

# *Madness*

*\* Crisis in America \**



Political Poems  
by  
Larry J. Eriksson

2nd  
Edition

January, 2019

## *Crisis in America*

The 1st Edition of this chapbook, in the fall of 2017, noted that “Donald Trump has led our country into madness: he responds to problems with lies and bullying, preferring to send flurries of laconic tweets – Congress is gridlocked, our nation is in crisis.”

Today, this statement remains true, only more so. Trump’s lies and bullying continue, Mueller’s team has indicted numerous individuals with ties to Trump, four-star General Jim Mattis has resigned as Secretary of Defense with a strong letter criticizing Trump’s foreign policy views, uncertainty rocks the stock market, and the gridlock between Trump and Congress worsens.

This collection of poems, some new and many from the 1st edition, expresses my thoughts and feelings about this perilous time in the history of our nation. Most are roughly in the order they were written from about 2015-2018.

\* \* \*

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## *Table of Contents*

Crisis in America	–
1945	2
Watch 'Evita' to understand Trump (prose)	3
Opinion Page Haiku	3
An American Election	4
The Greatest Ever Haiku	5
Why I Stopped Writing Poetry	6
A Tweet Too Far	7
New Math Haiku	8
At the Edge of the Abyss	8
Acting President Haiku	9
The Road to Chaos	10
Trumped-Up Reality	11
A Comedy of Errors or a Tragedy?	12
Haiku Question	13
The Captain of Our Ship	14
The Emperor's New Clothes	15
Clear Thinking Haiku	15
Demagogic Diplomacy	16
Nightmares for Dreamers	17
On Democracy	18
Demagogue	19
The Enemy of My Enemy	20
Election Haiku	20
Seeking Justice	21
Where is the Greatness?	22
Our Militarized Nation	23
Created Equal (prose)	25
Final Thoughts	26

*1945 (excerpt)*

Blitzkrieg invasions, horrific death camps,  
incendiary bombing, and atomic weapons –  
all convincing demonstrations  
of the willingness of the state  
to practice mass murder  
on an unprecedented scale.

In some ways, World War II  
was a triumph of good over evil,  
but it was also a triumph of  
destruction over reason,  
violence over peace,  
collective force  
over individual rights;  
the veneer of civilization  
was brutally peeled away –  
it remains thin.

October, 2011

(from chapbook *Marching*)

*Published as Letter to the Editor of the Wisconsin State  
Journal at madison.com, Aug. 3, 2016.*

### *Watch 'Evita' to understand Trump*

The easiest way to understand the attractions and danger of Donald Trump for our country is to watch the musical "Evita."

When Trump says he speaks for the people and is the only one who can solve their problems, he is repeating the same demagogic claims that Evita Peron made to Argentina. She also appealed to popular desires and promises rather than rational arguments. The result was a long period of violence and decline for Argentina.

The results of demagoguery are rarely good.

### *Opinion Page Haiku*

Letters are welcome,  
but poems are not accepted –  
just too dangerous.

November, 2015

## *An American Election*

*“Narrow minds devoid of imagination. Intolerance, theories cut off from reality, empty terminology, usurped ideals, inflexible systems. Those are the things that really frighten me” (observed by a character in the 2002 novel “Kafka on the Shore” by Haruki Murakami)*

panders to populist fears

“take back America”

racism, xenophobia, intimidation

“build a wall”

crude insults, empty promises, dangerous threats

“criminals, drug dealers, rapists”

mockery, bullying, name-calling

“Lying Ted, Little Mario, Crooked Hilary”

unpredictable demagogue, egotist

“lock her up”

incivility, vulgarity, misogyny

“you can do anything”

ridicule, irrationalism, isolationism

“I know more than the generals”

lies, ignorance, obscurantism

“trust me”

mean-spirited tweets, attacks foes for entertainment

“I have more power than they do”

email obsession, criticizes the FBI

“you can’t review 650,000 emails in eight days”

>>>

narrow electoral victory despite losing popular vote  
some claim he “earned a mandate”  
widespread marches after the election, he says  
“professional protesters, incited by the media”  
opposition warned, possible lawsuits or prosecution  
advisor says “be very careful”  
appoints Washington insiders and power brokers  
how does this “drain the swamp”?  
big benefits for corporations and a few jobs saved  
check off another campaign promise

avoids press conferences, just uses tweets  
no need to answer questions  
secrecy, closed doors, keep them guessing  
sounds like Putin  
generals and corporate execs  
running “The White House, Inc.”  
now located at Mar-a-Lago, the new Versailles  
keeping the king away from the people  
open for business, but  
...no trespassing

December, 2016

### *The Greatest Ever Haiku*

Whopping achievements  
and enormous modesty –  
not a hint of pride.

April, 2017

## *Why I Stopped Writing Poetry*

*“Bear in mind that bereavement is a process...More often than not, those who try to force themselves to ‘get over it’ quickly are unsuccessful” – caring.com*

The inspiration has vanished –  
words no longer seem adequate  
when the electorate selects  
a brash, self-centered narcissist;  
a candidate who acquired votes  
through lying and misleading tweets  
rather than thoughtful discussion  
of his plans and programs.

You might rationalize the flaws  
in the Electoral College  
and that his opponent received  
nearly three million more votes –  
but many millions supported  
an unprepared, unsuitable,  
unpredictable candidate  
to be our president.

>>>>

Due to the misguided actions  
of those desiring major change,  
the future is now uncertain  
with many questions, few answers;  
worn out by months of useless words  
and now overcome by feelings  
of frustration and impotence –  
why should I write a poem?

November, 2016

### *A Tweet Too Far*

The president talks in riddles  
without direction or logic –  
there is no substance to his words,  
there is no thought to his actions,  
they only bring mindless chaos.

Someday people may finally  
admit he cannot do his job,  
but will it be too late to stop  
the president's last big mistake –  
ending our sweet world with a tweet?

June, 2017

*New Math Haiku*

Election results,  
the winner got fewer votes –  
it must be fake news.

March, 2017

*At the Edge of the Abyss*

The Democracy Index –  
a four step ladder rating  
a nation's democracy,  
nineteen countries sit on top –  
these are “full democracies,”  
but not the United States.\*

Our country now one rung down –  
a sadly “flawed democracy,”  
due to an election where  
the loser had more votes,  
reduced trust in government,  
and political scandals.

If this isn't bad enough,  
we are just one step above  
so-called “hybrid regimes”  
with irregular elections,  
dysfunctional government,  
and a silent citizenry.

>>>

These dismal nations apply  
pressure on the media  
and partisan enemies,  
have a weak judiciary,  
an anemic rule of law,  
and widespread corruption.

This may sound familiar,  
but how close is the last step  
where savage “dictatorships”  
hold meaningless elections,  
abuse civil liberties,  
and silence their opponents?

February, 2017

\* The list of 19 full democracies now includes such small nations as Malta, Mauritius, and Uruguay as well as large nations such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain, but not the United States; see article on the *Democracy Index* in the *Wikipedia*.

### *Acting President Haiku*

Acting president –  
a position he enjoys,  
but what bad casting.

January, 2018

## *The Road to Chaos*

Many newspapers will not accept poems for their opinion pages. When it was rewritten as prose, this poem was published in *The Cap Times* online at [host.madison.com/ct/opinion/](http://host.madison.com/ct/opinion/), April 6, 2017; and as “The Road to Chaos” by the *Door County Pulse* online at [doorcountypulse.com/letters/](http://doorcountypulse.com/letters/) and in print by the *Peninsula Pulse*, April 7, 2017.

*“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”  
George Santayana (1906)*

Across eighteenth century France,  
deference to the king declined,  
his word no longer absolute,  
the populace were desperate  
for food and money to buy it,  
angry women marched on Versailles  
– his palace refuge from Paris,  
factions competed for power,  
people spoke of conspiracies,  
many killed by state violence,  
neighboring countries declared war,  
chaos overwhelmed the nation.

In this country, we suffer from  
a flawed national election –  
some would say illegitimate,  
the loser got more total votes,  
not much respect for the winner,  
many voiced their disapproval,  
women travelled to Washington,  
coalitions fought for power  
and conspiracies abounded,  
the president sends out tweet storms  
slamming the media’s “fake news,”  
but clings to “alternative facts,”  
followed by false accusations  
against President Obama,  
all producing distractions and  
confusion across the nation,  
as he presides at his Versailles –  
Mar-a-Lago, “The White House, Inc.”  
open for business and war talk,  
...but no trespassing permitted.

March, 2017

## *Trumped-Up Reality*

Amidst unwarranted charges  
and harmful foreign intrusions,  
Hillary lost the election  
despite getting many more votes.

After this flawed election  
under the “leadership” of Trump,  
respect for the presidency  
has dropped to an historic low.

Many expressed their disapproval –  
women gathered in Washington,  
divisions in the White House brought  
disturbing uncertainty and...

A budget that defies reason,  
more bucks for the military,  
no public television funds,  
more tax credits for the wealthy.

“Trumped-up” accusations against  
former President Obama  
accusing him of wire tapping  
Trump’s offices in Trump Tower.

An endless flurry of tweet storms  
slamming the media’s “fake news,”  
criticizing his opponents,  
making threats and accusations.

Challenges to reality  
creating anxiety and  
sowing confusion and chaos –  
distractions from our real problems.

March, 2017

## *A Comedy of Errors or a Tragedy?*

A few Donald Junior emails  
produce intense criticism  
– Hilary released thousands without  
generating much interest.

Junior's supporter announces  
just "much ado about nothing"  
– only if you are aren't concerned  
about lying or perjury.

Those not bothered by nepotism  
or collusion in the White House  
claim the meeting was just routine  
– why wasn't it disclosed sooner?

The Russian says she knew nothing,  
calls it a "misunderstanding,"  
but Junior's thoughts on the meeting  
– get more dirt on Hilary, "great!"

And why did his father announce  
in the campaign a "major" speech  
on Hilary that never occurred  
– what was planned, why was it cancelled?

Then Trump retreats to the White House,  
no appearances for three days  
– after leaving the G-19  
while Congress remains in gridlock.

He re-tweets "the greatest witch hunt,"  
a typical overstatement,  
but now that we have found a witch  
– how many more are still out there?

>>>>

The answer comes in a few days,  
a second Russian attended,  
so now we have a second witch  
– we need to continue hunting.

Amazingly, it soon turns out  
a third Russian was also there,  
– why were they all at this meeting  
and why didn't we know sooner?

After numerous denials,  
we learn Trump wrote Donald Junior's  
deceptive initial statement  
– how many surprises remain?

An endless string of news stories  
before the investigation  
of Russia has even begun  
– what in the world is going on?

These revelations have put Trump  
on the defensive, but we know  
war restores ratings, like Nero  
– will he “tweetle” while the Earth burns?

July, 2017

### *Haiku Question*

Name a mendacious,  
corrupt, egotistical,  
sleazy sociopath.

(using words in a description of Trump by British  
entertainer John Cleese in an article in the Wisconsin  
State Journal on Nov. 11, 2018)

December, 2018

## *The Captain of Our Ship*

The storm grew in intensity,  
the waves towering over us.

I had no worries, I knew that  
the captain would keep us secure.

But when I arrived at the bridge,  
it was empty, no one was there.

Where was the captain and the crew?  
I scrambled down to his cabin.

When I knocked on his cabin door,  
there was no response, I walked in.

The captain was holding a phone  
and punching out a stream of tweets.

I told him of the empty bridge,  
the growing power of the storm.

He told me to stop worrying,  
things were going great, fantastic.

No time to stop and look at me  
during his manic obsession.

I knew that the ship was sinking  
buried by waves of tiny tweets.

July, 2017

## *The Emperor's New Clothes*

Now the president takes  
on the LGBTQ community  
with a surprise attack  
on transgender people,  
a flying brick thrown  
by yet another tweet,  
neither the Pentagon  
nor even the White House  
know what to make of it,  
we have a president  
who “governs by tweet,”  
no plans, no discussion,  
just a laconic tweet  
– his standard medium,  
a crazy, ignorant,  
and mean-spirited way  
to run our great country,  
and another attempt  
to divide and distract,  
– why does no one exclaim  
“the emperor has no clothes!”

July, 2017

## *Clear Thinking Haiku*

Just to clarify –  
Trump is not open-minded,  
but empty-headed.

October, 2018

## *Demagogic Diplomacy*

Trump storms into the UN,  
where he is an outsider,  
and welcomes them to New York;  
then gives his bombastic speech –  
he has all of the answers,  
but doesn't know the questions.

He says America first,  
endorses self-interest,  
truculent egoism,  
not great for relationships;  
self-serving morality –  
what about helping others?

A self-righteous narcissist,  
a ranting, pompous bully,  
who threatens weaker nations –  
“no choice but to totally  
destroy North Korea” and  
twenty-five million people.

More arrogant name calling,  
no sense of diplomacy,  
belligerent diatribes  
and contradictions abound –  
he condemns the Iran deal  
without a better answer.

Risky confrontations are  
no way to bring the world peace –  
better to use the UN  
to improve relationships,  
expand cooperation,  
and enhance security.

September, 2017

## *Nightmares for Dreamers*

On the campaign trail,  
he told them not to worry –  
he loves the Dreamers.

No concern for the  
important jobs that they fill  
or their families.

Then he ends DACA,  
passes the buck to Congress  
to solve the problem.

Too many to deport,  
the message will drive many  
into the shadows.

Congress is a swamp,  
requests for action go in –  
nothing emerges.

Struggling to live,  
surviving on the margins,  
minds filled with worries.

Then the president  
says don't worry he will act  
if Congress doesn't.

How do you live with  
confusing contradictions,  
capricious statements?

Dreamers still are told  
to pack and prepare to leave –  
all eight hundred thousand.

Life in America –  
mercurial president  
and broken Congress,

>>>

...but he still loves  
the Dreamers.

Prose version of “Nightmares for Dreamers” published by *The Cap Times* online at [host.madison.com/ct/opinion/](http://host.madison.com/ct/opinion/), September 12, 2017, and in print, September 13, 2017; also published by the *Door County Pulse* online at [doorcountypulse.com/letters/](http://doorcountypulse.com/letters/) and *Peninsula Pulse* (print), September 15, 2017.

## *On Democracy*

Democracy always sounds good –  
“the will of the people, majority rules,”  
but most democracies are flawed,  
elections are rarely “free and open,”  
boundaries are gerrymandered,  
representation is unequal,  
parties control access and money,  
lies and deceptions abound,  
the right to vote is often curtailed,  
ballot tampering is a concern,  
the winning majority too often  
ignores the losing minority.

Even in a strong democracy,  
voters make misguided decisions –  
many voters are poorly informed,  
some simply dislike the government  
and are suspicious of experts,  
others reveal religious bias,  
racial bias, or gender bias,  
some direct their support and votes  
to a single topic of concern  
rather than overall competence,  
as a result, candidates running  
for the greater good may not win.

What do we really expect  
from our elected officials? –  
honest leadership that manages  
a fair and open government,  
protects our human and civil rights,  
adopts effective regulations,  
provides efficient services;  
democracy is necessary,  
but it is not nearly sufficient –  
our country needs informed voters  
and civic-minded candidates  
committed to justice for all.

March, 2018 (included in *Musings*)

## *Demagogue*

attack everyone  
hit fast and hard  
keep it short and simple  
LOTS OF CAPS  
lots of exclamation points!!!  
be unpredictable  
inconsistent  
outrageous  
keep moving

devalue democracy  
attack institutions  
compromise justice  
threaten the media  
destroy the opposition  
ignore the rules  
be opaque, lie  
keep everyone guessing  
create national chaos

upset the world order  
disavow treaties  
embrace enemies  
confront friends  
create confusion  
encourage fear  
threaten attacks  
remain bellicose  
play golf

April, 2018 (included in *Musings*)

## *The Enemy of My Enemy*

Some liberals are mad at  
James Comey for his actions  
before the last election.

Today, Donald Trump poses  
an existential threat to  
our values, institutions –

but Comey’s insightful book,  
*A Higher Loyalty*, speaks  
of truth and the rule of law.

An old saying suggests that  
perhaps “the enemy of  
my enemy is my friend.”

Seen as enemies by Trump,  
Comey and the FBI  
are friends of the resistance.

Don’t think about who did what  
when your house is burning down –  
take action with all your friends.

April, 2018 (a poem for liberals angry about  
James Comey’s role in the 2016 election;  
included in *Musings*)

## *Election Haiku*

Trump’s lunacy brings  
women voting for changes  
men have resisted.

December, 2018

## *Seeking Justice*

*...to make the right  
peacefully interpenetrate  
the fact, and the fact the right,  
this is the work of the wise.*

*Victor Hugo, Les Misérables*

Some focus on the facts –  
millions of immigrants  
living in the shadows  
without legal status  
in a country they love.

Others seek what is right –  
shelter for immigrants  
who sought a better life  
and have contributed  
to our nation for years.

Some citizens from birth,  
others, both young and old,  
without legal standing –  
but this is now their home,  
it is right that they stay.

A country adrift makes  
its heartless decisions  
to deport our neighbors,  
focusing on the facts  
and ignoring the right.

Connecting right and fact  
requires thoughtful leaders  
with legal expertise  
and a strong moral compass  
to reach a just result.

August, 2018

## *Where is the Greatness?*

Gerrymandering rigs elections,  
new laws restrict access to the polls,  
an unfair electoral college  
produces a liar for president  
who denounces his opponents  
with tweets that bluster and bully.

Journalists are disparaged,  
climate change ridiculed as “fake news,”  
the opposition smeared and ignored,  
women and minorities denigrated,  
global friends insulted, opponents praised,  
distraction and misinformation rule.

Obama’s nominee unfairly blocked  
during his final year in office –  
just two justices in eight years,  
Trump’s nominee quickly approved  
despite his angry partisan outburst –  
two justices in less than two years.

A government bought by the wealthy  
gives corporations citizen's rights,  
reduces environmental safeguards,  
unfairly persecutes immigrants,  
the Statue of Liberty is weeping –  
when will it end and healing begin?

December, 2018

## *Our Militarized Nation*

It is appropriate to honor  
those who serve in our military,  
called to protect our country from harm;  
but our boundless desire to recognize  
the military above all others  
has changed the fabric of our nation.

We are a militarized nation;  
once with a modest peacetime army,  
we now have huge permanent forces,  
an immense military budget,  
and pursue seemingly endless wars –  
Afghanistan for seventeen years.

We celebrate war on our holidays –  
war making rather than peacemaking,  
the rocket's red glare on the Fourth of July,  
high speed fly-overs at sporting events –  
even Armistice Day, a day of peace,  
has been transformed into Veteran's Day.

For two hundred years and nine major wars,  
no war monuments on the National Mall,  
then the Vietnam War Memorial,  
later the World War II Memorial  
and soon the World War I Memorial,  
each recognizing those who fought in wars.

A monument was recently approved  
for the Global War on Terrorism,  
waiving the required ten year delay  
after a war has ended since who knows  
when or if the war on terrorism will end –  
we are now a nation of endless war.

>>>

Despite a crowded National Mall,  
three additional memorials  
are planned for other veteran groups –  
our most public space is becoming  
a symbolic necropolis across  
the river from Arlington Cemetery,

We often ignore the public service  
of those outside of our military;  
during World War II, my father,  
with the approval of his draft board,  
helped build superchargers for our aircraft –  
his service unrecognized, forgotten.

During the divisive Vietnam War,  
many students had to leave school and,  
with the approval of their draft boards,  
some got defense deferments to work  
on equipment for the military –  
their service unrecognized, forgotten.

Civilian service is seldom honored,  
diplomats are rarely celebrated,  
peace prize winners are soon forgotten,  
but generals are remembered forever;  
our history books focus on wartime –  
peacetime years receive fewer pages.

Some peace memorials are well-known –  
in Hiroshima, the Genbaku Dome;  
in England, the Coventry Altar Cross;  
and in Ottawa, a monument honors  
soldiers in Canada's peacekeeping forces,  
but where are our monuments to peace?

(information on Mall monuments is from  
“War and Remembrance” by Elliot Ackerman  
in *Smithsonian*, Jan.-Feb., 2019)

January, 2019

The following edited excerpt is from the talk “Created Equal” presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County on July 2, 2017 (podcast and PDF file at [uufdc.org](http://uufdc.org))

## *Created Equal*

This past fall, a candidate, famed for his wealth and his role on reality TV shows, running with nationalistic fervor, and supported by many rural voters, became president despite losing the popular election by nearly 3 million votes.

We now have a president who embraces “alternative facts” and has criticized or ridiculed the media, the judiciary, the opposition, women, minorities, immigrants, and sometimes even his own party. Neal Gabler in his article “Farewell America” described “a man who has shredded our values, our morals, our compassion, our tolerance, our decency, our sense of common purpose, our very identity.

Haruki Murakami, in his 1997 novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, quotes a character whose comments reflect the feelings of many people following the November election:

“He knew how to knock his opponent down quickly and effectively with the fewest possible words...Consistency and an established worldview were excess baggage...In the mass media’s tiny time segments...He needed only to attack, to knock his enemy down...no one had questioned his sources or their reliability...I was never able to...refute him. It was like boxing with a ghost; your punches just swished through the air. There was nothing solid for them to hit...”

Joel Whitebook noted in the *New York Times* that the manic pace of misinformation wears down any opposition. Despite efforts to invest the misguided present with an air of normalcy, these are not normal times. There will be calls for unity, but we cannot unite until truth, respect, justice, and fairness are restored. It will be a long and difficult job. To succeed, we must work together, be patient, and persevere.

### *Final thoughts...*

The United States of America embraces a wide range of guiding principles. We are “a melting pot” and “a land of opportunity” that believes in “liberty and justice for all” and “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These principles grow out of our stories, our traditions, our shared moral values, and our hopes for the future. Some of these phrases are metaphors, many are inspired by history, others are more goals than reality. Our best principles unite rather than divide.

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### *About the author*

Larry J. Eriksson is a Wisconsin poet active in the Dickinson Poetry Series at the UU Fellowship of Door County and a member of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. He sees the world as filled with the music of poetry – a cosmic mystery driven by rhythms, rhymes, and riddles. His poems preserve memories, clarify thoughts, explore feelings, or simply have fun with language. You can download his publications for no charge at [www.quartersectionpress.com](http://www.quartersectionpress.com).



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