

Opinion The four kinds of truth America needs to pursue reconciliation



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Given our descent into political violence on Jan. 6, what is the path of recuperation? I would suggest that we need a reinvigorated commitment to seeking truth. Easier said than done, because it requires four kinds of truth.

First, forensic truth. This permits us to hold people accountable for their actions. Second come the personal truths each of us brings to making sense of our country. We need a moment of hearing one another without judgment.

Then we need to achieve a social truth, resting on shared moral horizons. For this, we must pass judgment, but we should seek to do that together. Finally, we come to the path of hope, restorative truth — identification of the policies, institutions and practices that can secure a shareable moral horizon.

Forensic truth is relatively easy. In every courtroom, the plaintiff or prosecution and the defense enter with different versions of what happened. Eyewitness accounts often diverge dramatically. Through the court’s adversarial process, we litigate facts and reach a judgment, laying down a historical record on the soundest possible foundation.

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The 64 [election lawsuits](#) filed by the Trump campaign, of which 63 were dismissed or yielded rulings against the president, gave us forensic truth: there was no election-changing electoral fraud. Prosecutions against those who participated in the attack on the Capitol and the president’s impeachment trial should, if well conducted, further secure the historical record.

The next steps in healing are difficult. We all bring emotionally resonant personal truths to the table. When conceptions of what is good vary widely, so, too, will perceptions of events. The goal is to understand people as they understand themselves. This requires deep listening that, at the outset, holds moral evaluation off to the side.

The personal truths in play on Jan. 6 diverged wildly. Witnesses on the left primarily saw the many Confederate battle flags and a white-supremacist insurrection. Witnesses on the right may have seen white supremacists — after all, they were trying to be seen — but they also saw a significant number of participants who believed they were embodying the spirit of 1776 in a morally legitimate uprising.

In the New York Times, columnist [Ross Douthat describes](#) conservatives as having coalesced in a fight “against consolidated liberal power.” We heard that same point in the streets. As one participant [told a reporter](#), “The left has everything: the media, organizations, the government. We have to organize if we’re going to fight back and be heard.” This testimony should stick; it isn’t just window-dressing.

Earnest invocations of 1776 go back to the emergence of the tea party in 2009, when tea partiers around the country wrote “Declarations of Independence” that railed against “power drunk” Democrats, biased media and “smug elites” who were “imposing a Socialist agenda” and “transformational change” and “repeatedly slander[ed] American citizens with false accusations of racism ... and hatred.”

For those previously convinced the Democratic Party exercises power abusively, the pandemic-related decisions in 2020 to allow or expand mail-in and early voting — changes instituted only a few months before the election — were perceived as a last-minute effort to skew the vote. This sparked a for-real revolutionary current.

How should we think about the emotional truth coming from the right? Stoked though it has been by conspiracy theories, it has a hook in recognizable reality. Elite organizations — universities, media, tech, corporations and civil-service federal appointees — are, in fact, generally left-leaning and have sufficient combined power to squelch socially conservative ways of life, particularly those linked to traditional family structures.

To slap the simple label of white supremacy on the Capitol rioters is to take the easy way out. Extremists led the charge, yes. But why were so many others with them? Why do so many who voted for Trump still think the election was stolen? Not only disinformation is at work; so is people’s real sense of loss of agency and control over the lives of their families and communities. Some of this loss is a result of the effects of globalization; some arises from our cultural fights over gender, sexuality and religion.

Understanding people as they understand themselves gives us a chance to pursue a shared social truth. We can begin the process of moral sorting — of trying to identify which views are out of bounds (white supremacy), and which have recognizable validity as one option among many on contested terrain (traditional family structures). Our renovated social truth should combine recognition of people’s hunger for personal empowerment with an embrace of deep pluralism.

If we could achieve that social truth, incredibly hard work would remain, indeed the hardest part: reconciliation. That tantalizing and still doubtful prospect would depend on concrete steps. What approach to economic policy will secure people's dignity, restoring access to good jobs and control over one's working life? What are the resolutions to the numerous fights we are having where securing the rights of sexual minorities appears to be in conflict with religious liberty?

Achieving a culture that both empowers people and embraces deep pluralism will require a degree of creativity we have not yet begun to exercise. But our times call for moral imagination.

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