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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Evan, "Roseanne & Trump Don't Reflect American Values" (2018). *Highlands College*. 113.
https://digitalcommons.mtech.edu/lib_studies/113

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Roseanne & Trump Don't Reflect American Values

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

May 31, 2018

Roseanne Barr's comeuppance for her racist attack on Valerie Jarrett should suggest that our nation has discovered the boundaries of unacceptability when it comes to racist comments or tweets. But then many in our nation felt we'd reached a new level in 2008 after we elected an African-American President for the first time. We then hoped that America might be entering a post-racial period, following hundreds of years stained by America's original sin of slavery.

But Donald Trump stands as evidence that neither is true. President Trump, our elected leader, has a painfully sad track record in uniting our diverse nation.

How do we explain America's values to our grandkids when we have a President who is responsible for the following: the racist bigotry of "birtherism" – claiming Barack Obama was born in Kenya and couldn't be president; the withering condemnation of Mexicans as "rapists;" the assertion that black athletes exercising free speech maybe "shouldn't be in the country;" or the call for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims until [we] can figure out what the hell is going on." Putting these all together reveals a frightening pattern -- a President who is certainly not calling Americans to reflect our better angels. Rather, his actions and words elevate racism, intolerance and hatred.

The American presidency is a hallowed institution -- a position where the "bully pulpit" has been used to lead by example and express the positive values of our nation. Instead, the Trump presidency has become a bullhorn that preaches hatred and bigotry. How do we explain this to our grandchildren? How can it be explained in a civics class where we are to learn the laws, rules and norms that govern this noble experiment in self-governance?

Our children and grandchildren have been taught to be proud that America has the welcome mat out for all. Our family has lived this. My Catholic father, though other nationalities, was mostly Irish. My mother's essentially Eastern European family was Jewish. One of my brothers is married to a wonderful lady from Mexico, now a citizen and their daughter is married to a Moroccan. One of my daughters married an African American and we have two bi-racial grandsons in our University system. One of my brothers is gay and his husband is from Mexico, also now a citizen. Our family includes a Native American and several Asian-Americans. As parents and siblings, children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, we are Jews, Christians and Muslims; we are black, brown and white; we are gay and straight, we certainly are part of that great jumble of differentness that is humanity – that is America.

We have preached and practiced the American dream of acceptance. Yet, today, we find an America where racists feel empowered to be more open and bold. A President who thrives on divisiveness buttresses that boldness. He has gone from "dog whistle"

racial politics to bullhorn, claiming in a lie that he doesn't know anything about KKK leader David Duke or that he "knows nothing about white supremacists" (like the Ku Klux Klan). We have a president who proclaims there are "fine people" among the Nazis marching (and killing) in Charlottesville. How can we justify this direct conflict with the essential American values we were taught.

We must be honest with our families, including the young ones. We must acknowledge that many Americans are under assault because our nation's values are under assault. But, we also need to show them there is a path out. So, as believers in American democracy, we must advocate a truly American response – the ballot box. America needs to soundly reject President Trump's intolerant and divisive ways this November and then, whether it be another Republican or a Democrat, we need to reject the man himself in 2020. Perhaps, then, we can renew the American commitment to our descendants; that America is a nation of values with leadership to match.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

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