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7-4-2021

July 4, 2021: Better Than July 4, 2020

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2021). July 4, 2021: Better Than July 4, 2020. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1377>

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Title: Better Than July 4, 2020

Date: 2021-07-04T15:00:00.004-04:00

7/4/2021--Happy Fourth of July to everyone--a lot better than last year. I want to share with my readers the opening of a section of Chapter 9 from my forthcoming book, *The Universe Is on Our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life*. We were already starting to do better, but July 4 might have been the worst moment of the year.***** Back from the brink Independence Day, 2020, was a dark time in American life. President Trump delivered a divisive and incendiary Independence Day Address, more like a campaign rally, promising to defeat “the radical left, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters...the angry mob” and to “protect and preserve the American way of life, which began in 1492 when Columbus discovered America.” Every racist dog whistle was sounded, every angry instinct provoked, despite the fact that the demonstrations had been mostly peaceful and, anyway, had mostly melted away by July 4. Mobs defacing statues were certainly not a national problem by that time. But it was not just President Trump that represented an American crisis. The pandemic caseload was spiking despite months of total or partial economic and social shutdown. Deaths had not yet caught up, but it was expected that they would. People were frightened and frustrated. Physical fights were breaking out in grocery and convenience stores over whether to wear a mask. It was also expected that the new surge in cases would interrupt, if not end, the budding economic recovery. At the same time, Russia was suspected of paying a bounty for the deaths of American soldiers. China had just ended Hong Kong's partial independence, which no international coalition seemed prepared to contest. Two American aircraft carriers were on their way to the South China Sea, signaling a new and dangerous level of confrontation with China. And it was hot. Really hot. And dry. Over most of the country. Climate change had not taken a break with the pandemic. It was at this moment that the New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote what might have been the bleakest July 4 message ever: *The National Humiliation We Need*. The column began with the American failure to rein in the virus. Because of that failure, Americans are depressed and many important economic and social institutions were about to go under. No matter what the upcoming election result in November—and Brooks thought the American people had already decided not to reelect President Trump—the economic future looked bleak, political division appeared to be permanent, racial discrimination remained, despite progress, and social capital was crumbling, including family formation.*****So, we have to say, on July 4, 2021, we have actually come through something and we really are in a better place.