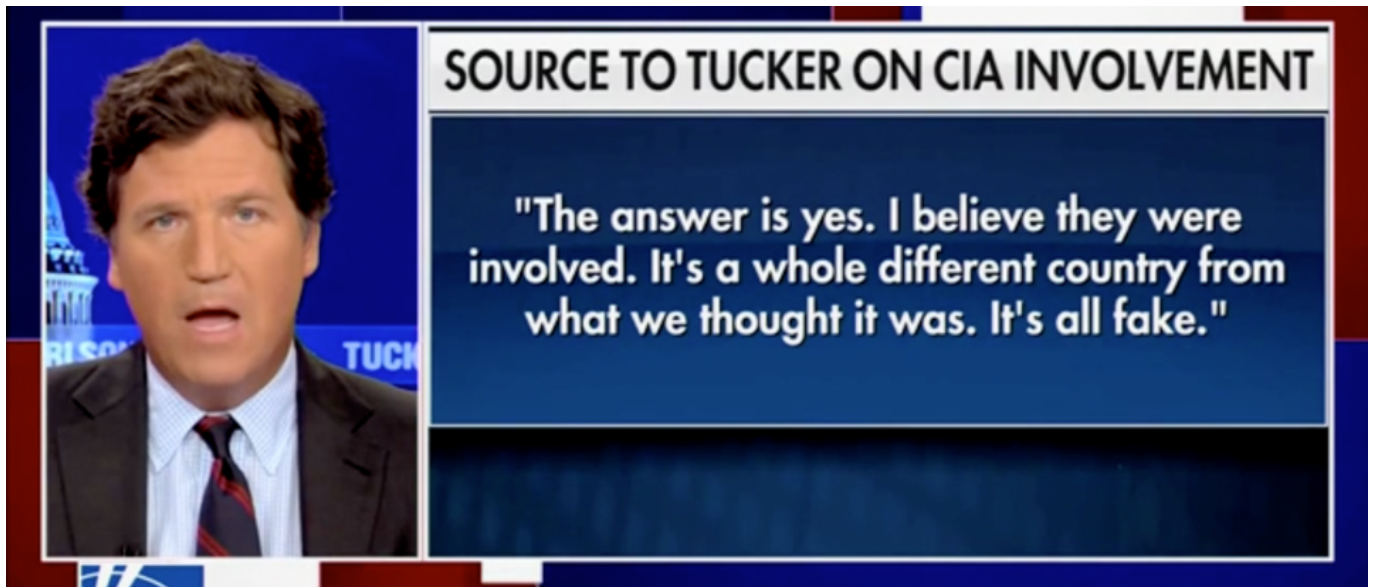


# Reflections on America at the End of 2022

Where are we and how did we get here?



by Bruce Bawer

November 22, 1963, was the first day of my life of which I have substantial memories: Mrs. Gibbons, my ample, white-haired second-grade teacher from Central Casting, wheeling the giant blond-wood TV set into the classroom so that we could watch some dull educational program; the sudden interruption for breaking news from Dallas, which we all followed avidly during the hour or so that was left of the school day; the anxious minutes during which I ran all the way home, convinced that the murder of a president must portend something absolutely horrible, at the very least the veritable collapse of society; my even greater anxiety when, unprecedentedly and apparently in confirmation of my fear, my mother didn't respond to my increasingly urgent knocks at the door; and the immense relief I felt when she called out from across the street, where she was watching the terrible news with the neighbors, and where I, too, would spend the next several

hours, experiencing a turning point in human history.

The day that President Kennedy was assassinated marked an end to what, in retrospect anyway, seems like an innocent and harmonious era in American life and the beginning of a period – one in which we still live – during which American society has been marred, sometimes more than others, by political doubt, division, and distrust and by growing disagreement on fundamental questions. A few days ago, on the December 15 episode of his show on Fox News – about which more later – Tucker Carlson noted that the phrase “conspiracy theory” had not been in common usage until 1964, when it began to be used to describe people who resisted the Warren Commission’s conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in killing the president and that Jack Ruby had acted alone in killing Oswald.

Those doubts about the JFK assassination, although backburnered most of the time, have never been entirely quelled. And over the decades there have been other doubts. After Pearl Harbor Day, virtually nobody in America questioned the virtue of our involvement in World War II; but over the course of the 1960s and early 70s, more and more Americans considered our prosecution of the Vietnam War unnecessary, if not outright wrong, and expressed an unprecedented distrust for the wisdom and virtue of our supreme military leaders. Watergate further frayed the fabric of American society. And the fall of the Soviet Union, which felt at first like a magnificent victory, proved soon enough to have taken from us a conflict that (we realized) had played a crucial role in maintaining our sense of national unity, national identity, and national purpose. Similarly, 9/11 brought us together briefly only to see the Bush administration lead us into two wars – the second justified on the basis of assertions about Saddam Hussein’s munitions that turned out to be unfounded – and those wars, as they dragged on over the years, resulted in increasingly intense domestic discord. And this is not to mention the

“conspiracy theorists” who, after 9/11, in what at the time seemed both outrageous and appalling, dared to suggest that President Bush, or other federal officials or agencies, had been behind the attacks on New York and Washington.

The election of our first black president, whose campaign speeches eloquently emphasized the oneness of Americans – those mystic chords of memory, don’t you know, that unite left and right, black and white, north and south – also seemed at first to be a marker of national unity: finally, once and for all, we had put racism behind us. But once in office the man did everything he could to divide us, to draw us apart, to drag us down; and when, toward the end of his eight years in the White House, a very different presidential candidate came along, promising a glorious restoration and renewal as well as a long-due reckoning with the largely mysterious permanent state that had grown steadily in size and power since the end of World War II, a sizable portion of the electorate responded with a degree of enthusiasm that was matched only by the level of dread with which the nation’s entrenched political establishment responded to his candidacy. Trump’s presidency was crippled from the start by absurd tales of Russian collusion – which were *not* described as conspiracy theories, because they were invented by major figures within the political establishment and were constantly represented in the mainstream media as nothing less than the truth.

Not since the Civil War had Americans been as divided as they were over Trump. So dug-in were his opponents that even after the Russian collusion stories were revealed to be lies, the Trump-haters showed no contrition, no embarrassment, and certainly no sign of having learned a lesson or of being willing to shut up and listen. On Election Night 2020, early returns suggested that Trump was headed for a second win, but after a highly mysterious break in the vote count in several states the whole thing turned around in a way that, in the view of knowledgeable observers, was exceedingly suspicious if

not statistically impossible, but that one court after another refused to take seriously as a possible case of widespread, coordinated fraud. Finally, the kerfuffle at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, provided Democrats and their media allies with something, however trivial, that they could pin, however indefensibly, on Trump and use to back up their ridiculous contention – which was substantiated by absolutely nothing that he had done as president – that he was an autocrat out to overturn a legitimate election. Add to that claim, which has hung over America ever since like a toxic cloud, the manifest mental incapacity of Trump's successor – who is obviously not running his own administration, and who on September 1 of this year, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, with bizarre blood-red backlighting, delivered an angry, denunciatory speech of a sort that no president in history had ever given, virtually equating Trump and his followers with Nazis – and you have an electorate more angry and more polarized than at any time since those shots were fired in Dealey Plaza.

And the tension just keeps ramping up. This month, having just spent \$44 billion to buy Twitter, the world's most influential media platform, Elon Musk, the world's richest man, has been releasing corporate documents proving what many of us already strongly suspected: that the people who'd previously run the firm had systematically colluded with the Democratic Party, with various Democratic politicians, and with the CIA and FBI to illegitimately block tweets that they *knew* to be factual but that would likely have done harm to Democrats. The most notable and most serious such case was that involving the *New York Post's* reporting on Hunter Biden's laptop, the contents of which, if they hadn't been improperly blocked from Twitter, would likely have handed the 2020 election, fraud or no fraud, to Trump – and would have landed Biden not in the White House but, with any justice, in prison for corruption.

The Musk revelations shouldn't have been a huge surprise. We always knew about the CIA's role in regime changes in Iran,

Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Bolivia, and elsewhere – but we always excused these activities by telling ourselves that, well, most of them took place at a time when the U.S. was enmeshed in a Cold War with a totalitarian enemy that seemed at the time to be an existential threat to the free world. So it was easy, not all that long ago, for us to cheer on Carrie Mathison and her CIA colleagues in *Homeland* (2011-20). The same was true of the FBI. As a boy, watching movies like *The FBI Story* (1959, with James Stewart) and the TV series *The FBI* (1965-74), I viewed G-men as heroes. Yes, J. Edgar Hoover, during his long directorial tenure, had used his power to intimidate presidents; later, the bloody debacle at Waco had been a big blemish – but nobody, we told ourselves, is perfect. Even more recently, however, even before Musk began releasing documents, the FBI had damaged its image among decent American citizens by its role in the plot to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer and its staged arrest of Roger Stone, among other politically motivated actions.

As if all this weren't enough, Tucker Carlson, on the above-mentioned December 15 episode of his Fox News show, discussed the trove of documents relating to the JFK assassination that have been kept under wraps by the CIA for generations and the release of which had, on that very day, December 15, been once again forbidden by the Biden administration. Carlson stated that an anonymous but trusted source familiar with the documents had confirmed the CIA's involvement in the JFK assassination. This wasn't entirely a surprise: during my teens and twenties, I'd avidly read several books that flatly rejected the conclusions of the Warren Commission and, instead, pinned the JFK assassination on, variously, the USSR, Cuba, the Mafia, the CIA, and even the Secret Service. Some of these authors' arguments were persuasive. But there had never been definitive proof, and none of these theories, of course, had ever won official approbation.

But now, in late 2022, in an America when so many things had once seemed so certain and so good, everything seemed to be in question or in flux. Seven years after Trump began his presidential campaign with a promise to “drain the swamp,” it seemed as if the curtains were finally beginning to be pulled back in a big way on the Deep State. The very thought that colossal – and *proven* – revelations about the JFK assassination might be in the offing sent my mind flying back to November 22, 1963, a time when extremely few Americans were capable of imagining that respected government officials of either party might be responsible for the murder of their president. Now, I daresay almost all of us can imagine it. The high-handed regulations set down and cruelly enforced by a number of governors and mayors during the COVID pandemic – regulations that destroyed countless small businesses, caused untold psychological damage to tens of millions of American citizens, and affected virtually all of America’s children in ways that may not be fully clear for a long time – opened the eyes of many of us as to just how capable many of our leaders are of sheer tyranny.

For some of us, anyway, all of these experiences and revelations add up to something that can fairly be described as a rather earth-shattering epiphany. They’ve led us not just to recognize that we can’t necessarily trust the results of our own country’s elections, but to contemplate the possibility that perhaps we should never have trusted them all along. (Yes, we all knew about the chicanery that put JFK in the White House in 1960, but how many other elections were also stolen?) They’ve led us to wonder what crimes against American liberty the FBI and CIA have committed that we *don’t* know about and that would knock our socks off if we did know. They’ve led us, indeed, to question pretty much everything we’ve thought and felt about America ever since we were proudly and naively patriotic children in school, unquestioningly saluting the flag, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and singing the “Star-spangled Banner.” Of course

we've always known that we weren't saluting the members of our government, whom we knew to be flawed, and in some cases terribly flawed – we were saluting our beautiful land itself, saluting the remarkable society bequeathed to us by our forebears, and saluting, above all, our Constitution and the principles embodied in our Declaration of Independence, which reminds us that when our government denies us our freedom, it is our right to replace it. Our right, and our duty.

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