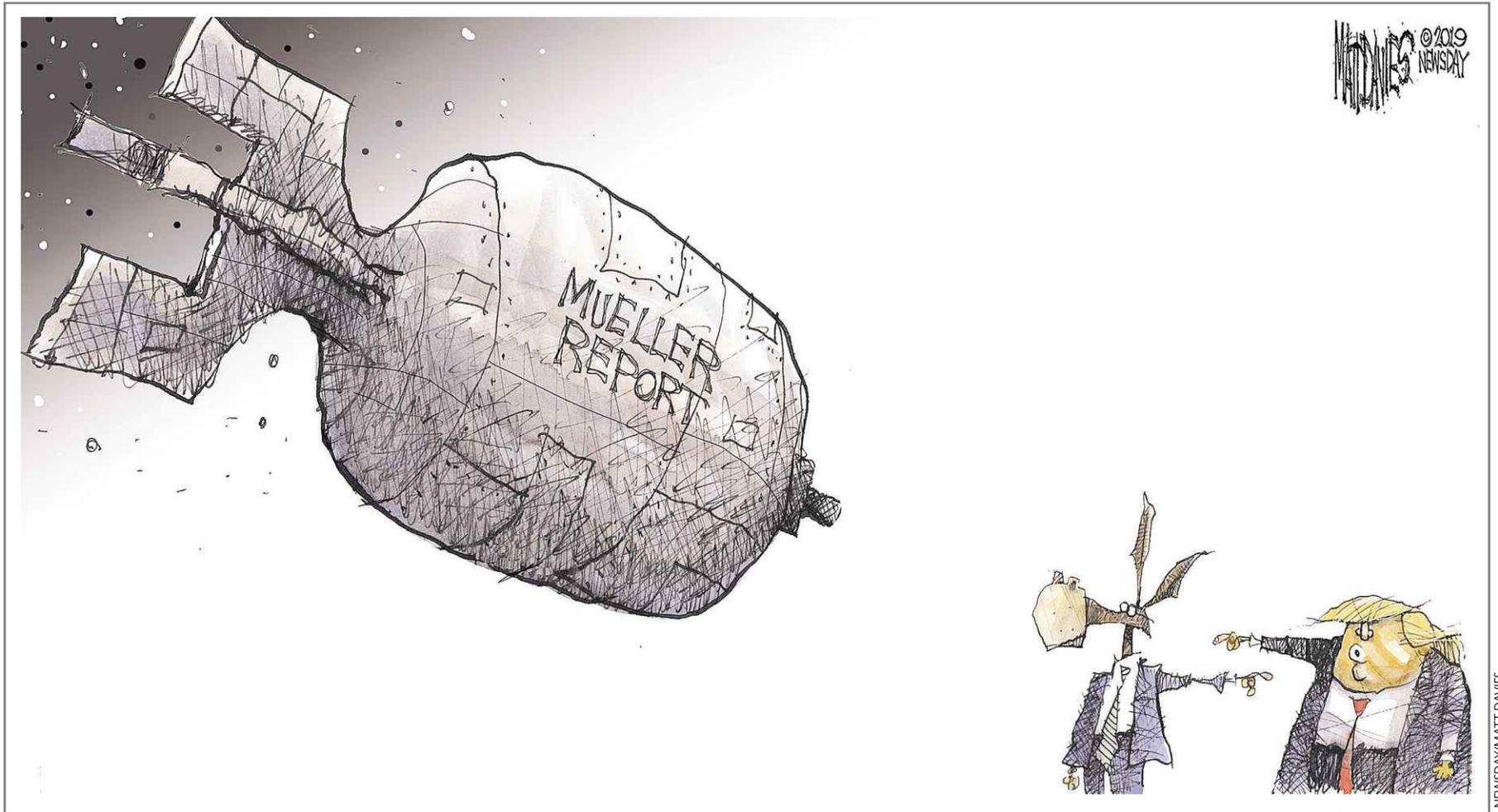


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OPINION

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America must retreat from abyss

Our declining happiness is disturbing, but we can regain our famous optimism



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When you put a seed in the ground, you commit an act of optimism.

You say that you believe that you can place this tiny shard of potential in a clump of soil, add water and some TLC, and coax from it something delicious. A carrot. Some arugula. A vine of peas. A shaft of Brussels sprouts.

And when it happens, your optimism is rewarded, and renewed.

I began that annual journey last week, kneeling before the three raised beds, plotting the placement of the spinach and

microgreens and radishes, digging and planting and covering and, then, nurturing.

It left me with the buoyant feeling you get upon taking the first step of any quest, a feeling that resurges at each milepost along the way — the first bit of green that breaks through the soil, the first harvest, the first salad that comes entirely from your own backyard.

But the news last week from beyond the garden left me thinking that we need a lot more buoyancy in this unsettled country of ours. Because as a bunch, we Americans seem to be an unhappy and uncertain crop.

First came a report from the UN, its annual measure of national happiness. The United States again fell in the rankings. We're 19th now after our third

straight drop. Finland, Denmark and Norway are 1, 2 and 3. We trail Belgium, and are just ahead of the Czech Republic.

More disturbing than the ranking are the reasons behind our unhappiness. Researchers spotlighted our "epidemic of addictions" — like substance abuse, gambling and social media usage. That last bears elaboration.

The average American 17- or 18-year-old spends more than six hours every day, apart from school or work, on the internet, texting and using social media. Six hours. And all of those activities have been linked to depression. As report co-author Jean M. Twenge of San Diego State University wrote, "In short, adolescents who spend more time on electronic devices are less happy, and adolescents who spend more time on most other activities are happier."

There is no reason to think that the same is not true of adults.

Then came a deflating national survey from the Pew Research Center. The first takeaway was somewhat reassuring — a slight majority of us is at least somewhat optimistic about America's future. But dig beneath the surface, and the roots are lodged in pessimism.

Larger majorities of us think the economy will weaken in the coming years, the divide between rich and poor will continue to grow, health care will get even less affordable, the environment will become more degraded, and a terrorist attack as bad as 9/11 or worse will happen within the next 30 years. Nearly 90 percent of us worry that our political leaders aren't capable of solving these challenges, two-thirds of us expect the nation to become even more politically divided, and three-quarters of us worry about the nation's morals.

And to think that crime is low and the economy is solid. At this rate, what will happen

when things get worse, as they inevitably will?

Step back and this is pretty striking. Our national posture from our revolutionary days has been one of audacious optimism. Now we seem mired in pessimism. And not without reason. Recovery from the recession was not even. More jobs will be lost to automation. Washington provides little hope or relief. There's a reason we now have a change election every two years.

I'm not sure how we get back from this. But I suspect it will be in small steps, taken in our own lives, in our own communities. A little less screen time, a little more connection with those around us, a little more charity in our hearts, a little more willingness to try ideas a little more different.

First, you plant a seed.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.

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