

Then She Asked Me About Benghazi

I went to Harpers Ferry seeking escape, and discovered how far our shared reality has fractured.



Ibrahim Alaguri / AP; Jim Rogash / Getty; Paul Spella / The Atlantic

About the author: [Ben Rhodes](#) is a former deputy national security adviser to Barack Obama.

In the winter of 2018, I drove out to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, to finish writing my White House memoir. The town is built on a hill that descends to the junction of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, ringed by mountains. A railroad bridge over the rivers, the brick buildings, and the church steeples give the place the feel of 19th-century America, a landscape that you might glimpse in a painting hung in the American wing of an art museum. This is also, of course, the place where the Civil War began; where the radical abolitionist John Brown seized the local arsenal in the hopes of sparking a mass uprising of enslaved people; and where Brown was detained by forces led by Colonel Robert E. Lee—he would later be hanged for his crimes under the watchful eyes of a young spectator named John Wilkes Booth. A quiet American place filled with American ghosts.

The town was cold and empty, and that's precisely what I wanted. I stayed in a drafty bed-and-breakfast on the main road, an old house with antique furniture and a deep quiet other than the creaky stairs. I was the only guest, so for the bulk of my day and through the night I was alone in this house, reviewing pages that told the story of the past decade of my life. I spent my first night there giving careful attention to the chapter that dealt with the Benghazi attacks, aware that it would be combed over by right-wing trolls who'd used my every utterance about Benghazi over the years to advance the projection that I was a villainous liar spreading disinformation.

In the morning, a cheerful middle-aged woman who cooked breakfast and looked after the place for the owners was intent on making conversation. I stood in the kitchen drinking coffee as she cleaned up after breakfast and peppered me with questions. What did I do? I was a writer. What was I writing? A memoir. What was the memoir about? My time serving in government. What did I do in government? I worked on international issues. When was I in the government? I was in the Obama administration.

This post is excerpted from Rhodes's [recent book](#).

Once the subject was broached, the woman was quick to volunteer, in the friendliest possible way, that she was a Trump supporter. She talked about how she'd moved to West Virginia from Florida, where her grown daughter was in law enforcement. She had become upset by illegal immigration, she said. She had no problem with immigrants, and she had long been okay with the influx of Latinos. But it had just gotten to be too much in their Florida community, and it was contributing to the crime that her daughter had to deal with professionally. She took out her phone and showed me a picture of her daughter, smiling with Trump during a recent trip to Mar-a-Lago.

I was, I realized, having the proverbial "conversation with a West Virginia Trump voter"—one of the white working-class voters who had abandoned the Democratic Party and elevated a New York reality-television star to the presidency on a promise of keeping immigrants out. It felt like a useful conversation, two citizens with earnestly different opinions about how to fix our immigration system, but it obscured the more insidious aspects of the president. I inquired gently about how she felt about Trump's character. She laughed. "Of course I know he lies," she said, "but that's just what he did as a businessman. It's how he does business."

I could see her perspective. Her concern about immigration wasn't without legitimacy, even if I didn't share it. Her world-weary acceptance of Trump's lying indicated a belief that she was in on the joke and I wasn't; that Trump's crass politics was simply the natural way to get things done, particularly when the task was upending the failed political establishment to which I belonged. She even volunteered that she'd voted twice for Barack Obama. "Barack," she said, claiming a first-name basis, "was cool." But in her view, Obama's time was simply done and Trump was what the moment required. So she was also one of those prized "Obama-Trump" voters.

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I recalled Obama telling me about focus groups that were done with these voters by the Democratic Party after the 2016 election. Nearly all of the voters could enumerate Trump's personal failings—his dishonesty, his treatment of women, his rude and vulgar manner. But they reserved deeper scorn for the Clintons and the corruption they seemed to represent—the profiting from power, the condescension, the membership in an elite that didn't care about them. I could see this woman fitting easily into those groups.

Then she started to tell me about the research she'd been doing. This entailed looking further into the "true story" of what was going on—deep reading online and watching documentary films. I could sense her moving into precisely the kind of space that I'd come to Harpers Ferry to avoid. Did I know, she asked, that "George Soros is the devil"? She said it more as an assertion than a question, with an intensity that made me wonder whether the assertion was meant literally or metaphorically. Then she asked me if I knew about Benghazi.

I felt as if time had suddenly stopped, the universe conspiring to place me there, in West Virginia, standing in an old kitchen clutching the handle of a coffee mug on a winter's morning. This was, I realized, the first time I'd met one of the tens of millions of people who had likely consumed some volume of content about my role in a terrible conspiracy without knowing my identity. My name was written in the bed-and-breakfast's register, all of that information one Google search away. This was a transitory moment. I could retreat from the room or explore where this might lead.

I'd be curious, I told her, if you could tell me what you think happened in Benghazi.

She said she'd be happy to, and we moved into the adjacent room, which—given the age of the house—felt as if it should be called a parlor. She started right in with the “talking points,” the idea that former National Security Adviser Susan Rice had knowingly lied on the Sunday talk shows by spinning a fake story about the attacks in Benghazi being caused by a video. I was tempted to share what I'd been reliving the previous night. How there was an offensive movie about the Prophet Muhammad that had prompted violent attacks at U.S. embassies and facilities across the Muslim world. People killed and black flags raised over our embassy in Tunis. Masses of people rushing our embassy in Khartoum. Flames rising up from the ruins of less conventional targets like a Hardee's in Lebanon. But that, I felt, would be a bridge too far, starting an impossible argument in which we could never agree on even basic facts.

What if, I said to her, the people working in government were not lying, but just trying their best; what if they were people, just like us, conveying what they believed to be true? That had, in fact, been the essential finding of the many investigations that had taken place.

[Read: Benghazi, explained](#)

She considered the possibility, before moving on to other aspects of the conspiracy. The lack of security at the facility in Benghazi. The so-called stand-down order that denied military support to the heroic Americans stranded under attack. Darker insinuations about the Obama administration's shady reluctance to confront “radical Islam.” The implicit accusation that, for some terrible reason, we'd let those Americans die there and then lied to cover it up.

I tried to counter pieces of this, pointing out that the facility in Benghazi had not been an embassy, with all the security measures that embassies come with. That there had been no stand-down order, but instead an effort to mobilize the appropriate military resources to get to the scene. That the whole thing was just a tragic attack that sometimes happens in this world, a situation in which people did their best and it wasn't good enough. More than once, I felt compelled to tell her that I was actually a character in this story. “If you knew who I was,” I said, “you wouldn't like me.” The thought seemed inconceivable to her.

“But you're so nice,” she said, waving my concerns away.

Soon we reached the end of the conversation. It was time for me to go back upstairs to work on my own history of these events. As if playing her final card, she asked me why—if nothing had gone wrong—all of these former military and Special Forces officers on Fox News said otherwise. I couldn't help but think of Trump's former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, the man who'd gone from serving alongside Hillary Clinton in the Obama administration to chanting "Lock her up!"

Sitting there, I considered the gulf that existed between me and this woman, the different worlds we inhabited. We'd both lived with the same presidents, experienced the same cultural moments, and likely made the same watercooler small talk about Super Bowls and celebrity breakups. We shared the trappings of a national identity that could stitch together disparate states, people of different backgrounds and religions. The national anthem. The Pledge of Allegiance. Memorial Days and Veterans Days to pay homage to the military. Knowledge of the Civil War, which had started right there in Harpers Ferry. Pride in winning world wars and the Cold War. Familiarity with the phrases inscribed on parchment: "We the People." And yet her understanding of the course of recent events was entirely different from mine. It wasn't simply the question of immigration policy. Basic facts—objective reality itself—were different, whether the subject was what happened on a chaotic night in Benghazi, Libya, or the motivations of people like me.

As she got up to leave for the day, she returned to her affinity for Trump. "What I like about him," she said, "is that he just brushes away these narratives." She held her hand in the air, waving it back and forth as if she were batting away flies.

I woke later than usual the next morning, having stayed up late working and finishing off a bottle of wine. I could hear the woman arranging breakfast on the table downstairs. I took my time getting dressed, nervous about the reception that I'd get, hoping that perhaps she'd just leave the breakfast and go on with her day. Maybe I was embarrassed about who I was and what I would look like through her eyes.

When I came down the stairs, she greeted me with a mixture of flushed embarrassment and generous enthusiasm. "I had no idea who you were," she exclaimed. She went on about how she never would have said those things had she known. I told her not to worry, that it was interesting to hear her perspective. We did the earnest work of trying to reassure each other, that our conversation had

been positive, that we'd listened to and learned from each other. She told me that her sister followed me on Twitter because she's a big liberal. We took a selfie together using her phone. She kept repeating a version of what she'd said the day before, as if needing to repeat it to underscore a surprising discovery: "But you're so nice." I assured her, genuinely, that she was as well.

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I left the conversation with a mixture of relief and despair. Relief over this happy ending to the interaction, the human connection that people can forge even when they've been living in different realities. Despair over the certainty that the same woman I'd just embraced had believed that I was someone entirely different before she met me. It wasn't her fault. This was the conspiracy theory I believed: that the infrastructure responsible for creating the alternative Ben Rhodes was fueled by unseen forces shaping the politics of people like this woman—the cocktail of outrage and suspicion that was served up on Fox; the algorithms that filled news feeds with increasingly dire content and conspiracies in order to generate clicks; the wealthy interests that lubricated the machine to achieve more predictable ends, such as lower taxes and less regulation; the toxins of white supremacy that sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly infected the whole project.

I had no doubt that she had a long list of legitimate grievances about the variety of disappointments that accompanied American life over the past several decades, just as she felt a sense of pride and likely believed her American identity to be a blessing. In our own ways, we all felt that. But we no longer had a common set of facts that could be agreed on other than fleeting interactions that were becoming rare in our individual lives and national experience.

I walked through the chill of empty Harpers Ferry streets, where unseen ghosts reminded me that the story of what is happening in America has always been contested, always connected to larger questions about who gets to be fully American, who profits from those determinations, and how the rest of us understand those realities and live within them.

In the years since I went to work on the 2008 Obama campaign, conspiracy theories have mushroomed in parallel to the spread of social media and the flood of disinformation, depositing us into different realities. When I was in the White House, I felt us losing control of some intangible connection between actual

events and an established set of facts, as a huge chunk of the population on the right was intentionally conditioned to disbelieve whatever someone like me said. Both in America and around the world, conspiracy theories ran like rivers beneath the surface of politics, preparing the ground for authoritarian leaders with bizarre justifications for their rule.

Sometimes conspiracy theories are the darker musings of those kept out of power in a society. Sometimes they are fueled by those in power to keep a society distracted. But the Trump years went beyond even that—conspiracy theories were a driving force behind the government itself, connecting to the most potent grievances of those who felt excluded even though their guy had won, shaping the subject matter of the national discourse, and radicalizing individuals inclined to prejudice. Once people choose to exist in an entirely separate reality, bringing them back is no easy task, especially when every turn of national events can be framed as a validation of their grievances. We will be living with the residue of that radicalization for a long time.

[Tim Harford: What conspiracy theorists don't believe](#)

America had helped shape the world we lived in before descending into the cesspool of the Trump years. We now had a government that was busy radicalizing a huge swath of American society, with pockets of the country turning to violent white supremacy or a QAnon conspiracy theory positing that America was secretly run by a cabal of child sex traffickers. At precisely the time that progressive forces around the world were under siege, America absented itself from the defense of the most basic propositions that had once defined it in the eyes of the world: the idea that individuals are entitled to a basic set of freedoms that should be applied equally to all people. The idea that democratic governance will compel a society to organize itself around a common set of facts. The idea that people of different races, religions, and ethnicities can peacefully coexist by forging a common sense of identity. The lifelines offered to those who struggled for these things in their own spaces, validated by the results that America itself could produce. We did big things.

Over the past 30 years, we had lost our grip on those lifelines.

Obama and Trump perfectly encapsulate two separate Americas, two different stories about where we need to go. In their own ways, these two opposing stories reach back into the recesses of American history—back to Harpers Ferry, where

John Brown insisted that slavery was irreconcilable with union; back to the nation's founding, when the author of the Declaration of Independence that stated that all men are equal owned slaves.

To have any capacity to help fix what has gone wrong in the world, we have to begin fixing what has gone wrong with ourselves. The end of the Cold War removed the demon that needed to be faced down abroad, the competing empire that compelled a certain sense of national unity and purpose. But we never did settle on a new national purpose after the Cold War, a sense of what it meant to be American in the world. Instead, after 9/11 we made the mistake of going abroad to look for new demons to confront.

The cold war that needs to be won now is at home, a battle between people who live in the reality of the world as it is and people who are choosing to live in a false reality made up of base white-supremacist grievances and irrational conspiracy theories—and seeking to impose it on the rest of us.

This post is excerpted from Rhodes's recent book, [After the Fall: Being American in the World We Made](#).