

The peaceful transfer of power

By [David Williams](#)

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Last Saturday my wife and I went for a long walk with our dog.

It was a strikingly beautiful day, clear and perfect and touched with the first hints of our late-arriving autumn. And though we've got some beautiful parks and wooded paths near our little suburban rambler, we got in the car and drove.

Our destination: the lovely fields and forests of a nearby national park, the park set aside as sacred ground to remember the first and second battles of Manassas, Virginia. It's a long walk, a whole afternoon, across the varying landscapes over which those battles raged.

On one great sweeping rise, rows of cannon sat silent. A young mother and father, he a person of color, she of European heritage, followed their inquisitive little toddler as he ran free across the field. "Not so far," called the mom, reflexively, but there was nothing to fear. The field went on, and on, and there was nothing more dangerous to a child than soft grass and earth.

In another field, where the grass rose tall and golden, a bright blue Ford tractor pulled a baler, as two farmhands neatly loaded a large wagon with the harvested hay. At the top of the hill, a line of pickups waited, good solid workingman's trucks, hitched to fifth-wheel flatbeds, ready to carry the hay to nearby farms.

The path across the fields brought us to woodland.

Those woods were filled with other Americans, walking and talking in little clusters of two and three. Some were running. At the bridge over Bull Run, a bride in white, flanked by her wedding party, the bridesmaids in surprisingly tasteful blue, a professional photographer and his assistant snapping those hopeful pictures for a future life.

We walked deeper through the shadows of the peaceful wood. And in one place, we came to a sign, which we respectfully read, as we'd read all of the other signs before

it.

On it, a quote from a Union officer, describing the movement of his men through that same forest, less than two centuries before.

"We advanced, and the woods were filled with the bodies of the dead."

I looked at the wooded ground around the path, scattered with fallen leaves, and I could see it. I have seen it, in photographs taken of that terrible war.

Young men no older than my own sons shattered and cold and broken by grapeshot and musket fire, their bodies stiffening in their own blood. Those old tall trees, so calm and quiet, touched with the remembered cries and stench of death.

So hard to see with your soul, on such a beautiful, peaceful day. So hard to imagine, that such a thing could ever be.

And yet it can.

All it requires is for us to forget what violence really looks and feels like, for [Americans lost in the dark spell of a demagogue to speak of revolutions](#) and uprising as if they are fanciful abstractions, as if they are a game.

All it requires is for [the reality of violent conflict](#) to be glossed over by [blithe romantic fabulism](#) and the anger-blindness of our self-righteousness.

All it requires is for us to stop believing in the old good magic of our Constitution, to let cynicism and gossip-whispers tear down the trust and mutual respect that is the bedrock of our civil society.

How easy it is for peace to be broken, when we stop believing in it.

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