

Essay *The following is adapted from a speech delivered on April 26, 2021, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Franklin, Tennessee.*

Our Increasingly Unrecognizable Civilization

Mark Steyn



Mark Steyn, host of *The Mark Steyn Show*, writes regularly at steynonline.com and has contributed to numerous publications, including the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Irish Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Jerusalem Post*. He is the author of several books, including *Lights Out: Islam, Free Speech, and The Twilight of the West*, *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It*, and *The [Un]documented Mark Steyn*. A frequent guest host of *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, he was for 15 years a guest host of *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. His albums include *Making Spirits Bright*, with Jessica Martin, and *Feline Groovy: Songs for Swingin' Cats*. From 2008 to 2013, he was a Eugene C. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Journalism at Hillsdale College.

I live about 20 minutes south of the Canadian border, which used to be called the longest undefended frontier in the world. People moved freely back and forth across it all day every day. But now it's been closed for over a year. At one point my daughter asked me to drive her up there, because there was a 30-minute opportunity for people on one side to talk to their friends on the other. "Sad!" as President Trump would say. It was like Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin during the Cold War, except that *both* sides are now like East Berlin.

I don't know how this happened, but it is just one indication that America, and the West in general, have become almost unrecognizable from what they were not that long ago.

Look at just three things we have lost.

One is equality before the law, something absolutely essential to a free society. In its place, we now have politicized law. If a policeman fatally shoots someone, whether his name is released to the public depends on whether the shooting is

consistent with the preferred narrative of the ruling class. A policeman recently took down a young woman who was threatening the life of another young woman with a knife, and that policeman was immediately identified—indeed, his photo was posted and he was threatened by NBA superstar LeBron James on Twitter. On the other hand, we know nothing of the policeman who shot dead an unarmed woman in the U.S. Capitol on January 6. His name will apparently never be released to the public.

Second, border control. Functioning societies, at least since the Peace of Westphalia three centuries ago, have borders. America has no southern border and no plans to get one. The official position of our government seems to be that any of the seven billion persons on this planet has a right to come and stay in the U.S. for three years, until his or her assigned court date comes up. As the number of people with pending cases continues to grow, that three years will extend out to five or seven or 15 years. If we get all seven billion people to come here, the court system will break down entirely and maybe we can go back to having a functioning border.

And third, dare I bring up the fact that it is a real question whether we can go back to agreeing to have open and honest elections? And if we don't have open and honest elections, control of our borders, and equality before the law, then we don't have the conditions for politics or free government.

And here's the thing. It is not at all clear to me that many of America's conservative politicians understand the seriousness of all this. You can see it in the fact that they go around trying to scare people with the specter of a "radical socialist agenda." For well over a year now, we have been living in a world in which it's accepted as normal that the state has essentially unlimited power—and in which our freedom to decide for ourselves has been diminished almost to invisibility. Why do these conservative politicians think the words "radical socialist agenda" still scare anyone in a time when the state can tell us whether we can have Aunt Mabel over for Christmas? They are completely out of touch.

Over the same period as the pandemic lockdowns, we have seen an escalation of so-called wokeness. And if you look at one of the most startling manifestations of this, transgender fanaticism—which involves, after all, the abolition of biological sex and, I'm sorry to have to say it, the physical mutilation of children—one notices that America is farther down this road than any other country in the Western world. In other words, at this moment of crisis for Western Civilization, or for what we used to call Christendom, the leading country of the free world is pulling the wrong way.

Think of it. Your daughter has been training since she was a little girl to run in school sports. Now at 17, she's in the state high school track championships, and you are forbidden even to notice that she's competing against a woman who is 6'2" with thighs like tugboats, a great touch of five o'clock shadow on her face, and the most muscular bosom you've ever seen. You're not supposed to notice the craziness of this, and the craziness is at its craziest right here in America.

We traditionally think of France as being a bit screwy, but today there are French intellectuals who regard themselves as hardcore leftists and yet who think America has gone bonkers on this transgender issue. President Macron himself has said that American wokeness is an existential threat to the French Republic, and he even found bureaucrats in France's education bureaucracy who agreed. There is not a single bureaucrat in the Department of Education in Washington, D.C., who would agree, but there are apparently a few in Paris.

If you look further east in Europe to the lands that were once behind the Iron Curtain—to Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, which still function as conventional nation-states calculating their best interests—you find tremendous fear of the threat of wokeness that is being exported, sometimes aggressively, from America. So it is here in the U.S. where we have to put the stake through these ideas.

But again, even most of our conservative leaders and institutions seem oblivious. School districts in America are talking about revising their curricula to cover transgender issues from grade school on. Now, I went to an English boys' school, and we were expected to pick up sexuality on our own time. In those days people would have looked puzzled if you had said, "We're going to have to cancel geography or Latin, because we need to put gay studies in there." These days, instead of going off behind the bike shed during recess to learn about sex, kids need to sneak behind the bike shed to do a little bit of closeted geography or closeted Latin. It's completely backwards. And yet what do we hear from most conservative politicians? That it would be nice to offer people a tax cut!

We are way beyond tax cuts. We're broke. We're just a smidgen away from \$30 trillion in federal debt—something with no historical precedent. Talking about tax cuts today is like talking about VAT tax refunds on the Titanic. It's not actually what's necessary at the moment.

Another big issue that should take our minds off tax cuts is China. I can't get over the way we in the U.S. have been ordered by our governors and the CDC to

punish ourselves by living small, shrunken lives, while the people in China who loosed this pandemic on the world have paid no price for it.

Dr. Fauci has been a federal government bureaucrat since 1968. He's the J. Edgar Hoover of public health. He talks about the COVID virus as if we're at war. But he seems to think a country wins a war by taking it out on its own population rather than the enemy, which is what we've done.

Which do you think was the only major economy to grow in 2020? It's not a hard question. America's economy shrank 3.5 percent last year. The economies of Germany and Japan shrank almost five percent. France's, Italy's, and India's economies all shrank over eight percent, and the economy of the United Kingdom was down ten percent. China's economy, on the other hand, grew 2.3 percent in 2020, and first quarter growth for 2021 in China set a new world record—it was up over 18.3 percent. The COVID pandemic has been hugely profitable for China.

U.S. policy towards China since the 1990s represents perhaps the biggest strategic miscalculation by any great power in human history. Just as communism was wobbling and beginning to fall everywhere else, we helped Beijing come up with the first economically viable form of communism.

At first we were told it was only our manufacturing that we would ship to China. After all, we were told, it wasn't economically viable for Americans to make widgets. Remember the talk in the '90s? We were going to be the "knowledge economy." All the clever people told us this. We weren't going to have mills and factories, but we were going to be the knowledge economy. Well, in case you haven't noticed, China's got the entire knowledge economy for itself now. It makes our laptops and our smartphones and it's out front with Huawei and 5G. It also makes the batteries that power our gizmos and the chips that run our cars. When COVID struck, we found out fast that the Chinese not only make our viruses, they also make the personal protective equipment that protects us against the viruses—and all of our medicines to boot! Those wily Chinese get you both coming and going.

China is now the number one global power. You can define this militarily, where it now has the largest surface fleet on the planet. You can define it economically. But the way I define it is to look at who gets its way in the world. New Zealand has just effectively pulled out of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement—an arrangement between the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the oldest such arrangement on the planet. New Zealand has pulled out with respect to China because it doesn't want to offend China. I would think Canada might be

the next to go. Or look at the World Health Organization. America pays for it, but Chairman Xi in Beijing calls the shots. China gets its way now, and the U.S. doesn't.

We need politicians with a sense of urgency about these problems, but all they seem to have is urgency about things that aren't urgent. Look at climate change. People say we need to take action over climate change or else rising sea levels are going to overwhelm the Maldives in the Indian Ocean in the 22nd century. That's the century after this one, which is still quite young. These same people say about the immediate crisis on the southern border that it's "a natural phenomenon beyond the control of politicians." But changing the weather in order to lower the sea levels that will threaten the Maldives in the Indian Ocean in the next century is within the power of politicians? In general, our leaders are urgent about nothing that matters and not in the least bit urgent about things that matter very much.

The things our news media talks about incessantly, whether it's transgender bathrooms or Confederate statues being toppled or the totally dishonest national conversation on race—nothing like this is heard in China as it goes along steadily strengthening its position as the world's leading power. The Chinese don't find themselves stuck in these sterile, drain-circling, dishonest public conversations about identity politics. These conversations are a waste of time. And one thing we should demand of our politicians is that they talk about things that *aren't* a waste of time.

At the root of our problems is that we have seen the emergence of a true ruling class, like Grand Dukes in medieval Europe. Its members intermarry. They send their kids to the same schools. They circulate back and forth between government and the private sector. And over time it has become increasingly easy to identify members of this class.

John Kerry gave a commencement address a couple of years ago in which he told the students, "You are going to be the first generation to live in a borderless world." And for the elite, the idea of a borderless world rings true. A typical member of the ruling class will get a job with a firm like Goldman Sachs, work for a couple of years in Hong Kong, then move on for a couple of years in Geneva, and then maybe come back to America. What are borders to such a person? Meanwhile, for the common American, COVID has literally ended, to a large degree, any freedom of movement. They live in the farthest thing from a borderless world. Oftentimes they're trapped in a town that is dying because of the open-border, cheap-labor policies advocated by people like John Kerry.

Our political division in America today is a class division, and we need to expose it as such whenever we see it. The ruling class tries to keep racial and other forms of division stirred up in our politics so that we don't notice the class protection racket they are running. Look at that guy from Twitter, Jack Dorsey, who wears a beard like he's playing the hobo in a Charlie Chaplin silent film. I wouldn't mind betting that when he's called to testify in Congress, he has his valet hook on the beard and lower him into the clothes that make him look like he's been sleeping in a dumpster. Then at night after the cameras are off he's like Lord Grantham in *Downton Abbey*, spending an hour being dressed for dinner. Our elites have become incredibly good at theater.

Getting back to the southern border, it perfectly symbolizes the bifurcation of our society. We're told there's a health emergency. We're told we can't open our businesses or attend weddings or funerals. Yet at the same time, every day, thousands of people pour across the southern border, test positive for COVID, and are then driven to a nice hotel and put up there at taxpayers' expense.

It's also interesting to compare the southern border with the northern. Prior to the pandemic, when the border with Canada was open, my kids had their Kinder Eggs confiscated by the Department of Homeland Security when we would cross the border going south into Vermont. Kinder Eggs are chocolate eggs with a kid's toy inside. They are sold in Canada, but they are banned in the U.S. because the Food and Drug Administration calls the toy a "non-nutritive embed"—and that's good enough to send Homeland Security agents swinging into action! There is always a big crackdown before Easter on Kinder Eggs. So at the northern border there are lots of things, down to Kinder Eggs, that are illegal. But at the southern border you can come in with pretty much anything you want, including COVID. Why is that? It is because some groups serve the needs of the ruling class and others don't. License is extended to the former and not the latter.

People ask me, "Why are you going on about Kinder Eggs? They're not important. It's more important that so-and-so is up two points in Iowa and three points in New Hampshire. That could be a real game changer." To which I answer no, that's not how it works. If they take the small freedoms away from you, whether it's the freedom to eat Kinder Eggs or to enjoy a high pressure shower, you will lose all the larger freedoms, which is the world we're in now.

I used to get occasional pushback when I'd talk about rights. "Rights are abstract things," people would say—"they don't have anything to do with our real lives." Well, after the last year, we know they have everything to do with our real lives. When you're told you can't open your hair salon, when you're told you can't have

family or friends over for dinner, when you're told you must wear a mask in your own garden, there's nothing abstract about it. This is where all the stupid Kinder Egg laws have been trending for years. And it's why we need to push back.

I made a little joke earlier about studying transgenderism in grade school, but it's not a laughing matter. Education is the biggest structural defect in our society. We have an almost entirely corrupt and abusive education establishment. And in one corner of Governor Whitmer's Michigan, of all places, Hillsdale College stands against this. Hillsdale's literature, I've noted through the years, talks a lot about the College's 177 years of being rooted in the soil of Michigan. And this reminds me of the fact that if you do not have roots, you are not a functioning society. You can't just be flotsam and jetsam, bobbing around on the currents of the age, wheresoever they tend. If you do that, you're cut off from your roots.

This is what's so frightening about the trends in education today. Cromwell told his portrait painter, "Paint me, warts and all." That's not what is happening in America, where the trend in education is to paint only America's warts. So even the great Kate Smith, who sang "God Bless America" for years, is having her statue taken down because she made a racially insensitive record in 1931. Well you know who really had a racially insensitive record in 1931? The Democratic Party. But unlike Kate Smith's statue, it's still around.

President Macron of France is not my favorite chap—he's a sinister globalist for one thing. But he made an admirable stand when he announced that not one French statue would be taken down and not a single French street name would be changed, because they are all part of French history. And "Bingo!" as Peter Navarro likes to say, the statue toppling and street-name changing in France went away. Why can't American conservatives show that kind of strength? The Senate Minority Leader says he personally would not be bothered if the historical names of U.S. military bases are changed. The editor of *National Review* says that he wouldn't be bothered about taking down Confederate statues. But of course it doesn't stop there—now they're going for all the statues. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, McKinley, and on and on. The point conservatives need to grasp is, unless you're prepared to surrender everything, don't surrender anything.

I'll end by pointing out that the Left wins because it seizes language. Take the policy of letting people vote who are not U.S. citizens and shouldn't be voting. The Left calls this policy "counting every vote." Therefore someone who wants to make sure voters are citizens is *opposed* to "counting every vote." If we don't take back the language, we will lose the truth. Even on FOX News, I have noticed, news anchors now talk about "gender assigned at birth," as if that's something different

from one's biological sex. There may be 57 genders, but there are only two biological sexes.

Don't surrender the language. Reclaim the language. It's the first step to recovering our civilization.