

## COMMENTARY / CULTURE

# ‘What kind of nation are we going to be?’ Can’t wait to find out



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Cathartic. That’s what it was.

Page through the whole dictionary looking

for a better word to describe President Biden’s speech on the first anniversary of the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and you will not find one. The address, delivered from Statuary Hall, which was so memorably besieged one year ago, was an act of catharsis — a purging of emotional toxins built up from too much time hearing too many lies too brazenly told by those who seek to deny or minimize what happened.

The insurrectionists were patriots, they say. The violence was peaceful, they say. The things we saw we didn’t see, they say. And down is left and up is sideways and monkeys drive rainbow-powered cars and flowers sing reggae and yada, yada, yada, Republicans and their media henchmen shoveling diversionary bushwa by the metric ton.

Biden wasn’t having it. In

Thursday’s speech, he cut through it all like a blowtorch through butter, calling out “the former president” — he never used the Florida retiree’s name — for weaving “a web of lies.”

“He’s done so,” said Biden, “because he values power over principle, because he sees his own interest as more important than his country’s interest . . . and because his bruised ego matters more to him than our democracy or our Constitution. He can’t accept he lost.”

Some of us needed that.

One suspects the president did, too.

It’s not that Biden said anything we had not heard before. But we’ve heard it from pundits. The relief felt on Thursday lay in the fact that the president was the one saying it, that he brought to bear the authority and prestige of his office to speak the truth bluntly and without equivocation.

“You can’t love your country only when you win,” he scolded. And there was an urge, as when the preacher gets going good in a black Baptist church, to tap your foot and say, “Amen.”

Yet, invigorating as it was to hear the president take a rhetorical claw hammer to the ex-president and his enablers, the speech was also sobering. “We are,” Biden said,



During a ceremony in Statuary Hall, President Biden speaks on the one-year anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Source: Drew Angerer, Getty Images

“in a battle for the soul of America,” facing an “inflection point” in our national life and called upon to answer a question: “What kind of nation are we going to be?”

That this even bears asking reflects the fact that American democracy is in mortal peril. And when you consider how quickly — we’re talking about five years — that assessment has risen from fringe fear to mainstream consensus, you get a chilling sense of the speed at which events are moving.

“What kind of nation are we going to be?”

For generations, the answer was a given. We were a nation of laws. A nation of democratic principles. A nation that knew its greatness sprang from its goodness. And most of all, a nation that aspired. Meaning that, even when — as frequently happened — America failed its lofty ideals, it at least had

ideals to fail.

If that was the answer not so long ago, things have since changed. Now a headline in *The New Yorker* asks, “Is A Civil War Ahead?” and what’s remarkable is that it’s not remarkable at all, that it accurately reflects the zeitgeist.

What kind of nation are we going to be?

For most of us, the answer would be the same as that given by generations before us. But the point of this anniversary and of Biden’s speech, is that last year, Republicans gave another answer, and it was starkly at odds with our aspirational ideals. They showed us what kind of nation they want us to be.

Heaven help us if they get the final word.

## Sidney Poitier, cont’d.

to Dinner,” an interracial romance comedy that ruffled feathers in America. Then came other memorable films, “They Call Me Mister Tibbs,” the sequel to the controversial blockbuster “In the Heat of the Night,” and “Uptown Saturday Night” opposite Cosby.

He released several more works; “The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography (2007)” “Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Great-Granddaughter (2008).”

“As I entered this world, I would leave behind the nurturing of my family and my home, but in another sense, I would take their protection with me,” he said in “Measure of a Man.” “The lessons I had learned, the feelings of groundedness and belonging that have been woven into my character there, would be my companions on the journey.”

## Queen Mother, cont’d

in this business for 30 years, and it was tough,” Miller-Perry insisted. “Many times I’ve had to fight with advertisers, and one time, it almost broke me,” she said.

Miller-Perry relayed a story of integrity and activism when Sen. Barack Obama sought the presidency in 2007. “When Obama ran for office, I was so naïve that I went and got the names of every unregistered Black voter in the city of Nashville, and I had the nerve to print those names,” she recalled. “I had a company that paid us over \$100,000 a year to advertise, and I banked on that [money],” she continued.

“We had to bank on that to print,

and they closed me down. [However], when they did that, another company came and paid the same amount. Eventually, the other company came back to us, but it has been a struggle for all Black newspapers.” Miller-Perry said there’s a quintessential lesson all Black-owned newspapers must learn.

“We have to struggle together,” she declared. “I’ve never in my life said it’s about me. Everything I’ve done in this city is to help other people. I didn’t open the news store just for me. I’m 87 years old, and if I haven’t made any money, I’m not going to make any now. So, we’ve got to be together.”

## THIS WEEK IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

### THE BLACK PEOPLE WHO DIED AND SURVIVED DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Hilarius Gilqes was an Afro-German worker, actor, dancer and labor organizer. He was only 24 years old when 12 officers of the SS (the black-uniformed elite corps and self-described “political soldiers” of Germany’s Nazi Party) kidnapped him, stabbed him 37 times and shot him in the head.

Jan. 27 marks the annual international observation of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

And while the millions of victims who perished during the Holocaust were overwhelmingly Jewish and at the forefront of Adolf Hitler’s psycho-driven efforts to “purify” Europe—and eventually, rid the world of non-whites-- it’s seldom remembered that Black people were also casualties of the genocidal Nazi terrorism decades ago, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The museum’s website says there was no systematic program for the elimination of Blacks, as there was for Jews and other groups. But to be sure, people of African descent were certainly not safe during the Holocaust period that killed millions of Jews over the course of more than a decade, beginning in 1933 Germany.

During World War II, Black Americans and Europeans captured by the Nazis were interned in concentration camps. Bayume Mohamed Hussein of Tanzania died in the Sachsenhausen camp, near Berlin and Lionel Romney, an American sailor with the U.S. Merchant Marine, was imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp.

There were many more.

Black prisoners of war faced illegal incarceration and mistreatment at the hands of the Nazis, who did not uphold the regulations imposed by the Geneva Convention (international agreement on the conduct of war and the treatment of wounded and captured soldiers).

Lieutenant Darwin Nichols, an African American pilot, was incarcerated in a Gestapo (German secret state police) prison in Butzbach. Black soldiers of the American, French and British armies were worked to death on construction projects or died as a result of mistreatment in concentration or prisoner-of-war camps. Others were never even incarcerated, but were instead immediately killed by the SS or Gestapo.

Even before WWII, the Nazis treated its native Black citizenry (children whose mothers were usually German and fathers who were of African descent) with pure inhumanity:

African-German mulatto children were marginalized in German society, isolated socially and economically and not allowed to attend university. Racial discrimination prohibited them from seeking most jobs, including service in the military. With the Nazi rise to power, they



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became a target of racial and population policy. By 1937, the Gestapo had secretly rounded up and forcibly sterilized many of them. Some were subjected to medical experiments; others mysteriously “disappeared.”

