

# Trying to decide when to panic (Part One)

I'm trying to decide when to panic.

Standing where I am (somewhere in the middle, I suppose) I turn to face my friends on the left and panic is pretty much all I see. Well, panic and its more sober, productive, currently-popular relation: resistance. I see people who are more than just dismayed at the direction in which our government is heading; they fear that the system upon which we rely - a system of justice and due process and free speech and equal opportunity - is coming undone. They fear that we could be nearing the end of the American experiment.

Turning to face my friends on the right, I mostly see amusement or bemusement or even satisfaction at the Left's distress. They think the panic is overblown. If they supported Trump's "bull in a china shop" campaign persona, they're thrilled to see it carried over to his presidency. If they weren't crazy about that persona then, well, they're mostly just relieved to see Trump heading in the right direction. Clumsy steps in the right direction are better than agile steps in the wrong one, they seem to say.

Personally, I think my conservative friends have too quickly forgotten their own Obama-era panic. And I think my liberal friends are suffering (among other things) the consequence of never really paying much attention to that earlier panic to begin with.

I couldn't begin to tell you the number of times in the past eight years I heard someone say that President Obama was destroying our country. Not "I don't like the guy," not "I disagree with what he's trying to accomplish," but a flat-out "Obama is destroying our country." I heard, over and over again, from people who were more than just dismayed at the direction in which our government was heading; they feared that the system upon which we rely - a system of justice and due process and free speech and equal opportunity - was coming undone. They feared that we could be nearing the end of the American experiment.

I'm sure you see what I'm trying to get at here.

(And I expect that if you find yourself firmly on one side or other of the Left/Right divide, you'll probably find my comparison lacking. "But Obama really was destroying our country," you might say. Or, "But Trump really is destroying our country.")

For years, the Right has feared an ever-strengthening executive branch, an activist judiciary, and a degradation of the concept of free speech. (Via a culture that aims to

dictate what is acceptable to think and feel and say.) They have feared runaway regulations and the global ambitions of the elite, which they think have been stifling opportunities for the little guy.

And now the Left fears an ever-strengthening executive branch, an activist judiciary, and a degradation of the concept of free speech. (Via a political movement that aims to intimidate its opponents and undermine the very idea of truth.) They fear an institutional entrenchment of the prejudices and tribal-like alliances that stifle opportunities for the little guy.

Regardless of which side you're on, it seems to be easy to slip into the fear that the sky is falling.

But I've never been the "sky is falling" type. I tend to be pretty cool in crises, pretty skeptical of end-of-days fears. Though I disliked many of President Obama's policy goals and many of his methods for achieving them, I never thought he was destroying our country. I'd answer my conservative friends' incredulity at that position with something like, "I can disagree with someone and not think they'll be the death of us all."

So what am I supposed to do now? My friends on the Left want me to panic, to resist. My friends on the Right mostly want me to shut up, I expect.

Should I do the same for President Trump as I did for President Obama? "I can disagree with someone and not think they'll be the death of us all." The line suits me well: My inclination is to be watchful, to be skeptical, to refuse support to either side, to not enflame fears.

But - and this feels like a big "but" - I have to admit that I am no longer sure whether I should trust my inclination.

*Read Part Two here.*



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