

# President reflects the worst in us

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**WASHINGTON** - I am struck by the all-too-clear awareness that there is no longer any question about who Donald J. Trump really is.

Even last spring, some of us were calmed by the idea that, yes, he was crude, and yes, he was rude, but perhaps he had valuable new ideas for growth, equality and citizenship in America today.

We might still have excused him as one of that special subculture of New York real estate vulgarians, but one who somehow had come to express the fears of leftbehind Americans - from the sad cities of the Rust Belt to the exquisite farms of Wisconsin - in the face of smart aleck "elitists" who couldn't tell a sufferer from a suffragette.

But that period is over. Essentially, we now know who this president of the United States is.

He is a boy - a small, spoiled, chubby boy who craves attention so vainly that he spends every waking moment figuring out how and where to wreak new havoc. There are no "whys" to it, so don't waste your breath searching for policy ideas. His enjoyment in hurting others is the why. Look at the eyes - Trump's eyes are cold and uncurious, except for the moments they fasten upon new prey.

And there, indeed, is where we find the deeper meaning in the angry but revealing words from Sen. Bob Corker, the respected Republican from Tennessee. The White House has become "an adult day care center," he warned, and this man "could lead us into World War III."

Many Americans have been so stunned by Trump's election and by his incoherence and incompetence in leadership that they have been unable or unwilling to speak out. But now, across the spectrum of political thinking, commentators in large numbers are speaking about the future - a future without Trump. And they are not mincing words.

Speaking here at the Cosmos Club early in October, Norman Ornstein, of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said sadly, but with visible inner anger, that America had become a "kakistocracy," which is an ancient Greek word meaning a society ruled by the "least qualified and most unprincipled citizens."

This brilliant analyst and two other respected scholars of moderate credentials have put forward predictable, but practical, ideas for the future in their already popular new book, "One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate and the Not-Yet-Deported." Ideas like teaching democratic citizenship in the public schools, mandatory national service and defenses against fake news.

But, Ornstein warns, while it is good that concerned Americans are finally realizing how far down a dangerous road we have blithely wandered, "we might have let it go on too long before nothing could be done."

Harvard professor Joseph Nye is one who has generally embraced the argument that the Trumpian period will pass and American power will return to its norm. "If Trump avoids a major war and if he is not re-elected," he argued in a recent article, "future scholars may look back at his presidency as a curious blip on the curve of American history." But then he adds, "Those are big 'ifs.'" And here is where I take a very deep breath and hold it. For what if the psychology of Donald Trump is only a subsidiary problem? What if he is not just a bump on the American highway but a profound sea change in American society? What if the real problem is *us*?

What if all the bad things we've allowed to happen since World War II - the "small wars" killing so many for no perceptible reason, the vulgarizing of our civic culture, the greed and avarice in financial sectors - have led us to the possibility that Donald Trump *is* us?

And what if these new, more constantly pressing negative critiques drive him, not merely to more nasty, juvenile tweets, but to actual action against real enemies like North Korea or Russia, or against those the vague, nightmarish enemies he uses to feed people's fears?

It seems we face two futures:

■ If Trump is the bump in the road - the freakish result of a series of problems that accidentally came together at this point in our history - then the "renew and replace" model Norman Ornstein and his colleagues propose could work, if we apply ourselves.

■ But if Trump is the sea change - if consequential numbers of Americans are truly broken off from our society's historical values, and if Trumpism becomes a political system because he actually represents what we are inside - then we face the unfathomable danger of becoming no kind of "shining city" on any kind of hill. Instead, we will become another of the terrifying "tribalizing" societies, run by cruel and pathetic strongmen, that are proliferating across the globe.