

Opinion: California first on the Fourth

By Joe Mathews

Dear America,

I suppose I should wish you happy birthday. But I'm just not feeling it.

You and I, the United States and California, used to be pretty darn close—"indivisible" was your word and "inseparable" was mine. Sure, we had our differences—I've always been a little out there. But



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America wouldn't be America without California, and California was proudly part of America, which tolerated our excesses for our mutual glory.

But you and I have been drifting apart. Today, I look at you and feel like I'm an entirely different place, with different values, even different realities. And I find myself wondering: Do you and I have a future together?

Who is responsible for our problems? It's really not me. It's you. While I'm the almond-producing state, you're the one that has gone nuts.

Everyone is entitled to a mid-life crisis, even 18th-century

republics. But you are having an especially nasty meltdown. I feel like you've turned against everything you used to love: immigrants, trade, international alliances, voting rights, women's rights, science, national parks, infrastructure, and treating people with respect.

These days, you're constantly freaking out. And the government you installed in Washington—a government my voters opposed by historic margins—is trying to take away people's health care, make it harder to vote, roll back environmental regulations, restart the failed drug war, and pick fights with my trading partners, perfectly friendly countries like Mexico, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and South Korea.

Your crazy nonsense is pretty bad. But here's what's even worse: You keep trying to justify your crack-up as just a natural reaction to what you say is my awfulness. In your narrative, I'm too coastal, too elite, too rich, too educated, too Hollywood, too tech, too globalist, too uninterested in the pain of the rest of the country, and thus too out of touch with you. And so you've had to go stone-cold crazy to get my attention, to wake me up.

That thesis is—how do I put this?—exactly what the cows drop in Tulare County pastures after a good feed.

I shouldn't have to say this, but my people and I know the pain of poverty (we're tops in the nation in it), economic dislocation (just look back at the carnage of our 1990s recession and our 2000s housing crisis), and drug abuse (the opioid crisis? it's here, thank you). There is no American malady I don't suffer.

So the fact that you keep projecting your outrageous behavior onto me tells me that you've taken leave of your senses.

I'm also worried that you're going get me nuked by North Korea.

So, going forward, our relationship can't be the same.

Now, I'm not going to march out the door and become my own country, like the crazy, Russia-compromised #Calexit movement proposed. You are still my country, and I'm not surrendering you.

But I do need to put some distance between you and me. I need some boundaries (and I don't mean a wall). I must think about my own needs first.

A few weeks ago, a small group of Californians filed a ballot initiative that will give me some space. The initiative, called "California's Future: A Path to Independence," does have a separatist bent—it takes "inseparable" out of the California Constitution's line about California being part of the United States. But it's agnostic on the idea of California leaving the Union.

"America, whatever" is its attitude; "California first," is its policy. The initiative sets up a commission to expand California's autonomy while "buffering Californians" and their values (respect for diversity, science and democracy) "against chaos, dysfunction, and uncertainty at the federal level."

It's time for "California to take stock of the leverage it has over the United States, and to use this leverage to negotiate for ever greater autonomy," the measure says. For example, my people should seek changes to budgeting policy so that I'm not paying more in taxes than I'm getting back in services. And I'm not interested in subsidizing your irresponsible debt or your constant wars.

The initiative's proposed commission — which is modeled on one of California's most enduring governing entities, the reform body known as the Little Hoover Commission — would pursue federal and state policy changes and demand progress from elected leaders on ever-greater California autonomy.

Yes, I'm going my own way. But my people are just as American as yours, and so on July 4, I'll still host enough barbecues, parades and fireworks displays for 39.5 million of your citizens. Back east of the Sierra, I hope your celebrations are bigger than ever, and that your people will stand extra close to the fireworks.

Maybe all the explosions will wake you the hell up.

Independently yours,

California

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.