

Heather Cox Richardson

Letters from an American

September 15, 2026

Seven years ago, on September 15, 2019, after about a six-week hiatus during the summer, I wrote a Facebook post that started:

“Many thanks to all of you who have reached out to see if I’m okay. I am, indeed (aside from having been on the losing end of an encounter with a yellow jacket this afternoon!). I’ve been moving, setting up house, and finishing the new book. Am back and ready to write, but now everything seems like such a dumpster fire it’s very hard to know where to start. So how about a general overview of how things at the White House look to me, today....”

I wrote a review of Trump’s apparent mental decline amidst his faltering presidency, stonewalling of investigations of potential criminal activity by him or his associates, stacking of the courts, and attempting to use the power of the government to help his 2020 reelection.

Then I noted that the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), had written a letter to the acting director of national intelligence, Joseph Maguire, on Friday, September 13, telling Maguire he knew that a whistleblower had filed a complaint with the inspector general of the intelligence community, who had deemed the complaint “credible” and “urgent.” This meant that the complaint was supposed to be sent on to the House Intelligence Committee. But, rather than sending it to the House as the law required, Maguire had withheld it. Schiff’s letter told Maguire that he’d better hand it over. Schiff speculated that Maguire was covering up evidence of crimes by the president or his closest advisors.

And I added: “None of this would fly in America if the Senate, controlled by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, were not aiding and abetting him.”

“This is the story of a dictator on the rise,” I wrote, “taking control of formerly independent branches of government, and using the power of his office to amass power.”

Readers swamped me with questions. So I wrote another post answering them and trying to explain the news, which began breaking at a breathtaking pace.

And so these Letters from an American were born.

Seven years later, we are approaching the midpoint of Trump’s second term, and the patterns I saw seven years ago are slicing to the heart of both the mechanics and the soul of the United States.

In that first letter where I warned of rising authoritarianism, I wrote: “So what do those of us who love American democracy do? Make noise. Take up oxygen.... Defend what

is great about this nation: its people, and their willingness to innovate, work, and protect each other. Making America great has never been about hatred or destruction or the aggregation of wealth at the very top; it has always been about building good lives for everyone on the principle of self-determination. While we have never been perfect, our democracy is a far better option than the autocratic oligarchy Trump is imposing on us.”

And we have made noise, and we have taken up oxygen. All across the country, people have stepped up to defend our democracy from those who are open about their plans to destroy it and install a dictator. Democrats and Republicans as well as people previously unaligned, we have reiterated why democracy matters.

If you are tired from the last seven years, you have earned the right to be.

And yet you are still here, reading, commenting, protesting, articulating a new future for the nation. And I am proud to be among you.

I write these letters because I love America. I am staunchly committed to the principle of human self-determination for people of all races, genders, abilities, and ethnicities: the idea that we all have the right to work to become whatever we wish. I believe that American democracy has the potential to be the form of government that comes closest to bringing that principle to reality. And I know that achieving that equality depends on a government shaped by fact-based debate rather than by extremist ideology and false narratives.

And so I write.

I have come to understand that I am simply the translator for the sentiments shared by millions of people who are finding each other and giving voice to the principles of democracy. Your steadfast interest, curiosity, critical thinking, and especially your kindness—to me and to one another—illustrate that we have not only the power, but also the passion, to reinvent our nation.

To those who read these letters, send tips, proofread, criticize, comment, argue, worry, cheer, award medals, and support me and one another: I thank you for bringing me along on this wild, unexpected, exhausting, and exhilarating journey.

Letters from an American

A newsletter about the history behind today's politics.

By Heather Cox Richardson

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