We’re better than this. Aren’t we?

Max Boot

For me, this election is intensely personal. I came to this country in 1976, with my mother and grandmother, as a 7-year-old immigrant from the Soviet Union. My family, like so many before and since, was fleeing poverty and oppression. Because the United States took us in and gave us dignity and prosperity, I have always loved this country. Americanism has been my religion, as it was for two of my heroes, Theodore Roosevelt and John McCain.

As I have grown older, I have developed a more nuanced understanding of the United States and its complex history — sometimes uplifting, sometimes shameful — noble and ignoble strands wound tightly together like a double helix. Historic wrongs have still not been righted — in particular, the poisonous legacy of slavery and segregation — but I thought we were moving in the right direction.

Then came 2016. I was devastated to see a dangerous demagogue rise to power by spewing hatred and promoting division. This was not the America I knew. This was the kind of thing that happened over there — in the old country — not on this “shining city upon a hill.” As our luster dimmed — as democratic norms shattered and body bags piled up — there were times when I lost hope in what Lincoln called “the last best hope of earth.”

How could President Trump be so awful and yet maintain the support of so many? This has been a terrible indictment, to me, of the country I love. But my faith in the United States, while battered, has not vanished. I continue to believe — to hope — to pray — that we are better than this. Aren’t we? We certainly should be better than this.

Americans have won nearly three times as many Nobel Prizes as the next-closest nation. We defeated diseases such as measles and polio, performed the first organ transplant and helped map the genome. We invented the airplane, harnessed the atom, landed on the moon and pioneered the personal computer and the Internet. How can we now turn our backs on
**science and reason** and embrace a president who **spouts nonsensical conspiracy theories**?

Racism is, of course, a defining feature of the American experience, but so is fighting for racial justice. America is the land of W.E.B. Du Bois, Rosa Parks, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis and other storied civil rights activists. Let their example inspire us today. How can we reward a president who **employs bigotry for political advantage**?

From Alexander Hamilton to Elon Musk, the United States was built by those born elsewhere. If the United States weren’t the land of immigrants, most of us wouldn’t be here — Trump included. How can we tolerate the president’s **intolerable abuse of immigrants** and even **the separation of children from their families**?

The United States was once notorious for the corruption of Boss Tweed, James Michael Curley and the Pendergast machine, but we have generally held the presidency to a higher standard. Not even Richard M. Nixon committed as many offenses as Trump — and he disclosed his taxes. Jimmy Carter placed his peanut farm in a **blind trust**, while Trump continues to promote his global business empire, complete with a **secret bank account in China**. How can we turn a blind eye to Trump’s **blatant abuse of office** for personal and political gain?

We have seen a peaceful transfer of power for more than two centuries — in peace and war, prosperity and depression. Generations of Americans have sacrificed for our freedom, from Valley Forge to Fallujah. They were not “suckers” and “losers.” They gave the “last full measure of devotion” so that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Honor their legacy. How can we accept the president’s refusal to honor the outcome of the election and his thuggish demands that **his opponents be locked up**?

We are the land of the First Amendment and of fabled journalists and truth-tellers, from Thomas Paine to Woodward and Bernstein. How can we have a president who, borrowing a phrase from Joseph Stalin, **calls the press** “the enemy of the people”?
We have had presidents before who were dishonest and undignified, but nothing like this. Most presidents, following the example of George Washington, strove to elevate the office and inspire the nation. Remember when a big scandal was President Barack Obama wearing a tan suit? Those were the days. How can we overlook the president’s vile name-calling, vituperation and lies?

The United States has made common cause with illiberal regimes before (such as the Soviet Union during World War II), but no president has ever denigrated our fellow democracies and glorified dictators as Trump has done. From Woodrow Wilson vowing to make “the world safe for democracy” to Ronald Reagan demanding “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” U.S. presidents used to champion the cause of freedom. How can we reelect a president who kowtows to our enemies and treats our allies with contempt?

Please, my fellow Americans, I beg of you: Do not let the Trump presidency define the United States for future generations. Electing Trump once can be written off as an aberration; electing him twice will leave an indelible stain on our history. Trump will see reelection as an endorsement of his first-term misconduct and a license for even greater abuses to come. The United States will cease to inspire hope — as it did for a young boy who came here in 1976 — and instead instill pity and fear. We cannot, we must not, turn our backs on the “better angels of our nature” in favor of hatred and division, irrationality and resentment.

We are better than this. Aren’t we?