

# A Culture in Collapse



by Victor Davis Hanson

In the last six months, we have borne witness to many iconic moments evidencing the collapse of American culture.

The signs are everywhere and cover the gamut of politics, the economy, education, social life, popular culture, foreign policy, and the military. These symptoms of decay share common themes.

Our descent is self-induced; it is not a symptom of a foreign attack or subterfuge. Our erosion is not the result of poverty and want, but of leisure and excess. We are not suffering from existential crises of famine, plague, or the collapse of our grid and fuel sources. Prior, far poorer, and war-torn generations now seem far better off than what we are becoming.

What is happening to us is not due to an adherence to a too strict conservative tradition but is almost exclusively the

wage of the progressive project.

In short, we are seeing fissures that America has not experienced in our cultural history since the Civil War. The radical Left apparently feels such chaos, anarchy, and nihilism are necessary to topple past norms and customs and thereby adhere to a socialist, equity agenda that no one in normal times would stomach.

Some of the decay is existential and fundamental; some anecdotal and illustrative. But either way, while decline came about gradually over decades, its sudden and abrupt chaos during the three years of Biden's presidency has shocked Americans.

### **Financial Implosion**

As long as interest rates were de facto zero, both parties ran up gargantuan debt. Now the national debt has hit \$34 trillion. But two odd things have also happened under the Biden administration that are beginning to undermine the very existence of the U.S. financial system:

1) Interest rates have soared from de facto zero and are on a trajectory to 5.5%—meaning that the interest on the debt, in theory, in the not too distant future will require 20 percent of the annual budget, squeezing out both entitlements and defense.

2) Yet the upcoming rendezvous with economic Armageddon has not slowed a Biden administration intent on borrowing nearly \$2 trillion in the current fiscal year.

The public is baffled: is the Left playing chicken with us? Is the strategy to “gorge the beast,” thereby demanding even higher federal taxes, which, combined with many state taxes, now exceed 50 percent of one's income?

Is the goal massive “redistribution” by ensuring “equity” by

gouging the middle class and rich? Or is the left's goal more nihilistic: to force a remedy for insolvency by ensuring high inflation, renouncing government debt, or government appropriation of private capital?

## **Military Crises**

Americans have lost deterrence abroad.

Confusion reigns among the public over why the Biden administration fled from Afghanistan, leaving behind billions of dollars of munitions and equipment in the hands of Taliban terrorists. Why did it allow a Chinese spy balloon to traverse the continental U.S. with impunity?

And why did Biden signal to Russia when preparing an invasion of Ukraine that our reaction would depend on the magnitude of Putin's offensive? Why has military recruitment cratered, shorting the Pentagon of thousands of soldiers?

Why do Iranian proxies attack almost daily U.S. installations abroad and ships in the Red Sea, apparently without fear of reprisal? Why did Hamas slaughter Israelis on October 7? What explains our indifference or ennui?

Is the answer a deliberate effort to curb supposed American "arrogance" by once more leading from behind? Are we rebooting the Obama Administration's bankrupt idea of empowering an Iranian crescent from Teheran to Damascus to Beirut to Gaza to ensure "creative tension" between Israel and the moderate Arabs and Persian-led theocratic Shiites?

Why do our officer classes rotate in and out of lucrative military consultantships, lobbying billets, and board membership on corporate defense contractors—as if their innate talents rather than their lifelong contacts with current serving procurement officers earned their exorbitant fees?

Why did our retired four stars with disdain violate the

uniform code of military justice by serially and publicly trashing the commander in chief? Why has the Pentagon revolutionized the entire system of recruitment, promotions, and tenure in the armed forces by predicating them in large part on race, gender, and sexual orientation rather than merit or battlefield efficacy? Did we learn anything from the old Soviet commissariat system? Would we prefer to lose a war by promoting equity than win one by ensuring liberty?

Why did the top brass go after supposedly “insurrectionist” white males (who died at twice their demographics during combat in Iraq and Afghanistan) in the military, only to discover from their own internal investigations that no such cabal of “domestic terrorists” existed, and only to drive out thousands more of the maligned by stupidly requiring COVID vaccinations from those with naturally acquired immunity?

In sum, the U.S. will either undergo a post-Vietnam-like revolution in the military or, in late Roman imperial fashion, our armed forces will be unable to defend the interests or indeed, the very safety, of the U.S.

## **Race**

Why, when so-called non-white ethnicities and races were achieving parity with or exceeding the majority population in per capita income and when racial intermarriage was commonplace, did we blow up the values of the civil rights movement and revert to precivilizational tribalism? Who were the sophists who convinced us that racially segregated dorms, safe spaces, and graduations, or using race as an arbiter of admissions and hiring, were not racist?

When did we lump together an entire cadre of diverse ancestries, ethnicities, religions, politics, classes, and values and dub them all “white,” and then smear them collectively in stereotypical fashion? When did we calibrate race as the chief determinative factor in our identities? Have

we become premodern tribal people—feuding clans right out of the Norse sagas, ghosts of the Balkans nursing ancient grievances and hatreds? Since when in history has a nation’s “diversity” ever been preferable to its “unity”?

## **The Sexes**

Did anyone in, say, 2004 believe that in just twenty years, the Left would try to mainstream the previously rare medical malady of gender dysphoria into a transgendered civil rights issue by insisting on three rather than two sexes?

Would anyone have believed that leftists, gays, and feminists would have done their best to destroy a half-century of female athletic achievement by allowing biological males to compete in women’s sports and thereby erase the record performances of three generations of women?

Would anyone have believed that a feminist and accomplished swimmer like Riley Gaines would be cornered, swarmed, threatened, and barricaded in at a university for the crime of daring to state the obvious: that transgendered women are still, in terms of their musculoskeletal physiques and frames, males and thereby have no business competing in women’s sports?

Would anyone have believed that a gay senate aide would have engaged in passive, unprotected sex in a public and hallowed Senate chamber, filmed in graphic detail his act of sodomy, had it circulated among friends and social media, and then, when outrage followed, claimed victimhood by accusing those offended of being homophobic toward him and his active homosexual partner?

## **Lawlessness**

We are witnessing the steady erasure of jurisprudence, both civil and criminal. Does the law as we knew it a mere decade ago still exist? Massive looting with impunity is now largely

exempt from justice in our major blue-state cities. In Compton, a van slams into a Mexican bakery as waiting crowds swarm, loot, and destroy the business. And for what? Some free pies and cakes? Or the nihilist delight in ruining the livelihood of a hardworking family business?

Such smash-and-grabs rob stores of billions of dollars in revenue each year. Can we even comprehend that employees and security guards are now ordered to stand down, as if the apprehension of such thieves might in some way seem illiberal or racist?

Does anyone even care that pro-Hamas protestors—many in America as guests on green cards and student visas—shouted support for the October 7 massacre of Jews, screamed for the destruction of Israel and the Jews in it, shut down the Manhattan and Golden Gate Bridges, defiled the Lincoln Memorial and White House gates, and disrupted Christmas celebrations in our major cities with complete exemption? Is storming the California legislature, and disrupting it in session, now a felony in the manner of those convicted after January 6, or do we have two sets of laws, dependent on ideology, race, and party affiliation?

In one of the most chilling videos in memory, Las Vegas Clark County District Court Judge Mary Kay Holthus was recently violently attacked by an unshackled career felon defendant (with three prior violent felony convictions and facing additional new felony counts). The assailant, Deobra Redden, leaped over the justice's bench with ease and began beating her and pulling her hair before two bailiffs, with great difficulty, managed to restrain him. Why was Redden out on parole given his violent record, and why was he not shackled given his toxic past? His self-admitted effort to kill the judge, his ability nearly to pull it off, and the record of past leniency accorded him are a commentary on a sick society.

But then again, in our major cities, George-Soros-subsidized

prosecutors have all but destroyed civil society. They have been systematically releasing felons with violent criminal records on the same day they are arrested, freeing convicted felons early from prisons and jails, and sabotaging the law by arbitrary enforcement on the grounds that it is inherently either unfair or racist.

The post civilization civil bookend to that precivilizational subterfuge was a systematic legal effort, for the first time in American history, to remove in an election year the leading primary and general election candidate Donald Trump from various state ballots. The Soviet-like charge was that he was guilty of "insurrection," a crime he has never been charged with, much less convicted of. Meanwhile, three state prosecutors and one special federal counsel—all leftists and some previously bragging in their own election campaigns of their intention to destroy Trump—have charged candidate Trump with an array of felonies. The vast majority of Americans agree Trump would never have been so charged had he just not sought to seek reelection—or had been a liberal Democrat.

## **Education**

In ancient times, the President of the Harvard Corporation was a signature scholar and intellectual, befitting Harvard's own self-regard as the world's most preeminent university. No longer.

Now-resigned president Coleen Gay's meteoric career was based on a flimsy record of a mere 11 articles—the majority of them plagiarized. Her entire career was fueled by the tired pretext that the privileged Gay was somehow deserving of special deference given her race and gender.

Confronted with such corruption, the Harvard Corporation, its legal team, and 700 faculty sought to downplay Gay's intellectual theft. Indeed, they smeared her critics as racist—only then to deal with her new billet as a professor of

Political Science with a long record of plagiarism that was exempt from the sort of punishments dealt out to students and faculty for less egregious defenses.

How did Ivy League degrees so quickly become mostly certifications of ideological and woke orthodoxy? Or is it worse than that? Does a Stanford history major or Yale literature graduate know anything, respectively, about the Civil War or Shakespeare's plays? Do they even know that we, the public, know that they don't know?

Was Elizabeth Warren really Harvard's first law professor of color? Was Claudine Gay truly an impressive and respected scholar of political science? Are the governing members of the Harvard Corporation the nation's best and brightest?

How in less than five years did our elite universities destroy meritocracy, abolish SAT requirements, require DEI oaths and pledges, and mirror the worst commissariat institutions of the old Warsaw Pact nations and Soviet Union? How and why these elite universities blew themselves up in a mere decade will baffle historians for decades to come.

## **The End of Sovereignty**

The Biden administration has shattered federal immigration law, as some 10 million illegal entries will have crossed unlawfully and with impunity in the first Biden term—all by intent. The southern border is not merely porous; it no longer even exists.

Did the Left want new constituents? New entitlement recipients to grow government and raise taxes on the clingers and deplorables?

Did it want a larger DEI base to replace the steady exodus of non-whites from left-wing agendas? Does it shun sovereignty, preferring a global village without arbitrary borders? Do these utopians in Malibu and Martha's Vineyard similarly feel



their own yards and grounds need no walls, no barriers, and no boundaries to deny the underprivileged their rights to enjoy what the predatory classes possess?

In this new America of ours, Joe Biden is hale and savvy, while Hunter did nothing wrong. Our heroes are Dylan Mulvaney, Gen. Rachel Levine, and the two Sams, Bankman-Fried and Brinton.

In today's America, Karin Jean-Pierre is truthful, while Alejandro Mayorkas is honest. An innocent and saintly George Floyd was randomly murdered; his death proof of systemic police racism. And defunding the police brought calm and quiet, in the way our border is secure and the homeless are mere victims.

Dr. Jill is an impressive academic. Oprah and LeBron are the downtrodden and victimized. Gen. Mark Milley is a brave maverick, and so is Adam Schiff. The flight from Afghanistan marked a brilliantly organized retreat.

The Chinese balloon really did not take too many pictures of sensitive areas. January 6 was an armed insurrection, preplanned by fiery conspirators and revolutionaries. Ashli Babbitt deserved to be blasted in the neck for entering a broken window.

Kamala Harris is a wordsmith. Russian collusion really happened. So did Russian laptop disinformation. Christopher Steele's dossier was mostly true, in the fashion of Claudine Gay's dissertation and Barack Obama's memoir. And 51 former intelligence authorities bravely came forward to offer their expertise in certifying that Hunter's laptop was cooked up in Moscow.

With all this, what do we think the Iranians, Putin's Russians, the communist Chinese, the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Hamas now think of the United States?

That we are the nation that won World War II or fled from Afghanistan? Did the eight million who broke our laws and simply walked across our border respect us, fear us, admire us, or come here to manipulate and use us? Did Hamas appreciate the hundreds of millions of dollars we gave them, in the same way Iran was friendlier after we lifted the sanctions?

In sum, American civilization has been turned upside down, and we have a rendezvous soon with the once unthinkable and unimaginable.

First published in [\*American Greatness\*](#).