Inside Story

Each issue our expert correspondents provide historic insights into global issues. Reporting from post-election US, **Adam IP Smith** suggests that Trump's victory should make us re-evaluate our expectations of continuity – and that historians must adjust their conceptions of change

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Why we must learn to understand zig-zags

"The Hillary Clinton celebration-that-wasn't was held in a convention centre with a glass ceiling: a hubristic case of the speech-writer's tail wagging the event-planner's dog, perhaps. Even before Donald Trump had given his oddly low-key victory speech, the party broke up in desolation.

Many weeks later, the palpable sense of shock at the outcome of the election has not abated. This did not feel like a normal campaign, but Democrats hoped – assumed, even – that Hillary Clinton would win and that normality would resume. The widespread presumption that Trump 'couldn't' win reflected a powerful urge not just to want continuity but to expect it, too. The shock of Trump is in part the shock of historical discontinuity: there has never been anyone like him before, so there should not be one now. Sometimes, though, the people who assure you that everything will carry on as before are wrong. Sometimes, people do not behave as you think they will, institutions collapse, and the world turns upside down.

President Obama directly confronted the challenge of discontinuity in his remarks on the White House lawn on the morning after the election. "The path that this country has taken has never been a straight line," he said. "We zig and we zag, and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forward and others think is moving back." At which point he paused, before adding, as if to reassure a scared child: "And that's OK."

Obama's conception of American history – shared by the Clinton supporters in that vast, glass-ceilinged room – is one characterised by the gradual absorption of more people into the universal 'promise' of democracy. Theirs is a familiar and, in one form or another, hegemonic narrative of the American past. It proceeds from the idea that there is a universal claim about liberty and equality encoded in the founding documents – not as a description of reality but as an end goal.

Theirs is the America of Abraham Lincoln – the first Republican president, but one as temperamentally different from Trump as he was similar to Obama. Lincoln talked of the US as the "last, best hope of earth" but saw it as a work in progress: an ideal "constantly looked to, constantly laboured for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colours, everywhere." There may be zig-zags on the way, but the destination is clear.

Many of those who voted for Trump appear to subscribe to a less teleological version of history: America not as a work in progress but as a once-beautiful accomplishment now sadly tarnished. Hence Trump wants to make America great *again*. As one Trump supporter told me, this election was the last chance to "get our country back." Hillary Clinton, he said, was "not really American". Deeply immersed as Donald Trump is in conspiratorial thinking – not least about the birthplace of Obama – I don't think that supporter meant to imply that Clinton was literally born outside the US but, rather, that she was simply alien.

CHRIS GLOAG

Clinton supporters in New York City react to news of Donald Trump's victory in Florida on 8 November. "The widespread presumption that Trump 'couldn't' win reflected a powerful urge not just to want continuity but to expect it, too," says Adam IP Smith

The Trump supporters I interviewed wanted a political counter-revolution. Surveys showed that support for Trump was strongly correlated with the opinion that America is a worse place now that it was in the past. Trump is hardly the first shake-up artist to be elected to the White House and, like many of his predecessors from Thomas Jefferson to Ronald Reagan, his promised political explosion in as much about a restoration of past purity as it is about advancement.

Historians of my generation came of age in the wake of the ending of the Cold War, of apartheid and, it seemed, of old entrenched hierarchies. Intellectually, perhaps the 1990s prepared us very badly for sudden discontinuity of this kind. True, we never swallowed the 90s conceit of the 'end of history' – Francis Fukuyama's artefact of its time – or we didn't think we had. In a post-structuralist mode, we were constitutionally sceptical of grand theories of historical change, and grew up smiling knowingly at the devastatingly witty take-down of the Whig view of inexorable progress (until America became Top Nation and history came to a full stop) in *1066 and All That*. Even so, it was easy to take for granted the historically unusual pace of social change we have seen in our lifetimes. It strikes me now that, at root, most historical scholarship in the past few decades has been written with a deep, unarticulated assumption that things can only get better in the end.

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It is difficult to write history without a sense of direction, but perhaps we need a new framework for writing about these lurches from zig to zag – for example, when an uber-cool African-American is replaced in the White House by a reality TV star endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan. Maybe historians need to be more ironic, more multi-dimensional in their conception of change. Yet somehow we must do that without losing a fierce commitment to the truth – a commodity under sudden attack.