Commitment to community

EDITORIAL

It's a dark time in America. Together, individuals and institutions, must find a way to bring in the light.

It's a dark time in America.

This year, the holiday season comes at a time when our country is in distress. The federal government faces a constitutional crisis following the impeachment of the president. At least the government is not shut down like last Christmas.

But our leaders have failed to provide much-needed relief to the far too many families who are struggling with poverty, low incomes, and a rising cost of living. How many kids will not receive a holiday present this year because of the recent roll back of food stamps and Social Security disability benefits?

American despair is so pronounced that after six decades of increase, life expectancy of Americans has declined for three consecutive years. Behind the trend is the increase in drug overdose, suicides, and alcoholic liver disease.

Philadelphia's Christmas tree shines brightly in LOVE Park.

Our region is not immune to despair. Philadelphia lost more than 1,100 people to drug overdose in 2018 and, according to preliminary estimates, is on track to lose as many in 2019. Both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have experienced an increase in suicides in 2019, including high-profile student suicides on college campuses.

For the region, added to suicides and drug overdoses is the trauma of gun violence. In Philadelphia, a child or teenager was shot on average every four days throughout this year. Across the river in New Jersey, a month after a 10-year-old was shot and killed in a crowded football game, a gunman opened fire in a Jewish market in Trenton killing five — a massacre motivated by hate.

It's a dark time in America.

We must find a way to bring in the light.

In a time of hate, divisiveness, and vulnerability for many Americans, turning the tide requires a commitment from as many individuals as possible to push back against these dark forces in their daily actions — and to share a sense of responsibility for one another.

The term "personal responsibility" has gotten a bad reputation. For decades, it has been used politically to maintain an image of an American dream in which every American has a chance to grow wealth and climb on the ladder of socioeconomic mobility if only they work hard. We know that's not true.

The personal responsibility that will outshine the darkness of these bleak days is the one that President John F. Kennedy was referring to in his inaugural address when he implored Americans to ask not what their country can do for them, but what they can do for their country. Then, and now, the focus needs to be a commitment to community.

"Tolerance and acceptance are among our founding values, and diversity is one of Philadelphia's greatest strengths," Mayor Jim Kenney said in a statement accompanying a letter to the Trump administration expressing the city's consent to accept refugees.

Tolerance and acceptance are not substitutes to good policy and investment by government, but these two types of actions — by individuals and by institutions — are not mutually exclusive. If everyone works to embody the values that Philadelphia expresses publicly, we can together be the light that pierces through the darkness — not only during the holiday season but throughout the year.

OPINION

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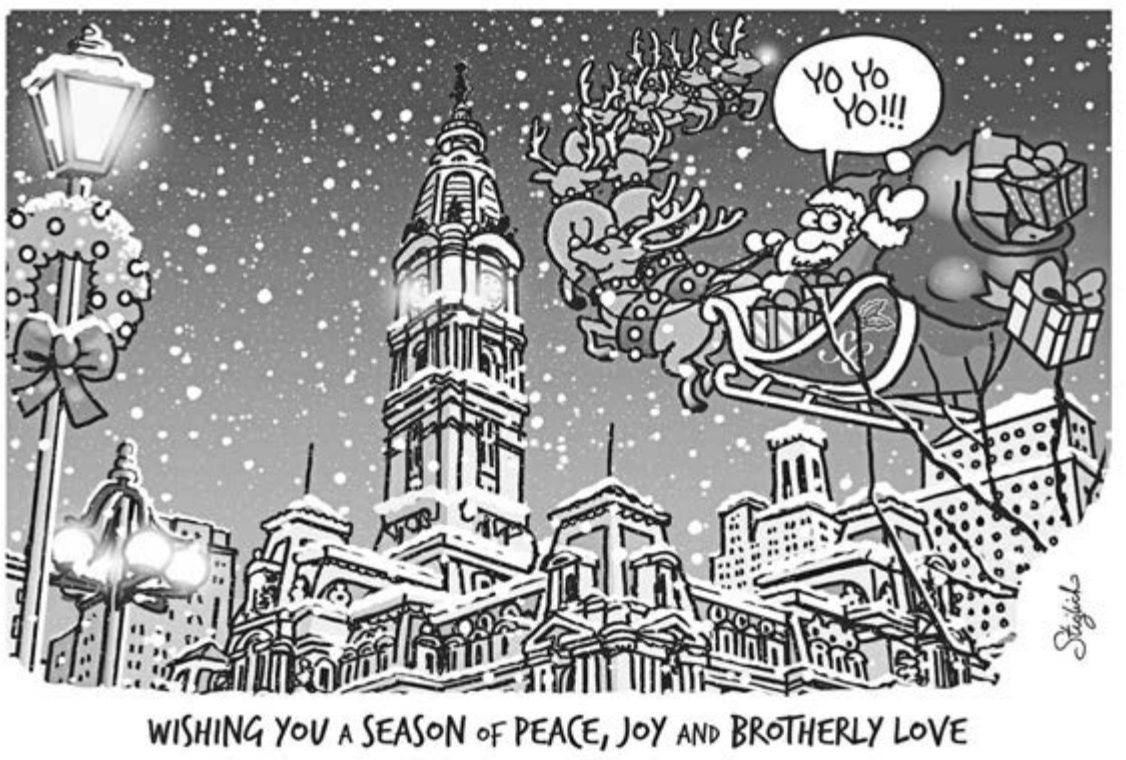


TOM STIGLICH

COMMENTARY

The benefits of believing in Santa

By Jacqueline Woolley

Every year, parents of young children have an important decision to make, even more important than which presents to buy or what to cook for Christmas dinner. Parents must either commit to the Santa myth or attempt to survive without it in a culture in which it is deeply, and often passionately, embedded. It's a decision that raises angst and generates heated discussions among people of all ages.

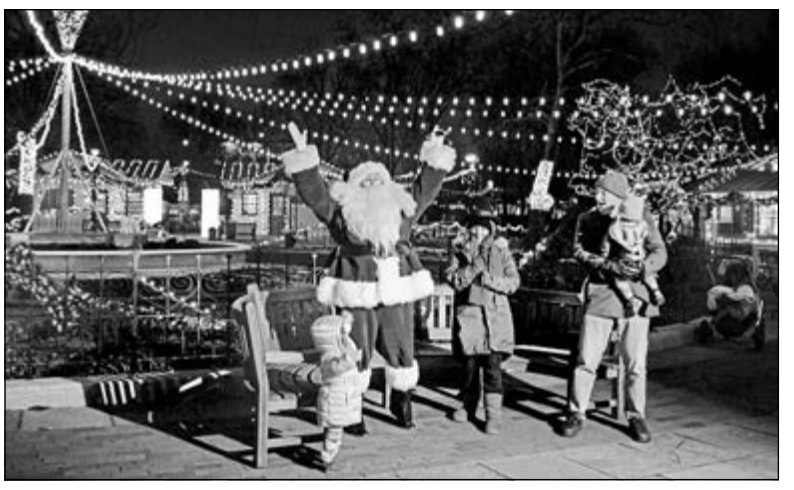
It doesn't have to be this way.

Some parents are concerned that engaging their children with the Santa story constitutes lying. To them, not only does this feel unethical, it raises concerns regarding whether their children will lose trust in them once they discover the truth. But studies say otherwise. They report that, in fact, most children respond positively to the discovery, and that any emotional upset is extremely short-lived.

Another perspective is that telling your child about Santa doesn't require lying at all — parents are simply encouraging their children's participation in a fantasy. In taking children to see *Frozen*, in reading them Harry Potter books, in dressing them up for Halloween, we're involving children in fantasy worlds. With certain excursions into the realm of the fantastical, the benefits can justify the means — like how the father in the movie *Life is Beautiful* convinces his young son that the concentration camp is really a game in which he can earn points to win a tank.

Parents have to decide for themselves: Do the benefits of telling children about Santa outweigh the potential costs?

So, what are the benefits? Research on the benefit of believing in Santa Claus is sparse, but there is research indicating that there are benefits of having a vivid imagination. Believing in impossible beings like Santa Claus or flying reindeer might also exercise children's counterfactual reasoning skills. Engaging the border between what is possible and what is impossible is at the root of all scientific discoveries and inventions, from airplanes to the internet.



Santa Claus, in this case City Councilman Mark Squilla, spreads cheer at the Franklin Square Holiday Festival on Dec. 12. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

Perhaps the greatest benefit to children's cognitive development arises from the discovery that Santa Claus is not a real physical being. Although parents often envision a singular point in time when their child demands the truth, there is often a protracted period during which children become increasingly unsure about Santa's existence. Toward the end of this period, children may actually look for evidence to confirm their suspicions, or in some cases even set up their own experiments.

My daughter left a camera and a note next to the milk and cookies, requesting that Santa take a picture of himself and leave it for her. I recommend that, once parents sense that their children are beginning to doubt, they help them make the discovery on their own. For example, if you think that your child is ready for the truth, instead of disguising your handwriting on the presents "from Santa," use your own handwriting. Conspicuously place a few "from Santa" presents under the tree the night before. Let your child feel proud that she figured it out.

Children are, after all, little scientists. Upon making the discovery, they become part of the adult world — they are "in on the secret" — and can also derive emotional benefit by being given an adult role in keeping the myth alive for their younger siblings.

In the end, even if there are no cognitive benefits of believing, or disbelieving, in Santa Claus, just the fact that it's fun might be good enough. And it's not just fun for children. Adults also often crave opportunities to be transported into fictional worlds. Whether you consider it a "white lie," a lie whose benefits outweigh its costs, or simply a chance to collectively imagine the impossible, bringing Santa into your family at Christmas can make a special time a little more special.

Jacqueline Woolley is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

Why Trump's anti-Semitism order is problematic

By Heather Mac Donald

President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Dec. 11 to combat campus anti-Semitism. While well-intentioned, the order could raise free speech problems, depending on its implementation. Anyone who worries about the campus left's suppression of alleged hate speech should also be concerned about the precedent that the order may set.

Trump's directive addresses a lacuna in anti-discrimination law. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 covers discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin, not Judaism or religion in general. The Trump order extends Title VI protections to Jews through some fancy rhetorical footwork that in essence conflates race, color, or national origin with Jewish religious practice.

Before the order was published, the New York Times had reported that the Trump administration had defined Jews as representing a "national origin." This claim set off a firestorm of protest among some Jewish advocacy groups, but that protest has since mostly died down. Had the directive confined itself to affirming the long-standing executive branch position that Title VI extends to discrimination against Jews, there would have been little cause for First Amendment concern. But the order goes on to direct the federal agencies that enforce Title VI to consider the definition of anti-Semitism as adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016. That definition states in part: "*Rhetorical* and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities" (emphasis added). The Trump order also directs federal agencies to consider the examples of anti-Semitism provided by the IHRA as evidence of discriminatory intent. Those examples include: "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor"; "applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation"; and "drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis."

The examples of anti-Semitism provided in the IHRA may seem self-evidently odious. Nevertheless, there is considerable risk in the government declaring that certain concepts and language are per se discriminatory and that they constitute part of the predicate for legal action. Consider the guidelines disseminated by the University of California for identifying microaggressions. The disfavored statements include: "America is the land of opportunity," "I believe the most qualified person should get the job," and "There is only one race, the human race." It is not hard to imagine an Elizabeth Warren or Joe Biden administration ordering government agencies to monitor such statements in enforcing Title VI, while also supplementing them with equally dangerous ideas such as "blue lives matter" or "all lives matter."

President Donald Trump signs an executive order combating anti-Semitism in the U.S. during a Hanukkah reception.. MANUEL BALCE CENETA / AP

And while it may seem patently discriminatory to claim that Israel is a racist endeavor, the right of self-determination is not always self-evident. As Eugene Volokh pointed out in Reason, one can reasonably dispute whether the Basques, Kurds, or Catalonians, say, possess such a right. It is not up to the government to decide which claims of self-determination are beyond questioning in any possible rhetorical context.

The defenders of Trump's executive order would argue that it does not penalize speech per se but only sets out which speech may be used to determine whether someone had discriminatory intent in harassing another person. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education rejects that defense. It has warned of the order's likely effect on campus authorities: "While the order is couched in language intended to paper over the readily evident threat to expressive rights, its ambiguous directive and fundamental reliance on the IHRA definition and its examples will cause institutions to investigate and censor protected speech on their campuses."

The order's precedential value is even more worrisome. The question is not whether the government today will correctly identify speech that shows discriminatory intent and limit itself to that inquiry alone. The question is whether government can be trusted to make such calls indefinitely into the future. The college administrators, students, and faculty who today declare any challenge to academic orthodoxies racist will not always stay cabined on campus. Some will go on to wield government power. There is no reason to assume that as federal politicians and regulators, they would abandon their anti-free speech instincts if handed a ready precedent with which to continue their crusade against America's alleged fascist power structure.

Heather Mac Donald is the Thomas W. Smith Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and contributing editor of City Journal, from which this was adapted.