America has turned blue: Should Canadians trust them again?

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America has turned blue: Should Canadians trust them again?

Is America working through some stuff, or just returning to the mean?

Line Editor

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wide road with vehicle traveling with white dome building

Canadians cannot help but watch the U.S. midterms with mixed feelings: uncertainty, trepidation, glee, and even cautious optimism. The repudiation of the Republicans may prove a fatal political blow to U.S. President Donald Trump, and the authoritarian populism that has consumed American politics over the last decade. The results are particularly welcome in most of Canada, which has weathered the brunt of Trump's threats, ranging from economic coercion, punitive tariffs, and trade wars. There is no question that America's heel-turn has profoundly damaged the bilateral relationship between the two countries - traditionally among the closest in the modern world.

Further, that change has fundamentally altered Canada's politics, and self-conception, mostly for the better. This is a country that is more open toward acknowledging its problems and taking itself more seriously as a direct result of a U.S. foreign policy that increasingly looks as if it seeks to vassalize its closest friend and neighbour.

So, is there room to embrace a bit of quiet optimism that the midterms will mark the beginning of the end of Trumpism and all its works; or does Canada need to continue to stand on guard for a true north strong and free?

Your Line editors can't agree.

So, they're going to argue. Because that's what they do.

Presenting the case for optimism: Jen Gerson. Pessimism: Matt Gurney.

Let's begin.

Gerson: I'm going to start this fight by bounding the case for optimism just a little bit. I don't think this is over. I don't think all is forgiven. I don't think we can look at the results of the midterms and simply assume that Donald Trump and the forces that put him in power are an anomaly or a blip. The President's hold on power over two terms is and ought to remain a warning sign to Canada, and to all of America's allies. There is something transactional, avaricious, and authoritarian intrinsic to the country's nature. Many of the Great Power forces that are undermining what we once assumed was a durable Western liberal democratic order are still very much in play. And, more worryingly, we have very good reason to be concerned that American

institutions are no longer up to the task of resisting any of this, nor of defending the fundamental values upon which American economic, military, and cultural dominance has traditionally sustained itself.

But, I don't think the midterms are an anomaly, either. I don't believe Americans are, as a people, too far gone. I think most of them - at least those outside the current U.S. administration - still wish to see themselves as Good Guys, as the heroes of a broader moral order, even if they might disagree vehemently about how that heroism asserts itself both domestically, and abroad. And I think that desire will prove deeply corrosive to the kind of amoral and transactional imperialism that Trump and Trumpism is seeking to impose on the world.

Is that too much to conclude from a Democrat sweep that was broadly rooted in dissatisfaction with higher costs of living? Maybe. But I'm not so sure that it's a simple thing to extricate values from material consequences of abandoning those values. Or, as the kids would say, America is starting to Find Out.

Tariffs proved to be radically unpopular: the American people were able to recognize a tax grab by a different name. Threatening Canada ultimately made life worse for ordinary American people, and they responded.

For Canada, we've shown that we can resist American domination effectively, if we choose. And Americans demonstrated that they still retain the capacity to choose a different path for themselves; they were able to vote in an election that was not totally undermined by either gerrymandering or violence.

My final note of optimism rests in history. Weak and short-sighted people are the ones who tend to be overawed by the superficial and aesthetic strength projected by authoritarian regimes. However, in the long run, power that is exercised by fear is a brittle thing. By comparison, systems that are free and democratic are messy, exhausting and often inefficient, but they are durable, precisely because they are rooted in processes that produce real consensus. The free are always slow to get going, but once we go, we won't be outdone. Is the fact that Canada has, by all accounts, credibly outmanoeuvred America, 10 times its size, in the ongoing trade war - that U.S. officials now appear to be pushing for an easy resolution - not some evidence of this maxim?

Once fear breaks, it breaks heard. The midterms are not the end of America's flirtation with authoritarianism, but it may be the beginning of the end of the fear that will sustain it.

Gurney: I'll stipulate that all of that is possible. I do think Jen is being optimistic, but I'll be generous and grant that it's a plausible theory of the case. She could be right. I hope she is. I'll also meet her where she is on a different point - I also like Americans and think your typical American is good. To be honest, I probably like the median American more than the median Canadian. There's a snooty and priggish streak in us that's often absent from them, and I don't claim to be immune from it myself.

But I'm the guy making the pessimist's case here, and I'm lucky enough to have drawn the assignment that fits my view anyway. So here's what I'm taking from Tuesday: nothing. Zero. Zip. I conclude nothing from it, at least as it concerns Canada and, by extension, the rest of the world. I think the Americans voted against a party and a government and, despite his claims, a president, that they had concluded (correctly) was working against their interests. And I don't think the slightest thought went into what this ought to mean for any of us.

Jen probably remembers how, after the general election two years ago, The Line adopted "The Americans have a right to choose their own destiny" as something of a mantra. Or maybe a coping mechanism. Whatever you want to call it, it was true then, and I think it's true now. What has been shattered, for me, is two particular bits of faith in the American people and its processes.

The first is that the Americans care about, or are even aware of, the uniquely vital global role that they chose to take on after the Second World War. Our format here today doesn't suit a full historical summary, but suffice it to say, after the war ended in 1945, the United States' political class recognized that the war had shattered the pre-existing world order. The great powers that dominated the world in 1939 were either effectively destroyed or, in the unique case of the British, triumphant but bankrupt. The Americans concluded, and I think they were correct, that America's choices were to withdraw to something closer to their historical isolation, or dramatically increase their role in global politics, to supplant the capitalist and/or democratic empires that were no longer able to function in their traditional roles. Had they chosen the latter, the American leaders knew, that was likely to result in the Soviets expanding as much as they wanted. America, thankfully, chose the former, and the world trusted them to do it. We sometimes lose sight of how remarkable that trust was, and how much America's history as a (more or less) non-imperial power played into that.

This was not charity. This was to America's enormous benefit. They truly did lead the world. And then, in the last decade, they just ... lost interest. I can understand some of the why - I really can. But what I still struggle to accept is how little awareness there seemed to be among Americans how much better off they were living in the world they'd built. America pulling back as it has from the world stage isn't just a betrayal and abandonment of allies. It is, first and foremost, a recklessly suicidal act of geopolitical self-harm. And I don't think they know that. I'm still not sure they know that.

I don't know how anyone is supposed to take them seriously again.

The second point, I can make more briefly. Once again, I agree with Jen - the average American is lovely. But there is an unfortunate but I think now undeniable element of just rank hypocrisy and immaturity in the U.S., as a political unit. In many ways, the Americans have generally been better model citizens than is the case across many democracies. They've had a thriving political culture, high rates of volunteerism and charitable donations, etc. I had once dared hope this might have hinted at a degree of maturity as democrats (small-D, of course). As it turns out, a great many of them, and primarily the ones who'd claim ad nauseam to believe in a higher being and live according to a divine standard, looked at a narcissistic windbag serial adulterer and notoriously unethical business operator and said ... you know what? We like this guy. And then, even after that ended badly in 2020 - and it was the American people who decided that, not just my opinion - by 2024, enough of them had forgotten all they'd learned, and decided to give it another go. With a bigger margin of victory!

This is one of those things that, once seen, cannot be unseen. Modern America is a deeply unserious nation. I don't think it was always so, but it is now. And growing up, or growing up again, is going to take decades. I think we should wait on that before declaring all is forgiven. Because there's no map covered in big blue arrows all pointing left that gives me any faith that tens of millions more of these guys wouldn't hand power right back to Trump or his party if they believed for a second they'd save a dime on a gallon of gas. All that happened on Tuesday was that they did not, in fact, believe that. Trump did not have the credibility to make the case that his party was making things better, and the voters conducted themselves accordingly. Okay! I'm just not willing to give them the credit of assuming that now having been twice bitten, they'll finally get around to the shy part. Once really t

Gerson: The problem, of course, is that I mostly agree with Matt's points. From the outside, America looks like a nation that's lost sight of its purpose. I don't see people who know what they stand for, what they want to do, or who they want to be anymore. My guess, admittedly from across the border, is that the nation never really recovered from the disillusionment it suffered as a result of the war in Iraq. And if you're just a massively powerful and wealthy near-empire republic that no longer really believes it has any higher moral purpose or leadership role to serve for the greater good of humanity, what's left?

I'm reminded of that glorious five-minute speech from Ned Beatty in the 1976 film Network - a movie so cynical and transgressive that I don't think any studio in Hollywood would dare touch a script like it in 2026.

"We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable bylaws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale. It has been since man crawled out of the slime. And our children will live, Mr. Beale, to see that perfect world in which there's no war or famine, oppression or brutality - one vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused."

That's a long-winded way of putting it, but what I'm trying to say is that absent guiding purpose or soul, what they've got is the pursuit of capital, comfort, and eventually, collapse. The assumption that that's all there is. Trump is the living face of that mentality. He's a straightforward narcissist; a weak nation's fantasy of a strongman. And the consequences of putting someone without character or direction in such a position of authority were both inevitable and foreseeable. He is self-indulgence, and decadent decline, and a mark on America's claims to exceptionalism.

But in Matt's observation of decay, I see the greenshoot, too. This loss of self-faith makes Americans a threat not only to others, but, in the long run, to themselves. As Americans isolate and pull back from a position of responsible global leadership, so too will they witness a decline in the material benefits of that leadership. I can't be the only person who anthropomorphizes America, and sees a third-generation frat boy, a legacy admission to an Ivy League school squandering the family trust fund on crypto schemes. Self-assured, entitled, without conscience or a sense of duty - and radically more vulnerable to misdirection and fate than he may realize. Empires fall. Populations revolt. Oligopolies turn on themselves. Aristocrats die in poverty. It happens all the time.

I reiterate my point above: one cannot extricate values from material benefits that those values ultimately create. You cannot forever revel in the vast wealth accrued by power while also undercutting the very thing that makes you powerful. This is especially true when the benefits of both wealth and power are so radically unevenly distributed, and the social mobility entrenched by a democratic system calcify into an oligopoly.

In short, the system that Trumpism would create is inherently self-limiting because it is corrupt and amoral.

But ... America is just so damn big and wealthy and powerful, and its ruling class is so comparatively insulated, that it may take generations for new incentives and values to take hold. It's going to take time, time and consequences, for Americans to re-learn why it is in their own best interest to be a serious and graceful people. And it's going to fall on us in Canada - among others - to become serious, sovereign, and effective enough to create those incentives, to apply pressure, to resist coercion, and to extract

consequences for bad behaviour. We cannot serve our purpose simply by being angry and smug. More is required of us.

I share with Matt a belief that the Democrats can't be trusted to behave any better than the Republicans going forward. Once norms break down at an institutional level, the trajectory of a national character is re-set. And I do think those norms have broken down. Further, I don't see any political faction willing to risk the real political capital to force meaningful reform, to restore a values-based political culture, or to champion norms or limits on executive power.

It's going to take more than simply voting blue in one election.

We've been speaking here at The Line about what it would take to restore trust between Canada and America again. There are practical answers to that question: Restore CUSMA as the governing trade agreement between the two countries. Post a significant bond that Canada can draw upon if any of those terms are fundamentally abrogated by the U.S. administration. Sever the last-minute deal that extracted more cash from the Gordie Howe bridge just weeks before it opened.

For me, the most important is a formal apology for the threats of annexation. It's not just the words themselves, it's a show of understanding about why the words are important. Weak people who pretend to be strong are the ones who fear amends and repair - it takes true strength of character to acknowledge the harm done to the other, and to accept the momentary sacrifice of pride required to restore trust between parties.

Apology signals equality - a show that Americans are willing to see us as equals as people, even if they outclass us in economic and military power. There's something of a spiritual virtue in this, recognizing that individuals are something more than a number on a ledger. Just a tiny bit of humility and vulnerability from a country secure in its strength would tell us quite a lot about how Americans want to move forward in the world. Do they wish to be leaders, or dictators; a republic, or an empire.

Friends apologize to friends. Imperial hegemons don't apologize to vassals.

All that said - is this really beyond the realm of possibility? I don't think it's impossible to imagine any or all of these things happening eventually. Nothing is static. All systems move and adapt. I suppose the case for optimism relies on time, time to let the inevitable consequences of poor choices play out, and time for Americans themselves to see the value of the relationships they've squandered.

Gurney: I ... I did not expect Jen to go full Network like that.

Jen opened her segment above by largely conceding much of my argument. I'll do the same and grant that time does indeed really, really matter. I've made this quip before, but, I'm an optimist heart, but only on a really long horizon. Look at the column I wrote yesterday! I'm a Trekkie. We all believe that we're just riding out the shit era before we get to the good stuff.

So, yeah, Jen's probably right ... on a long enough timescale.

I want to get into the meat of what she said, but first, I want to talk about her notion of some kind of reconciliation. We'll probably get some individuals in positions of power offering mea culpas; we have seen

some already. But something formal on behalf of the United States? No chance. And not just because of what Jen correctly noted - hegemons wouldn't so deign. I also just think we're working against a pretty fundamental element of human nature here. People are ashamed, hate being called out, and recoil from accusations, particularly those that catch them by surprise.

This is going to drive a lot of Canadians nuts, but I think we'll have to just write that off and live with it. Any whiff of Canadian grievance would catch many Americans by surprise. American opinion polls show that we remain popular with Americans (less so with Republicans). That's nice and stuff, but I suspect that that's because a lot of Americans do not know that we had a dispute at all. I'd put the number of Americans who are aware that we are mad at them as many one in five, and they'd be roughly equally split between being embarrassed about it and thrilled, eager to dish out some more.

I can live with that? Like, I think right now, of the aware group, it's probably a split, maybe even tilted a bit in our favour. If Americans start finding out we're mad at them because they start hearing that we want some kind of apology, we'll probably not like how that ends up for us. So maybe we just let that slide.

But to Jen's broader point, I'd say that a really fundamental concern I have, and it's an awfully pessimistic one, is that rather than planning around some kind of eventual American return to normal, well, this might be that. All of us are prisoners of our own perspective - we are shaped by our life experiences, and a little bit by what our parents and maybe our grandparents went through. Beyond that, only weirdos that enjoy and study history - ahem - really have a broader view. And speaking as our representative weirdo here, the broader view is not necessarily a happy one.

This is really just yet another opportunity for me to trot out my "your expectations are a problem" thesis. Basically all of us, and certainly every Canadian in any official role, has only really known the version of the United States that emerged from the Second World War, so the last decade seems really friggin' weird to us.

But zoom out a bit and, honestly, not so much. First off, the American republic has existed for 250 years, and they seem to get a bad case of the crazy every four or five generations. The country was born of revolution, and a bloody war that pitted brother against brother. Not quite a century later, they decided to have yet another bloody war that pitted brother against brother. If you're willing to be a bit loosey goosey with the numbers, it's very possible for us to look at today as a delayed return to that pattern of American self-destruction. (Or, as some have said, we can look at some of the political, social, racial and economic upheaval of the 1930s and 1960s as a less violent version of the same crazy.)

Even without going all The Fourth Turning on you, consider what we've heard from the White House in recent years. Trump has run an administration that (nominally!) wants to avoid foreign entanglements, seeks to interact with the world mostly via trade, which it intends to dominate, believes in high tariffs to foster a domestic industry, and has imperial designs on its neighbours in the Western hemisphere, including Canada, Greenland, Cuba and Panama (which is coveted specifically because of the Canal linking the oceans). You could pair this with some really nasty internal divisions on race and immigration. If you wrote down a little cue-card summary of what Trump wanted and showed it to a random American drawn from every decade in the country's history, a lot more of them would find it familiar than bizarre.

Put in the most basic term: we have to consider the possibility that the America we knew and loved between the Second World War and very recent years was a historical fluke. An anomaly. And that what we're seeing from America today isn't a weird tantrum borne of the trauma of 9/11, the Iraq War, the 2008 Great

Recession or the COVID-19 pandemic. This might just be the magic of that incredible American experiment in relatively benign global leadership as it existed during the Cold War finally and maybe inevitably wearing off.

If so, Trump isn't a freak event we can outlast. He's just the start of the reversion to the American mean.

(And yes, before anyone tries to argue with me in the comments, "relatively benign global leadership" is doing a lot of work. I know that. This piece is long enough already. Spot me that one, will ya?)

Gerson: So, we mostly agree? We just haven't decided on what kind of timescale we're considering, and what "normal" even means.

Either way, I think Canada has to plan a future around the assumption that the Trump era, and the "values" it represents, are a new normal. We can't assume a return to goodwill and must make our own strategic assumptions around the most pessimistic case. Because, well, of course we do. And one midterm result won't change that.

Plan for the worst, sure. But we can still hope for the best, too.

Gurney: I never tell anyone not to hope. Hope is good. It's healthy. Sometimes it's all you have.

All I'll add here as my parting thought is that the U.S., Canada and the rest of humanity is now in a position where we are dependent on the Democratic Party to not screw things up. They ran a good campaign. They really did. They stayed focused on pretty moderate, bread-and-butter issues and pulled off a massive win. They have a mandate to go hard after the GOP on corruption, and I hope they do. Heads should roll. A reckoning is warranted.

But I just have no faith that they aren't going to screw this up by going after all kinds of fringe issues that will play well with their left-wing fringe while alienating the moderates. They did avoid that trap before the midterms. Whether they can stay disciplined in victory is, to put it mildly, not a foregone conclsuion.

But hey. Like Jen said. We can hope.