actually aiding and abetting the neocon warmongers who lied the US into war — in [Iraq](#), but also in [Syria](#), [Libya](#), and, they hope, Iran. For the Times to complain now that the country, out \$6 trillion thanks to the “War on Terror” it enabled and cheered at the top of its lungs, is broke and broken, is hypocritical in the extreme.

Bill of rights, or bill of goods?

Freedom of speech, so important to the national identity it leads the Bill of Rights, has been so vilified in the media that the very notion of “defending free speech” has come to be associated with the extreme Right in establishment reporting. This is no accident, of course — truth is the first casualty of war, and anyone who speaks it has been told in no uncertain terms that they are next on that casualty list. The looming extradition of Julian Assange is a warning to all adversarial journalists and publishers that they are no longer protected by the laws that once enshrined press freedom in the country’s heart, and even those who never set foot in the US can be treated as disposable if they oppose its imperial project. The internet, once a refuge for those silenced by the bought establishment organs, has been quietly scrubbed of those same troublemakers thanks to private corporations doing the government’s dirty work. And the only group more enthusiastic about the police state than the government itself is the clique of Big Tech bandits that receive fat government contracts to enable it.

Private corporations can get away with a lot that governments can’t, even beyond the legal

restrictions on the state imposed by the Bill of Rights. Thanks to “free market” orthodoxy, regulation of the private sector is considered borderline criminal, *un-American* even, allowing companies to do whatever they want — financially, legally and ethically. And Americans have a certain reverence for successful corporations that they have never had for their government. They were livid when they learned their government was spying on their phone calls and emails through the NSA’s StellarWind program, but when it’s Amazon doing the spying through an Alexa “smart” speaker, they not only don’t mind — they’ll pay \$100 for the privilege.

Increasingly, corporations *are* the intelligence services. At least a [quarter](#) of American intelligence work is done by private contractors, most of whom work for 5 [companies](#). The CIA has run off Amazon servers since 2014, while the DHS is rolling out an ultra-Orwellian new biometric [database](#) that will allow agents to cross-reference facial scans, fingerprints, DNA, and even social relationships(!) — using Amazon servers. Amazon is [competing](#) with Microsoft to host the entire Defense Department computing infrastructure in a process riddled with conflicts of interest. Even as the #Resistance flings around the word “fascist” with gusto, they never seem to apply it where it fits — to describe a system in which large corporations work hand in hand with an authoritarian state to suppress dissent and perpetuate the (myth of) national greatness.

Nor is the First Amendment the only one to go AWOL when most needed. The Fourth Amendment, protecting Americans against unreasonable search and seizure, was gutted by the PATRIOT Act under the reasoning that if the terrorists truly hate us for our freedoms, it’s best to just be safe and chuck those freedoms altogether. What the post-9/11 police state started, civil asset forfeiture exacerbated, institutionalizing the practice of confiscating the possessions of individuals merely suspected of committing a crime. While the Supreme Court [decided](#) earlier this year that the procedure violated the Constitution’s prohibition against excessive fines, police departments have already found a way around that problem — they simply classify the desired property as “[evidence](#),” allowing them to hold it in the station indefinitely and, after four months, sell it.

The right to a speedy and public trial was destroyed for good under the watchful eye of Obama, whose 2011 National Defense Authorization Act [allowed](#) indefinite detention of Americans without charge or trial around the world. Someone clearly got a chuckle out of having a president who convinced voters he would close Guantanamo instead take the model global. Meanwhile, overcrowded courts and backlogged public defenders mean the Sixth Amendment is violated as often in practice as in letter, with innocent defendants urged to plead guilty just to get out of jail with a conviction that will follow them the rest of their lives — often not knowing they have any other options, let alone a constitutional right to them. Likewise, protection against excessive fines and bail has been superseded by systematic greed. Predatory courts have learned that offering impoverished defendants alternatives to jail like electronic monitoring can be just as lucrative as civil asset forfeiture, without the bad press — even if the target is eventually found innocent, he still has to pay to have the monitor removed, and if he doesn’t keep up with the payments mandated by the extortionate contract he signed to keep himself out of [prison](#), he ends up there anyway.

Cruel and unusual punishment, meanwhile, has been renamed “enhanced interrogation” and embraced by unreconstructed thugs. Leaked vetting documents from Trump’s cabinet selection process revealed that “opposition to torture” was actually [considered](#) a “red flag” among those being considered for administration positions, suggesting the US has learned

nothing from the horrors of the Bush years and Abu Ghraib. Or perhaps it has — the US' "War on Terror" and the torture it enabled have been a terrorist recruiter's wet dream, [quadrupling](#) the number of extremist Salafi Islamic militants since 2001 and ensuring a constant supply of propaganda-ready enemies.

So what's left?

Americans still have the right to vote and the right to bear arms, but the first is a bad joke and the second we've primarily turned against ourselves. [Suicides](#) are at an all-time high, part of a phenomenon commentators have termed "deaths of despair" when combined with steep rises in deaths from alcohol and drug abuse, both of which are also at record or near-record highs. The pursuit of happiness has been replaced by the pursuit of oblivion. And given the future spread out before us, it's not difficult to understand why.

Millennials and Generation Z are confronting an even wider gap than the previous generation between their expectations — the Shining City on a Hill conservatives unironically insist the US is, the example the rest of the world supposedly envies and wants to emulate — and reality. More than ever, Americans coming of age are finding it impossible to square the crippling debt, decaying infrastructure, impossible expenses, and absence of basic services that characterize their own experience with the propaganda they've internalized since their first day in school.

Whether they blame themselves for failing to measure up or blame the system that sold them a bill of goods depends on their programming. Americans are taught to think of poverty as punishment for personal shortcomings, a Calvinistic safeguard against socialist sentiment taking root in the working classes, but traps have been set even for those who realize the problem is larger than themselves. Too many fall for simplistic scapegoat-based explanations of the US' problems: on the Right, immigrants and foreigners are blamed for stealing jobs without so much as a glance for the private equity firms and CEOs who actually shipped those jobs overseas. On the Left, the entire white race is presumed responsible, ensuring a working class that should be united is instead divided along racial lines, reenacting centuries-old oppression.

Even those who have managed to eke out a position of economic comfort are plagued by a nagging awareness that their country is not what it seems, but most are unwilling to peek behind the façade and admit something has gone drastically wrong with the whole American experiment. Instead, they keep their panic in check with the politically amnesiac view that it's the fault of the current inhabitant of the White House. Orange-Man-Bad and Obama-the-Secret-Muslim are two sides of the same coin: these figureheads, not decades of neoliberal leprosy, are blamed for the country's misfortunes.

What we once understood as "America" has been packaged off and sold, and not even to the highest bidder — just the best-connected one. In its place has arisen a series of gated communities that require a certain income level for entry. Those who do not meet the restrictions — "You must make this much money to matter" — are relegated to the few dilapidated public services that remain, the leftovers too unappealing to privatize. Flint's water system, Washington DC's metro, Stockton's police force, Puerto Rico's electrical grid. The middle class that might once have relied on these services has been erased, literally and figuratively — robbed of their assets during the crash of 2008, they have been written off as irredeemable as "middle class" was itself [redefined](#) as six-figure incomes. Meanwhile, private companies, unfettered by regulation in Milton Friedman's free-market wet dream,

can do everything the government can't. The state of Alabama [signed](#) a law last month allowing schools and churches to operate private police forces, opening the door to Blackwater (or Xe, or Academi, or whatever bad press has forced it to change its name to now) operating in the US with the full complicity of the government.

The Pentagon is so overrun by contractors like Blackwater doing the jobs the military is no longer capable of doing that it [admits](#) it doesn't know how many of them are lined up at the government trough, but in 2016 three quarters of US forces in Afghanistan were [contractors](#). Which isn't so strange — the Pentagon doesn't know (or care) where most of its [money](#) goes, because there's always more where that came from when you're the world's reserve currency. America's once-mighty military-industrial complex — the last heavy industry standing post-NAFTA — has been picked over by [predatory](#) monopolies to the point where despite unprecedented levels of military spending, America can no longer compete on the global stage. The F-35 — the most expensive fighter plane ever produced — performs so [poorly](#) Washington has to [threaten](#) its allies with sanctions to get them to buy it (and presumably stash it in the back of the closet), while Russian and Chinese missile developments have rendered the US' multibillion dollar aircraft carriers a flotilla of overpriced sitting [ducks](#). Even Big Tech — the last great hope for American capitalism — is quietly [migrating](#) to Israel, sucking up subsidies from both US and Israeli governments and laughing all the way to the bank.

All the US can still "make" is deals — Wall Street gets fat on Main Street's misfortunes. When the mortgage bubble popped in 2008, financiers turned to student debt, packaging and marketing loans as "Student Loan Asset Backed Securities" (SLABS). Over the last decade, as [SLABS](#) have become a \$200 billion market, the total amount of debt held by American students has more than doubled, surpassing \$1.47 trillion. It's no coincidence that college [costs](#) more than twice what it did 20 years ago. Student debt is even more attractive than mortgage debt, because it can't be forgiven or dismissed through bankruptcy, and its bearers are too young when they sign the papers to fully comprehend that they may never pay it off.

Colleges have turned students into "investments" with exploitative income-sharing [agreements](#) in which the student agrees to give a percentage of their future income to the school after graduation in order to guarantee loan payback, a model uncannily similar to indentured servitude (and, perhaps unsurprisingly, developed by Milton Friedman). Debtors' prisons are back with a vengeance, too — SWAT [teams](#) and US [Marshals](#) are arresting people over unpaid student loan debts and predatory court fee systems have widened the pool of potential "criminals" the state can count on as a renewable financial resource. Broke municipalities are so excited when private prison corporations like GEO Group come knocking that they willingly sign agreements [pledging](#) to keep the facility a certain percentage full, offering their citizens up on a silver platter to appease their new corporate overlords.

What's the government to do when there's no "America" left to sell? How do you define yourself when you've sold your ideals, your heavy industry, your technological advancements, your [land](#), and even your citizens? The American dream has always somewhat resembled a fairytale, and that has been part of its persistent attraction. People fleeing war-torn countries or economic wastelands believed they would live happily ever after if they just made it to the United States. But there was once something, however flawed, to back up the fantasy. Now, Americans celebrating their country's independence are hard-pressed to find any traces of it left. No wonder we're setting off

more [fireworks](#) than ever — nothing banishes an existential crisis like a big explosion.

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