



*Photo by Rose Anderson (Above): Hampton Mansion on what used to be a plantation owned by the Ridgely family of Baltimore County. The stately example of Georgian architecture looms high above the slave quarters at the bottom of the hill.*

The [speech I made as an eighteen-year-old](#), in which I extolled the virtues of old-fashioned European women and condemned all others as "modern Gorgons", didn't come out of nowhere. Neither does Donald Trump's executive order proclaiming a [Classical standard of beauty for Federal buildings](#).

When my family moved to St. Marys, Kansas, I was only fourteen. My new life would center around the chapels, halls, dormitories, and classrooms of the old Indian Mission where The Society of Saint Pius X now provided a boys' school and--separately--a girls' school for the rigorous indoctrination of young soldiers of Christ.

On the [Saint Mary's campus](#), the historic buildings loomed larger than life. The burned-out shell of the Immaculata Chapel remained, its broken spire reaching upwards in defiance. As I stood in the open rectangular commons, surrounded by stone buildings on all four sides, I was overwhelmed with the presence of the great One Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church. Those buildings whispered to me: "You don't deserve to be here. Yet."

I spent the entirety of the next four years preparing myself to give that speech, striving to be good enough.



*The Immaculata, Saint Marys, Kansas. "[Ruined SSPX church -- southwestern view](#)" by [cog nate](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)*

work paved the way for the savage Indians to learn civilization and find salvation in this very place.

I had to learn to reflect the grace and dignity of Mary the Mother of Christ. But this was not any real person who lived and breathed, perspired, bled, ate and drank and slept as I did. It was the representation of an ideal that I could see only in statues and illustrations in books. She was pure and white and graceful, holding herself above the carnal filth of the rest of humanity, yet somehow still humble. She was most certainly submissive to her husband.

In those hallowed halls of Saint Mary's, just as Native Americans had before me, I learned about Classical and sacred music. I learned about Renaissance painting, and Greek and Roman architecture and sculpture. In these things, I would find the full expression of what I was to become.

The first thing I had to learn was that I wasn't nearly polished enough in my appearance or in my mannerisms to represent the same culture as the lovely ivory-skinned maidens that graced the pages of the books I had grown up with.

I had to learn that I was now part of the great European Catholic Tradition begun in the Middle Ages and brought to the New World by Catholic heroes Ferdinand and Isabella, whose



*"The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple", Europeanized religious illustration showing Classical architecture. From a book of Mysteries of the Rosary I pored over as a child.*

I would also have to learn what dangers lurked, waiting to derail me from my beautiful path. All music with heavy beats had its origins in Africa and was absolutely forbidden. African art was sharp and angular, lacking in aesthetic harmony, even demonic. Art from India, China, or other Eastern cultures was awkward, incomprehensible, godless. Eastern cultures had music that used the wrong scale.

Native American culture was never mentioned. It was simply irrelevant. We knew the land on which we stood, and that missionaries who stood here before us had accomplished God's work.

Modern art, architecture and entertainment in America had mixed too much with inferior cultures. Classicism had been polluted with ugliness in an attempt at "multiculturalism". This was what we called "Americanism", an understanding of the American melting pot as a corruption of white European dignity.



"Sadness, darkness, love of and attraction to ugliness" would be the signs of a soul in mortal danger, one priest proclaimed. Ugliness is the visual representation of internal disorder, he said. I had been paying attention in school, so I knew exactly what he meant.

My mother eagerly took up his refrain. Americanism was to be avoided at all costs. Other cultures should not replace Classicism nor mix into it. Beauty, peace, and light were to be found only in Western ideas of antiquity, in graceful lines, delicate carvings, Corinthian pillars, chivalrous men, and soft-spoken women in flowing garments. I learned to appreciate and love Classical European culture as my own and reject all others.

*Above: Idealized women and Classical architecture in 17th Century European art. ["IMG 6152 Adam Elsheimer. 1578-1610. Francfort sur le Main et Rome. Retable de la Sainte Croix. Altarpiece of the Holy Cross. 1604-1607. 48,5x36 Huile sur toile Francfort Städelmuseum."](#) by [jean louis mazieres](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)*

By the time I graduated in 1995, I had become the ideal that the hallowed buildings of the Indian Mission demanded of me. [I was chosen to give a speech](#) before hundreds of visiting families and potential financial supporters.

Just six years after that, I would leave this cult and begin a naive exploration of what it really meant to live in America.

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As I ventured beyond the only world I had ever known, I came to understand that almost everything I had ever been taught about the "real world" since birth was a lie. So, I approached my new life in the most efficient way possible: I reversed all of my beliefs.

From now on, all religions are good. It's OK to be gay, lesbian, or transgender. There is no Hell waiting to swallow us up when we die simply because we are flawed. I didn't have to obey men. In fact, I could openly defy them, and I certainly didn't have to listen to priests and nuns. I could be loud, I could be mannish, I could be crude, I could be prideful and selfish. I could cuss and swear. I could wear pants if I wanted. I started listening to forbidden music and learning about people of other cultures.

I had a lot to learn, and my initial joy at breaking free soon gave way to the unyielding fury and aggression it would take to save myself and my three children under the age of three. I had no safety net, and no choice but to launch. I attacked the challenges of single motherhood head on with no background or education that would have prepared me for life in the real world. I banished from my mind the impossibility of what I was about to attempt.

I was terrified. I had to continue pushing myself forward, taking risks, going farther and farther outside of any role I had ever envisioned for myself. I did not know on any given day if I would have enough money to pay my bills.

I didn't know if my children would have a future. I didn't know if I could keep them, and myself, safe. Maybe I would fail and all of it would come crashing down around me. Maybe I would lose my children, and it would all be for nothing.

I was arrested in front of my children for writing bad checks to buy gas.

The van that my now estranged husband had bought me to carry the dozen or more children we were to have was repossessed as I watched, helpless.

In the [NPR article](#) about Trump's executive order for Federal architecture, former Washington Post art critic Blake Gropnik is quoted as saying "I actually think it's kind of a wonderful executive order, because it says a building has to be beautiful. It means virtually nothing."

But it does mean something. Architecture--especially public architecture--is a language. So, what is the Trump administration trying to say?

Classical styles are indeed beautiful. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with them. The problem is that since the early days of America, white men in power have used Classicism to signal white superiority and white dominance over economic resources. Today, they are still a way to call upon nostalgia for the glory days of White power, from the colonizer triumphs over Native Americans to the enslavement of Black people. Declaring that Classical styles alone are beautiful and mandating those styles for government buildings excludes people with no cultural affinity for them, and represents an outright reprimand to Black, Brown, and Indigenous people who dare expect representation in the realms of American public policy and resources.

The Trump administration wants to mandate Classicism in Federal architecture for the same reason that employers make dress codes forbidding dreadlocks, cornrows, and natural Black hair. It is being done for the same reason that Trump so passionately decries the removal of Confederate monuments and white Founding Father statues. It is for the same reason that Trump pushed so hard to erect a wall at the Southern border even though it would not actually keep many immigrants and refugees out: it is symbolic. These constructs whisper: "You don't belong here. This is not your government." It communicates that the American dream is for Whites, and perhaps for those willing and able to fully assimilate.



["Philadelphia: First Bank of the US"](#) by [wallyq](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

If I could have realized that the oldest bank buildings in the United States, many still in use, used the same grand architecture I learned about in Saint Marys, I would have known that I had entered into a system created *by* people who looked and sounded like me, *for* people who looked and sounded like me.

The day after my van was repossessed, I still did not have a job, but I walked into a bank with my three toddlers in tow, told a white loan officer about the repossession, and convinced him I should have a loan to buy a new car and get a job.

I went for a job interview and was instantly offered an office job making much more than the minimum wage I would have expected for someone with no experience, no secondary education, and no demonstrable work history.



*"Old Banks Boston Mass"* by [dog97209](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

Terrified as I was, doors continued to open for me, and obstacles continued to fall away.

I learned. I succeeded. I more than succeeded.

I climbed the corporate ladder in terror, often stopping to look back down from the dizzying height I had quickly attained, wondering how I hadn't fallen yet. I thought perhaps that doors continued to open for me because I was intelligent and incredibly talented. I didn't know for sure. Maybe, I thought, it is because anyone really can make it in America, and I should write a book about that someday.

It was years before I understood what this phenomenon was, this incredible power that seemed to allow me to do the impossible:

I was White. Thanks to Saint Mary's, I was not just physically White, but culturally White. Classically White.

Every time I spoke with a loan officer, interviewed for a job, or had to ask for access to resources, I reverted to that polished White Europeanized ideal I learned in the grand halls of that old Indian Mission. I put on that presentation that spoke of my superiority and the superiority of all Whites. I don't know that I could have reversed that part of my belief system, even if I had known that I had it. I had no idea that my strength came from seeing my Whiteness reflected back in the gleaming white Classical pillars of great American institutions: court houses, bank buildings, city halls, the grand buildings of universities. They loomed high above

me in their grandeur, but as a representation of my aspirations rather than a demand for submission.

The American System and I were one. I had nothing to fear.

If you believe that representation matters, you must understand how subtle and how omnipresent the language of white supremacy is, and that an executive order mandating Classicism for Federal buildings is a part of that language. It is really an order to keep America White.