



The deep fault lines
Race and ethnicity, apart from socio-economic status, affect a person's access to healthcare. The number of Covid-19 fatalities among African-Americans, Hispanics and low-income groups in the US illustrates this ugly truth GETTY IMAGES/AFP/MICHAEL M SANTIAGO

STATES OF MATTER

Summer of discontent

A train wreck that began in slow motion, the Trump presidency has now plunged the US into social and economic chaos



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The elusive story of Donald Trump's taxes was unravelled by *The New York Times* just as the US president was preparing for his first campaign debate with rival Joe Biden. It told of a businessman unsuccessful at everything except the marketing of his own name. The loans that Trump enterprises have taken on his personal guarantee amount to over \$400 million. A president in hock to that magnitude is a clear and present threat to national security.

Trump's 2016 shot at the Republican presidential nomination was widely derided, but the tale of his precarious finances suggests a plausible explanation. It was perhaps another marketing stunt to shore up his sagging business fortunes and earn enough to roll over part of his crushing debt burden.

The US electoral system rewarded him with a most unlikely victory. Through the Republican primary process, which winnowed down the field to the very worst, he bore little consequence for doing everything wrong. And then in the general election, the surly and sceptical public shifted just enough votes to carry him to an electoral college victory despite losing the popular vote.

The Trump presidency was a train wreck in agonising slow motion, from his very first efforts to deliver on reckless campaign promises. Driving the chaos was his tenuous grasp of complexity, solipsistic vanity and brazen insistence that nobody knew better than him.

If nothing else, the continuous parade of characters who quit key positions in his administration rather than serve his caprice was powerful indicator, well before his impeachment late last year, that here was a man of manifest incompetence. And yet he remains in play for a second term in office, though with diminishing chances. Trump had a clear path to the Republican nomination this year. Servility to incompetence has never quite been so abject.

What explains this death-wish in a country that prides itself as the world's greatest and oldest democracy? Simply put, Trump has wedged himself into the deepest fault lines in US politics, of race, class and privilege. His politics has been about deepening rather than papering over these faults. And when the fault lines start rupturing he seeks an aggravation of social chaos as his formula for success.

Carl Bernstein, the journalist of Watergate fame, has been saying for some years now that the US is in a state of "cold civil war". His partner in that legendary chapter in journalistic history, Bob Woodward, has meanwhile got Trump to speak on the record, effectively giving away his unconcern at the potential damage the coronavirus pandemic could cause.

Data now being parsed show that African-Americans, Hispanics and low-income groups have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic. Trump loses little political capital in waving away 200,000 deaths with the blithe phrase that "it is what it is". It is politically expedient for him to rail against the complex mix of strategies that are considered best practice in dealing with viral outbreaks. The pandemic has been lethal for those of lesser privilege, but the control measures, even in their imperfect and indecisive implementation, have been most inconvenient for his political base.

Trump's right-wing base was out on the streets in strength in the early stages of the pandemic, protesting all restrictions as intolerable violations of personal liberty. These demonstrations often involved the conspicuous display of lethal firearms, legitimate in terms of the "open carry" permitted in the jurisdictions concerned, but deliberately menacing towards any notion of the social good.

Late in May, urban centres across the US

erupted in anger at the brutal public execution of a 46-year-old black man, George Floyd, by police in the city of Minneapolis. Continuing incidents of police brutality since, have added fuel to the protests. Early in September, a study by the Project on Armed Conflict Location and Event Data and Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative found that the cycle of police violence has triggered demonstrations in no fewer than 2,400 districts across the country. Of these, a mere 220 locations had reported violence at any stage. In many of these, violence was triggered by disproportionate police responses, or deliberate acts of provocation by right-wing counter-demonstrators.

Yet a survey of public opinion found a large number of respondents, over 40 per cent, recording their belief that the demonstrations were violent and disruptive, targeted specifically at destroying property and fomenting chaos. That was testimony to the power of media framing, often in turn, a consequence of how people in positions of authority responded to mass events.

The invective that Trump and his surrogates have unleashed against movements of social justice offer blindingly clear insight into the strategy of winning by dividing. This also involves the shredding of all the niceties and conventions that have enabled smooth transitions of power and the orderly functioning of an imperfect electoral system. For the guardians of privilege, who have now taken to the ramparts in what they see as the final and decisive battle against the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, it seems an acceptable price to burn down the house to secure victory.

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