

# Nostalgia safeguards against negative feelings

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Donald Trump's campaign slogan resonated deeply with many Americans. Notions of America's greatness and moral superiority have a long tradition and are deeply engrained in the country's culture. Such ideas are often projected into an imagined golden past. But how can this

collective nostalgia be reconciled with the many historical wrongs the country has perpetrated?

A new study titled "Nostalgia for America's past can buffer collective guilt," published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, explores the collective yearning for past greatness, and how it contributes to establishing group coherence in the present.

In a series of five studies, Dr. Matthew Baldwin, a psychologist at the University of Cologne's Social Cognition Center, and his two colleagues Mark H. White II (University of Kansas) and Daniel Sullivan (University of Arizona) examined when—and for whom—American collective [nostalgia](#) can relieve feelings of collective guilt. "People who tend to glorify America, seeing it as the best and most moral country in the world, are also particularly nostalgic about America's past," says Baldwin. "And those who glorify the country's past also tend to portray America as morally superior and to downplay its past wrongdoing. This can alleviate feelings of guilt about things like the Japanese internment camps during World War II," he adds.

In a pilot study and four subsequent studies, the psychologists interviewed approximately 100 to 200 individuals per study. They report that those who expressed a high level of nostalgia felt lower collective [guilt](#) about past wrongs. Moreover, among participants who also glorified America, reminders of American past wrongdoing in turn evoked spontaneous collective nostalgia. Hence, it appears that nostalgia serves as a kind of defence against bad feelings and as a resource to raise the coherence and moral standing of the group.

Baldwin and his colleagues are currently exploring how nostalgia serves this purpose: "Maybe nostalgia leads people to legitimize bad actions as good, or rather allows them to exclude them from what America 'really is.'" Along with Dr. Joris Lammers from the University of Cologne,

Baldwin is also looking at whether nostalgia has a general effect of making bad things look good. "Nostalgia for the past may even give a positive spin to things that are detrimental to society, like smoking indoors," Baldwin notes. "Overall, nostalgia seems to be a driving force behind many of the things that we believe and do, and while it usually serves the self well, it might sometimes have the opposite effect on the well-being of society as a whole."

**More information:** Matthew Baldwin et al, Nostalgia for America's past can buffer collective guilt, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2348](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2348)

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