

The Delray Democrat

Are You Better Off Today Than You Were Four Years Ago?¹

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Ronald Reagan coined this question in 1980 and took all the way to the White House. It quickly became a meme and is asked in every presidential campaign.

At that time, the term “meme” had itself just been minted. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins had been searching for a word to describe *cultural* evolution via the transmission of ideas, much as “gene” describes *biological* evolution via the transmission of genetic traits. In 1976, in *The Selfish Gene*, he settled on “meme.”

Answering Reagan’s question in 2024 requires little effort if you have been paying attention and remember the deadly clown show that was the Trump administration. The *nature* of the question merits examination, for it reveals how America and Americans have devolved since the question was first posed.

Reagan appealed to naked self-interest and sowed division where once there was unity. The powerful had free reign to plunder and the vulnerable were abandoned. The Hobbesian dystopia was neither inevitable nor evolutionary. It was a conscious choice and it made us weaker as a country.

That *genes* are selfish does not mean *humans* must be selfish, Dawkins [insists](#): “Organisms can behave altruistically towards other organisms—the better to forward the propagation of their own selfish genes.” We collectively benefit from “social institutions which encourage us towards moral behavior.”

Millennia earlier, Rabbi Hillel asserted that altruism is essential to being human:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am only for myself, what am I?

Reagan’s presidency was transformative but it represented a cultural *devolution*. He made us both worse and weaker and set the stage for the barbarian that is Trump..

America was built on the pioneer spirit and rugged individualism, but Americans have always been able to work and sacrifice together for the common good. We were united through the dark days of the Great Depression and the existential battle against Naziism and fascism. Together we clipped coupons and endured rationing.

The ethos of that era was “we must sink or swim together.” It made America Great, to employ a much misused meme. Under an effective and responsive government led by FDR, we beat the Nazis and built a middle class that was the envy of the world.

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), May 2024, page 1.

Reagan's ethos was "I got mine, Jack." Greed was glorified and a government that saved the world and created our prosperity was demonized and left to rot

Reagan used racist tropes like "welfare queens" and "strapping young bucks" to exploit and misdirect the blind, imponent rage of a White working class that had fallen behind. He conned them into believing their problem was government support of the poor when in reality their problem was government toadying to the obscenely rich. The class war Reagan launched on behalf of plutocrats demanding to pay lower (or no) taxes exploded inequality and pushed workers (including the newly minted Reagan Democrats) even further behind.

Reagan destroyed the middle and working classes and fractured the country but acted with a disarming bonhomie. Trump threw away the dog whistles, grabbed a bullhorn, and revealed the savage beast that civilization had spent centuries working to tame.

Our corporate media was shocked to find they had unwittingly helped elect the intellectually impaired, psychologically damaged creature they had wrongly believed to be unelectable. And they seem to be at it once again, turning an election that should be a slam-dunk into a horserace.

Our democracy survived four years of Trump, but it is unlikely it will survive a second term. See the companion article, Will You Be Better Off in 2028?

Trump's colossally incompetent response to COVID greatly increased the death toll. Here's how a study in the British medical journal [The Lancet](#) put it:

Instead of galvanising the US populace to fight the pandemic, President Trump publicly dismissed its threat (despite privately acknowledging it), discouraged action as infection spread, and eschewed international cooperation. His refusal to develop a national strategy worsened shortages of personal protective equipment and diagnostic tests. President Trump politicised mask-wearing and school reopenings and convened indoor events attended by thousands, where masks were discouraged and physical distancing was impossible.

The medical journal estimated that almost 40% of the 470,000 deaths that occurred during Trump's tenure could have been averted. Some of those deaths are also attributable to the increased barriers to medical care under Trump. A Harvard [study](#) estimated that 2.3 million Americans lost health insurance during Trump's presidency.

Today our president is a capable and compassionate man. Joe Biden broke COVID's back by overseeing the vaccination of 200 million Americans in his first 100 days in office. KFF [estimates](#) that 1.9 million previously uninsured Americans gained insurance during President Biden's first two years in office.

President Biden added more than 15 million jobs in his first three years and reduced unemployment to levels not seen in over half a century—and Black unemployment to levels never seen before. He has signed legislation that will fuel the economy for years, including the greatest investment in green energy and infrastructure in American history.

These historic achievements were overshadowed by decades-high inflation for which Biden has [unfairly](#) been deemed principally responsible. And the media continues to obsess, even as inflation

nears the Fed's target and even though cumulative wage increases since January 2021 only slightly trail inflation and have outpaced inflation since May 2022.

Not only am I better off today than four years ago; America and Americans are in a far, far better place.