

Opioid of the Masses (From 2016)

To many, Donald Trump feels good, but he can't fix America's growing social and cultural crisis, and the eventual comedown will be harsh.

By [J. D. Vance](#)



Jae C. Hong / AP
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Editor's Note: This essay originally ran in 2016, shortly after its author published his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*. We are republishing it on the occasion of its tenth anniversary, so that our readers can judge for themselves how well his assessment of the man he now serves as vice president has stood the test of time.

A few Saturdays ago, my wife and I spent the morning volunteering at a community garden in our San Francisco neighborhood. After a few hours of casual labor, we and the other volunteers dispersed to our respective destinations: tasty brunches, day trips to wine country, art-gallery tours. It was a perfectly normal day, by San Francisco standards.

That very same Saturday, in the small Ohio town where I grew up, four people overdosed on heroin. A local police lieutenant coolly summarized the banality of it all: "It's not all that unusual for a 24-hour period here." He was right: in Middletown, Ohio, that too is a perfectly normal day.

Folks back home speak of heroin like an apocalyptic invader, something that assailed the town mysteriously and without warning. Yet the truth is that heroin crept slowly into Middletown's families and communities—not by invasion but by invitation.

Very few Americans are strangers to addiction. Shortly before I graduated from law school, I learned that my own mother lay comatose in a hospital, the consequence of an apparent heroin overdose. Yet heroin was only her latest drug of choice. Prescription opioids—"hillbilly heroin" some call it, to highlight its special appeal among white working-class folks like us—had already landed Mom in the hospital and cost our family dearly in the decade before her first taste of actual heroin. And before her own father gave up the bottle in middle age, he was a notoriously violent drunk. In our community, there has long been a large appetite to dull the pain; heroin is just the newest vehicle.

Of course, the pain itself has increased in recent years, and it comes from many places. Some of it is economic, as the factories that provided many U.S. towns and cities material security have downsized or altogether ceased to exist. Some of it is aesthetic, as the storefronts that once made American towns beautiful and vibrant gave way to cash-for-gold stores and payday lenders. Some of it is domestic, as rising divorce rates reveal home lives as dependable as steel-mill jobs. Some of it is political, as Americans watch from afar while a government machine that rarely tries to speak to them, and acts in their interests even less, sputters along. And some of it is cultural, from the legitimate humiliation of losing wars fought by the nation's children to the illegitimate sense that some fall behind only because others jump ahead.

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During this election season, it appears that many Americans have reached for a new pain reliever. It too, promises a quick escape from life's cares, an easy solution to the mounting social problems of U.S. communities and culture. It demands nothing and requires little more than a modest presence and maybe a few enablers. It enters minds, not through lungs or veins, but through eyes and ears, and its name is Donald Trump.

Last Sunday, the day before Memorial Day, I met a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War at a local coffee shop. "I was lucky," he told me. "At least I came home. A lot of my buddies didn't. The thing is, the media still talks about us like we lost that war! I like to think my dead friends accomplished something." Imagine, for that man, the vengeful joy of a Trump rally. That brief feeling of power, of defiance, of sending a message to the very political and media establishment that, for 45 years, has refused to listen. Trump brings power to those who hate their lack of it, and his message is tonic to communities that have felt nothing but decline for decades.

In some ways, Trump's large, national coalition defies easy characterization. He draws from a broad base of good people: kind folks who open their homes and hearts to people of all colors and creeds, married couples with happy homes and families who live nearby, public servants who put their lives on the line to fight fires in their communities. Not all Trump voters spend their days searching for an analgesic.

Yet a common thread among Trump's faithful, even among those whose individual circumstances remain unspoiled, is that they hail from broken *communities*. These are places where good jobs are impossible to come by. Where people have lost their faith and abandoned the churches of their parents and grandparents. Where the death rates of poor white people go up

even as the death rates of all other groups go down. Where too many young people spend their days stoned instead of working and learning.

Many years ago, our neighbor (and my grandma's old friend) in Middletown moved out and rented his house on a Section 8 voucher—a federal program that offers housing subsidies to low-income people. One of the first folks to move in called her landlord to report a leaky roof. By the time the landlord arrived, he discovered the woman naked on her couch. After calling him, she had started the water for a bath, gotten high, and passed out. Forget about the original leak, now much of the upstairs—including her and her children's possessions—was completely destroyed. Not every Trump voter lives like this woman, but nearly every Trump voter knows someone who does.

Though the details differ, men and women like my neighbor represent, in the aggregate, a social crisis of historic proportions. There is no group of people hurtling more quickly to social decay. No group of people fears the future more, dies with such frequency from heroin, and exposes its children to such significant domestic chaos. Not long ago, a teacher who works with at-risk youth in my hometown told me, "We're expected to be shepherds to these children, but they're all raised by wolves." And those wolves are here—not coming in from Mexico, not prowling the halls of power in Washington or Wall Street—but here in ordinary American communities and families and homes.

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What Trump offers is an easy escape from the pain. To every complex problem, he promises a simple solution. He can bring jobs back simply by punishing offshoring companies into submission. As he told a New Hampshire crowd—folks all too familiar with the opioid scourge—he can cure the addiction epidemic by building a Mexican wall and keeping the cartels out. He will spare the United States from humiliation and military defeat with indiscriminate bombing. It doesn't matter that no credible military leader has endorsed his plan. He never offers details for how these plans will work, because he can't. Trump's promises are the needle in America's collective vein.

The great tragedy is that many of the problems Trump identifies are real, and so many of the hurts he exploits demand serious thought and measured action—from governments, yes, but also from community leaders and individuals. Yet so long as people rely on that quick high, so long as wolves point their fingers at everyone but themselves, the nation delays a necessary reckoning. There is no self-reflection in the midst of a false euphoria. Trump is cultural heroin. He makes some feel better for a bit. But he cannot fix what ails them, and one day they'll realize it.

I'm not sure when or how that realization arrives: maybe in a few months, when Trump loses the election; maybe in a few years, when his supporters realize that even with a President Trump, their homes and families are still domestic war zones, their newspapers' obituaries continue to fill with the names of people who died too soon, and their faith in the American Dream continues to falter. But it will come, and when it does, I hope Americans cast their gaze to those with the

most power to address so many of these problems: each other. And then, perhaps the nation will trade the quick high of “Make America Great Again” for real medicine.

About the Author

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