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Waiting to Exhale

By Parris J. Baker
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Until several weeks ago, the future of America was described by many as nine miles of bad road. With two aging presidential candidates – before Kamala Harris was the Democratic nominee – most Americans believed their choice was between “the lesser of two bad candidates.”

The first quarter of the 21st century found most Americans experiencing an ever-present air of malaise, anxiety, or outright fear for the future. As time passed, it appeared more people were in less control of a series of events that were increasing in frequency and severity:

Major Events in the United States from 2000 to 2024

1. The terrorist attacks on America, Sept. 11, 2001. During the assaults, 2,977 victims and 19 hijackers were killed.
2. The disintegration of the spaceship Columbia upon re-entry. All seven astronauts were killed, Feb. 1, 2003.
3. Hurricane Katrina (Aug. 29-31, 2005) lands in the Gulf of Mexico coastal area killing 1,836, with economic damage estimated at \$170 billion.[1]
4. Election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States. Re-elected in 2012.
5. Great Recession and banking crisis of 2008.
6. Hurricane Sandy (October 2012) kills 233 people, affects 24 states, with estimated economic cost of more than \$65 billion.

7. Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting on Dec. 14, 2012, killing 26 people, including 20 children between 6 and 8 years old.
8. The shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddy Gray, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd prompt the Black Lives Matter Movement.
9. Charleston, South Carolina mass shooting, June 2015. Hate crime that killed nine African American worshippers. In 2017, the Sutherland Springs becomes the deadliest mass shooting in a place of worship in the U.S. (26 murdered and 22 injured). The mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was an antisemitic terrorist attack killing 11 people and wounding six. Religious spaces are no longer considered safe havens, but potential targets.
10. Donald Trump is elected president of the United States in 2016.
11. The Women's March on Washington in 2017 was one of the largest single-day protests in American history.
12. Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (August 2017) involves white supremacists and neo-Nazi extremist groups gathering to protest the removal of Confederate statues. Heather Heyer was killed and 35 people were injured.
13. Las Vegas mass shooting in 2017 killed 60 people and injured 413. Major national attention refocused on gun control and the banning of assault weapons.
14. Ten hurricanes in 2017, two rated Category Five, resulted in the costliest hurricanes on record with estimated damage at \$295 billion.
15. In 2017, the #MeToo Movement, which began in 2006 by activist and sexual abuse survivor Tarana Burke, gained significant traction with the exposure of film producer Harvey Weinstein. The movement focused attention on issues of sexual violence, sexual harassment, and support for sexual survivors.
16. Donald Trump was impeached on Dec. 18, 2019, by the House of Representatives and was later acquitted by Senate.
17. The first diagnosed case of Covid-19 was made on Jan. 20, 2020. It was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. The Center for Disease Controls and Prevention estimates that 1.1 million people have died from Covid-19 in the United States. Public life in the U.S. was restricted.
18. The Covid-19 Recession followed as the nation virtually shut down and the United States experienced its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.
19. Jan. 6, 2021 – domestic attack of the United States Capitol by rioters seeking to interrupt the peaceful transfer of presidential power.

20. Donald Trump was impeached for a second time by the House and was again acquitted by the Senate, despite the condemnation of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and other Republicans.
21. July 13, 2024 – assassination attempt on Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania.
22. July 21, 2024 – President Joe Biden withdrew as the presumptive Democratic nominee for president and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris for president.

Those are just some of the major events. Americans have been waiting a long time to exhale.

The phrase, “waiting to exhale,” made famous by the 1995 movie^[2] of the same name, has several interpretations. One is that whatever happens was supposed to happen (philosophy of predeterminism) so you might as well breathe, thereby releasing the anxiety and worry of the moment. A second interpretation is related to the psychological phenomenon known as effortful breathing.

Effortful breathing happens when a person is under real, perceived, or anticipated threats of harm, danger, or stress. Under these conditions, people might involuntarily hold their breath because of the increased tension in their bodies. For more than a year it seemed that whenever the president or former president spoke, much of the nation heaved a heavy sigh, fearing what they may say.

However, Biden, accepting the possibility that he could not win re-election or would lose the Senate majority and House, he bravely announced on Sunday, July 21, he was withdrawing from the presidential race. In that one moment, you could sense America’s long exhalation of relief or, as Whitney Houston sang, “Shoop, Shoop, Shoop – you’ll find your point when you exhale.”

After that sigh of relief came a refreshing inhalation of hope. Immediately after his announcement, in a social media post, President Biden wrote, "Today I want to offer my full support and endorsement for Kamala (Harris) to be the nominee of our party this year. Democrats — it's time to come together and beat Trump. Let's do this." For me, in my heart I had a tremendous sense of gratitude for the remarkable sacrifice made by the leader of the free world. Though sung by Whitney Houston and CeCe Winans, I heard Vice President Harris singing to President Biden, her friend and political partner, “Count on Me.”^[3]

Count on me through thick and thin. A friendship that will never end. When you are weak, I will be strong. Helping you to carry on. Call on me, I will be there, don't be afraid. Please believe me when I say, count on me.

I can see that it's hurting you, I can feel your pain. It's hard to see the sunshine, through the rain, oh, I know sometimes it seems as if, it's never gonna end. But you'll get through it. Just don't give in cause you can.

Count on me through thick and thin. A friendship that will never end. When you are weak, I will be strong. Helping you to carry on. Call on me, I will be there, don't be afraid. Please believe me when I say, count on me. You can count on me.

I know sometimes it seems as if we're standing all alone. Be we'll get through it, 'cause love won't let us fall. Count on me through thick and thin. A friendship that will never end. When you are weak, I will be strong. Helping you to carry on. Call on me, I will be there, don't be afraid. Please believe me when I say, count on me.

There's a place inside of all of us. Where our faith in love begins. You should reach to find the truth in love. The answers there within, oh, I know that life can make you feel.

It's much harder than it really is, but we'll get through it, just don't give in. Count on me through thick and thin. A friendship that will never end. When you are weak, I will be strong. Helping you to carry on.

We are living in some peculiar times. I thought about using several descriptive synonyms such as unprecedented, unparalleled, or unusual, but each has become an overused superlative in our modern-day vernacular. Politicians and journalists are searching endlessly for terms to describe or explain the perplexing times we are living in. Democrats have settled on describing everything Republicans say or do as “just weird.”

Charles Dickens (1859), in his classic, “A Tale of Two Cities,”^[4] offers the best description of the age were living in:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

This literary illustration of duality and polarity describes the ever-widening chasm between the affluent and the lavish lifestyles of aristocrats and the indigent and beleaguered lives of the masses. Here in the United States, the growing abyss, among a certain segment of affluent leaders, determined to establish an autocracy and a struggling middle class, just as determined not to lose our democracy, is, like our ever-expanding universe, filled with controversy and consonance.^[5]

Current competition between Democrat and Republican candidates must be grounded in standards and principles of competence, character, civility, and collaboration. Gerrymandering, voter suppression, voter subversion, and the Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise (Project 2025) are political philosophies that embrace attitudes of “win at all costs”; adopting a Machiavellian perspective of “the end justifies means,” or implementing the Malcolm X

preservation principle of “by any means necessary.” These political pugilists, who use fear, fraud, and other failed criminals, to prepare for the upcoming presidential election will condemn our nation to ruin.

The issue for our nation is not just winning or losing, but how we survive, thrive, and move forward as a nation. As more Americans are being filled with the hope found in Vice President Harris’ presidential campaign, the rest of the world is watching us and waiting to exhale.

References

[1] United States Government Accountability Office. Retrieved on August 10, 2024.
<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-633r>

[2] *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). Based on Terry McMillian’s 1992 novel of the same name. Screen play written by Terry McMillian and Roanld Bass. Distributed by 20th Century Fox.

[3][3] *Count on Me* (1995). Written and produced by Kenneth Brian (Babyface) Edmonds. Features on the soundtrack *Waiting to Exhale* and sang by Whitney Houston and CeCe Winans.

[4] Dickens, C. (2012). *A tale of two cities*. Penguin Classics.

[5] The ongoing debate between the Big Bang Theory versus Creation Theory to explain the existence of the universe and humanity. Another hypothesis is that the Big Bang supports the existence of an intelligent Banger (God).

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