

KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

CAN AMERICA SAVE ITSELF FROM DECLINE?

Politics, Culture, Morality: Volume II

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BOOK REVIEW

A set of impassioned essays that investigate racism, sexual harassment, economic inequality, and former President Donald Trump.

This second volume of playwright and columnist Seaquist's writings collects topical essays, book reviews, and film appreciations published in *HuffPost* and *Medium* from 2015 to 2020, a period that filled her with foreboding about what she sees as ethical rot. The author writes about the killing of George Floyd by police, condemns bigoted fraternity chants at the University of Oklahoma, and encourages White people to join in solidarity with Black protesters, while also enjoining all activists to eschew violence and vandalism. She spotlights incidents of sexual harassment and assault, and she appeals to men to help women combat sexism. She condemns the separation of migrant families at the border, pillories corporate misconduct, and hails "Bernie Sanders, moral hero," for his tireless fight for economic justice for the working class. Her "In a Plague-Time" series of essays explores aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic, including some people's animus against masking and various ways to stay mentally healthy while under lockdown. Many pieces criticize Trump, whom Seaquist calls the "ugliest American ever" and "a proto-autocratic leader who fans the flames of nationalism and racism, lies without end, [and] has no morals or ethics." (She further tags Trump with spreading "trauma" and "ruination," and even with "invad[ing] not only our lives, but our marriage" when she and her husband argued about his policies.) She traces the nation's dysfunctions to a pervasive culture of amoral cynicism, exemplified by the drug-dealing antihero Walter White in the AMC television series *Breaking Bad*, and calls for a "New Day" in which America reclaims its nobility and goodness.

Seaquist advances her center-left views in elegant prose that alternates between tart takedowns—"Trump's 's***hole' insult takes the prize for condescension, oozing with a white supremacist's disdain for non-white peoples, also a turbo-capitalist's disdain for the poor"—and penetrating insights that extend into explorations into the mindset of Trump voters: "You are angry that America, the greatest country in the history of the world, appears to be losing out in a globalized economy—with bad trade deals, mainly—and that you, too, are losing out and are being left behind." Over the course of this book, Seaquist often does an admirable job of maintaining an even keel while tackling tough subjects and offering sharp opinions, although she sometimes lapses into crude partisanship: "Saddest are the women blindly babbling their anti-Hillary, anti-woman hatred," she writes, for example, of women who criticize former Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. There are also occasional judgments that seem ill-considered in retrospect. For example, "This Pandemic Could Be Over Now—IF Our President Believed in Government" is the title of a September 2020 essay, which some readers may find questionable, given that the contagion remains a threat more than a year into a new presidential administration. Still, her always-interesting pieces serve up plenty of food for thought.

Smart and well-informed takes on the great issues of a tumultuous era.