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زبانهای اروپایی

BY RICHARD FALK

16.02.2023

## *An Open Letter to President Biden on Optimism of the State of Union 2023*



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I listened to your prideful nationalism in the State of the Union address with stunned disbelief, wondering how such sentiments could have slipped by your entourage of previously reliable self-censoring staffers. When I received a private email text the next morning featuring your words, I was perplexed and disturbed. I began to understand better your intentions when it turned out that this follow-up was one more in an endless succession of daily appeals from Democratic leaders for money to support the Democratic Party, with even a listing of proposed pledge amounts. These are the most offending words drawn from your long presidential address, which you seem in the process of adopting as a theme heading into the anticipated 2024 fight to govern increasingly ungovernable America:

“I’ve never been more optimistic about the future of America, Richard. I mean it. We’re a nation with a strong soul, a strong backbone, and a strong people. We just have to remember this and remember who we are. There is nothing beyond our capacity if we do it together.”

If I had been a person of color, an indigenous survivor, or just poor, I might have wondered whether your inappropriate message was after all intended as a dark comedy. In a spirit of

arrogant empathy, I yielded to the temptation to edit this passage of yours in the following way: “I’ve never been more pessimistic about the future of America. We’re a nation tainted by a weak soul, a racist, patrioteering backbone, and a seemingly endless love affair with guns, war, and militarism. We could do better if we try finally to do our best to remedy the sins of the past and failures of the present. In the spirit of long overdue and solemn remembrance, I call upon all citizens to take steps to erase these national memories of who we were by transferring some of future expenditures from future annual military budgets to a reparations trust fund for the benefit of past and present victims of slavery, ethnic cleansing, and official forms of racism. If we want to be serious about overcoming this tainted past of our country we must also become more positively engaged in the wider planetary struggles for justice and species survival. It would be an embrace of futility to suppose that we can currently meet these challenges by acting together as a nation when we cannot even cooperate at home, much less internationally, for the global common good. If I am to speak realistically, I would have to admit that we seem to be able to act together only when comes to waging war or preparing for it with real or imagined adversaries.”

In other words, not only was your message out of touch with the experience of most Americans, but it is somewhat odd to preach unity while soliciting partisan funds that are needed to ensure that Democrats stay in control of the government. Neither the opposition nor the party whose virtues you praise and now lead has any intention of resting the future of America on “our capacity” to act together. You make this clear yourself when you reinforce this pitch for funds with these partisan words, which strike me as being closer to your real feelings: “And we need to elect more Democrats to get more done.” Only these words are bolded in the email I received from party headquarters as if to underscore the core idea that only by donating money to the good guys can virtue prevail given the polarized national struggle being waged through the advocacy of antagonistic ideas about how to shape the future. Whether your future biographers will explain such a posture as a matter of hypocrisy or mercenary opportunism, or some combination, is at this point uncertain. What does seem clear is that only simplistic apologists would suggest that your words were expressions of real beliefs, given their detachment from the realities of the country’s past and present behavior.

By wrapping this appeal for contributions in an inflated sense of optimism about the future of the nation and its people you is more puzzling because you make no accompanying effort to explain the reasons for such reckless disregard of the array of national and global menaces that daily and so obviously darkly cloud the country’s future as never before. It suggests a provocative question—How would you distinguish your outlook from Donald Trump’s primetime slogan—‘Make America Great Again’? Maybe this unlikely convergence of outlooks is your implicit contention. To clarify you might respond to a similarly phrased Trumpist claim by an insistence that America is already great, and so there is no need to make it great, especially if that involves following Trump’s regressive path to greatness.

Mr. President, you should be ashamed of such expressions of optimism about our national future when hardly a day has passed without a mass shooting at a school or public social setting such as a dance hall or public cultural event. In addition, recent reports suggest that suicide rates in America are again on the rise among veterans, persons of color, and the growing number of citizens who struggle to earn enough to provide health, food, and housing for their families. For more detailed information on such bleak generalization visit the website <[gunviolencearchive.org](http://gunviolencearchive.org)> Should you be misleading the public when such expressions of gun violence and acute depression are disproportionately much higher in America than in comparably industrialized societies? And what is in some ways worse than the tragedies themselves, that so little of what could be done is even contemplated, much less undertaken? Such whitewashing of national scandals should induce shame rather than mindless boasting. In no other country in the world, not currently afflicted by severe internal strife or large-scale combat do parents worry that they might never again see their children alive if they fail to return home from school at the expected time.

Should you keep hiding from the citizenry the bad stuff about poverty, racism, gun culture, encroachments on academic freedom, and global militarism (higher annual military expenditures than the next nine countries, highest sales and profits of corporate merchants of death, hundreds of overseas bases, rejuvenation of military alliances, predatory behavior with respect to natural resources)? Should you not instead be offering some ways forward that will involve struggles against these regressive tendencies while offering some realistic hope that it is at least possible to be cautiously positive about the future of the country? It seems a perfect time for an American leader to exhibit a posture of humility and urgent concern. It is not a time for expressions of national pride and the downplaying of threats to the future quality of life in the country and throughout the planet. The national situation is far too worrisome to be content with presidential bromides. What is needed is compassionate realism that is dedicated to fulfilling the imperatives of human security at all levels of social interaction from the local to the planetary.

**Richard Falk** is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University, Chair of Global law, Queen Mary University London, and Research Associate, Orfalea Center of Global Studies, UCSB.

FEBRUARY 15, 2023  
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