

## FOREWORD

### HISTORY SURPRISES—AND HOW.

What I thought was a one-off has become a series. When I published *Can America Save Itself from Decline?* in early 2015, I had no idea there would—very soon—be good cause to think of that book as Volume I of a series.

But when Donald Trump announced in June 2015 his campaign for President of the United States, proudly touting his racist and xenophobic program in service of his mission to “Make America great again”—and when public response to his anti-democratic message became passionate, massive, and ultimately victorious—I knew America’s decline was not only not arrested, it accelerated. Thus, Volume II’s size.

In Volume I, I traced how the notion of American decline took root and persisted, even during the comparatively sunny years of Barack Obama’s presidency: the polls showing increasing majorities of Americans believed America to be on “the wrong track” and the future to be less bright for their children than it was for themselves; the disillusion with the country in its “comeback” from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when supposedly “everything changed”—but little did; and the disillusion increasing after the financial crash of 2008, a crash caused by Wall Street, which soon enough was back to its old risky ways. Volume I began with that marker, with a pro-Main Street commentary titled “Recovery Without a Reckoning.”

Now, with Donald Trump in the White House almost four harrowing years, we can itemize the ruin. In addition to the racism and xenophobia made explicit, we see a Justice Department become Trump’s personal legal team; we see America, the former champion of human rights, now separating migrant children from their parents; we see America, once “Leader of the Free World,” cozying up to strongmen autocrats; we see this

proto-autocrat's assault on fact and truth ("fake news"). And now, just defeated for a second term by Democrat Joe Biden, Trump is knocking off every last institutional guardrail to deny the election result. Stuningly, this four-year performance—and a criminal lack of performance in managing the federal response to the coronavirus pandemic—earned Trump in 2020 the vote of *nearly half the electorate*. If anyone still questions the notion of America's decline, this marker should give them pause.

As a commentator, I had no choice but to track Trump in his—what?—"disruption": Trump—anti-democratic, crude, amoral—hit the trifecta of my beat: politics, culture, and ethical-moral issues. I love America—the *idea* of it—and I write in defense of that beautiful idea: rule of law, equality, fair play, second chances. As a deep reader and playwright, I have tracked the degradation of American culture—the "anything-goes" ethos of its literature, film, TV, theatre—and I see how little it instructs or comforts us in this chaos-cum-pandemic. To recur to the disrupter archetype: America has long been fascinated with it (see: Facebook's motto "Move fast and break things"), yet despite all the chaos, half of America cannot see this disrupter has no follow-up plan. Even with Trump gone from the White House, he, and anti-democratic Trumpism, will remain a force. Thus the need for this series' Volume III. I will remain on duty: Just how low does this descent go? With Joe Biden in the White House, can we head for what the Roman poet Virgil called "the upper air"? I will keep writing, hoping this Dark Age can be transformed into a Renaissance.

As harrowing as Trump's four-year Reign of Error has been, however, History had another surprise: the emergence of a formidable counterforce—the conscientious American public.

If we did not understand how precious is our democratic form of government—of, by, and for the people—we do now, having watched Donald Trump, and the Party of Trump (once known as the Republicans), attack taken-for-granted rights, like voter enfranchisement. If we did not appreciate the beautiful idea of America, we do now, seeing those migrant children pulled from their parent's arms. If we did not understand the historic problem of racism and a Trump-driven

resurgence of white supremacy, we do now, seeing the agonizing video of George Floyd, a Black American, asphyxiated under the knee of a white police officer, whose hand was propped nonchalantly on his hip. In protest, conscientious America, Black and white, poured into the streets, in numbers that were the largest in American history. To protest Trump's record of sexual assault, the Women's March the day after his inauguration set another record in turnout. As to turnout, voter turnout in this 2020 presidential election was also the biggest in a century, with voters braving the coronavirus, standing hours to ensure their vote. The protest, the vote, a recovered Americanism = tools for action, unity. And, bless them: Historic numbers of conscientious Americans are running for office, from local school boards to Congress.

Will this counter-force be enough to save American Democracy, reverse our decline? That is the question compelling conscientious America, also much of the world, as it struggles with the forces of anti-democracy/strongman rule everywhere.

In this journey, I thank especially my late mother, Mildred Lofberg, who died during the course of this volume. While Mom and I had our issues—she was Republican, I am Democrat—we were united in our concern for the moral health of the country. It is those close conversations that I miss most, but the memory of them informs my work.

And notably, Joe—Dr. Joseph G. Bell. Volume I was dedicated to Joe, because of our years of yeasty exchanges over the American idea—Joe emphasizing America as a capitalist entity, me emphasizing it as a democracy. Joe gets the dedicatory nod again in this volume, because: Not long after Trump's surprise election, Joe said, "You know, I think Donald Trump may be just the stinker to get John Q. Public off the sofa." As ever, Joe was right: Trump got America off the sofa! And as ever, eternal thanks to my husband Larry Seaquist, former Navy captain, former state legislator, now also a writer. Larry is my *compagno di vita*, first reader, best friend, and co-dedicattee.

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