



January 10, 2021

The ‘Winning’ Narrative, and the Promise of the Trumpian Way

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<https://talisman-gate.com/2021/01/10/the-winning-narrative-and-the-promise-of-the-trumpian-way/>

Why hello there! I see you looking perplexed, that you’re searching for something. Can I help you? What’s that? The election? What about the election? The results? Oh, you still can’t comprehend why so many voted the way they did?

You’ve come to the right place, *friendo*! You may be wondering who those multitudes are—out there, lurking, shifting, blurring into the background, that voted for that terrible, *terrible* man. The FedEx guy? That couple at the playground who said ‘God bless you?’ Those Vietnamese neighbors with an American flag foisted onto their front door year-round? Jose? Not Jose! But what if, Jose...?

Come take a stroll with a Trumpian. I will explain it all. Come along now. I promise not to bury you in the woods—not on our first outing. Never on the first outing.

Come again? The guy with the Norse hieroglyph tattoos and the horns-and-fur headdress, the one cosplaying a Viking or a Celt or something? No, we won't be running into him. At least I don't think so. Besides, we only dress up like that on Tuesdays...

Keep in mind though, Chief, that what I am about to tell you is neither analogy nor analysis. It is projection, fanciful, optimistic projection. But it will prove right, for I have the gift of foresight.

And bear with me, I will be using weasel buzzwords like 'narrative', probably even overusing it as some McKinsey flunky would. But I can't help it, for it is *all* about the narrative for the devotees of Trumpism; the stories they tell themselves and each other, and the legends they recount. A sovereign, autonomous folk narrative that writes itself, one with its own turns of phrase and allegory, and one that shall take on a fuller, honed form and consequently become more potent—I'd even say *invincible*—over the next two years.



N. Kazimi, *Civil War 3*, 2014, 30'x30'

Donald Trump may have forfeited a presidential term, but he has bequeathed to us a generational movement. I don't like calling it a populist movement—the term is too broad. I don't think anti-establishment captures it either; he did, after all, bring in Goldman Sachs to run the economy. No, the labels on hand are too saggy, too slovenly. This movement, our movement, is new, unprecedented, and it is emerging during a transformative time. Dwelling on its precise classification, while it is still unformed, is going to waste my time and yours. Trump made that clear in that final televised message of his: "While this represents the end of the greatest first term in presidential history, it's only the beginning of our fight to Make America Great Again!" We are just getting revved up. Although I will say this: with this loss the Trumpian movement transformed from whatever it currently is into a revolutionary one. It turned less compromising, less receptive to half-measures: we expect to witness a genuine, fundamental transformation in how the country is run. We have far less tolerance for the excuses of the Republican Party establishment, and the ruling establishment at large, as to why that is unfeasible.

The Trump coalition will hold. It has been tested through adversity. There is a solid 44 percent of the 2020 voting public that is not going anywhere unless Trump gives the signal. There is also another 11 percent that is reluctantly on the other side. They will come over. It is fated. The 44+11=55 percent coalition will dominate for a generation. Why is this happening? Why did this coalition coalesce in the first place? Was it because of the public's disillusionment with the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts? The scars of 2008 subprime banking collapse? The overpromise of Obama's 'Hope'? The desolation of the culture wars? Demographic angst? All this malaise could have remained present and pervasive, fermenting into grayer shades of toxicity for a long time without resolution. No, none of that scratches the itch in providing an explanation. The only way to understand Trump is through Trump. Had there not been a Trump, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Trump showed us that we can win: 2016 was a proof-of-concept run for what is to come. He also exposed the lengths to which the other side would go to win. We have learned a lot.

Trump is truly an American original. He has proven difficult to pigeon-hole by political theorists. In style rather than in philosophy, he resembles the answer that Louisiana political muckraker Huey P. Long gave in the early 1930s when cajoled into describing his own guiding tenets: "Oh, hell, say that I'm *sui generis* and let it go at that." Long was a proto-Trumpian in his mannerisms if ever there was one, with the two sharing almost exactly the same negative representations hurled at them by their hoity-toity critics. His trajectory was halted by an assassin's bullet just as he was preparing a run for the presidency. Comparisons are tempting, after all that is the bread and butter of historians like me, but just to get a sense of how exceptional Trump is, consider that Long trudged up the hardscrabble path of a traveling salesman, a state railway official, then Governor, and then U.S. Senator before setting his eyes on the highest office. Whereas Trump entered the game at the very top. Sometimes a historian just has to call it: historical allegory gives us little guide on a genuinely new phenomenon.

Trump had been articulating—let's say ball parking—his opinions on trade, immigration, foreign policy, and law and order for decades. The Trump platform, such as it is, did not suddenly flesh out in 2015. This was dismissed by observers at the time as more brand than bandwidth. But in politics, are the two really that separate? The Trump brand is unmistakably vigorous. That, more than a balance sheet, is his claim to wealth. His ability to turn his brand into political, presidential-caliber capital is a feat that is not easily replicated—just ask Michael Bloomberg. It should reveal that there is more going on here than dumb luck. And it wasn't just plain old demagoguery—there's certainly no shortage of those character types around, yet none made it far. The stars did not suddenly align for Trump; it was his sense of timing, a carefully cultivated image, as well as an understanding of the new mediums of propagation that allowed him to create his own moment, and so boldly go in for the kill. Furthermore, Trump is always tweaking his brand, as any student of his rallies—a new art and performance genre in itself—can attest. It is this inventiveness that should make us hold off on describing where his 'cause' will land. This adaptiveness also gives him an edge when marshalling his multitudes and sending them off to conquer unfamiliar rhetorical and ideological ground.

The anti-Trump coalition, by contrast, is undisciplined and looks about to fray. Its best tools—the media, for example—are already blunted, and useless. The Democrats are unable to reform and recalibrate even if they wanted to. The media has several unpaid bills coming due very soon (Joe Biden's frailty, the 'laptop from Hell' and the *treasonous*—yeah, I said it—way the Steele Dossier was used) and that realization will be critical in pushing the 11 percenters to the Trumpian way—they will inevitably feel they were lied to. The media's irrelevance going forward will be showcased by the Trumpians not arguing back, but simply seceding from the media's cultivated and controlled narrative.

The two narratives, Trump's and the anti-Trump's, have been engaged in battle for years. As we look into the future, we must assess whom is the victor for the longer term. Trump lost a bout—that much is true. But how will his people remember this loss? Equally, how will the anti-Trump's regale their rank with tales of their 2020 win after their 2016 defeat? In every heroic saga there comes a setback. A fluctuation in the fortunes of Manichean powers, a concave reversal in a grand oeuvre of historical progression. But are we living in Trump's heroic timeline, or that of his enemies who too profess heroism?

The Trumpians will follow their leaders into the hills as they regroup. They shall march back to power with the coherence of a common-sense, tolerant, 'Big Banquet' coalition. They shall sing the psalms of 'winning' along their way. 'Big Dem' and its new establishment allies, conversely, will surrender one fortress after another. Too stunted, too stilted, too divided to rally. Theirs will be a bilious, discordant threnody. They *are* an angry lot, a losing lot. They look it, and sound it.

Aren't Trump's supporters angry now too, you may wonder? I'd say that they feel they were wronged, which is different from the tumult of anger. There is a difference in how they manage expectations. Some of them must be angry. But I sense that the larger body of Trumpians already

has moved on and reverted to an old-new battle stance: rather than flailing in 'resistance', hysterically throwing punches hither and thither as the Anti-Trumpers have conducted themselves, theirs is a go-to posture of defiance. Theirs is a steely resolve to bite a lower lip, keep mum, and set their sights on what comes next, while occasionally turning to each other muttering "This ain't over" under their breath as both mantra and pick-me up. In many ways, including through Trump's agency, they have been prepared for this moment. They are not shocked in the way that Hillary's voters were in 2016. The Trumpians were told that the fix is in for 2020. They believed it and now think that they are seeing abundant evidence for it. But they are not going to hurl bricks through windows—well, most of them won't. So what are they planning to do?

Ha! Good one! No, their plan is *not* QAnon's "trust the plan." I'm willing to give you a sneak peak, but the premium content, well, that's for the initiates who make it all the way through. If you want, I can put in a good word, but maybe that's too soon. We'll see.

Trump is the crag against which the establishment is thrashing itself. It has done more damage to itself than to him in the manner it has fought him. One theory about this election was that it was a referendum on Trump the man, less his policies and results. A referendum on his chaotic manner, which a 'wave' yearning for political normalcy would put an end to. By this measure the 2016 election should be considered a referendum on the efficacy of the establishment. Hence, the more recent results demonstrate that the establishment has not won back those skeptical of its oomph; Trump kept his voters and gained some. The high priests of the establishment cannot govern by reasonable consensus without the ability to instill awe in their power or to shape the dominant narrative. They will keep bleeding out legitimacy. Once kooky terms like 'swamp' and 'Deep State' have become apt and widely circulated shorthand to describe an alignment of interests among the powerful. Trump's may not be a classic anti-establishmentarian movement but it will get a lot of kick in going for the scalp, that allegorical fuzzy trophy marking the humiliation of an elite class. There is a name to the enemy. There is clarity. Again, the narrative writes itself, and it is supreme.

In some ways, this loss is far more dangerous to the ruling class than a consecutive second term for Trump. In 2016, a big portion of the Trump-voting public wanted to rebuke the powerful, to put them on notice. The point was not to replace the powerful with a new caste. The Trumpians merely wanted to drag the establishment by the ear to get it to bend an ear. The powerful, though, turned dismissive and disdainful of the voters' protestations. They continued to insult and damn them as deplorable and irredeemable. They also came off as crazy and deranged in the manner by which they resisted Trump and his movement. Over the years, the Trump voter turned from dissent to contempt; a dangerous development for the ruling class. It meant that there was little latitude left for it to win back this type of voter. An establishment that fails to accommodate half of the population it claims to govern, or to create the illusion of hearing them out, well, that indicates that something is off with it—in the very least it may show that it lacks the attributes of wisdom and forbearance that distinguishes capable leadership. It

may also indicate that the rot goes down even further. The problem is deepening and widening and, by my reckoning, irreversible, thus necessitating a measure of replacement. Let's just hope this doesn't end with a necklace of ears, for either side. I doubt that it would, namely because, and this may conflict with what you're heard from the media, Trumpism is highly disciplined in its disorderliness. I'll explain this one later.

Trump himself came in trying to be accommodating. He set up Ivanka-Jared as his goodwill ambassadors to Washington, reprising their previous roles with the posh set in Manhattan. They were rudely received at the salons of Georgetown, Kalorama and Capitol Hill. Had he won again this time, he would have tried to reach out again since that instinct for accommodation comes naturally to him. And, now exhausted, the crème would likely have been more welcoming in return. As happened many times throughout history, the elite would profess no hurt feelings while cheering on the conquering barbarians, motivated as it were by their own instinctual impulse to survive the storm and find a place in the new order. Trump mused about such a scenario during his more recent rallies. "They'll just give up," he'd say. I don't think 'Nice' Trump is coming back, though. The shake-up at the Pentagon just a week ago is evidence that he has made up his mind as to how he interacts with the Washingtonians going forward. We *really* like this epiphany of his.

The other side, the establishment that the Trumpians take be the 'enemy' is in a bind: they can only call Trump himself an enemy. But Trumpism consists of Trump and his people, and it would be difficult to target him and not them. There is no discernible, archetypal upper caste ensconcing the levers of Trumpian power that can become the focus of resentment and frothed-up agitation by the anti-Trumpers. The Republican elite does not fit the bill—they are just as resented by Trump's people. Therefore, extending that 'enemy' classification beyond him turns his whole horde, all seventy-odd million of them into foes. Maybe that is a bridge too far, and maybe not. Who's to say what the anti-Trumpers will try to do in anger? After all, they hardly attempted to win over any Trump voters during the past four years when reason warranted it. Their approach has been irrational and self-defeating. Why should it change now? They cannot help themselves: they shall seek revenge, for the election result did not humiliate Trump or his supporters nearly enough. Something more has to be done. After all, how can you let Nazis, racists, child-parent separators, and grandma-killers off the hook so easily? There'll be no unity hug-fests on their agenda. Again, advantage Trump, and us.

Once the Trumpians breach the District of Colombia for a second time, we shall see just how revolutionary their creed had become indeed. The real work of draining the swamp and uprooting the rotten undergrowth will be front and center of their furies, and by my reckoning their deepest cuts will excise and exorcise the Deep State—the brain hive of the 'Resistance'—from its lairs and layers of administrative sluff. Now, ain't that swell?!!

Gird yourself, and let me run you through the fine print.

* *

Who are the current and future Trumpians?

All you need to know about the Trumpians is that they exist. Two presidential elections cycles should tell you that much. Estimating their number at a solid 44 percent of the voting public is not a stretch—another 3 percent voted for him but we'll set them aside as a probable margin of vacillation.

The 44 percenters are the hardest core of personal allegiance to Trump; they are what remained after every solvent of rhetorical erosion and persuasion had been washed over them for several years in order to break their connection to this one man, and yet they persisted in their support, even hardening it. That experience, coupled with the election result, one which told them that there are tens of millions of Americans like them out there, has given them a feeling of invincibility. It has also fastened them together in the bonds of camaraderie. Seeing a Trump flag whoosh by on a pickup truck, a cuddy, or an Amish buggy sets their hearts aflutter. The person flying that flag becomes an instant comrade. These are powerful emotions for any political movement. The anti-Trumpers derogatively call this phenomenon a cult. It certainly has sectarian attributes, and one may impartially observe that 'Trumpian' has become a stand-alone identity for many within this solid bloc. But hold on to your horses, we will get to what that means later. A more pressing matter for us concerns the 11 percent number that I threw out there.

Are you ready for some math? Try thinking of a society as a composition of thirds, well three of them at most. There is a left-leaning third, and a right-leaning third. And lastly there is a middle third. Then imagine that these thirds are composed of thirds themselves. Each third ends up coming up to a little over 11 percent. The left-leaning third or the right leaning third are not simply rigid ideological automatons. There is plenty of contrast within, likely to do with disposition and temperament. For example, some individuals may be ideologically leftist or rightist but are innately skeptical of authority and group conviction, while others may find comfort in authority and a shared fate. It seems that humanity needed both types to survive and evolve. For our purposes, it means that the whole spectrum of thirds may recombine and refashion itself when having to respond to fundamentally new phenomenon; in times of great upheaval there is a fundamental reordering of loyalties.

If Trump was merely at 33 percent of support, I'd tell you to write him off. But he has already secured a third of the middle despite a pandemic, despite an economic downturn, and despite every manner of attack. All he has to do is win the 'middle-middle' third—whatever composition that may turn out to be—in a few Mid-Western and a couple of Western battleground states. Some of them already have a proclivity towards giving him a try as evidenced by the 2016 election results, even from the very left of the spectrum. This is eminently doable.

And it can be done, to my way of thinking, by convincing that middle-middle third that the Republican Party is under new (and exciting) management, while making them regret a vote for Joe Biden in 2020 as a scoopful of fetid sludge that had been plopped back into the swamp. Easy-

peasy. Thus our challenge now is to figure out what segment of the voting public is likely to respond to the Trumpian narrative and be swayed by it.

Many commentators have been making the point that the pre-Trump Republican Party is no longer. A shorthand of GOPe, with the 'e' standing in for 'establishment' seems to be the new way of describing the supplanted former hierarchy or at least the portion (a small one) of it that has yet to swear fealty to Trump. Practically, what we have today is a Grand Old-New Party. Let's call it the GOnP. It is a hybridization of the 'Cocaine Mitch' ethos of the old party (though not its let's-only-give-them-600-bucks component) and the Trumpian movement. The latter has subsumed the former, and there is no turning back. It seems to be a good fit.

Thus the Trumpian movement does not need to break away. It is just going to squat inside the GOP organizational superstructure and make itself comfortable. And the GOPe does have a few redeemable and useful qualities. For example, there is talent to poach. Talent like Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina who had forced his own way up the old order without any help from the Trumpians. He is a formidable force, and it comes primarily from his unforceful demeanor. He signals awkwardness, not 'politician'. He's black, but there's something about him that immediately asserts itself beyond skin-color: a vulnerability, a discomfort with being in the public eye, a hesitation that makes his whole pitch, often geeky and technical, quite endearing. This is a rare and difficult-to-fake attribute in politics. He was given a peak timeslot at the Republican National Convention—a pitch-perfect celebration of Trumpism and 'American Greatness'—and he showed that he has what it takes to capture the attention of an audience. Now imagine a future ticket pairing him with Ivanka Trump. Just sayin'.

The GOnP in the era of Trump already looks strikingly different, making it competitive against the Democrats' own meticulously adorned 'Vitrine of Diversity'. The incoming GOnP congressional contingent includes Nancy Mace (from outside of Charleston, South Carolina), the first woman to graduate from the Citadel; Nicole Malliotakis (Staten Island) a daughter of Greek and Cuban immigrants; Tony Gonzalez, an Iraq War veteran clearing the Rio Grande Valley in Texas; African-American former NFL player Burgess Owens coming in from Salt Lake City; Byron Donalds, a young black man now representing the almost 90 percent white district of Naples, Florida; the first Cherokee woman ever elected to the U.S. Congress Yvette Harrell of New Mexico; Victoria Spartz, from the north side of Indianapolis, now the first immigrant born and raised in the Soviet Union ever elected to serve as a congressional representative; the first Iranian-American ever elected to the U.S. Congress Stephanie Bice from Oklahoma City; Young Kim and Michelle Park Steel of Southern California, the pair being the first Korean-American women heading to Congress. Mike Garcia a first generation Mexican-American Navy aviator in southern California won a primary against a candidate backed by the GOPe, and he may well be on his way to Congress again.

Exit-polls are probably as much garbage as pre-election presidential polling. But the takeaway message from those and other indicators is that Trump expanded and in some cases doubled his share of the Black male vote, the 'Hispanic' vote, the 'Muslim' vote, the gay vote, the

Arab Christian vote, the Jewish vote, various sorts of women categories, and so on. In fact, the only demographic he seems to have slipped in is the white male category. This was supremely important to the remaining run-of-the-mill white (male and female) Trump voter. In the back of his or her head he or she may have been thinking "What if maybe I am a racist and I didn't know it" for liking, even loving Trump? Everyone, *everyone*, everyone with the loudest megaphones had been telling him and her so for five years. But these statistics told the white Trump voter otherwise, and convincingly so. The debate, the self-doubt, is over for this voter. He or she feels relief and is ready to move on even if the megaphones keep blaring 'racist, homophobic, xenophobe, microbe!'

But just who are these new non-white-male Trump voters who have given such succor and cover to their white brothers and sisters in Trump? Just *who* are these race traitors in the parlance of Joy Reid and Charles Blow? I do not think there is a clear cut answer to this one. This is one of those unformed aspects of Trumpism. I have a strong suspicion that within this new category Trumpism may discover potential 'gets' that may be winnable as 11 percenters—they may actually be the ones putting Trumpism over the top. They began moving into the Trump column in 2020 but hadn't done so in the 2016. It is still unclear as to why they are doing so. A part of the answer, however, may be discerned in Tom Wolfe's 2012 novel, *Back to Blood*, which is set in Miami.

One of the Trump's most hair raising feats was shaving off a 23 point advantage for the Democrats in Miami-Dade between the 2016 and 2020 elections. There are various explanations given, mostly deriving from a bespoke anti-socialist message that resonated with Colombians, Venezuelans, Nicaraguans and as usual, Cubans. But there is also the alluring possibility that another part of the Trumpian message had clicked within the unique cultural ecosystem that is Miami's. What could it be? Miami is a city of an American future. It would be a stretch to showcase it as *the* city, but it is certainly a paradigm for parts of urban life across America, for Miami represents the intensification of future American realities and trend lines, especially when it comes to immigration.

Miami is the City of the 'Recent American Immigrant'. It is the Petri dish of the Immigration and Nationality Act (more technically the Hart-Celler Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act) of 1965. The numbers of these immigrants achieved critical mass across the country at the tail end of the Cold War and right at the inception of the culture war of the early 1990s as heralded and so labelled by Pat Buchanan at the 1992 Republican Convention in Houston (even though Buchanan never mentioned the word 'immigrant' in his thirty-five-minute rouser). Pretty soon those immigrants found a resentful half of the country, blaming them for all sorts of cultural and economic infractions. By the end of the decade that sentiment would pervade into popular culture, as in an episode of *Friends* where Ross tries to convince his British girlfriend to stay on in America by making the case that "I'm always hearing about uh, them foreigners coming in here and stealing American jobs; that could be you!"

Especially resentful were those at the bottom of the economic rungs, such as blacks, as well as whites who fretted over population replacement tacking browner. More than 18 million legal immigrants entered the United States in the three decades following the passage of the Act, more than three times the number admitted over the preceding thirty years. It was a glut, an undigested glut, some of it coming up like vomitus across the landscape. The Immigration Act of 1990 expanded the numbers, and created the lottery to bring in even more unfamiliar cultures to this land. More immigrants were admitted to the U.S. throughout the nineties, following the updated act, than any decade prior, clocking in at 10-11 million documented—*documented*—entries. The undocumented entries, together with their families, are estimated to number anywhere between 11 to 22 million souls. With such numbers, any society has the right to ask the question of “How much change is too much change?”

I am one of those new additions to this society, arriving as a college student in 1994, and I too ask myself that question. There are no satisfying, unoffending answers. So what is a society to do if no answers offer themselves up? Wallow in recrimination and self-injury, or move on? A big part of the Trumpian moment hinges on this follow-up question.

The 1965 Act was supposed to reflect its Civil Rights era, one in which a changing country was uncomfortable with prior policies giving seventy percent of immigration slots to British, Germans and Irish would-be newcomers, many of which went unused. There were a few thousands slots available for Italians, while hundreds of thousands of them waited in line for years on end to join family members in America. Lots of Greeks, Poles, Portuguese and assorted Eastern Europeans waited too; there was a feeling in Congress that they had waited long enough and that it was time to bring them in. The crafters of the act played down its potential impact, and seem to have genuinely undercounted how many would likely come in as beneficiaries of this new legislation. And come they did. What began as a trickle of immigrants getting their foot in the door, quickly pulled in multitudes of their kin. Several millions of Mexicans, some 1.4 million Filipinos, and upwards to a million-strong contingent each of Koreans, Dominicans, Indians, Cubans, and Vietnamese poured in. The act actually tried curbing Mexican immigration but that only resulted in more illegals—err, undocumented—striding over the border.

By the time Buchanan took the stage, the country was feeling the chill of fewer opportunities, dying communities, and the loss of a sense of destiny. There was a feeling of malaise, the bitter aftertaste of the Vietnam War still not washed out by the more recent victories over the Soviets and upstarts such as Saddam Hussein. A large swath of the landscape was populated by a dwindling ‘remnant class’. Their grandfathers and fathers had been called, at the twilight of the nineteenth century, to mine coal and oil and to forge steel along stretches of territory extending into the Midwest, upstate New York, western Pennsylvania and down into West Virginia, an expanse that must have had a name before being reduced to a ‘Rust Belt’. They came from around the world, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, and from deep in the American south. They grew up in towns and cities that absorbed this influx of action and production. They made things durably, cheaply and at scale. They were the first link in a chain that would give

world markets the products of the American brand, a brand both stylish and cool because the American market had adopted it before the rest of the world did. It was the American worker and the American consumer who together midwived tens of iconic American brands. Soon this would be forgotten by the corporations profiting off those brands.

There was exuberance and vitality in that American brand. America exuded invincibility in all it did and made. A stitch of American jeans gave you confidence. A whiff of Virginia-blended tobacco products made you feel like a movie star. American wheels could take you places, both literally and figuratively. And what's more, it was relatively affordable. Forgotten in this whole saga is how American cigarettes and excess war materiel proliferated in Europe, in Russia, in Africa, in Southeast Asia at the tail-end of World War II, after America had tipped the scales of conflict. Much of the world first experienced the American brand as a byproduct of American victory. Such first-impressions are beyond the wildest dreams of Madison Avenue advertisers.

Then the vanquished started making things too, with a little seed money from Americans mind you. The Japanese came in with their electronics, the Germans returning to their strong-suits of vehicles and heavy machinery. Their stuff was cheap also, and well-branded. The American brand had to adapt to ward off those who may poach its 'global' customers, and the emigration of production began to flock to wherever cheaper labor resided. Supply chains of raw materials and transportation routes followed the relocating conveyor belts. The coal miners and steel workers were told there was less for them to do. The industrial machine they and their fathers built was about to spit them out. They stood there idling by the factory gates, waiting, waiting, waiting. The little generational wealth that had accumulated as savings and property was fading and losing value. They began moving, or wilting. This was much of the America that the new immigrants passed on their way to their swearing-in ceremonies for naturalization.

When the tech boom came, American branding was still going strong. It was the environment of America (and the Department of Defense) that gave a leg up to such innovation, and again it was an American consumer who gave it its first bona fides of cool. The product went to the global market quickly after it was focus-grouped by Americans: there were billions and billions of customers out there. These gadgets, apps and ensuing tech support had to be set-up quickly, and cheaply. A few stretches of highways, college towns and urban centers in states like California, Massachusetts, Washington, Colorado and Texas prospered, while a few streets in Manhattan made a killing counting and loaning out the winnings. And that was globalism for you. A new economic order of exuberant wealth that had no real impact on either the remnant class or the vast majority of immigrants, many of whom ended having to serve as 'help' for the *nouveau globale riches* of the big cities.

But it wasn't just a recession and phantom opportunities that made the new immigrants feel unwelcome and out of place. The America they came to lacked a lofty, ambitious to-do list. All the heavy lifting had already been done. That the heirs of those who had done the heavy lifting were out of jobs just contributed to the sense of emptiness and drift. Half of the oath of naturalization, as it took its final form in 1952, speaks of an obligation taken freely by the newly

minted citizen to bear arms on behalf of the United States; to perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces; and to perform work of national importance under civilian direction. With the draft tossed out of the door in 1973, incoming waves of citizens were never put to the loyalty test. Peace is a fine thing, an all-volunteer force too, but it did leave the oath sounding archaic, unrealistic.

Every prior immigration wave that came to this country was voluntarily or involuntarily huddled into their era's particular cause. They were immediately assigned, dragooned, and drafted by official decree or by market realities to the current 'Grand American Project' of its time, whatever it may have been. Whether they liked being coerced into a job or a duty was beside the point, at the end of their labors they felt ownership for the outcome, and if their labor contributed to a great American story, then their lives became intertwined, and immortalized, within that story. They weren't just cogs in some thrashing wheel. They were cogs that lifted up the Brooklyn Bridge, that dug out the Erie Canal, and that laid asphalt across the deserts. Think of those Irish immigrants being carted away from the docks to the ranks of Civil War. Think of taming the wilderness, settling the west, laying the railways, industrialization, fighting the World Wars, space exploration, Civil Rights, then sprawling out into suburbia and realizing the dreams of home ownership with a yard and a grill. The immigrant's personal cause, providing for a family and finding economic and political security, seemed to mesh with those Grand American Projects.

Every wave of prior immigration also came with an opting out clause. If they missed the old country, if they couldn't get that sweetheart out of their minds, they could just go back after making some money. Back then it was harder to bring the village to Pittsburgh. Congested ethnic enclaves did take shape, but they were waystations until a leg up the social ladder materialized, or the conditions to make it back home came about. For a period of time, a fifth of Greater Syria worked and toiled in the New World. Same, even larger proportions of the populations of southern Italians and others made it westwards. But almost 50 percent of Italians repatriated. Kurds from the deepest reaches of Anatolia came in, earned a little and went back. For those who stayed, it was also easier to sever ties with the old country simply because they, like others around them, made a conscious decision to become American.

By the time the 1965 wave came in, suddenly one could live fully as a hyper-hyphenated American, with more emphasis on the modifier. Grocery stores imported all the knick knacks and fare of the old country. The internet allowed for daily updates on the goings on in the village. Within a few decades, media infrastructure expanded on the ethnic paper of the past to provide radio, TV and eventually satellite entertainment. And to be honest, a larger proportion came from "shithole" countries—crude economies with malevolent, rapacious government—that had little prospect of allowing a returning emigrant to lead a dignified, middle class life. So a lot more stayed, with fewer opportunities to participate in new projects of American renewal, and revolution. 9/11 allowed for a brief effervescence of American determination, but was soon sullied and maligned as too patriotic, too ambitious (thank you Deep State and media, but we

will get to them later). Thus, the pull factors of assimilation soured while the push factors slackened.

It is into this urban landscape of undigested immigrant identities and unfulfilling and fragmentary 'American' makeovers that Wolfe navigates his readers. Wolfe spent five years researching his novel, one that he was determined would tackle the topic of immigration, or so he told a film crew documenting his travels during that time. He gets his character Dionisio Cruz, Miami's Cuban mayor to spell it out:

"I want to tell you a couple of things about this city. There are things you probably already know, but sometimes it helps to hear them out loud. I know it helps *me* ...Miami is the only city in the world, as far as I can tell—in the world—whose population is more than fifty percent recent immigrants ...*recent* immigrants, immigrants from over the past fifty years ...and that's a hell of a thing, when you think about it. So what does that give you? It gives you—I was talking to a woman about this the other day, a Haitian lady, and she says to me, 'Dio, if you really want to understand Miami, you got to realize one thing first of all. In Miami, everybody hates everybody.'"

Cruz is dressing down the city's African American Chief of Police, a man picked for the job to placate 'Our African-American Community'. The mayor wants the Chief to fire the novel's protagonist, Nestor Camacho, a muscly Cuban rookie cop who doesn't really speak Spanish but who nonetheless is a walking-talking "one-man race riot" by the mayor's book. The novel presages many of the issues roiling the larger country a little under a decade after its publication: anti-black police brutality and humiliation, black-Hispanic tensions, black and anglo resentment at unbridled, illegal immigration, the gulf in logos and worldview between the college-educated and those who are not, even a note of Russian disinformation (of the artistic provenance variety). Wolfe adds what seems to be a personal tone lamenting the diminishment of WASP power, mystique and prestige. His is a WASPy bemusement and bewilderment at the scale of changes, a sloppy attempt at ordering the *mélange* of identities according to facile archetypes. The Haitian-wannabe-Frenchman-Creole-despising-Art-Deco-loving professor, and the Russians—two oligarchs and a drunken artist—are poorly fleshed out, for example. But it doesn't come from a place of darkness, the novel does feel and read like a chronicle of WASP-grade innocence abroad, but this time at 'home'. Miami, even if Wolfe does not come out and say, is an example of too much change.

Cruz's prescription is to minimize friction between the antagonistic identities of his city by compartmentalizing them into 'safe spaces', to anticipate and manage outrage by pre-emptively excising troublemakers like Camacho: "We can't melt 'em down ...but we can weld 'em down ...*weld* 'em down ...What do I *mean* by that? I mean we can't *mix* them together, but we *can* forge

a secure place for each nationality, each ethnic group, each race, and make sure they're all on the same level plane."

This sounds a lot like the PC-for-POC, social-justice-y worldview, equality-of-outcome end state of the modern Democrat Party. Separate, with some self-identifying 'victims' more equal than others. This is the new world they envision, one that Georgetown University professor Joshua Mitchell calls—in his new book *American Awakening* (2020)—a "quasi-religious world of identity politics [where] innocent victims alone are hallowed; they alone receive what could be called debt-point recognition, by which I mean credits in the invisible economy of transgression and innocence." Mitchell explains that for the rest of us "our penance as transgressors is to listen to the innocents, and our lay responsibility in the identity politics liturgy is to assent to the right of the innocents to tear down the civilizational temple" which was only built in the first place by their sweat, labor and tears, or so we are told. "Whatever the innocents wish to accomplish in politics," he continues, "is legitimate because the *real basis* of political legitimacy now is innocence. The past belongs to the transgressors, who today are an archaic holdover and an embarrassment. The future—politically, economically, and socially—belongs to the innocents." Wolfe's novel seems to concede these points: this is to be Miami's fate under the reign of identity politics. His role as a white heterosexual male is to listen, reflect, and seek forgiveness for being.

But Wolfe, the innocent (in the WASP sense) and eternal American optimist that he is, tosses before us some unlikely pairings. Some turn out horribly, but some, such as the prospect of Camacho's enduring partnership with the Yale-educated *anglo* reporter John Smith, as well as his romance-in-the-making with Ghislaine, the Haitian professor's daughter, suggest that a city like Miami may eventually triumph over the tribalism of bloodlines, that if enough of these sweeter pairings can come together—and they can only come together in a shared space such as Miami's (and by extension, America's)—then our shared lot may turn out slightly less cynical, slightly less miserable than what that mayor, and the Democrats, are prescribing.

Half of the foreign-born immigrants from Latin America now living legally in the U.S. are not from Mexico; they are Central Americans, Colombians, Caribbeans, and all sorts of others. Their issues are different. DACA, for example, is not their thing. Even within their respective countries there are differing issues according to regionalism, class differentiation, language (not all Mayans want to speak Spanish, for example) and race. Tailoring a platform for each identity is not going to work. A Republican message of anti-socialism is likewise weak sauce. So is the prospect of the Democrats asking them to hold the line as they achieve the 'browning' of America, whatever that is supposed to mean in terms of substantive improvements to their lives.

Five percent of Wisconsinites are foreign-born immigrants. Another five percent are native born with at least one immigrant parent. About a third of them are Mexican, 8 percent from India, and 5 percent from China. Seven percent of Pennsylvanians are foreign born too. 10 percent of them are from India; 9 percent from the Dominican Republic. The number of foreign-born stands at 7 percent in Michigan too: 13 percent of those are Mexican, another 11 percent are Indian, and 10 percent Iraqi. Minnesota clocks in at 9 percent foreign born. Another 7 percent

are natives with at least one foreign-born immigrant parent. Of the foreign born there, 12 percent are Mexican, 8 percent Somali, and 6 percent Indian. New Jersey is one of the bigger ones: twenty-three percent of its population is foreign born; 13 percent came from India, 10 percent from the Dominican Republic and another 5 percent from Mexico. Why is it so far-fetched that the GOnP can actually make a play for the Garden State in a future presidential election by trying to win over a quarter of its voters? Remember, Florida has a population that is 21 percent foreign born, with 23 percent of those Cubans, 8 percent Haitians and 6 percent Colombians. (These number are from the American Immigration Council)

These Mexican and non-Mexican legal immigrants are part of a 60 million foreign-born contingent of Americans, or about twenty percent of the overall population. This is a historic high, when considered in sheer numbers. Nigerians, Cubans, Soviet Jews, Bolivians, Ethiopians, Guatemalans, Hmong, Eastern Turkestanis, Algerians, Taiwanese, Iranians—is there no wider message to be crafted for them? Could 'Make America Great Again' be the Grand American Project that they will take ownership of despite the 'Again'? Or is the 'Again' what sells them on it? Wasn't it *that* America they thought they were immigrating to?

There was poignant moment during the second night of the most recent Republican National Convention: Trump attending the naturalization ceremony for five new Americans that was hosted at the White House. There was the Bolivian construction business owner, a father of two; the Lebanese mother of three who was a psychologist and a daycare teacher; the Indian software developer, also mother of two; the lady from Sudan with three children and a PhD in Animal Nutrition; the Ghanaian medical interpreter who speaks five languages. Trump welcomed them as "absolutely incredible new members into our great American family." His banter, forecasting that the construction business would go from five employees to hundreds, and hoping that the psychologist would finally figure him out, was sweet and touching. Trump saluted them for playing by the rules, and thanked them for bringing merit, verve and skill to this country. No hostility, no bristling at the 'browning' effect, no playing ethnic favorites. Just a vibe of fairness and appreciation. And it felt authentic. This sort of pageantry can go a long way.

The Trumpian narrative has the potential to offer them something exciting, new, and flexible. I think this pool of recent immigrants is the biggest prize for the GOnP going forward, and the results from Miami-Dade may have told us something profound that we have not deciphered as of yet. While we can't yet answer why they may be tempted by Trumpism (we will try further into this essay), let us answer why the Democrats cannot keep them. After all, it was the Democrats who lost those voters in Miami. Could this be a harbinger of the Democrats' greatest fear: that there is nothing destined about demographic destiny, that the actual browning of America could be that the Democrats are toast?

And the reason for that is that in this most recent election, one of the most important political contests in America's history, one that drew out unprecedented numbers of votes (real and fraudulent), the Democrats billed themselves, assuredly, as the party of the *past*. Their 'Again' compass reading for greatness points back to five years ago, a couple of minutes before

Donald and Melania Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower. The Democrats promised their voters a restoration of normalcy, but what exactly is the DC variety of normalcy?

Funny you should ask. Joe Biden is as DC as it gets. He is to be America's 46th President with 47 years of political mileage, with all that pertains in terms of engine trouble and corroded values. Does he really excite the run-of-the-mill Recent Immigrant? Does he really inspire a new American purpose for them? I am not sure the Democrats have thought this through.

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The Old Way of Doing Things

The Biden-Harris ticket comes to the White House hobbled by a unique set of vulnerabilities. Their ticket billed itself the one of decency and character. It drew more contrast with Trump the man than their opponent's platform. The Democrat party bosses assured us that the last time around Hillary Clinton was personally disliked but now they found someone approachable, genial. Naturally, Joe Biden the man had to loom large, and shall continue to do so. Yet there is an unescapable reality: Joe Biden looks and sounds frail. This optic will run through every mind every time he appears in public.

Since persona has been made especially critical in this election, the public's opinion may bifurcate on this 'new' man, their promised anti-Trump. Those who think of Biden as a politician half-a-century in the limelight may be leaning to perceive him as a scripted, disingenuous, platitudinal mouthrunner; a faded throwback to the glad-handing, 'Listen here, folks'-sputtering, kitchen-table-imagery-setting snollygoster, one with a closetful of skeletal inappropriateness and strikingly un-PC stances and phrases in his distant and not so distant past that he hopes no one will bring up (he's looking your way, media). There is also the whiff of corruption, one that is assumed by a skeptical public as something that just comes with the territory. But what amount of corruption is to be expected from this type, and how much is too much corruption?—this is sort of the 'how much is too much change' question. Well, we are about to find out.

Taking the other road are those who want to think kindly of Biden, as the poor stuttering, widowed 'Good-Catholic-Scranton-Boy' who—bless his heart—is just trying his best. However, they may end up perceiving him, given his obvious and increasing frailty, as one who is prone to manipulation. The more they hear of corruption, the more they will think his coterie has led him astray.

So what is he, a *corruptor* or a *patsy*? This is not a question that anyone wants to ask at the start of a presidency, but it will force itself into the public discourse. The reason this will happen is the Hunter Biden laptop.

The laptop is real. Its contents are real, really embarrassing and *really* incriminating. Some of it is, err, too depraved and disgusting, and that's putting it mildly. Its provenance, from Hunter's possession to that of Rudy Giuliani's while running through a half-blind Albino computer repairman in Wilmington, is gonzo but authentic. The ludicrous smokescreen that it is somehow associated with Russian disinformation, peddled as that was by anti-Trump national security luminaries, will have to be answered for. Big Tech's attempt to censor the story will be recalled for the bizarre and creepy intrusion that it was. It will not be forgotten. It will not get lost in the din. Da ya think that that's possible with a walking-talking indefatigable media dynamo like Trump, who will not fade away, who will not go silently into the night, out there bringing it up over and over again day after day?

Remember when Trump tried to make Hunter's business dealings an issue at the first debate? He tried, but Chris Wallace, another beneficiary of a powerful father, shut it down as irrelevant. Wallace pompously said, "I think the American people would rather hear about more substantial subjects. Well, as the moderator, sir, I'm going to make a judgement call here." He did. He ended the discussion. Or so it seemed. News of the laptop broke ahead of the second debate, and it again fell to Trump to raise the topic directly with Biden since hardly anyone else did. Biden weakly deflected by citing Romney who served on "that committee" (meaning Ron Johnson's Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs) and who "said it wasn't worth taxpayer's money. That report was written for political reasons." The Senate report too came out before the laptop revelations. When pressed directly by Trump on the new information emanating from the laptop, Biden categorically answered "None of that is true." How long will his answer hold?

Those who are prone to read corruption into Biden's actions will recall Tony Bobulinski's credible account as an example of 'Big Guy'/'chairman'/Joe Biden's direct familiarity and involvement, and cut thereof from the business ventures of his son(s) (we're not supposed to speak, for respecting-the-dead thanatological reasons, about how Beau Biden, RIP, was involved too) and brother James. This too will be remembered.

The "laptop from hell" as Trump masterfully tagged it has yielded many revelations, but one in particular stands out. In any other telling, it may sound esoteric and difficult to follow. However, it is the backstory against which Trump was impeached so there is some metanarrative groundwork already in place for a wider audience. The revelation will lay bare to many (or just enough) that Trump the disruptor was unfairly impeached, while Biden the establishmentarian got off scot-free. That's right, we are back to Burisma.

The whole deal with the Burisma story is whether there was a personal or familial agenda at play when Biden leaned on the Ukrainian government to fire its prosecutor. Biden famously withheld 1 billion dollars in aid until it would do so. This is known as a *quid pro quo*, a bad thing when gobs of taxpayers' money and personal agenda are involved, which is the charge that House Democrats pinned on Trump as grounds for impeachment. Remember this, the worst Trump is accused of doing was asking the Ukrainians to look into whether something smelled funny in the Biden family's Burisma dealings.

We were assured that Biden had no personal gain here. Not by the Ukrainians mind you: it was the American press and an assortment of officious 'Deep State' bigwigs offering up those assurances. They placed their credentials as guarantees for the veracity of these assurances. Their argument hinged on their assertion that the prosecutor was not investigating Burisma at the time of Biden's threat to the Ukrainians. Yet this is where Hunter's laptop shreds their sureties to confetti. The laptop contains a record of a smoking gun email that told us that in fact Burisma execs felt that they were being harassed by investigations during those months. The timing is key here. Now you really need to *pay* attention.

The e-mail was sent by Vadym Pozharskyi from his Burisma address on November 2, 2015. It is addressed to the email addresses of Hunter Biden, Devon Archer, and Eric D. Schwerin at Blue Star Strategies Group. The email lays out the expectations that Burisma has for re-hiring them. Pozharskyi, in a communication sent seven months prior to this email, had thanked Hunter for introducing him to his father the then Vice President. Hunter had done that as part of his sweet gig on Burisma's board. But the Nov. 2 negotiation was about something new. It had a new urgency. And Pozharskyi was asking for a new set of services from Hunter and his partners.

Pozharskyi's new 'deliverables' literally meant delivering U.S. officials, current and former ones, to Ukraine. He wanted Hunter and his partners to get officials such as the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and others stateside to express a supportive, positive opinion of "Nikolay/Burisma" both publicly and through private channels. "Nikolay" is Mykola Zlochevskiy, Burisma's founder. Pozharskyi wanted these messages of support to be delivered to "the highest level of decision makers here in Ukraine" such as his country's president, the president's chief of staff and the "Prosecutor General, etc." He spells it out: "The scope of work should also include organization of a visit of a number of widely recognized and influential current and/or former US policy-makers to Ukraine *in November* [my emphasis] aiming to conduct meetings with and bring positive signal/message and support on Nikolay's issue to the Ukrainian top officials above..."

And why is that necessary to do in that particular month of November? Well, Pozharskyi tells them that "the ultimate purpose to close down for any cases/pursuits against Nikolay in Ukraine."

There it is, in plain, somewhat Eastern European-accented English. Burisma was worried that its top guy was under imminent threat of "cases/pursuits." Meaning investigations into corruption and what have you. The urgency strongly suggests these were to be new and impending.

Hunter began delivering. Blue Star met with the U.S. Ambassador in December 2015, per Pozharskyi's demand. This was an important 'get' for Burisma. George Pyatt, a career diplomat who had gotten his first ambassadorial-rank appointment to Ukraine in 2013 under Obama, had been somewhat undiplomatically vocal on the subject of corruption, and "Nikolay" Zlochevskiy's corruption in particular. On September 24, 2015, five weeks before the e-mail above, he publicly laid into the Prosecutor General's office for slow-walking an investigation into Zlochevskiy and his millions of dollars in illicit assets held in Britain. He was even hinting of deliberate sabotage, which was the general impression among watchers of the case those days. Zlochevskiy had been minister of environment and natural resources from 2010 to 2012, during a transformative time for Ukraine's lucrative natural gas and oil fields. He coincidentally became very rich. One of his ventures was the Cyprus-incorporated Burisma Holdings Limited. Hunter was brought onto the Burisma board in April 2014 during the same month that Zlochevskiy's assets were frozen in London. Zlochevskiy had been under a variety of Ukrainian and international investigations for two years before Pyatt renewed the call.

Pyatt specifically called for an investigation of a few shady officials within the Prosecutor-General's office. It was unclear whether Pyatt was specifically going after the Prosecutor-General himself, Viktor Shokin, or just members on his staff. Shokin, a veteran prosecutor, had been on the job for less than a year. Two days before the ambassador's remarks, Shokin had set up a special anticorruption department within the Prosecutor-General's Office. Those leading this department, chosen as they were by Shokin, seemed to be in the good graces of the U.S. Embassy. There was a sense of renewed direction and vigor, and Pyatt was providing covering fire as the new team went after its quarry, which judging from the ambassador's specific mentioning of him seems to have been Zlochevskiy, but we haven't been able to know for sure. We still do not know why Pyatt took the meeting with Blue Star knowing who they were working for. Furthermore, we do not know if he raised the inappropriateness of their reaching out to him in any cables back to the State Department or privately with other Obama administration officials. Or whether he took a reading of where the wind was blowing and simply bit his own tongue.

A more jaundiced viewpoint would add that Hunter delivered his father too—the administration's key person on Ukraine. Joe Biden visited Ukraine from December 7-8, suddenly elevated the firing of Shokin as a key demand of the United States *while* on the plane over there. The new talking point was that everyone—the State Department, the European—were on board with firing Shokin for shirking his duties in not moving zealously enough against the corruptors. Thus Biden was acting gallantly and in contravention of his son's interests, or so his defenders argued. It was Biden himself who boasted the details of this trip during a later talk at the Council on Foreign Relations (January 23, 2018) that was released on video and in transcript. Biden was not simply running his mouth as he is wont to do; he spoke of those details to 'fix' the record in a manner that strategically worked for him ahead of his run for the presidency since he anticipated that there could be some trouble with this story. That is why his memory of it functioned better than it usually does—he came prepared. The press had first reported on Hunter's association with Burisma just as Biden was landing during that December 2015 trip; there was a *Vice* story reported out of Kiev by Simon Ostrovsky laying out the details, as well as the inappropriateness of it all. So Biden and the Ukrainians both knew how things appeared. But Biden pressed on, even threatening to withhold 1 billion dollars in aid. The incredulous Ukrainians told him, "you have no authority." They must have known how it would have looked for Biden if this got out given that Hunter's associations were already out in the press. But Biden bluffed them into calling Obama and finding out whether the guy facing them down has the authority or not. We know that because Biden told us so at his talk. The way Biden retold the tale at CFR was that he gave the Ukrainians an ultimatum to fire the prosecutor, and "Well, son of a bitch. (Laughter.) He got fired. And they put in place someone who was solid at the time." But Shokin wasn't fired until four months later, in March 2016; we also don't hear of any active investigations of Zlochevskiy during those few months between Biden's intervention and Shokin's actual date of dismissal.

That December standoff in the Ukrainian capital had an eye-of-the-beholder aspect to it, one could play it down or play it up depending on perception, and purpose. When Airforce Two went wheels up from Kiev the *New York Times* ran a follow-up to *Vice's* story under Jim Risen's byline. It didn't add anything new, but it did widen the public's knowledge of the incident. That it came from Risen, a conduit for Deep State leakers (we'll be discussing a book he co-authored later), was also interesting. The author assured us there was nothing there even if it did smell iffy. This was not the line that a story running in the *same* paper on the *same* topic took a few years later in May 2019: this time around it seemed designed to implicate Biden, probably to hobble his primary. He won the primary so the story had to be reburied, or re-spun before Trump got a hold of it. They—the *NYTimes*, Chris Wallace, the Deep Staters, the Bidens—*almost* got away with it. Almost.

It was clumsily resurrected by Adam Schiff because he couldn't find anything else to impeach Trump on. A dinky NSC busy-body, 'That's Colonel to you' Alexander Vindman, had been creating a ruckus behind the scenes over Trump's phone call with an incoming Ukrainian president after Vindman had heard, second-hand, that POTUS had brought up the issue of Biden, the prosecutor, and Burisma. Time was running out for the Democrats. They were to face Trump in an election set against the backdrop of an astounding economic success, and COVID-19 had yet to offer itself as Biden's running mate. So Schiff ran with Vindman's persnickety grievances. But of course Trump had a transcript to back up his counter-claim of "a perfect phone call" and whatever Schiff dug up didn't really seal the deal on the *quid-ing* and *pro-ing* and *quo-ing* after six months of roiling the political class, so impeachment broke along partisan lines, failed to remove Trump from office and DC moved on. The Bidens again breathed a sigh of relief: the candidate could still claim that everything was above board, at least there was no direct evidence otherwise. The record still showed that Biden went after the prosecutor when there were no active investigations into Burisma. And that's where everyone left it.

But here is where the Biden defense falls apart: The November 2 e-mail from Pozharskiy revealed imminent urgency. Things had to happen that same month to forestall fresh investigations. They wanted the U.S. ambassador to be spoken to. They wanted U.S. officials to come to Kiev and say nice things about Zlochevskiy to Ukrainian officials including Shokin, the Prosecutor General, *now*.

"So what? You got us, but Biden is now president. Too late! Too bad!" I really do get it. I'm a grown-up, I've been around DC and politics for two decades now, and I know how things are. No one is going to jail for what this one e-mail uncovered, but the fact that this was hereto an unknown aspect of the story, unknown to the media and to the Congress, and that when it was revealed it was censored by the media and by Big Tech, well, this is going to leave a bad taste in the mouths of a portion of Biden's voters. How big of a portion? We don't know, but we do know that they will keep wondering: is he corrupt or was he manipulated by Hunter?

The Burisma scandal is the gateway drug to all sorts of cognitive trips in a voter's mind, for the bad taste is part of a pattern. This was no isolated blip in the narrative. It fits elegantly against

the backdrop of how the Hunter laptop was delegitimized. Fifty former intelligence officials signed a letter casting doubt on the laptop. They claimed the whole tale had the whiff of a Russian information operation. They marshalled their expertise to demonstrate that they knew what they are talking about, that such knowledge led them to believe that the Russian government played a significant role in this one. The fifty names even boasted high-ranking signatories whose terms overlapped with that of Trump's, lending a pseudo-claim of bipartisanship. Here we had the Deep State in all trappings and regalia, telling us to clasp our ears and to look away, lest the siren song from Yasenevo lead us astray. All the usual suspects were there: John Brennan, Leon Panetta, Michael Hayden, John McLaughlin, Michael Morell, Thomas Finger, Mike Vickers, Doug Wise, Nick Rasmussen, Nada Bakos, Steven L. Hall, Russ Travers, Marc Polymeropoulos, Cynthia Strand, Emile Nakhleh, John Sipher, and so on. A number of them had publicly endorsed Biden, but that was neither here nor there. They were putting out this letter to safeguard the republic, you see. The letter was not above certain flourishes, "in addition, nine additional former IC officers who cannot be named publicly also support the arguments in this letter." These former officers were such hot stuff that they couldn't even sign their names, *in retirement*. They were risking their covers to tell us to take heed! How could we ever repay them? Where do we even send the gift baskets to?

Now they *do* tell us that they have no evidence of Russian involvement, nor do they know whether the emails and other data were genuine. But the whole thing was "consistent with Russian objectives." And that's that. They were putting their credentials on the line, credentials that the American people had paid for. After all, those positions of authority that they occupied were subsidized by American taxpayers. And leveraging those credentials to deflect blame from a presidential candidate in the final stretch of a campaign is nothing out of the ordinary. That's what they tell us. Who are we to argue?

Of course, it's all hogwash. They are claiming Russian disinformation where there is none. But this claim of theirs locks into yet another pattern that is foundational to the Trumpian narrative: it was the likes of Brennan and Hayden in 2016 who, from their official perches atop the U.S. national security establishment, enabled Russian disinformation to get into the intelligence bloodstream in the final stretch of a campaign because it could have damaged a presidential candidate, and could have derailed a president-elect, and could have ousted a president. I'm talking, of course, about the Steele Dossier.

The Steele Dossier is bunk. Much has been written about it. There are strong suspicions that parts of it were concocted by Russian intelligence, a genuine Russian disinformation operation. The Russians may have done so to screw with an American election, or the genesis of their work could have had the humble objective of discrediting Christopher Steele alone. Again, getting into the nitty gritty—who paid for it, who used it, who leaked it, who gifted off of it—is beyond our scope. But there is one element to the story, recently revealed, that focuses on a dimension that not only borders on treason in my mind, but rather leap frogs well into treasonous territory.

Less than a month before the election, on October 6, 2020, we learned about the declassified notes made by former CIA Director John Brennan concerning a briefing he gave Obama in July 2016. In those notes, Brennan indicates to the former president that the Russians knew that Hillary Clinton had commissioned an investigation into Trump's Russian entanglements. This is important in the intelligence world. If a spy agency knows that some outsider is fishing for a particular type of fact, said spy agency would be hard pressed not to feed tainted stories to such an investigation just to see where it all goes. Such subterfuge had been going on since the beginning of spy work. It is elemental, and some like the Russians are very capable at it. Or at least, given how gullible they think American spies are, they usually go for it in a big way with a much-relished goal of humiliating their American adversaries. This is the analysis that any espionage flunky can make. And here we have the head of the CIA telling a U.S. president that the Russians know. Which means that the Russians will feed it garbage. Which means that the intelligence product likely to come out if will be tainted and toxic. Which if it enters the intelligence data bloodstream, running between the dozen or so intelligence agencies of the U.S. government, this taint, this toxicity will spread, and at one point, at some inevitable point, it will leak to someone in Congress, someone in the press, or some other foreign intelligence agency trying to get at what is really going on in Washington.

Brennan knew all that. Obama would have known all that too. They knew that whatever Hillary's campaign was fishing for was compromised. Yet they allowed Operation Crossfire Hurricane to be unleashed on the Trump campaign three days earlier. They were hoping the leaks would occur before the election. At no point did they pull the brakes. Then they hoped the leaks would materialize during the transition. And then they awaited the leaks to break out during the early run of Trump's presidency. So it wasn't incompetence that allowed the Steele Dossier to fester and spread within the intelligence bureaucracies. It was clear and apparent malice, oozing down from the very top, with the clear and apparent intent to overturn the result of a presidential election. This is shameful. This is treason. And this will go unpunished too. Because a system that could not prevent the beginnings of this so damning of a taint cannot fix—and consequently untaint—itsself.

But it will be remembered. And it will fall into place with the question over whether Biden knew of this taint, or whether a Deep State, one that could participate unaccountably in such seditious deception, would easily manipulate him going forward.

Another twist on this narrative is that every time it is raised, every time it is whispered, every time it is wondered, some eyes would naturally have to turn to Kamala Harris. Is some of the kindling for these perceptions, that Biden is too frail and too easily manipulated, or that Biden is too corrupt, coming out of her team? These sorts of suspicions are a running theme in all vice-presidencies, but there is something about Harris that would seem to amplify it: she comes off as clumsily devious. Returning to the theme of decency and character, and this time focusing on her person, one can immediately tell that she is not ready. She isn't even Senator-grade ready. Mike Pence filleted her expertly during their debate. She was grating and unauthentic during

the primaries. Her initial campaign was one misstep after another; seemingly the more the Democrat constituency got to know her, the more off-putting she got.

There was something nervous about her, as if she was about to get caught in a massive sham. Some of this is her own doing. For example, she clearly figured that being childless may hurt her as a paragon of would-be breaker-of-glass-ceilings womanhood, so she clumsily crafted fake-tender stories about her step-children that one has to do several steps of research to pin down as bizarre and creepy. She told us that she baked cookies for them the first time she met them. She told us that they took to calling her 'mamala'. She left the audience with a mental image of this kindly lady winning over the affection of two children. It is a heartening image. It softens her. But what she (and the media) didn't tell us is that when she married her husband five years ago in 2015, his eldest son was already a twenty-year old junior in college, while his daughter was a 15 year-old teenager. Harris had met her husband less than a year before they got hitched. So the timeline does not make sense. Who bakes cookies for a frat boy and a teenager? Which teenager do you know off starts calling a step-mom 'mamala' without an eye roll and gobs of high-pitched irony? How would their actual mama, the one who lived through the first projectile vomit, the first successful potty transition, the first the-boy-I-like-pulled-my-hair heartbreak, feel about this? Harris' family life is her business, but she did leverage it as a political asset. And upon closer scrutiny, well, ewww.

And as sure as hell there will be more of this. Kamala gives off *that* vibe. And ultimately the Biden team will begin feeling that some of the blowback to their guy is being fanned by hers.

So the decency and character ticket has some destabilizing flaws. This is where the narrative of election fraud fits in seamlessly too. Trump had been laying the foundations for this rhetoric for months before the election. He said he would win, but there was a serious prospect of the other side cheating, especially with unsolicited mail-in ballots. It no longer matters whether it is true. His people will believe it. They will have enough 'evidence' to go by. It is easy for them to believe that the Democrats, the establishment and the Deep Staters are corrupt and would go to any length to regain power. And they won't believe the credentialed authorities or the media when it attempts to debunk this evidence. After all, four years of relentless anti-Trump rhetoric never dented their resolve to stand by their guy. They do not stand there sheepishly, embarrassed by his antics, hoping that he would concede and move on. They are cheering him on. They want him to do what he does best: fight. Fight till the end. Get at them Mr. President! Maul and brawl. Maul and brawl. They know this claim of being robbed and wronged shall become yet another subplot in their narrative arc. A narrative that leads him to run again in 2024, to take back what was rightfully his, in their eyes at least. (The current efforts underway to legally deny Trump the chance to do that only reinforces the notion among his supporters that the establishment types have done something untoward that they are trying to hide, and that they are terrified of the prospect of his return to look deeper into what transpired during the election.)

But is all this enough to win over the 11 percenters? A case can be made that the voting public has no patience or attention span to hear foreign words like *Burisma* or to follow the machinations of a Brennan. They would just shrug and move on to some celebrity gossip. The powers that be certainly have a low view of the public. But they were wrong about them in 2016, and were wrong again in 2020. Can they risk being wrong again? Can they be certain there isn't an 11 percent out there that may give this narrative a hearing? That at the end of hearing it out they won't feel lied to, or 'red pill'd' in today's jargon? Can they be certain that a talented pugilist like Trump is too set in his ways to retool and revamp his messaging to include this whole tapestry? He already has a whole vocabulary of scandal and retribution cocked and ready: laptop from hell, fake news, lock them up, end endless wars, suppression polls, drain the swamp, stop the steal, and MAGA, *and* MAGA,A. These things may sound silly to the elite, but in capable hands, they are politically lethal.

Or maybe the powerful are unimpressed by all this huffing and puffing. To them, Trump is king of the rubes, master of America's Dalits. He can have all of them and still come up short. His 'remnant classes' in the Midwest are tapped out, and would be cancelled out anyway by the urban black vote in any electoral challenge. He has no new ground to claim. Unless of course he breaks into the 'Recent Immigrant' game, one the Democrats believe they have all locked up. What they don't get is that Trump has always been the Ilkhan of a great Mongol horde who leads the enemy into thinking they are winning right before clamping them with a bone-crushing defeat.

Maybe I am giving the Recent Immigrants too much credit. Maybe what happened in Miami is really solely about anti-socialism. Maybe immigrants, or at least the 1965 Act portion of them, don't have a unique attachment to fairness, to holding this new land of theirs to a higher moral plane. Will they actually listen and be swayed by tales of corruption, abuses of power, and voting fraud? Isn't that what they detested about the places they left; how the powerful played by different rules and got away with it? When the Statue of Liberty was unveiled in 1886 none of the speech givers mentioned the word 'immigrant'. The French craftsmen who made the statue and the citizens who paid for it, as well as the Americans who donated towards building the pedestal thought they were erecting a dual monument: one that celebrated the Declaration of Independence, as well as the abolition of slavery. The story of immigration played no part in its symbolism. It was the immigrants passing Liberty Enlightening the World on their way to Ellis Island for arrival processing who *assigned* her a role as their august greeter and welcomer, a meaning and looming presence within their own stories and myths of coming to America, so much so that the plaque with the sonnet now indelibly identified with the statue, seeming to be in Lady Liberty's own voice—Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free—was added almost two decades later, in 1903.

Many have described the naturalization ceremony as a rebirth of sorts. That is what I experienced too. With that comes a measure of child-like innocence, of expectation, even after having lived in the United States for a while, even after witnessing the defects here and there.

That expectation lifts one up, reminding the new citizens of why they came here. As Wolfe puts, "For everyone in the world, America is Plan B. If it doesn't work out here, we'll try to go there." It is the immigrants' task to spot defects, to do repairs and to keep it going. That is why I don't think such citizens would shrug off the Trumpian narrative of fairness and renewal that indifferently.

They, and others, will ask themselves whether it is worth being lied to so as to save us from Trump's crudity? Was a return to the old way of doing things, corrupt and static as they are, really a soothing improvement over Trump's chaotic management, a win for themselves and their families rather than one for the establishment? How many of Biden's 2020 voters would come to answer 'No'? What do we know about the reactions of those who feel they were lied to and implicated in the preservation of a fraudulent, suffocating status quo, one that took and took from them and their families and left them exposed and in ruinous debt?

I would say there is a fair chance of events playing out to Trump's advantage.

And if all else fails, then the decency-character ticket can get an unseemly smear of the laptop's jam of venereal spirochetes. There is stuff in there, and also out there if one takes the time to look, that turns the Biden family into Jerry Springer Show sweepstakes material. This is not 'Tara Reid says' stuff. This is audiovisual. And it cannot be unseen. Crack made Hunter do really, *really* horrifying stuff. It is ironic that his father was the one who in his 1986 legislation turned the possession of a tiny amount of crack into a far greater sentencing offence than carrying a similar amount of powdered cocaine, even extending the disparity upwards to a hundred times for the same amount in cocaine. This tweak decimated an African-American generation just then experiencing the blight of crack. Sniffing yuppies got away with it. So did Hunter three decades later when he literally got a slap on the wrist, receiving an 'administrative separation' from the U.S. Navy reserve—not even a dishonorable discharge—after testing positive for drugs in 2014. But now we know that the crack was the least of it. How long will it remain unacknowledged? A brawler like Giuliani gets to traffic in this sort of smut after being accused for half a day by the Twitterverse of propositioning a 15 year-old on Borat's new movie. That turned out to be false yet he will get memed with it for the rest of his days. But it gives him the moral clearance to bring up unseemly stuff that looks (and sounds) like incestuous pedophilia, with 'Pop' knowing about it, and seemingly not doing much to punish or turn in Hunter. These sorts of family tragedies are just what they are, tragic. But it will be difficult to pretend that the story is not there. And let's not pretend that human nature will not warrant this human wasteland a glancing, curious look. And let's not pretend that it has no bearing on 'character'. Laptop from hell *indeed*.

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Trump Cancels the Media

One could see why the elite couldn't understand Trump or his people, given the economic, cultural and physical gulfs between the two camps, but why would the media, left leaning and supposedly driven to document the plight of the little man, be so out of tune with that man's pathos?

Maybe the muckraker myth was just that, a myth. Maybe these were isolated cases of the jaded, dogged, righteous reporter archetype, but the majority had always been somebody's nephew, or had married into power, or were there for the cocktails. Rogue publications meant to challenge legacy media, ones that would tell it like it is, often mellowed, sold-out, or floundered.

Hating on the media had turned archetypical too. Yelling at the television, or fuming over an Editorial, or sending in a letter had morphed by the embittering 2000s of the Bush era into blogging snarky takes. The more talented bloggers were co-opted into the business, and into power. And so on. By the midpoint of the Obama presidency, the media landscape had consolidated: legacy flagships such as network news and news shows, the *NYTimes*, *WaPo* and CNN had survived financial ruin by accepting rescue from the billionaires who held on to them for status, rather than balance-sheet success. Institutions lower down the scales simply fell into the void or starved at the periphery. But the cultural supremacy of those surviving flagships was unassailable. And they all looked, and sounded, and opined the same. There was Fox News to entertain and channel the dissenters, but even that would change in the post-Ailes era. There was a sense that things had stabilized on the media landscape after the internet's disruption, and that the media was back as a powerful influence on how America thinks and talks.

Then Trump came along and amplified the talkback, so much so that he disrupted the news cycle over and over again. He harried, and tweeted, feigned, and tweeted, and struck, and tweeted, and then repeated. His tactics were Mongol, his technical edge is what I called 'celebrity technology'. He gave journalists compelling, thrilling copy and made it so that his name was uttered with each of their breaths. Then he wouldn't let the media catch its breath as he unleashed a new round of invective. Trump went on to invite those same journalists into the ring with him. Journalists accordingly took the bait and inserted themselves into the news cycle. They told themselves it must be done. Being idealistic and telling it like it is, and fighting the man, and fighting for the little guy somehow necessitated that reporters become protagonists in the stories they covered. Trump came back at them with "enemy of the people" and they vowed that democracy would not die in darkness, not on their watch. Their watch has lasted the entire length of the five year-old Trump phenomenon, without let-up. It is coming to an end, but not because the phenomenon is ending. It is coming to an end because the media is fated to irrelevance, which to them is a fate worse than death.

Irrelevance will come when Trump's people stop reacting to the legacy media. They will stop engaging. What the media says or does will not get a rise out of them. In 2016, half the country

wanted to be acknowledged. They were sending a message. They felt betrayed. The polls couldn't even spot them, or want to see them. They adopted Trump's moniker for themselves, "the forgotten men and women"—even Hillary's "deplorables" became a mark of their distinction and pride. Instead of attention and sympathy, the media kept belittling them and maligning their movement, so they made the calculation that any rational person would make in this case: the media is useless in terms of getting their protest voice across. So they will simply secede from the media's domain; they will leave the designated public square as assigned by the powerful. But they will gather elsewhere.

It will get silent with less talk back. It shall inevitably feel 'normal' when half the country vacates the country's meeting place, the customary town square. But it will be a delusion. The Trumpians will go off the narrative grid. They will hike up to their mountain redoubts. They will hold revivals in the woods. Their movement will become leaner, tougher, fiercer. Once in a while they will send down bands of trolls to hit and run, planting memetic IEDs in comments sections. Every time 'Where's Hunter?' gets typed up, they will eat into the fabric of the establishment's credibility. The media will delude itself further when interpreting these 'signs of life'. They will deem the Trumpian movement a weird, dwindling sectarian cult, diminishing into silence, isolation and frustration. Trump will still hold rallies, but the media would color his crowds as the non-musical deadheads of a very-aged rocker; throngs of adoring fans, still swaying to his greatest hits that no station would keep playing. The media would lord over the vanquished, bemused by them as some specimen of a bedraggled Japanese soldier still thinking the war was on.

The only problem is that these Trumpians constitute a big part of the middle class. Maybe a huge part of the lower middle class. They are a significant consumer pool. The Democrats like to tell themselves that blue states make up around seventy percent of the country's wealth, but they forget to factor in that these blue states have big swathes of red, swathes that do much of the wealth creation. The journalists may not spot that, but their accountants will. The media will no longer be the arbiters of style, taste and decorum for these consumers. They will no longer get to offer a set of acceptable norms to this crowd, a guide as to what is to be buzzed about, and how things are supposed to be said. The inability to endorse and validate, let alone authenticate, shall have serious bottom-line consequences. However, does that even matter when there are tech billionaires willing to cover the difference? Probably not. Which just means the media's blind-spot deteriorates into a more severe form of blindness.

Trump has always said that the media would be out of business if he should lose. They need him, they need the ratings he brings. The media (and entertainment) model for the last few years has focused on the anti-Trump classes who needed something to hold them over during these four long years. A prodigious amount of content was piped out. A whole industry was mobilized. Showtime even turned James Comey's book into a fawning movie. In their minds, they were sure that not only were they ministering to the anti-Trumpers, but they were re-educating and converting large segments of those who had been misled by him. They only

discovered that the latter objective had been futile when viewing the election result, when so many stuck by Trump. Hey, at least they have the attention of the other half of the country, right? But what happens when their spiel turns bland, when there are too few outlets for their rehearsed outrage takes on Trump? What happens to the Don Lemons, the Jake Tappers, the Anderson Coopers, as well as the late night comedians? It will gnaw at their wits as to why they couldn't reach half of America's audience. It will eventually gnaw at their pride, and at their compensation. It will get worse when they bore the other half away to other channels too.

Whither the David Frum, Jennifer Rubin, Bill Kristol, Max Boot cohort? What is to become of them? They billed themselves as the contra-Trump. Back in 2016 they were incensed that their conservative flock, imagined as it was, had not heeded their fatwa forbidding the layperson from imbibing the Trumpian nectar. How dare Trump and his rabble scorn the intellectual hierarchy of the party? How dare they show up the high priests as nothing but poseurs with little actual clout, credibility and power? They had barely made it back to DC's invite lists after the banishment of the Bush years and the Iraq War, and now *this*? So they flung themselves unto the front lines of resistance. Consequently they became consumed, and defined, by Trump. But what are they now *sine*-Trump? Their life's work is even less relevant. Take for example the grifters of the Lincoln Project. They produced some biting, well-made propaganda. But it didn't move the needle, not even by a quiver. It seems that a larger proportion of Republicans—some 95 percent, in total—voted for Trump even after all that vitriol than had done so in 2016. The Projecters will try to sell their overstock of bilious juices by the roadside for a decade to come, with few takers. Their story will turn 'sad'—uttered Trumpically.

Only Trump could have taken this abuse. And only Trump could have survived it. And only Trump could conquer his media adversaries. How does he do it? Well, it's simple and counter-intuitive: he does it with love. He won over his crowds with love.

Trump is unique. He is amusingly human, not tragically so. He is a misfit, a rascal, and a funny one too, not psychotic as the media diagnoses him. This is the biggest gulf between his supporters in the rally crowd and his detractors in the media. They seem to be watching two very different performances. I think that is so because the media does not realize that its presence at the rally is integral to his shtick, while the crowd understands that they themselves are also there as part of the show, as part of the interactive carnival. Jim Acosta comes off like an Asperger's sufferer having to explain the tango when reporting on the rallies. He has no awareness that he is a prop, that when Trump points to the red lights on the cameras and the crowd shouts 'CNN sucks' that that is the point of CNN being there. And we love Trump for letting us share the national stage with him.

Ours is a deep and abiding affection for our guy. It is far from the reverence that was held for and cultivated by Obama. We know Trump to be vulgar, obnoxious and even chaotic. We've known that for as long as he's been the butt of many gilded palace nouveau riche jokes since the 1980s. We've known these things about him ever since *The Apprentice*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, and every instance of his many cameos throughout the annals of entertainment, and the gossip

columns. We understood that he could be a brash, loud celebrity, but we could also see that he is a builder of things. How can you miss that with that grand "TRUMP" lettering on skyscrapers throughout America and the world's greatest cities? We heard him say "grab them by the pussy." We didn't like it, but we forgave him. Because the 'locker room talk' excuse made sense. Because the women among us understood that their brothers and sons could act as jerks. The press pushed 'liar' to brand him. We actually found him refreshingly honest in his fudging and evasion. We found it cute, especially when he let us in on the ruse during his tongue-in-cheek off-the-teleprompter asides. We laughed. He made us laugh. We were not blind to his faults and flaws. In 2016 we knew him to be a clown. To us he never pretended otherwise. It took a leap of faith to vote for him, knowing all that we knew, and to send him to Washington to show up those other clowns. And through it all we fell for him, and fell hard, despite everything. Because he was our champion, our brawler-in-chief, and what a great champion he turned out to be! The media tried to peg him as punch-drunk unbalanced. Did you get a look at the *other* guy?

How did he do it? He did it because he is the consummate performer. His rallies have achieved pitch-perfection, for he was constantly tweaking and refining his message, reading the crowd, and capturing their attention. The Trump rally will be studied as an art form, a spectacle so engaging and so endearing. And somehow it doesn't get boring. The crowds, both physical and digital, keep coming. And as Trump likes to brag, "he does it without a guitar." Russell Brand, the British comedian/rocker, uploaded a YouTube video in June analyzing how Trump retold his version of what happened during a commencement ceremony at West Point. The media had run with a story about signs of Trump's physical deterioration, a favorite go-to attack pattern of theirs that they hoped would induce his 25th Amendment discharge from office. It had to do with how Trump drank a cup of water, and how he went down a ramp. Brand went through a blow-by-blow comedic analysis of how Trump turned the media's story against them. It was a masterful achievement, a work of art; Brand was complimenting a fellow artist and warning the left that they cannot defeat Trump on this terrain. Obama was a scripted performer, levitated by an act of mass projection, and protected by kid-glove-wearing reviewers. Trump is a natural, a force of nature in fact, one that dwarfs his predecessor's overwrought soliloquies. With Trump it really feels like one of the greatest one-man acts of recorded history.

This is why Trumpism will always need, nay crave Trump. He willed it into existence, and only he can wield it.

How will the media keep up the fight after it was demonstrated they could do nothing to dent his support? How will they keep going at him for ratings when their own existing constituency is supposed to be craving and expecting normalcy? And how will the media attempt to explain their shielding of Biden when the dust settles?

It was Trump who was reporting critical information about Biden to the public at his rallies regarding dangerous and compromising corruption at the highest levels, not the reporters at the *WaPo*. If anything, he deserves next year's Pulitzer, not they. It was those few last weeks of the campaign that really did something to the media's standing, something of permanence, a

brokenness that cannot be bonded. We have yet to understand what happened, and how it will be remembered. The media went to the finish line lugging a lot of bullshit. The “fine people on both sides” lob was bullshit. “Failed once again to condemn white nationalism” was bullshit. “Suckers and losers” was runny, not-even-trying bullshit. The Trumpians can easily prove it. They have all the rhetorical tools and evidence needed to prove that the media was not acting in good faith. It got really bad towards the end, when the media blatantly hid the Hunter laptop story: Trump, at a rally in Ohio on October 24 was speaking honestly when he looked towards the media gaggle and said “Even I didn’t realize you are so corrupt.” The *WaPo* could even shamelessly publish these words: “We must treat the Hunter Biden leaks as if they were a foreign intelligence operation—even if they probably aren’t”—and not expect to be called out on it by their peers. And remember that time when the *NYTimes* had us believing that ‘Anonymous’ was Kelly Ann Conway or even Ivanka-Jared and then it turned out to be a ‘Jonah from Veep’-like nobody with even less clearance, both in terms of security and height?

Far from being “an obese turtle on his back, flailing in the hot sun, realizing his time is over, and he just hasn’t accepted it,” Trump and his horde are energized and are on the prowl. The media may not pay a legal penalty for their malfeasance, but one can be certain that Trump will deliver unto them a karmic penance, as only he can.

Perhaps the lowest point of the media was how it covered the COVID-19 briefings. Trump thought he should be out and center to calm Americans and perhaps even to distract them. He also knew that he was a vortex of attention, and wherever he stood, the world would watch. And they needed to know that things were happening. The media were telling them that soon there won’t be any ICU beds or ventilators left to handle to the deluge, as had happened in Europe. Trump was there trying to tell them that he and his team are on it, while Acosta and his colleagues were there to scratch and tear at the president. Trump reflexively fought back. His supporters would watch that and give him credit. But that is not what audiences of legacy media saw as those hours of daily briefings were edited into soundbites and clips. Lost in the melee was that Trump actually delivered. Lost in the acrimony was the fact that government worked well without overstepping state rights or private sector autonomies. The media knew what it was doing. It had an end state of tying hundreds of thousands of deaths around Trump’s neck as he went into an election. It was a moment for a Grand American Project, but the media hijacked the ‘cause’ for its existential war against Trump.

COVID-19 will recede like a bad dream. It will be recalled as that missing year, a phantom limb. Human nature does not dwell on acts of god. It needs to move on, and move back to normalcy. But economic ruin will linger. The ‘Dark Winter’ will linger. Trump’s briefings and warnings about media-fanned panic will be remembered differently. People will remember how news of a successful vaccine soon coming to everyone was conveniently announced six days after the election, just like Trump said it would. We will remember all that, and then we will forget about the media. Sure, we will mention them from time to time, but we won’t be watching: we

will have our own reporters editing soundbites and clips from whatever the media is saying just to prove to ourselves how ridiculous and irrelevant they are.

What Trump achieved by love will endure because it will keep contrasting with the media's uncontrollable hatred of him and his people. CNN's Brian Stelter can theatrically mute Trump's post-election tweets on his phone while on the air, but he will be back to hate on Trump. The Trump hatred, or Trump Derangement Syndrome as Trumpians call it, was intoxicating. Those in the media who think they have kicked the habit will get their DTs soon (is it a coincidence that those are Donald Trump's initials too?). They will keep hearing him yapping about this or that just around the corner and they can't keep themselves away. Just the thought of those four years of their 'heroic' struggle will trigger nostalgic tumescence, something they'll need to revisit, and revisit, and revisit. Especially since the alternative is impotence and irrelevance.

Remember when many in the media tried to discredit the Walter Reed medical staff after Trump was diagnosed with COVID19? "When Trump walked through the doors, Walter Reed had a stellar reputation. As he walks out 72 hours later," Maureen Dowd, the *NYTimes* columnist tweeted on October 5, "its reputation is in tatters. There's nothing Trump can't ruin." Her tweet garnered two hundred thousand likes. Do you think Dowd, a seasoned trafficker in mordancy, can kick such a habit? She's long moved on from mocking 'Dubya' to harder stuff—who else but Trump can give her the hit she craves?

In contrast, Trumpism has weeded out most of its grifters and haters—well, Lin Wood showed up in overtime like a bad penny, but hopefully we'll shake him off too. Anthony Scaramucci works for the other side now; apparently providing debate moderating advice for C-SPAN's now discredited Steve Scully. Ann Coulter stands there jilted, with daggers in her eye. Richard Spencer, the neo-Nazi the media took to be the (punching) face of their imagined alt-right subculture, even endorsed Biden (the latter's campaign renounced Spencer).

Love has a champion, and hate has an address. This is how Trumpians see it. And there's nothing the media can do now to change that. They have lost their power; they no longer get to be the gatekeepers of America's political culture, or any other form of culture. The Trumpians, out there on the frontier, are tinkering with one of their own.

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Trump Cancels (Out) Cancel Culture

Is Trump an intensifier of cultural crises, or a byproduct of cultural antagonism? Or could he be a resolver, a peace-maker?

Was Trump using the culture wars to aggressively mobilize an electoral base, or was he forcing a long overdue resolution on a number of issues, or at least a needed intermission?

Again with the eye-of-the-beholder stuff. Suffice to say that the 'culture wars' preceded Trump, and could even be an integral, enduring motif within the American story. For America lends itself to fantasy, and folly. There have always been, and will always be, those who envisage that destiny—hers and theirs—compels the imagination to expect more. America was (mostly) *tabula rasa*, bequeathed by a higher calling for a higher standing. A new society, a natural order, a divine vision would be willed into place. That the few original inhabitants were of the noble savage variety, as those who first arrived from elsewhere perceived them, offered up the opportunity to invite and win them over to a better human attempt at civilization, one that is shepherded by the grace of God. Naturally, not everyone agreed what the end state should look like. Not everyone agreed on what manner to get there either; a contested issue in America's toddlerhood, for example, was whether to allow mail delivery on Sunday since the postal office was critical in coping with this country's vastness and its sprightly growth spurts, but there were those who believed that the Sabbath should be strictly observed. And then there was the practical, messy and often ruthless business of surviving the wild, however immaculate and transcendental its beauty and promise. Oh, and the original inhabitants sometimes weren't as appreciative of the version of civilization they were introduced to, confounding their proselytizers (and displacers).

Slavery was one such practical solution. It was not invented in or for America, but it was needed there, or so many agricultural entrepreneurs argued. Yet it was a solution that overstayed its welcome during a changing, rapidly industrializing nineteenth century. The abolitionists wanted it over. A culture war ensued. Here as elsewhere a culture war was a function of long-standing arrangements and traditions grating against the march of time, coupled with the zeal that revolutionaries exhibit in appropriating the mantle of righteousness and change. Once in a while, a culture war finds practical excuses to combust into an all-out conflict, as happened during the Civil War. Further down the line a culture war flared up over prohibition, seemingly a reaction to too much merriment and drinking by recently arrived Irishmen, Czechs and Germans. Then there was Bible study in schools, and then, in the 1960s, working wives and premarital sex, and so on.

The ideal clashed with a lived reality over and over, and though with hindsight it can seem as if the ethics were clear, it was more likely the case that those we take to have been in the wrong held strongly to their justifications, and wholly believed them to be right. Often times, after those clashes subsided, the winning side attempted to extend empathy and a "we're all in this together" sense to the losers. For example, the former Confederates were allowed to

celebrate the valor of their generals and soldiers by erecting monuments to their memory. Maybe that was a necessary salve to be applied at that time. Maybe it reflected wisdom. I took some time to reflect on those monuments and the purposes they serve. I could not help but understand the issue in a way that was personal to me: whether Saddam's Ba'athist monuments should be torn down or left for the ages. I have always maintained that they must come down—none of that era should be normalized, anyone associated with it should be shamed and forever ashamed. The German model of eradicating any valorization of National Socialism made much more sense to me; even finding memorials exclusive to the German soldiers who fell in WWII is rare there—they probably number fewer than a dozen across all of Germany. That seems wise too, seeing how memorials to the dead of the First World War were often erected during the Weimar years to fan revanchist flames and to remind the populace how their soldiers were betrayed, setting the stage for remilitarization and Nazism.

Yet it's been four generations since the American Civil War, what use is there for more shame? What danger is there of encouraging secession? Of a return to slavery or even segregation? Or even of legitimating a 'tradition' of racism? I can let the monuments for the soldiers slide, but a muscled-up Stonewall Jackson at Bull Run? No, that just ain't right. Whatever his story, however gripping his exploits, and notwithstanding the complicated impulses that drove the two sides, history and much of the populace—then and now—remembers the Civil War as one fought over slavery, and no one standing for and over it should ever be celebrated. Those who needed their defeated selves reassured of their place within America are long dead, so are a couple of generations of their progeny. They have no use for this statue. Living blacks and unborn ones should not have to look up to such monuments; they are unnecessarily hurtful.

But was I, in advocating for the removal of Jackson's statue, in effect practicing 'Cancel Culture', the latest, zaniest phase of the culture wars? Was I retroactively undoing what wiser minds had deemed a necessary truce, a begrudged resolution in the culture wars of generations past, and that what the monument now represents is less a tribute to the general but more a reminder of that wisdom underwriting the hard work of peacemaking?

Buchanan's list of flashpoints in 1992 revolved around abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, women in combat, pornography, and a reverence for America and her symbols. America had lost its footing by the time he took the stage. There were too many loose threads, too many bits and pieces of the country humming on very different wavelengths. Billy Graham's circa-1950s gambit to wed a mainline Protestant revival to a sense of patriotic mobilization against Communism—one that was sponsored by powerful politicians and media barons whom Falwell had strategically cultivated and who cultivated him in return—had just lost its Soviet foil. Graham's unifying revivals—racially integrated, rising above anti-Semitism, and eventually even conciliatory towards Catholicism—that had been fully certain of the eventuality of America's spiritual and material victory had been overtaken by the Jerry Falwell-types of a dour evangelism, one that fretted over a more nefarious internal enemy sabotaging the morals of the

majority rather than an external internationalist cabal, an enemy that must be excised from America's midst or else all would be lost. Yet even this strain was on the wane by the end of the 1980s after the sunshine of Reaganism made things seem not so bad for religious conservatism after all.

America's black minority was going through something else altogether. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s had successfully bent the letter of the law to its own arc of history, opening realms of opportunity that herein had remained closed under segregation. But it also opened up the black economy that hereto had remained a vibrant world unto its own to macro forces. When the larger economy went south, the black economy no longer had the controls and barriers to protect itself that it had instituted to pick up the pieces after the Great Depression, and that helped it survive numerous recessions since. The black middle class was destroyed, with drug epidemics hastening its decline. Left standing was the black church that Reverend Martin Luther King had turned into the nerve center of Civil Rights.

In contrast to both, the Catholic Church grew by leaps and bounds during this time, catering to expanding numbers of recent immigrants as well as lapsed white Catholics who found its structure reassuring during times of economic upheaval.

There was little form or function to all these disparate pieces. No one was proposing a way of bringing it all back together, under a new, reinvented American rubric. Clinton's centrist teleological message of mercantilism whereby blue collar workers would learn new skills for a changing world economy did not do enough to bring people together. Clinton's personal foibles touched off a storm of ethical censuring and upbraiding, but even that seemed too meager of a trial by hellfire for the nation's soul. Little was resolved, no certainty reached. It seemed as if the multitudes of America, each under a tribal banner, were wandering through a grey desert for decades, an expanse where every horizon was a blur, every gesture an affront, every tepid tonic unequal to the thirst.

Some three decades later, inflationary issues-hood expanded Buchanan's list to include climate change, gun control, legalizing drugs, systemic racism, defunding the police, further LGBTI+ rights, socialized medicine, border security, student loans, war on Christmas, toxic masculinity and 'science'. It was as if every week witnessed a new set of commandments delivered, every fortnight brought a new golden, suckling barnyard babe to be worshiped. Jihadism came in to briefly substitute for Communism as a Western imperative to defeat; Franklin Falwell reinvented his father's mission as an anti-Islamic crusade, this time the enemy taking the form of migrant Muslims, but even that never really caught on. A culture war now conjures up images of forest fires (or forest management), Confederate statues (or those of Christopher Columbus), paper straws (or sea turtles with a plastic one up its nose), and masks (again with those fucking masks!). This current imagery would have been unfathomable to Buchanan and his audience.

I would never consider the removal of a Columbus statue—that's just dumb—but did I set that eventuality in motion by being unable to abide one of Jackson's? There must be a path other

than the all-or-nothing options set before me. What would wiser minds counsel when faced with these multiple fronts of cultural friction?

Interestingly there has been resolution on matters like gay marriage, women in combat and pornography. These issues simply fizzled out over time. I was one of those who would argue in the mid-2000s along the lines of “but you really don’t need to antagonize the other side by calling it ‘marriage’.” A few seasons into *Modern Family* (a sitcom that began airing in 2009 featuring Mitch Pritchett and Cam Tucker as a gay couple who adopt a child, who bicker, and who eventually marry) had me and others just stop arguing. And then we genuinely offered our congratulations to any gay newlyweds. Now it doesn’t even cross my mind that ‘same-sex’ and ‘marriage’ wouldn’t go together. This happened even though my reaction to the first episode of the series was one of pique: I felt that gay marriage was being shoved down our throats by powerful entertainment executives. But the jokes were funny, and Mitch and Cam were believable in their ups and downs. They were humanized, and so was the patriarch Jay Pritchett, Mitch’s father, whose discomfort over his son’s choices was believable too. If the show made the Jays of the world a little less agitated over the issue, and the Cams and Mitches a little happier about their place in the world, then what’s the big deal?

I don’t think I have ever cared about women in combat: I know that women in my own Middle Eastern family were trained as partisans for street combat, and I’ve seen footage of just how effective (and vicious) women fighters were on multiple sides of the Lebanese Civil War. With time, few seemed to mind that much either and Buchanan’s words and the applause they received on this topic seem puzzling to us this far out on the timeline. Furthermore, *YouPorn* came along, inundating pubescents the world over with every manner of smut where just a generation ago even the slightest trickle would consume the boys of a neighborhood for weeks on end, and civilization still held.

Yet it’s not as if progressives have won every battle so far, seemingly making their stances a cultural inevitability as Stephen Prothero of Boston University claims in his 2016 book *Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars (Even When They Lose Elections)*. Prothero was finishing up his book at a time when Trump was still a quixotic and much-ridiculed curiosity among a crowded Republican Party primary field, trying to hawk his red hats. Yet even before what was about to transpire, Prothero likened the Republican ethos to “a wooden bench in front of town hall where crotchety white men gather to wax nostalgic about the good old days and complain about their increasing irrelevance at work, at home, and in church,” and that their politics were driven by those “who are determined to return to what they remember (rightly or wrongly) as a better place, where straight, white, Protestant men ruled the roost and no one dared cluck at their authority”—descriptions which would become standard fare among the elite in explaining the rise of Trump as a form of demographic dread and societal anxiety.

Prothero tells us that his research revealed to him that conservatives, motivated as they were by the notion that “a form of culture is passing away and it is worth fighting to revive it,” instigate culture wars but the other side ends up winning, always, and almost by default. That cultural

conservatism is “centripetal” and that it “posits a shared center in American culture and carefully enforces its boundaries,” which becomes harder and harder to do as the country itself changes, while cultural liberalism is centrifugal: “forever spinning off new forms of culture and including them in the mix” to accommodate change.

The book lays out the troubling history of how the “Protestant consensus” lashed out against Catholics and Mormons through incessant rioting around the mid-eighteenth century, battles that it mercifully lost. After generations of laying the groundwork, the religious types managed to get Prohibition enshrined in the constitution for little over a decade, then they lost that front almost in a flash. But just as Prothero explores how religious zeal seems to undergird conservatism, he conveniently coasts over the fact that the forces of American *piety* had instigated abolitionism, women’s suffrage, *and* workers’ rights, and they won those battles handedly. White Protestant fundamentalists fought Andrew Jackson over Indian Removal, though they lost that battle. The black church incubated Civil Rights and mercifully won. Nowadays, opposition to abortion seems to be hardening as more socially-conservative blacks and Hispanics join the fray. Gun sales keep increasing. Legalizing weed did not turn out to be a panacea for the opioid crisis. ‘Merry Christmas’ made a comeback, so did ‘America—hell ya!’ All these examples do not fit neatly into Prothero’s thesis.

At one instant in the book, Prothero seems to cite the abundance of casual nudity on HBO’s *Girls* (2012-2017) as some sort of ‘win’. But is it really? The show itself does a good job of suggesting that it is a vacuous and soul-deadening victory. The squad portraying the four main protagonist in *Girls* were the spiritual nieces of the four-member squad comprising another HBO production, *Sex and the City* which ran from 1998 until 2004. Even the respective settings, a gentrifying Brooklyn and a post-*Seinfeld* Manhattan, echoed that connectedness too. Carrie Bradshaw and her crew lived an enchanted, glamorous life reconnoitering the Upper East Side for their due of fun and fulfillment, all the while celebrating femininity liberated, and libertine. The *Girls*’ Hannah Horvath embarks on a journey of self-exploration, gets lost without a Maps App, gets knocked up, and escapes the city altogether at the end. Beyond being a gratuitous titty-fest, would Prothero referee Hannah’s story arc as a victory for conservatism or liberalism, or neither?

None of the characters on either show would ever vote for Trump. All eight would be a natural constituency for the talking points pegging him and his followers as clingers to “guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” But would a third cast, spiritual grand-nieces to the original, contemplate voting for Trumpism? It is not so far-fetched, should you chose to understand Trumpism beyond the binaries of ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative.’

In season two of *Sex and the City*, Bradshaw narrates a scene in which her friend Samantha is having a drink at the bar while waiting for her latest beau to finish up some business. We can spot him at a back table talking things over with you-know-who: “Samantha, a cosmopolitan, and Donald Trump. You just don’t get more New York than that,” she muses.

It reminded me of a line uttered by Woody Allen's character in *Annie Hall*: "Don't you see the rest of the country looks upon New York like we're left-wing, communist, Jewish, homosexual pornographers? I think of us that way sometimes and I live here." This is probably where Ted Cruz was going when he cited Trump's "New York values" in one of the primary debates when trying to take him down. "Not a lot of conservatives come out of Manhattan," Cruz said. "I'm just saying." And it was saying a lot.

Prothero explained that the delineation of sides is a challenge sometimes, since "liberals and conservatives have traditionally defined themselves in contrast to each other, so when liberals shift on a particular policy (or principle), conservatives often adjust in turn." But Trump was quite the shift for the Republican Party base, which naturally skews conservative. They had lots of shades of conservatism to pick from during the primary contests, so why go for a garish New Yorker who is not only that but is notoriously an icon of New Yorker-ism? And why would this guy be their pick at a time that feels like a peak, the tallest one in recent memory, of a culture war cycle?

These examples of past and present culture wars above, from Sunday postal service to paper straws, demonstrate that resolution and stalemate over extended periods of time are the usual sequence and result of such disputes. Culture wars attrite and exhaust both sides, and the warriors of each need to be prepared for that. But if one were to take measure of the fervor driving the current fray over those issues remaining unresolved, one would think the country is on the precipice of another civil war. There are those who still tell their flock to charge up the trenches and put in one last stand. That a resolute victory is but an election away. Yet this call to action dangerously instills a sense in some listeners that a real shooting war offers just as much resolution as a vote drive. Then there are leaders who tell their own: "Or maybe not. Whatever, dude." Obama is an exemplar of one faction, Trump is of another. America's current moment can be pared down to a showdown of their two visions and the vibe—one harried, the other less hurried—that they project.

Certainly, one could perceive the culture wars as just one of those endless wars that we keep hearing about, ones that drone on and on somewhere in the background of the day to day. Or one could also point out that inflationary outrage is outpacing a society's, any society's, ability to manage and resolve social cleavage, to offer wise truces, or to salve wounds. Back in 1992, it was a "war for the soul of America" for Buchanan and his supporters. In 2020 Biden was speaking about the need to "restore the soul of America." One side thinks that restoration means *preventing* the realization of Gilead, the fictional misogynistic dictatorship of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*. Another side takes restoration to mean the *prevention* of the transgenderization of eight year olds with hormone replacement therapy, and the advent of 73 categories of restrooms. The argument no longer ebbs and flows on the genteel and polished pages of the *New Republic* and the *National Review*, as it did for most of the 1990s. The conversation (the shouting) has moved on (and down) to the comments sections. Even this era's

crop of intellectuals tend to subtweet rather than debate. It is loud, it is constant, and it is fruitless. And with cancel culture, it turned unforgiving, savaging, and nullifying.

And along comes a booming, relentless half-savage Trump, obliging us to place him within the context of contemporary culture. But rather than an escalation, I take Trump to be a national time-out. I know, I know, this is what the kids these days call a counterfactual. Trump is fueled by these wars, and fuels them, or so all the highbrowed essayists of *The Atlantic*, *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* magazines tell us. "So why do you, you fresh-off-the-boat unbrowed blogger-man, think otherwise?" Well, it's not what Trump says, which granted is often inflammatory. It is what he does. And what coalesces around his actions. I maintain that even if he does not bring peace to the culture wars, then he will at least provide a long truce. That truce shall come by way of disruption, a prioritization of issues, and the birth of a new societal coalition. Trump has delivered and is in the process of delivering on all these ingredients. Rather than fascism, Trump actually exudes a "don't harsh my mellow" vibe to his followers, for missing from the picture—one that Trump, himself a cultural artifact, has perceptively figured out yet the smarty-pants set hasn't—is the realization that although most Americans may be sympathetic to this side or the other, they are just not *that* committed to the warring. Most Americans have an opinion on this or that issue, but not much of their time is going to be spent coining barbed, venomous zingers on Twitter. A lot of them, like Hannah, may even take the victories that have already come their way as underwhelming, and unsatisfying. The zealots make for interesting media features, but they are utterly marginal. The in-betweens just want a measure of normalcy, a one-crises-at-a-time pace to the news cycle, and at times, distraction. Trumpism, whether or not you realize it, does just that. I know, I know—this is more counter than factual for you. So let's dive into this a little deeper.

For what is culture but the narrative at play? A narrative that can be at once inherited, adaptive, fluid, solid, and changing. The powerful seek to control it. But once in a while at times of disruption, a new author steps into the breach, whereby the narrative must turn to factor in the disruptor, to explain the breach, and herein a new coalition emerges to spread the good word.

A culture can brood. A culture can sing. A new 'us' against a new 'them' is the turn of coin in culture. And a culture can anthropomorphize into colossal showmen such as Trump, as it did in 2016, and then take on their personalities as its own aspect. It is precisely because the Trumpian narrative is so liberated, so agile, so lithe, so cannibalistic at times, that it can transform to embody the culture, or the yearning for one, of this very moment. Yet it isn't that simple, for Trump is no mere mirror, reflecting the times. Trump is both the embodiment and the autonomous creator of a new American culture, and we have yet to grasp the transformation. For disruptors come in two varieties: destroyers and creators. Historically significant disruptors can be both. Trump is one of them. Just as he smashes the old order, he is creating a new one, and this I believe is what most observers are missing about what is going on in America right now. Consequently, where Trump goes so does the Trumpian narrative and so does this new

culture that is but an extension or rather redefinition of the narrative. The other side is no match: the Democrats are stuck because their narrative is unyielding. Theirs is victory or nothing, while Trump's is "how you doin'?" in a Joey from *Friends* voice—a confidence boosting pick-me-up that the soul of America needs right now.

The Democrats take Trump to be an interregnum on their path towards an enlightened society. The march of inevitable progress was rudely interrupted by this oafish charlatan. But now things can pick up where Obama left it. And it is all about Obama at the end, or so he seems to think, as his latest biography *A Promised Land* demonstrates. Obama has been setting himself up as the Democrat Party's sage emeritus. It is a role that suits his reticent temperament that is mismatched with his tetchy inability to let things go. It allows him to be peer down from high above, maintaining his exalted stature, but keeps him close enough to mollify his meddlesome impulse. He has to, since his work for the nation is not yet done, for he was not appreciated enough when he was in command. Much of his efforts in office were dissipated because there was that one thing that remained knotty and inhibiting. It then metastasized into the horror of Trumpism. And as far as Obama is concerned, Trump is but the manifestation of one aspect of the culture wars, but it is an aspect that is the cipher by which the country's initiated and enlightened ones such as himself understand the sum total of all of America's culture wars, past and present: racism.

Defeat racism, and you defeat its manifestations such as Trump or whatever emerges from the darkest recesses of the country, Obama counsels us. Excise the malignancy of racists and everything else will flow smoothly. Only then can America proceed to the promised land of whatever the opposite of racism is supposed to feel and sound like. But if one looks a little closer, one can spot the fatal flaw at the heart of Obama's world view. Nothing, nothing but stunted souls can grow in the acidic soils of identity politics—the algorithm by which the Democrats think racism can be dismantled. Their promised land is but another stretch of arid wastes. But they won't see it, their mind is elsewhere. They have been consumed with coming up with a snazzy name for their destination: the first universal nation. Everything begins with a name, "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." Would you care for a brochure?

I don't take Fareed Zakaria seriously. He doesn't bring anything authentic or original to the conversation, and when it looks as if he may have, I just assume it's been plagiarized. He is a fixture though of the elite's top shelf socials of Manhattan and DC, and I always imagine that he picks up the mood there and assigns himself the role of clarion. On October 23, 2020 he published an Op-Ed in the *WaPo* that I found to be revealing, again, not about him but more so about the people he speaks to. Three years prior he had narrated a reasonably good CNN introspective about 'Why Trump Won?' Maybe he had forgotten those reasons, or maybe the transcript was somebody else's work, for in his recent opinion he goes back to his instinctual explanation that the Americans voting 'Trump' do so out of demographic angst, which is dredged up by "Trump's brand of naked racism." Zakaria loves playing the victim here, recalling

his starry-eyed wonder at America when arriving from Bombay in the early 1980s to attend Yale, joining one of its super-elite secret societies while there. But now those who would reject him have been emboldened by Trump, and something had to be done.

Zakaria came from privilege: the son of a wealthy, conservative father, who at times worked as a journalist, a politician and a diplomat father and who claimed descent from Arab merchant-settlers on India's western coast (he was chairman of the Indo-Arab Society). Zakaria's father had gone on to earn a PhD from London's SOAS and to serve as deputy head of the Indian Congress Party in parliament and as India's permanent representative to the United Nations. Zakaria's mother is a prominent educator, journalist and editor in India. His older full-brother studied at Harvard and became a successful New York City investment banker. Zakaria also earned a PhD at Harvard and became managing editor of *Foreign Affairs*, the establishment's flagship sounding-board on all things foreign policy, at the age of 28. But his shtick has consistently been "woe is me, yay is me, for I am brown *and* Muslim" and it has played well throughout his career as a plugged-in elitist.

In his latest column, Zakaria tells us that the 2016 election result was a setback on America's path to its hoped-for goal of becoming the world's "first universal nation"—a concept, he told us on occasion of the 2012 election, that he was borrowing from the Democrat-operative-turned-neoconservative-thinker Ben Wattenberg's 1991 book of the same title. This is how Zakaria framed it two elections ago:

Growing up in India in the 1960s and 1970s, I always thought of America as the future. It was the place where the newest technology, the best gadgets and the latest fads seemed to originate. Seemingly exotic political causes — women's liberation, gay rights, the fight against ageism — always seemed to get their start on the streets or in the legislatures and courts of the United States. Indians couldn't imagine embracing all American trends — in fact, some were rejected outright — because they were too edgy for a country like India. But we had a sneaking suspicion that today's weird California fad would become tomorrow's conventional practice.

For me, Tuesday's election brought back that sense of America as the land of the future. The presidential race is being discussed as one that was "about nothing," with no message or mandate. But that's simply not true.

Zakaria hesitates to build a grand narrative out of that moment, but he does so anyway: "[the] trend seems to be toward individual freedom, self-expression and dignity for all. This embrace of diversity — in every sense — is America's great gift to the world, one at which, since the days of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville, foreigners have marveled."

And it was happening because America had just picked Obama for president, again. Everything was moving along swimmingly. Any moment now, we would all turn into universal nationalists, the first humans to achieve such blessed enlightenment.

But soon afterwards America chose Trump. What? *What?* What the hell?! The first answer that Zakaria and his circles came up with and that stuck with them was that Trump's advent was the *Empire Strikes Back* portion of their heroic saga. This was the molted, mottled past reconstituting itself within the deepest muck of the nation's darkness, the South-Will-Rise-Again having risen, awakening the inner racists of the Rust Belt while at it. Obama took four years to craft an explanation. Naturally, much of what is happening in this country is about him. But he does cycle back to Zakaria's point: Trump was a rejection of the first universal nation, and let's hope it is nothing more than a temporary setback.

Obama began writing his presidential memoir shortly after departing the presidency, when "someone diametrically opposed to everything we stood for had been chosen as my successor." He was aiming to explain "how my career in politics really started with a search for a place to fit in, a way to explain the different strands of my mixed-up heritage, and how it was only by hitching my wagon to something larger than myself that I was ultimately able to locate a community and purpose for my life."

Throughout the 768 pages of Volume 1 (*Volume 1!*) he kept asking about what the outcome of the "contest of two opposing visions of what America is" would look like and whether "we care to match the reality of America to its ideals?" Loftily, and luckily for all of us, he is not ready to abandon the ennobling possibilities of America—phew! That was close!—and he does so not just for the sake of future generations of Americans but for all of humankind. For as he tells us, "I'm convinced that the pandemic we're currently living through is both a manifestation of and a mere interruption in the relentless march toward an interconnected world"; a world that is headed for collision, but, but, *but* if we learn "to live together, cooperate with one another, and recognize the dignity of others" then America "can do what no other nation has ever done. To see if we can actually live up to the meaning of our creed." The world is watching. The clock is ticking. The first universal nation is within reach. But "[T]he jury's still out", or so it seemed in August 2020 when he put the finishing touches to the memoir, seemingly awaiting the 2020 election result to provide us with an answer. I think he put off writing Volume 2 until he knew whether Trump was to be defeated or not, for that result is the prism by which he can gauge his own time in office, and through that the meaning of his life.

He means for both volumes to be an invitation to America's youth to "remake the world, and to bring about, through hard work, determination, and a big dose of imagination, an America that finally aligns with all that is best in us."

But what the first tranche really gives us is a nauseating seesaw of trite logorrhea, hollow in grandiosity, shallow in its performative disquiet, too self-absorbed to reflect on the difference between pique readily taken and actual injury delivered, followed by a plunge into a deeper well of resentment, resentment, resentment, and then some more resentment. And then it repeats.

If one borrows Isaac Deutscher's title formulation for his trilogy on Trotsky, then Obama's should be called *The Prophet Scorned, The Prophet Enraged, The Prophet Deferred*.

I do not hold the megalomania against him. History needs these driven types to propel its story forward. Nor am I detracting from the historical aspect of his presidency. And I'm not knocking the man, his contradictions, his angst or how he chose to resolve it: He seemed to have had a happy childhood, or as much as can be managed by doting grandparents, a fully absent father, and a fleeting, flaky mother, and he was lucky, as he clearly acknowledges, to have a good family life with Michelle. Here is where he sounds most authentic, in his gratitude for what his family has provided him. Yet it wasn't enough for "I was from everywhere and nowhere at one," a "platypus" of "ill-fitting parts." By the time he made it to Columbia in the early 1980s, his newfound political and social awareness nudged him towards yearning for "an America that could explain me" thus framing his presidency as a quest for self-discovery, for self-realization. We're still good with his motivations, even though it would be nice to point out to him that there are others who need America for other things after he's done bogarting it as his own personal vanity desk.

Obama moved to Chicago and basked in the afterglow of the election of Harold Washington, the city's first African-American mayor. "Above all, Harold gave people hope. The way Black Chicagoans talked about him in those years was reminiscent of how a certain generation of white progressives talked about Bobby Kennedy—it wasn't so much what he did as how he made you feel. Like anything was possible. Like the world was yours to remake," and this is where it starts getting iffy. This is where Obama begins to interpret his life story and the signals the world is sending him as a divine instruction to remake America in his own image. Again, history needs such types to get things going, but history need not judge them too kindly when they turn embittered, and begin to lash out and scapegoat whoever they take to be responsible for things not panning out as 'destined'. By Obama's reckoning, America would be great by now, had not half of those Americans inhabiting it gotten in the way. And the reason he deduced as to why they were misled away from his awesomeness had to do with a saucy, minxy political bandit that had sprung out like a crazed lynx from America's toolshed.

Obama is right to perceive Sarah Palin as a game changer, as he tells us (and obsesses over) in his book. But clearly he has yet to understand why. The world was transfixed by her for two weeks after John McCain plucked her out of relative obscurity to run alongside him; she was briefly a bit glossier, sexier in the public eye than the shining Obama. Even the intellectual class was intrigued: it was as if Dr. Joel Fleischman's infatuation with Maggie O'Connell in the 90s comedy-drama *Northern Exposure*, set as it was against the human and topographic landscape of Cicely, Alaska, had been projected by a nation and its media unto Palin, another Alaskan woman they took to be in the ditzy tomboy mold. But then she sat down with Katie Couric and mangled out "I can see Russia from my house" which is funny because in her own inelegant and barely coherent way she was trying to sound the alarm on Putin. (But back in 2008 the experts snickered at such wet-blanket-ry; Obama followed their cue and derided Romney with his

rehearsed “the 1980s called” line when the 2012 challenger was trying to bring back Putin into the conversation. But that is neither here or there). Yet Palin was damaged goods after that interview, deemed an unserious contender, and a drag on the ticket by those-in-the-know as they kept telling us throughout the news cycle.

Palin, then 44 and three years younger than Obama, was a “potent disruptor” because she was one of the little people. As Obama reminds us:

She'd been a small-town basketball player and pageant queen who'd bounced among five colleges before graduating with a journalism degree. She'd worked for a while as a sportscaster before getting elected mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, and then taking on the state's entrenched Republican establishment and beating the incumbent governor in 2006. She'd married her high school sweetheart, had five kids (including a teenage son about to be deployed to Iraq and a baby with Down syndrome), professed a conservative Christian faith, and enjoyed hunting moose and elk during her spare time.

He adds, “Hers was a biography tailor-made for working-class white voters who hated Washington and harbored the not entirely unjustified suspicion that big-city elites—whether in business, politics, or the media—looked down on their way of life.” She was a proud “real American.” But Obama professes that she hadn't had him worried, because “she had absolutely no idea what the hell she was talking about,” and her lack of qualification for the top job was magnified by McCain's infirmity and history with cancer. In the meantime, she could do some minor damage he presumed, as a charlatan performer (a good one, admittedly) conducting a mass national séance, dredging up the GOP's “dark spirits...[of] xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, paranoid conspiracy theories, an antipathy toward Black and brown folks.” It is convenient (and lazy) for Obama to reduce everything to race. It doesn't change the reality that he is misleading himself, and his readers.

Here, in the Obama-Palin match-up we had a clash of biographies, not skin color: his was lyrical, self-reverential, and strategic: he wrote his first memoir as he launched his bid for the Illinois State Senate; his second framed his Senate and then presidential runs. Hers was authentic, gritty, difficult, relatable—and believable. He was a vehicle for high-minded thoughts, a narrative conjured up, mechanized and optimized; she was a hockey mom driving us rowdy lot to practice in a rust-speckled minivan with a perennially-lit ‘Check Engine’ indicator.

What Obama never understood was that many humans are inherently mistrustful of what Palin called the “hokey, changey stuff”, not because they reject it or may be disadvantaged by it, but because they can see through the magic trick. They can spot the wire, they had glimpsed the switcheroo, they had figured out the illusion. And they took Obama to be such a sham, a

chimera, one that was being hoisted unto America by powerful entities such as the media, big business and the entertainment world, and Americans were being told that it wasn't enough that you had to be quiet about your skepticism, you had to buy into it completely because, you know, slavery-racism. Some of it was racism, one cannot deny that. But one also can't deny that it is too convenient and self-serving of an explanation. Much of it simply wasn't. The racism, both blatant and latent worked both ways: it was likely that a lot more white people voted for Obama *because* he's black, to exorcise their guilt over slavery, than there are people who voted against him for the same reason. That is not exactly a healthy episode in race relations. Didn't the Civil War and Civil Rights make everything even-steven? Wasn't that what the generations who lived through them were told? Also, most whites in America had nothing to do with slavery. Most whites arrived after the Civil War, what demons are they supposed to confront? "No, but they benefited from a racist system, you see." Really? White privilege wasn't a thing for the throngs of the Irish, the Germans, Italians, Russians, Eastern Europeans—not even for the Nordics. It still isn't for many blighted communities across the country. These considerations contributed to a feeling that they were being tricked as this candidate was being pushed on them. What if they were looking at other priorities that impacted their lives and livelihoods other than skin color? What if Obama's journey of self-realization was not their own? They were told to renounce such personal indulgences such as values and policy preferences, for if they were not to vote for Obama then they would be holding the country back. Take this man and his plans as one package, for this is the only way.

And when they were told that not voting for Obama made one a bad person, they were no longer suspicious that the elite disdained them for who they are—they were now certain. This was the game changer: the guilt trip was taking too long, the feel-good pill was too big to swallow.

I loved Palin. Even though I had volunteered for McCain's primary campaign in 2000 and had re-enlisted in 2008, Palin amplified everything that had intrigued me about him in the first place. She was rogue, unfazed, and a fighter. I eventually would buy all her books (I wouldn't read them) to support her. I wore a 'Drill Baby Drill' t-shirt around the snazzy gym I went to during those times and relished the grimaces I got from other patrons. When I watched her post-election 2010 show on TLC *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, I would mutter Obama's words back to myself in awe about how these Palins were "real Americans"; these were the sort of people that the term "rugged American individualism" applied to.

It is true, Obama's very presence in the White House was a disruption if measured by skin tone alone. But there was a domesticated, tame aspect to him, suggesting that the revolution was too carefully choreographed. He may couch his unthreatening, even disarming demeanor in terms of a deliberate strategy not to freak out the old order, not to antagonize the establishment and make it seem as if his rise was at their expense. He may add that he would need to work with them to push through his visions. In fact, it does seem that Obama saw Biden as a warm blanket to sooth long in the tooth racists, because Biden was deemed one. Obama

justifiably bristled at Biden's categorizations of him during the 2008 primaries as "bright", "articulate" and "clean"—"that's a storybook, man"—anyone would recoil from that, because anyone would know that Biden was effectively whispering, under his breath, "...while black" after each word. Yet Obama willed himself into tolerating Biden if the latter's presence on his ticket allayed those he needed to work with.

Yet his biography tells us that Obama was never really deemed a threat, that he was in fact a product of that old order. He seems to have droopily sauntered up to the gates of power, and they seem to have opened up magically for him. He tells us so in his book: "The only person who questioned this smooth path of ascent seemed to be me. It had come too quickly. The big salaries being dangled, the attention—it felt like a trap." Obama was never a feral creature in the Palin form, he was always a cosseted, exotic *object* of adoration for the moneyed and monocled set.

Obama, in true fashion, pats his own shoulder for being "the only person" skeptical of such a welcome and such abiding patronage. He would be mistaken, again. It was always hanging in the air. Hillary Clinton spotted it. Palin in her own acerbic way began dropping hints about it. But it was Trump who weaponized it. Obama may dismiss Trump's birtherism as "an elixir for [some Americans'] racial anxiety" but there was a deeper play here. Trump knew this taunt got attention, and used it to frame his central thesis as he enunciated it at the Conservative Action Conference in DC in 2011: "our current president came out of nowhere" he would say, precipitating that cloud of hesitant skepticism into torrents of queries. How much do we know about this guy? What's his deal? We don't even know where he was born. Is he some sort of Muslim or something? What's up with this dude? The subtext to these words were that Obama did not earn his place in the spotlight. The nation had not witnessed a long tortured story arc for him, one that zigged and zagged, as the American hero prototype is supposed to endure before ending his run in majestic triumph atop the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum, which is what the election of the first black president should feel like. He had nothing like Rocky Balboa's training montage with America cast in the role of the elderly and jaded Mickey, Rocky's trainer, nodding along and clocking-in his progress. Obama's trajectory was unfair, his path was too easy, too neat—it was *un-American*. Trump wasn't speaking to the racists out there, he was speaking to the "suckers" who still believed in comic book superheroes, ones who just didn't dig Obama's origin story.

It wasn't only Obama that mistook Trump's gambit for carney-styled racism. Mitt Romney huffed and puffed that Trump's creed was one of:

...racism, misogyny, bigotry, xenophobia, vulgarity and, most recently, threats and violence...Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud. His promises are as worthless as a degree from Trump University. He's playing members of the American public for suckers: he gets a free rise to the White House, and all we get is a lousy hat?

Romney here is echoing Obama in abhorring Trump's messiness and coarseness, not as kindred members of minority groups that feel menaced by majoritarian mobs and the agitators that lead them. Rather they were sharing an elite outlook on the world, one that was trained into Obama and inherited by Romney, and it really shows. And what was Romney's origin story? The son of the governor of Michigan travels to France to do two years of Mormon missionary work; learns French. Oh, the humanity!

Obama pretends not to have taken Trump's taunts to heart: "...but maybe because I didn't watch much television, I found it hard to take him too seriously. The New York developers and business leaders I knew uniformly described him as all hype, someone who'd left a trail of bankruptcy filings, breached contracts, stiffed employees, and sketchy financing arrangements in his wake, and whose business now in large part consisted of licensing his name to properties he neither owned nor managed." Those lines tell he harbors a seething anger still at Trump. It also tells us something basic about how Obama sees the world: rather than understanding failures and flubs as evidence of *doing*, he takes the doer to be engaged in a con game. If so, then Obama understands very little about how early wealth in America took shape. And how it continues to take shape. Likewise, Romney never started anything: his corporate experience was dismantling once thriving but now failing behemoths for parts. Neither understood that very few beginnings follow a McKinsey power-point. Granted, Trump's path was especially colorful, but no one can say that he didn't put in the work and dedication to build up his brand and business. Obama's sense of doing was farcically displayed when he was pre-emptively awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, with much of the world going "*for what?*" Didn't he sense that that this too was a trap?

Obama cannot be held responsible for the excesses of his supporters. That would also be unfair. But those excesses do tell us something about the atmosphere in which they arose. Such an excess was on display in a [YouTube video](#) titled 'Sing for Change Obama' that was uploaded by Kathy Sawada on August 19, 2008. She's a pianist and music teacher at the exclusive Colburn Community School of Performing Arts in downtown Los Angeles. She was educated and trained at Oberlin, Yale, and the Manhattan School of Music. But what Sawada did was gather up an ensemble of her neighborhood's prepubescent kids to sing a song of hers. Some two dozen of them got together in a neighbor's house in Venice, California for their breakout performance where they were joined by their parents and a filming crew. Everyone had the mark of affluence on their faces, and in their demeanor. There was also a studied and nodded-to measure of 'diversity'. The words went: "We are going to spread happiness, we're gonna spread freedom. Obama is gonna change it, Obama is gonna lead 'em. We're gonna change it and rearrange it...we're gonna change the world". The video even had an aged hippie-looking guy playing the flute. The kids go on to sing about "nations all joined as one". The parents look on approvingly, proud and as if conceding that these youngsters are their betters. The song ends with a hypnotic, ecstatic "Yes we can" chant, repeated rapidly. I wonder where these kids are today? I wonder what they think of what Sawada had them do? And I wonder what their take is on Obama's

legacy, twelve years on? This may have been too extreme an example of excess, but as someone who lived through that period, I do not take it to be marginal. The expectation of some grand redemptive moment had intoxicated America's elite.

Obama is not responsible for Sawada getting ahead of herself. He is not culpable for what aspirations were projected onto him, whether by elitists or laypersons. The politician needed that fervor (and pocket change) to propel his rise. Which is fine. What isn't though is that the man needed it to steady his gait—he drew courage, and yes audacity, from those misplaced, inflated hopes. He spent what was not his to spend: not on the movement, but as a personal psychic indulgence. That is, he is guilty of getting high on his own supply as Tony Montana of *Scarface* was warned not to do at the pinnacle of his power. And then Obama couldn't stop himself from doing it, can't do so now. He could have turned it down. But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Because there is tenuous and tentative scaffolding within his character that would cave unto itself if he did. That is why he has to wait for an election to pen a second volume, for history to give its verdict. And that is what a large portion of Americans saw when Trump kept pointing it out to them: weakness.



Credit: Pete Souza, White House Press Office

One can admire confidence men, one can even fall for them, but that whiff of weakness—that the act is just as much for them as it is for you; well, that invites resentment and stirs a deep

impulse to expose them. "They shall know them by their fruits" the Bible says of false messiahs, and here we have a prim, unconvincing, embittered fraud, who snarls out at the powerless while coddled within the bosom of power. One can forgive the messianism, one can forgive the projection of historical agency, but that, that fragility, that is unforgivable in those seeking immortality. When a false prophet stands exposed, and still tries to maintain the act, surely an audience can be excused its scorn. That Trump did the exposing, knowing what he is, a jesting charlatan so transparent as to be virtuous, only accentuated the drama of the scene.

It's tragic stuff. But the audience moves on: Hold the hopey-change, give us a double shot of Berlusconi. After Obama, they needed to ground the presidency in something other than self-enlightenment for the office holder, and through him for the rest of us. They wanted something genuine, something real. A guttersnipe is as grounded as it gets, and then some. That was the meaning behind Trump's ascent if measured by Obama's eclipse, in its plainest, most plaintive sense.

Yet the Kathy Sawadas of the world never understood the audience's comeuppance. For her, the Trump interregnum interrupted the natural progression towards a changed world, a process begun by Obama. She cannot believe or behave otherwise. And like her leader the internal scaffolding will fall apart without this expectation that salvation and redemption are but a few presidencies, and a few congressional and SCOTUS majorities away. Obama's explanation of racism resurgent held her over through the dark years, but now that Biden is in charge, then the work of changing the world can resume apace. Posthaste too, for her causes will have to make up for lost time. How much more tragic will the scene turn when betrayal shall come from her own?

The advent of socialism was always an expedient bogeyman for the right; a cynical mobilizer of youth, minorities and ageing hippies on the left. But the problem is that some of the further Left believed their own propaganda in advocating for Biden. Biden is nothing more than the restoration of the status quo ante, but they are mistaken if they think it is a restoration of Obama's trajectory. Obama's left eye must have started ticking when the old geezer rebranded Obamacare as Bidencare during the second debate with Trump. Biden's (and the establishment's) forthcoming four-year-long 'transition' away from both Trump's real disruption and Obama's choreographed 'revolution' will prove unsatisfying to the nickels-and-dimes Left of Bernie Sanders' as well as the post-modernist influencer-chic leftism of the AOC+3 Squad. It will drive Obama up the wall, and one can bet that he will show it.

There shall be no dramatic victories on the fronts of the culture wars. America will not get a revamp of environmentalism to forestall the end of the world along a twelve year timetable; Greta Thunberg will become a quaint 'I wonder what she looks like now?' Google search away. America will not legislate for 73 genders. America is not paying out reparations for slavery. America is not getting a packed Supreme Court. The Biden folks will blame a reluctant Congress, as he did to explain the shortcomings of the Obama administration (even though the Democrats

had a congressional supermajority for the first two years of Obama). The two Leftist camps will clamor for ruling by decree as Obama did. But Biden won't do it.

There will be a few cosmetic wins: reversing tax cuts, rejoining the Paris Accord, maybe even revamping the Iran Deal. Something new like Bidencare may get a few policy wonks excited. But how can that ever be enough? The 2020 Electoral College tally was delivered by the urban black vote in a few key battleground states. Biden owes them his presidency. Before that he owed them the primaries: he was dead in the water until South Carolina, where the Democrat Party is sixty percent black. Nowadays trillion-dollar aid packages have become less of a fiscal heresy for centrist Democrats and Republicans. If there was ever a time to pay out reparations over slavery, then this is it. Which centrist from either party would dare oppose it at the height of the Black Lives Matter moment? If every man, woman and child descended from slaves got 70 thousand dollars, then the total onetime reparation payment would come in just under 3 trillion dollars. There is tolerance for such numbers post-COVID19, and isn't this price tag worth it if it means putting the issue to bed? And the whole deal can be turned into an economy-growing gambit, with vouchers for property acquisition and American-made vehicle purchases, as well as education funds. If not now, if not after the 'nightmare' of Trump and his shaking of the establishment's certainties, and after the rescue provided by black votes that ended the nightmare, then when?

It is not going to happen. Because the establishment won't let it happen. It doesn't suit them. The powerful are done with elevated expectations and voter insurgencies, whether they be choreographed or real. They saw how the 'change' and audacity promised by Obama had emboldened voters to throw the dice with Trump. The powerful seek to manage uncertainty and to put things back in place. Biden also owes them: had they not gotten Elizabeth Warren to stay in the primary race through Super Tuesday to split the progressive vote, and had they not gotten Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar to drop out before then, Biden's black votes wouldn't have carried the day on their own. The politicians will excuse inaction on reparations, for example, as a necessary evil not to antagonize non-blacks who won't be getting any, and who would eventually have to pay for it. Which is basically the same excuse they have been giving for generations.

One of today's great political ironies is that what Anarchist-leaning leftists (in the strict definition of these words from a century ago, which even if he doesn't realize it, is a better fit for Obama than 'liberal') don't realize is that Trump is their long-awaited deliverer of disruption, the only force in a lifetime that can compel a realignment of power. It is very odd that America's revolutionaries are now giving their all for the side of 'resisting' restorationists. They did not understand that the Trump phenomenon is in essence revolutionary. That those 2016 votes for Trump were Molotov cocktails, or at least a decisive number of them. How did the left miss out on this would-be constituency, all the while mistaking Trumpism for regression? Trump's instincts run towards trillion dollar infrastructure spending and a total reappraisal of trade policy. This is not what the pre-Trump GOp wanted to hear precisely because it is too

revolutionary, precisely because it would create conditions for shaking up the hierarchy of wealth. But he's normalized those concepts and smashed any institutional and wider opposition to them on the right and amazingly did so *from the right*, while the Left was left twiddling its thumbs and recycling its excuses. Obama, had he unequivocally believed in his vision more than in himself, and had he truly possessed autonomous and transformative historical agency, should have sized up Trump as an unexpected ally. But he didn't.

What Trump did to the GOPe cannot be replicated among Dems. The establishment still has control over the latter, that's how Bernie's momentum was snuffed (twice). They will never allow the left to take over. The pursuit of that objective is a delusion. It is a delusion because the Democrat Party today is the party of the old order, of wealth, access and privilege, while still paradoxically commanding a massive share of the urban minority vote. The freelancing, left-leaning journalist Michael Tracy tweeted out on November 9, after having studied the early election returns, that "[a]mong the 10 wealthiest counties in the US by median household income, there was an average of an approximately 8-9 point shift to Biden compared to 2016. Every one of these counties is trending substantially Dem. That's where the power and leverage in the Party resides now." His observation meant that the richest and the poorest voters in America celebrated Biden's win. This was their coalition going into 2020, a year during which the ultra-wealthy grew vastly richer while some blacks took advantage of the rioting bedlam to loot sneakers in Chicago and New York City. But a coalition cannot hold if one faction is out to rob the other. And one can bet that one faction will out-leverage the other.

Consequently, if the Left cannot have real progressive breakthroughs, they will dwell on the superficiality of their righteousness: that's right, they will double down on identity politics. It will be all identity, all the time; Obama's navel gazing journey of self-discovery, his making sense of his platypus self-image, writ large. One can spot early manifestations of that: a [top ten list](#) of the D.C. Public Library's most popular borrowed non-fiction E-books (in a pandemic year) include *White Fragility*, *Me and White Supremacy*, *Educated*, Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, *How to Be an Antiracist*, and *Between the World and Me*—all concerned with identity; this is what library patrons in the nation's capital are leafing through. Of course, the natural end-point and let down when salvation goes undelivered, when celebrating 'diversity' turns hollow, is to launch an inquisition to weed out the dissemblers among them who they hold responsible for their overall defeat. The unsatisfying, dreary progress of the culture wars will lead them down a path where cancel culture provides their only dose of action, of what passes for the *feel* of iconoclasm and 'revolution', just as Mao had launched a Cultural Revolution as an ancillary channel by which to vent the hysterics of disappointment and rage after the price China had to pay for his victory in its civil war and then his abject bungling of the Great Leap Forward. The Left's shrillness will clash with the establishment's plate-setting for an era of normalcy and norms under Biden. The establishment seems to have figured that out though, and that is why activism such as BLM, critical race theory, #MeToo are corporate-sponsored now to the tune of billions of dollars—the powerful have nothing to fear here.

The establishment further tried to pre-empt this clash by finding itself *another* Obama. They offered up a female upgrade too, inviting us to rev ourselves up into a tizzy over Kamala Harris. Yet something is not working here as it should be.

Mindy Kaling, the comedian, tweeted on November 7, that she was “crying and holding my daughter, [telling her] “look baby, she looks like us.””—as if it was an Obama-esque moment of arrival for Indian Americans. Really? It took Kamala Harris to make Kaling feel welcome in this country? Not Bobby Jindal in they-eat-alligators-down-there Louisiana? Not Nikki Haley in how-much-more-Confederate-can-you-get South Carolina? M. Night Shyamalan, Mira Nair, Aziz Ansari, Kal Penn, and Miss America 2014 all making it didn't do it for her? Or the dean of the Harvard Business School, and the current CEOs of MasterCard, Bose, IBM, Microsoft, Nokia, Google, Adobe and Alfred A. Knopf? Neither did Norah Jones or Zubin Mehta? Nor Zain Verjee, Ali Velshi, and Sanjay Gupta? The ABCDs (American-born Confused Desis) I hung out with at Brandeis in the mid-1990s took to boasting to me that Indians (and other assorted 'SubContis') were “the New Jews” who would dominate professions such as law and medicine. This sentiment was reflected in later popular culture depictions of Indians. Kelly Kapoor, Kaling's character in *The Office*, cynically abuses minority empowerment at Sabre to get ahead, making us laugh at her hierarchy-climbing ruse; the only other Indian we meet during the series though is her dashing pediatrician paramour whom she leaves Scranton with (then ditches in the show's last episode to run away with Ryan). When Kaling created her own show, she cast herself as a NYC obstetrician in *The Mindy Project*. That is what her mother does for a living in Cambridge, Mass. Kaling's father is an architect. Her parents met while working on a hospital in Nigeria, her father designing it, her mother doing the staffing, before immigrating to the United States. America was good to her parents, as it evidently was for massive numbers of India's professional class. So why would it take Kamala Harris, a daughter of a UC Berkley endocrinologist PhD originally from a Brahmin caste in Madras, who likewise found opportunity and success in America, to get elected Vice-President for Kaling to experience the feeling of arrival?

Or was it that combination of womanhood, brownness and the highest offices that Kaling was waiting to share with her daughter, a moment Kaling and her own mother never felt addressed by Indira Gandhi nor Benazir Bhutto?

And I wonder how much of a moment of arrival Harris represents for her other, black half. Is she really the 'female Obama' in their eyes, another notch on America's height chart in rising above the odium of slavery and racism? I think many of blacks would distinguish between the legacy of slavery and the immediateness of lingering racism. There is resentment there at the interlopers on their misery. Harris' father, who met her mother at Berkley, is from Jamaica. His family's story is not America's story. His arrival in the U.S., to better himself, and then to move on to an academic career at Stanford University before divorcing and returning home (he later became a U.S. citizen in 2015), was voluntary. Should reparations for slavery ever come to pass, Kamala and her father get nothing, nor should they. Barack Obama wouldn't either—his father too came here to study. Neither would Ben Ali, of DC's iconic 'black' establishment Ben's Chilli

Bowl, for he is an Indian (from India) by way of Trinidad who came to the U.S. to study at the University of Nebraska, then transferred to Howard where he met his black wife (she does qualify though). The list of black Americans whose family history is fully or partially made up of voluntary immigration to America includes: Susan Rice's mother, Colin Powell, Joy Reid, Don Lemon, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Harry Belafonte, Eric Holder, Sidney Poitier, David Paterson's father, and Malcolm X's mother. This is not to say that they have never endured the humiliation or impediment of racism. It is that their stories cannot possibly match how slavery breaks the spirit of a blood line. I can fully appreciate the resentment and anguish a descendant of slaves, such as Condoleeza Rice, Michelle Obama, or Tim Scott would carry at the thought of what their ancestors had to live and die through to have their bones interred in America. But that that mantle can be readily donned by whoever looks the part is absurd, even insulting.

It is absurd because it encourages the kind of blinkered self-absorption of Kaling's tweet, despite the enormous evidence of Indian success in America. It is absurd because everything can become 'racism' and everyone can claim it. Imagine had there been slightly more diversity on *Seinfeld*, another cultural artifact of the 1990s, and then setting that series in Kaling's world of perceived bias rather than the Upper West Side. A dispute over a parking space—racism. A disagreement over what amounts to proper mechanic care—prejudice. A misunderstanding over a puffy shirt—bigotry. And when this outlook is applied to the presidency, then Trump stands guilty of robbing an 'identity' of its turn, in his particular 2016 case, he stole it from a 'woman'. Then the expectation for the next president would be giving a turn for a gay guy, then a 'Latinx' woman, followed by a paraplegic, etc. Everyone gets a turn before we cycle back to pudgy Orange-Americans, got it? Them's the rules.

In a universal nation, we are supposed to sit around and marvel at how diverse we are according to categories of race, creed, gender, sexual 'preference' (watch it, Amy!), and so on, while still paradoxically taking measure of our individuality. This is a pretty picture, and Zakaria's affirmations of 'Brown! Muslim!' would get plenty of welcoming hugs and attention in a republic of identities. But our individualism may trigger inflationary identitarianism. That's how we get to 73 genders, and even to 730 genders. You can maximize your 'uniqueness' through amplifying intersectionality, unlocking infinite identity categories. My daughter is going to be a superstar in this new world: having a West African-born Muslim refugee/political dissident father with bits of Arab, Kurd, Armenian, Turk and Persian in the mix; a half-Jewish, Soviet born mother with splotches of Russian, Ukrainian, Greek and maybe Gypsy blood; lots of German, Norwegian, Iraqi, and Israeli cousins; a lower middle class secular upbringing—she is going to rule! "YAAA-SSS-SSS kwEEEn!" But you can't stop there, for if you really, *really* mean it and you really, *really* wanna show it, then you've got to legislate and allocate for all these identities, yes, even if that mandates 73 categories of restrooms, or more. This is where it falls apart as it grinds against common sense, and strains against the confines of the common purse. Which of course will lead to even more frustration and recrimination, necessitating the establishment of a new establishment whereby a social and economic hierarchy shall be allocated according to

genealogy and descent, because the old one simply could not deliver a universal nation. These things never stop there though, for a shrill parochialism heaving along the lines of "You're not brown enough" acrimonies will inevitably further atomize the ranks. So rather than celebrate diversity as in Zakaria's first universal nation, identity becomes a cudgel in a decidedly-boorish power struggle.

Short of a universal nation, I think most Americans will settle for a lot less of the above, and a little more common sense. Common sense *does* have a constituency, and it is up for grabs. The Democrats' endpoint of an Identity-stan with a citizenry wrought through permanent struggle sessions does not hold much promise for such constituents. Trumpism does.

Jacob Siegel, [writing in *The Tablet*](#) a day after the election, personified this coalition with "the powerful podcaster and political harbinger" Joe Rogan, the host of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, whom he calls the *Aleph*, borrowing a literary allegory from Jorge Louis Borges. Siegel clues us in that:

The tenets of the Rogan worldview include rugged individualism, swings between techno enthusiasm and techno skepticism, the value of hard work and thrift, patriotic social obligation to the needy and disenfranchised, and cultural traditionalism nagging at a libertarian faith in sovereign individual rights. He preaches personal growth through risk, pain, and confrontation, supports both police reform initiatives and the imperative of maintaining law and order, evinces a "live and let live" attitude combined with a disdain for the maximalist social positions ascendant on the Left. In short, he has opinions that resonate with many different kinds of Americans yet are systematically underrepresented in organized politics.

But there is something that Siegel seems determined to miss: it is Trump's disruption that created space (and demanded attention) for this constituency. It is also Trump's prerogative to lead it should he chose to, for he has cleared out space on the GOnP for it, it being "a political arrangement combining a moderate redistributionist welfare state with moderate social conservatism." Trumpism is no mere example of "occasional anti-establishment coups and insurgencies" but is in fact that "broad new political consensus, triggered by the kind of fundamental technological and economic transformation we are currently living through." It is understandably difficult for an intellectual to place so much promise in so loutish a torchbearer as Trump. Siegel does not want to credit Trump because that may sully the new, soft constituency at its infancy, but it is Trump's coarseness that breathes spirit into it. Trump's imperfections allows us to forgive ourselves for being imperfect. Trump's bluster absolves those who "fake it till you make it" types so typical of an American frontiersman's heritage. Trump's

fibers and yarns make the journey less somber, less destiny-fevered. He may not get us to a promised land, but we'll land somewhere that isn't so bad.

Trumpism is redemptive, forgiving, the very opposite of cancel culture, which is a mindset that constantly whittles down the ranks of the chosen. Trumpism welcomes all, both saints and misfits, to a Big Banquet of little judgement and much conviviality, a come-as-you-are hospitality—but since it isn't a free supper (nothing is with a stingy Trump), do bring something to pot-luck with. Judging by demographic trends, America's future is going to have a lot more Hasidim and Amish. At what table can they possibly be seated? What communal meal could they possibly be served? Is it an accident that they have skewed very Trump? Reactionaries they are, but they see their survival within Trumpism. Is it because they understand him to be likewise reactionary? But Hispanics are also joining them at Trump's table. And gays too. So what is going on here?

Many have attempted to provide explanations for Trump. These explanations run from the unserious to the thoughtful. One of the more thoughtful explanations is that Trump was seen as a rejection of the Bush and Clinton dynasties. The Bushes came from a super-WASP background; Bill Clinton from the white southern working class. To explain the dissonance in origins and circumstances but the similarity of political end-product, it was assumed that both dynasties were stand-ins for globalist establishments and the rising political stars that such establishments could co-opt from time to time to survive and regenerate. Thus they were rejected by primary and national elections voters as such. That could have been part of the answer to explain a vote for Trump, but it is still unsatisfying. Such voters could have just stayed home instead of voting against the Bushes and Clintons. And as it is, this pertains to the 2016 election but does not explain why these same voters stuck with Trump. Obstinacy? Still more of the protest vote? Or was it that voting for Biden-Harris was too much of a vindication of Obama's legacy for them to stomach? Again, none of this even comes close to explaining things. Because *choosing* Trump, even in 2016, was something else altogether.

There were those who volunteered self-serving explanations, inserting themselves and their agendas into the record. It was a mistake listening to the Steve Bannons, the Stephen Millers and the Michael Antons. They did not conjure Trumpism. They rode in on its coattails, and in the confusing first days and months, with the shock still fresh, with media attention searching for 'But *why?*', they stood up and claimed eminence. They had no right to do so. Only Trump created Trump. Why privilege coattails and those who ride them over the gilded epaulettes on Trump's shoulders and his alone? It was Trump who moved in at precisely the right moment of national dissatisfaction after the over-promise of Obama.

At heart, and as mentioned earlier in this essay, his improbable initial rise was about no grander a narrative than sending a clown to show up the clowns, but it was also tinged with the bet that this particular clown may actually pull off a better job, and should he do so then that would validate their whole world view. It was anti-messianic denouement. Stop saving us, stop ministering to our better angels, and get back to governing us more sensibly, which is your

actual job. Obama promised a redemption he was never going to be able to deliver on. Trump promised jobs, a wall, a common sense approach to all things and having a little fun while delivering—promises made, and in their eyes, promises kept and then some. And then, love happened. The crowds never chanted “We love you” during the 2016 rallies. They didn’t do so either during the mid-presidency ones. But by the lead-up to the 2020 elections, they let it all gush out. Something had happened.

It must have been, and continues to be gratifying for Obama to play Jeremiah, a prophet whose warnings of doom were unheeded by the sinning Jerusalemites. Obama reprised the admonishing performance while double billing it with the role of messiah, which really doesn’t work especially since Obama was never that convincing as either. Trump by contrast, ever with an eye for real estate, told Americans that “Sure, the Promised Land is right over there, you can see it from atop this mountain, and it’s just a few more days of marching, but check out this Mt. Nebo location, isn’t it fantastic? Take your shoes off, find some twigs, start a fire, heat up some water and have a soak. What’s the hurry? Let’s hang out here where Moses had led his people to, and where he died before ever continuing the journey. The soil is a little rocky but I bet you could plant some vines and turn out a reasonably good vintage. See those wild olive and fig trees over there, that’s lunch! I’m sure we can do something with this potent wild thyme growing in abundance, I think I saw some hares hoping down towards the valley, and hey anything will do; I don’t know about you but I am sick of the taste of manna. And of course, nothing beats the view.”



The authors of those earlier Biblical narratives were probably communicating something wise and profound when they had Moses glimpsing the Promised Land from atop Nebo but not taking a step further. Another chronicler gives us an account (or a parable) of how Jeremiah rescued the Ark of the Covenant from the Holy of Holies as the Babylonians were closing in, and returned it to Nebo for safekeeping and burial not far from where the recipient of the commandments is supposed to have rested for eternity. There seems to be some sort of secret message in that too. Whatever it is, it makes for a great story. And Trumpism, by telling us that there is nothing wrong with dilly-dallying at this vantage point that we have reached as a nation, nothing sinister about looking wistfully towards the sun setting over the Promised Land, that it is no deep moral flaw of ours, but just an understandable condition of a tired, bedraggled humanity after forty years of wandering, and that you are no less saved or chosen or redeemed or exceptional for doing so—*this* is how Trump will force a truce in the culture wars, in a way that only Trump can.

So there you have it, the secret sauce of Trumpism: an imperfect Trump is deeply loved by an imperfect people, who want to be taken as they are, and who deeply love an imperfect country as it is. They'll promise, with a somber Augustinian comportment and half-rue, fingers crossed and hope to die, to contrive a route to that wondrous yonder aflow in milk and honey, just not today. Or as Biden puts it, *Inshallah*.

Trumpism is crafty and expedient. In the ways that it is inelegant, even indecent, there is nothing new there as some pearl-clutching commentators would have you think. It offers little for the intellectual, it adds almost nothing to the life of the mind, but it is thoroughly new though in how it revitalizes the American spirit—that is where its—and his—true ('very stable') genius lies.

Locating the good parts of Trumpism within historical precedent is folly. Locating the bad parts of Trump the man and president within historical comparison is useful, at least in dispelling the myth that he was uniquely bad, or polarizing. Trumpism is not Jefferson versus Hamilton, it's not Tocqueville versus the cosmopolitan idea. There's no intellectual heft to it. The trick to understanding Trumpism is that it is basic, but not all that base. It's nothing new in its crassness: according to Jon Meacham's *American Lion* (2008) the political camp of the sixth president (son of the second president) accused the seventh president-to-be of marrying his wife while she was still married to another man; of being a son of a whore who had borne a half-black child that was later sold into slavery; with John Quincy Adams (no. 6, son of no. 2) actually on the record accusing Andrew Jackson (no. 7) of being a barbarian who "hardly could spell his own name." The Jackson camp countered by accusing Adams of serving as a pimp to the Russian tsar during his tenure as ambassador to the latter's court at St. Petersburg; Russia always seems to make a cameo in these things! And as Victor Davis Hansen demonstrated in his 2019 book *The Case for Trump*, the 45th president was not nearly as ethically lapsed as JFK, or Lyndon Johnson, or even Bill Clinton.

Hansen goes on to tell us that Trump was not uniquely polarizing either: he has governed no less boldly and just as effectively as another much reviled president (at his time), Harry S. Truman. Official DC loathed Truman, and the feeling was mutual. He dropped two nuclear bombs to hasten Japan's breaking point, he recognized Israel, he triggered the Korean War, he made an enemy out of Stalin—all things that the experts of the time strenuously cautioned against. He established the CIA thus angering the Left and the isolationists, fired an iconic war god (Douglas MacArthur), and regularly and biting mocked a crop of generals and admirals who had just won the world's greatest military conflagration. Truman was vulgar and occasionally threatened critics with physical harm including one who had penned a disapproving review of his daughter's piano recital. Truman was also dogged with accusations of corruption harking back to his days wading through the Kansas City swamp, from which he came, and calls for his resignation and impeachment were weekly stuff in the press. Sounds familiar?

Trumpism is not high-minded philosophy. It can't be. It really is as straight forward as an entertaining, charismatic figure administering common sense fixes, which is all it needs to be. The Trumpian crowds swoon as Trump regales them with stories of his penny-pinching trusteeship of the common piggy bank. He reveals that he does that because he's "essentially cheap" and that he wouldn't hesitate to stiff someone if they do a bad job, whatever their sob story is. They love his story about the new (yet-to-be delivered) AirForce One, one that a clueless Biden will take out for its first ride, and probably fart up its new jet smell, not realizing the back and forth between Trump and Boeing on getting costs down. They listen transfixed for the hundredth time to his story about fixing up the Embassy in Jerusalem, bringing down the cost from a billion something dollars to half a mil.

Yet there is indeed something unique about Trump: energy. Partly his own profuse flow of it, but also how he unlocks it in his devotees. He doesn't reason them into a joyous whirl, he *moves* them. It is less of a mindful aspect, and more of a mindset. This is where there is difficulty in situating a historical precedent. Sure, there was the distasteful spectacle-end of things: name calling and the incessant bombast. There was also the frugality, and the silent exertion of managing prudishly. The COVID19 briefing turned into shout fests with the media, the journos competing with Trump for the limelight and he flinging them off stage. Turbulent as it seemed, it did show there was someone at the wheel during a time of run-for-the-hills-and-grab-toilet-paper panic, however erratic the driving. What went unreported is that under his stewardship states had enough ICU beds and enough ventilators, many that went unused. Trump didn't go maximalist and overstep state rights as a 'literally Hitler' would have done. He didn't take-over the private sector despite the clamoring in the media and Congress for doing so. In terms of mobilization and achieving objectives, as well as federal-state and government-private sector partnership, and in a country as big and as unwieldy as America is, his handling of logistics and supply chains and delegation of duties was a model operation in management and deal making. His supporters don't think that all this is random. The juxtaposition of the juvenile with the

agile makes perfect sense to them as if it is the most natural thing ever, because in their eyes Trump is the patron saint of “Winning, winning, winning”. Their guy must win the logistics game, *and* beat the crap out of Acosta at the same time. Because that’s what he does. That is the energy he brings. And he is exactly what America needs.

Therefore, Trumpism is not nationalism, not sovereignty, it is just dolled-up and sensationalized common sense, at least as it is beheld by us Trumpians. It is a new set of ground rules for a country that cannot climb up any higher, for now, up to Obama’s ideals or those of an absolutist conservative conviction. Trumpism is obstinate when challenged, and fine with making do with what it has already. Obama, the media and the entertainment industry can admonish us to their hearts content, but Trump allows us to say “you know what? This is what we have going for us for now, so sit your ass down you sanctimonious scolds.”

Trump inoculates Americans too against the modern moral inquisitor’s gravest charge of heresy—racism. One broadcaster began a January 2018 show with: “This is CNN. I’m Don Lemon. The president of the United States is racist.” Gasp! How bold! How daring! A shot across the bow if ever there was one. And Trump just goes, *meh*. And thereby Trump wins, all the while teaching us how to survive such a scary charge if ever levelled against us.

Trump doesn’t pander on race, which is a revolutionary act these days. When pushed on the issue during the second debate by the moderator Kristen Welker, whose mother is black, he comes out with “I’m the least racist person in this room,” then he mimes putting his hand up to shield his eyes from the stage lights, and looks out into the dark recesses of the auditorium just to check that he is indeed the least racist one there. He does the opposite of pander on race—he leaves you perplexed, for he is not reading off the authorized “No, really, I’m not a racist” script that every white man or would-be ‘Karen’ in the public eye is supposed to recite by rote. He speaks a different language on race and identity when the path of least resistance is to do what everyone else is supposed to do. He didn’t introduce us to Corn Pop and wet leg hairs while lifeguarding at swimming pools in black neighborhoods as Biden did; he did not retrieve the hot sauce from Hillary’s bag that’s been there ever since she referenced it during a hip hop radio show broadcast in the 2016 election.

To my knowledge Trump has never mentioned that he dated, from the likes of it seriously, a black girlfriend, Kara Young, for two years in the late 1990s before breaking it off after getting serious about Melania. That is even better than claiming that some of his best friends are black (it seems that some of them are, but that too he doesn’t bring up) especially when the likes of Lemon lay into him. Trump had also been seeing another black woman at the time, Maureen Gallagher, a knockout model and actress, but that affair seemed to be one of the many frivolous frolics he’s had over the years. But with Young it was different: he allegedly proposed to her several times, but she had a toddler from a previous marriage, and life as a Trump (and looking down the road, as a Trumpian) was too much for her. The media, in the few times they had brought her up, labels her biracial; her mother is black, her father white. Yet Obama is plain black in the media’s telling, never a biracial, even though his mom was white, so go figure! Young

has said that "I never heard [Trump] say a disparaging comment towards any race of people," adding that "I would never go out with anybody that was a racist — of course not — that's crazy." The furthest she went was that he had stereotypes about people, such as not realizing that blacks were enthusiastic about tennis because of the Williams sisters. That isn't that bad by any measure. He is, though, a bit of a misanthrope Young acknowledged, and can be an equal opportunity offender to people from all walks, all colors. Yep, that's a better fit for Trump than most labels.

This raises the question of just who are Trump's people, what's *his* identity? I think the identity he most closely associates with is that of a performer. If he walks into the room and finds a gaggle of fellow performers in some corner then that is likely where he would gravitate towards. This is his comfort zone. He worships within this gauche, garish, larger-than-life denomination of entertainers, where the Rat Pack crew would be revered and taken to be divine. This is where he belongs. Don King is his people; Liberace too. Trump's mother was a fan of the latter, but he saw him as a colleague. The two could pal around, enjoy each other's company, get their pictures taken and secure brand maximization and harmonization while at it. Trump sold Liberace an apartment, got him to name drop his new address at live shows, and then the pair went shopping for fur coats. That is why he shrugs at Caitlyn Jenner's preference of restrooms, and his audience follows suit. This is why Rick Grenell is a super star in the world of Trumpism without an eye batted over his homosexuality.

Little did the establishment realize it, but Trump's was the first post-identity presidency in America's history. By Trump's words and measure, success heals racism, and slavery too. "Success brings people together"—there, he fixed it. It may not be artful. It may not be particularly empathetic. It may not even be workable in the long term. But it isn't racism, and it *is* different. One is not a racist just because one doesn't follow the orthodoxy on how to speak and think about race. Trump thinks there's a path out of this. Abraham Lincoln believed that the drawn-out Civil War he was trying to make sense of was divine retribution for the preceding two hundred and fifty years of slavery. When the north won at enormous cost, then the bill owed to God for the transgression by some of his children against another group of children was mostly paid, or so he thought. A few weeks after his second inaugural, after Lincoln was martyred, a nation likened him to a savior dying for that remaining balance of sin, thus absolving the survivors. But as we know, it never stopped there, and could not have either. Moralizing auditors have gone through the books for all of the hundred and fifty years since Lincoln's ascent to the pantheon of righteousness, tracking down a scar of racism here, a heap of broken spirits there. But when does it end? Does it end with Black Lives Matter placards in front of tony upper middle class houses? Does it end with reparations? If it does, then go for it. But if even that is unsatisfying, then what?

Black people, as sensible people anywhere, do not want to see repenting whites getting on their knees and asking forgiveness. They are likely to be seriously creeped out if the CEO of Chik-fil-A again tries to foist an impromptu shoeshine on them. I remember walking around our

lower middle class black neighborhood at the height of BLM and all the blacks seemed a little more eager than usual to be friendly to the random white person, not because of some national moment we were sharing, but rather their general demeanor was one of “please, *please*, don’t be weird.”

The Democrats have yet to demonstrate that their path would actually lead to a moment of historical *deus ex machina* on race. If anything, their formula is for never-ending racial obsessions. That’s the trap that Obama is not seeing. Trump is at least saying, follow me, I got a way out of this. For many Americans, and it seems a larger proportion of black men, his crazy escape scheme is good enough. For now.

Trumpism is loosely about family, faith, federalism—all moderate conservative lodestars—and mostly about the fight. The fight is absolutely important. Actually, the family, faith and federalism stuff is more of an add-on, a perk. But it is the fight that Americans needed, and still need. Trumpians relish the fight, for it is both spectacle and affirmation. And it is one only Trump can fight for now; or as he puts it, anyone else would suck his thumb and go crying for mama. In bringing the fight, Trump infuses Trumpism with energy; his confidence, his tenacity, is superhuman, indestructible. And the country took its cue. Trump offered confidence as an antidote to Obama’s contriteness. Trump is loud and messy. The establishment told us that his performance in the first debate was grating, but he argued like many immigrants, recent or otherwise, would, and that is what they saw. He argued like any man would if the fellow across the stage calls him a clown (twice), a liar, a racist, and the worst president ever. He was manning up, he wasn’t taking it, wasn’t going to abide by all those classy customs and rituals of a prettied-up, rigged class system, and it’s about time. That is why the loudest, sharpest, most-heartfelt chant during his first post-election rally in Georgia a few weeks ago was, “Fight for Trump!” He taught Trumpians how to fight, now they’ll fight for him.

American confidence, especially male confidence, had been sagging under the reprobating and rebarbative stare of the Obama years. And if that confidence was borne out of fighting, well that’s no good, for fighting was deemed a symptom of ‘toxic masculinity’. It was Neanderthal, sexist, and by empowering the patriarchy, it enables all of society’s evils, you know, the usual list: racism, homophobia, etc. But fighting is elemental. It comes from a place deeper than the reach of reason. Even so, men were being told that a Freudian sublimation of this innateness was not enough of a repentance, not enough of a commitment to a just new society. That rather than accepting the good enough outcome of taming their inner dragon, they must exorcise their demonic self. But humans get glitchy when you screw around with their basic wiring. Men especially needed to hear something else. A cacophony of marginal speakers came out to fill this manly-men vacuum such as Jordan Peterson, Mike Cernovitch and Scott Adams. But again, had Trump not shown up, had they not wired their signal to his three-mile-high antennae, would we even know their names? No. He created space, and attention, for them. Without him they would have simply registered in our collective awareness as the fading echo of Charlie Sheen’s ‘tiger blood’ warlock-ing meltdown.

This Trumpian confidence is something that recent immigrants can assimilate into. Not for any traditionally-specific infatuation with *caudillo*-hood, as some cultural interpreters would explain it. Asking recent immigrants to adopt America's heritage—pilgrims, founding fathers, greatest generation, but also slavery, robber barons, unequal generational wealth—was always going to be a stretch. Asking them to sign on to Obama's vision of a first universal nation was too exhausting of a trek after they had already trudged so hard, and not why they came here. Had that been their ultimate destination they could have stayed home and had the first universal nation come to them. But they can assimilate into a mindset, and this is what Trumpism offers, a mindset of winning. Trump, the grandson of an immigrant, with an immigrant mother, choosing a first wife and a third one from among immigrants, projects a swagger, a verve, an anti-victim creed. He acts as if he owns the place (well, he does at his usual hang-outs like Mar-a-Lago). An immigrant can get behind something like this. An immigrant can make use of such energy. An immigrant can carry himself confidently in this new land by channeling Trumpian energy. "I couldn't fix systemic racism today but I did buy a week's supply of groceries for my family—winning." "I couldn't stop the seas from rising this morning but I did pay off a loan last week—winning." "I failed to use the barista's preferred pronoun and got a look for it, but I did get through traffic to make it for my daughter's ballet recital—mega winning." "I didn't even remember to say 'Happy Eid' to my neighbors but my three-year-old son said something in flawless Portuguese during his weekly Skype call with his grandparents, impressing the wits out of them—jackpot!"

This is a mindset that a Rogan coalition, such as it is, can get behind too. What's that? Are you saying this all sounds a bit too sexist? Screw you. We've got Sarah Palin in our pantheon. Make *that* leap and then come tell us about sexism. Our feminism is not abortion-on-demand. Our feminism is about demanding common sense paid maternity leave and common sense childcare support, anything along the lines as what is afforded to women in other advanced economies in the West. Did you ask yourself as to why the other side hasn't fought as hard for *these* sorts of women's rights?

Trump's extremism compensated for Obama's. But granted it is extreme. It is not sustainable for the long term. Partly because Trump is not going to be around forever, and partly because there must be a period of respite after such bouts. The future GOnP will land in between, skewing towards confidence. But before that happens, Trumpism will amp up America, and may even do fundamental historical good in cobbling together this Big Banquet coalition of gays, Hispanics, black men, recent immigrants, and the Amish. It may not get everybody to join, but it will get enough to get the party going. And Trumpism wouldn't just offer blacks and immigrants a transient and feel-good alternative to identity politics. It may actually rewire the inherited disorders that permit the survival of soft racism. Here again, this is something that only Trump can potentially do.

Trump can drag the hold-outs to the center, to the mainstream. Just like he did with prison reform: it took Trump convening a wide coalition that found the conciliatory space to get a deal done, a historical one that had alluded others for forty years, including Obama and Biden.

Wisdom can come from unlikely places, and on this particular potentiality it comes from Don King, the eccentric boxing promoter, and an early supporter of the BLM movement. King affirms in a 2017 interview with *Politico* that “Trump has the opportunity to be a Founding Father. You know why? Because...Jeff Sessions comes from Alabama, where the constitution is staunchly racist...So it’s not whether [Sessions] is racist...but [where he comes from]. Trump can bring him in the mix...and they open up a chance to do what...If [Trump can help] change what [Sessions] has been taught all [his] life, [he] can do more for the uplifting of the downtrodden than anyone else.” King’s vision draws inspiration from the Fusion Party of 1894, a coalition of white and black politicians from different parties in the late 19th century that “shocked the world of politics”. Trumpism can make residual racism uncool, and that’s that. “Lay off it dude, we’re one American family at this table.” Done. (That same interview reveals that King built a tennis court on his property in the hope of hosting the Williams sisters, but they never visited—too bad he didn’t educate his friend Don on such things before making a fool out of himself with Kara!)

Trump hasn’t achieved that yet, but he may still.

In a hyper-hyphenated America, Trumpism allows the Trumpian to self-identify as a Winner-American. And that is awesome. Trumpism is a narrative for winning, and at this particular juncture in the American story, as the scribes squat to jot it all down on Mt. Nebo, it shall prove a winning narrative. And that is enough. For now.

*



'Trump Rock', Mersin, Turkey

National Security: The Heart of the Swamp's Darkness

Not that you'd know that if you were following the news, but there was relatively little overall chaos and turnover in Trump's cabinet. Secretaries Chao, DeVos, Mnuchin, Ross, Perdue, Carson, and Lighthizer have served the entire length of the president's first term. Others were brought into deputy positions by Trump early on before moving them up once vacancies arose. The same is true for a host of agencies and other government bodies. Generally, the occupants of the top posts there seemed to have had a good working relationship with the president. Several former Secretaries such as Perry and Acosta have remained on good, supportive terms with the president.

But that has not been the case with the national security constellation: National Intelligence, the CIA, the FBI, Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the National Security Council, etc. Trump's relationship with these bodies was marked by turmoil and acrimony, much of it leaked strategically and concurrently to the press. The heads of the intelligence community and the foreign policy establishment adopted the moniker given to them by the media of being the 'the adults in the room', a tag ostensibly connoting a group of grey hairs—at times including Mattis, McMaster, Haley, Kelly, Nielson, Pompeo, Haspel, Coats, Esper—that blocked a "Toddler-in-Chief" with his grubby fingers on the nuclear button from excessive mischief. They also had to watch him closely because, you know, he was an agent of Putin's. The 'resistance' to Trump, before and after his assumption of the presidency, was led

from this constellation too. How did that discrepancy in attitude towards the president between the national security side of the government's business, and everything else that more or less ran smoothly, arise? This question is as important as any that can be asked about the history of the United States over the *last* half century, whether these questions pertain to the realms of culture, economics and politics. And it is just as critical to answer it fully and truthfully as anything else the country's thinkers and strategists must consider in order to prepare America for the *next* fifty years.

A few years ago I was invited as a guest to one of America's most exclusive and private conclaves of national security heavies. It was a four day affair held annually and at the same place, in one of the western idylls of this country, with each year's get-together highlighting the most pressing issues facing the United States. I was invited to participate on the discussions of that year, which focused on the Middle East, and to share what I had learned from my many years of studying the jihadists. But there was a social aspect to these gatherings, with shared meals, outings, and cocktails. There are usually four dozen or so regulars, comprising former and current-at-the-time top officials, politicians, journalists, academics and thinkers as well as several billionaires, interested in this realm of foreign affairs, among their crew. And they would invite around twenty additional one-time guests to share their expertise on the given topic being discussed. There was an easy camaraderie among the members, who came from both sides of the partisan divide, and they tried their best to make the outsiders feel welcome.

At one such dinner, held at the palatial lodge of a high ranking elected official, a microphone was wired up and an impromptu sing along broke out, with a bustle of ungainly, galumphing line dancing in tow (there was a 'Western' theme to the party). I sat mesmerized though when, at some point, a former Secretary of State, a former National Security Adviser, a former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, a former chairman of a congressional committee, joined by a few more officials then serving, along with the former prime minister of a European country (she was called up because of her euphonious singing voice), all huddled around that sole microphone and belted out 'God Bless America'—I think it was that song, I can't be sure, for I was more taken by the scene than by the performance. I wasn't a citizen at that point but the thought going through my head was that these patriotic carolers assembled before me sure are proud of their country, and that they feel ownership for its successes since, in their minds, they had engineered some of them. These were the custodians of America's security, the inheritors of a tradition that wrested independence, defeated the Barbary pirates, expanded the republic, kept it, applied the Monroe Doctrine, made Japan take in America's goods, beat back the specter of secession, dug out a canal that linked two oceans, took over the Philippines, pulled through a decade's worth of a Great Depression, tipped the scales of two world wars, then won the Cold War, and in the decades since delivered their country to the status of solitary superpower and retained a hold of that exalted standing—these giddy folks singing their heads off before me had the hands-on experience of accomplishing these things. There were a few other foreigners there, mostly of the same stature—a former Australian prime minister, the former head of MI6, a

compatriot of his who had been the UK's Foreign Secretary, and so on—lending a 'globalist' tinge to the crowd, but it was unmistakable that the Americans carried themselves as the leaders of that gathering, and of the globe.

Here, before me, was the most potent core of the Deep State. There, in denim, boots, and bolo ties, stood the highest priests of Westernizing globalism.

I did not begrudge them their stature and pride. In a way I was touched by it. I was enthused by their elation. I recognized that deserved feeling they had of wearing rows upon rows of invisible medals commemorating exploits past that they knew were there but did not have to brandish to the plebs, and that others of their standing would readily distinguish. At that moment I was also oblivious to their many flubs and disasters. That changed quickly.

While I was in my "just jazzed to be here" trance, the fellow sitting next to me, who had just been introduced by the person hosting me at this gathering with the urgency of "you two must get talking", leaned over and said: "they are oblivious to the suffering they have created in the world, aren't they?" He was of a mixed background, some of which was Middle Eastern, and it was the sort of thing that a taxi driver in Beirut would blurt out, which is definitely not his station in society. I gave him a weary smile, and tried to look back at the singers, but his companion interjected with a "they would soooo freak out if we go up there and shout *Allahu Akbar!*" This was meant to be a joke. I did that head-nod-eye-widening thing meaning 'ha! I get it!' while thinking to myself 'finish this BBQ chicken wing and move away from these people.' Yet the quip indicated something disturbing. My reverie was broken.

That fellow was a professor at one of the country's most prestigious universities. Just earlier that day he was being feted by the same people he was badmouthing as *the* authority on all things Islamic and Middle Eastern. I had read one of his books. It was good and groundbreaking, although it only covered a somewhat obscure topic, in a peripheral country, during a period where far more formative things were happening elsewhere in the region. His was not an expertise that lent itself to the big picture. He certainly was no Bernard Lewis, a scholar and interpreter of the region that I had had the occasion to see, and speak to, at close quarters and who could, whether one agrees with him or not, lavishly elucidate on overarching trends. He was no five percent of Bernard Lewis. He was no twenty percent of Fouad Ajami, another scholar whom I had known and who was of the caliber to be feted (and probably had been) by such a crowd. But to have him say something like what he did, at the moment that he did, to someone he had just met, and that the custodians of America's security had let *him* into their midst, to celebrate him and to further validate his standing, well something was not right with this picture.

The following day, when I realized that he had a special ringtone for a high ranking Saudi prince, one whom he had met in college, one whose calls he did not mute, one for whom a customized ringtone declaiming a verse from the Quran was assigned, a ringtone that summoned him to leave the meeting in a scurry to go out in the hallway to answer and I assume to fill-in the prince on the discussions underhand, well, I grasped then that a lot was wrong with

this picture. Here was a fellow who had suckered and gamed the Deep State, leveraging its adulation into access to gainful consultancies, while relishing in his derision of the men and women who constitute its leading lights.

But it was something I had known all along. The Deep State was in a bad way. And it was in a uniquely bad way, not one of the cyclic periods of decline and haplessness from which it rallied back to eminence in the past; this time it was less a phase and more of an end-stage condition. I also knew that so much of the rise of Trumpism had to do with foreign affairs, and specifically with the efficacy of this very same Deep State. The [exact timing of the inevitability of his Republican candidacy and eventual presidential victory](#) can be traced back to a terrorist event, one that the Deep Staters were supposedly on the watch for:

Trump broke away from his primary rivals in the immediate aftermath of the San Bernardino shootings. Trump's incendiary remarks struck a chord with a part of the electorate. Especially since it was in such stark contrast to Obama's detached stance on the event. It was that segment of the voting market that turned him into an anti-establishmentarian candidate who could potentially make it all the way. What was a relatively minor terrorist event inspired by events in the Middle East, ended upturning many 'givens' in a structured and stable society as that of America's. Sure, the system must have broken down along the way to allow it to be vulnerable to such outside triggers. But however way it came about, jihadism became one of the litmus tests for the credibility of the elite, whose foreign policy 'deep state' bureaucracy is policed by the 'Praetorian Guards' of Realism.

I am always struck by how few people realize that the Trump presidency became realizable only after San Bernardino, when he was willing to speak in terms too stark for his Republican primary competitors to match. There were no Russian hackers then. No Wikileaks dumps. Trump broke away ahead of the pack because a Muslim couple had been inspired by the visions of a native of Samarra, compelling them to shoot at their co-workers. One of the key duties the establishment was delegated to do, to keep America safe, had been fumbled. Then downplayed. Enter the master pugilist, Donald Trump, with his incendiary catch phrases and tweets. The Realist establishment had misjudged whether the wayward sparks of the faraway fires of the Middle East would pose an existential threat to their own 'credibility'. Trump was the vehicle of a reckoning.

The breakdown of rational predictability undergirds the demise of trust in institutions. Getting the Middle East that wrong took its toll. Elites

may think that the 'deplorables' in Hicksville don't follow world events that closely, but they do so when a loved one is deployed in Baquba. And a soldier that served there will keep following events, wondering whether his service, whether his country's costly power projection, had left a mark on the trajectory of history. The Middle East is not an abstract set of dueling IR game theories for them. The Middle East is a measure by which they discern whether the elite knows what it is doing. Guess what happens when the news cycles keeps running with bombings in Baquba?

A solemn responsibility is afforded by the American people to the ruling class (and its adjunct bureaucracies) in managing America's standing and interests around the world. But there is little effective oversight. The whole set-up is premised on trust—that the powerful know what they are doing. Yet for the preceding two decades the American people have developed the sense that something was particularly off with Washington as evidenced by its failure to protect the homeland on 9/11 and then by its subsequent handling of the fallout. This was no kneejerk, ingrained impulse for isolationism and a mistrust of secretive government bodies—an American political tradition. This was different. And it began with Iraq. And I know something about how it began. And much of that story intersects at the Central Intelligence Agency.

But to explain that story, to lay out what Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer meant when he told Rachel Maddow on her MSNBC show airing December 9, 2016, after being asked by her about what he thought of Trump's repeated taunts against the CIA not a month after the election, that if "you take on the intelligence community they have six ways from Sunday of getting at you; even for a practical, supposedly hardnosed businessman he's being really dumb to do this..." Then Maddow pushes him further, "What do you think the intelligence community would do if they had [a mind to]..." and Schumer replies: "I don't know but from what I was told they are very upset with how he had treated them and talked about them"—before one explains what Schumer was going on about one has to tell the story of John Brennan, and to explain his story one has to tell the story of his former boss George Tenet who instituted a culture of deflection, strategic leaking and a cultivation of attention-grabbing congressmen and senators, including Schumer and another one named Joe Biden. And to tell Tenet's story one has to tell the story of my former boss Ahmad Chalabi, and to tell Chalabi's story one has to reach back to the earliest days of the Deep State's birth in the late 1940s and then to one of its longest periods of decline during the 1990s, leading up to 9/11. Chalabi? Oh, by the official narrative he was another outsider who had suckered America's elite, but not to get himself invited (+ one) to some soirees, rather he did so to bring America's military might to bear in settling a familial vendetta of his—or so it is said. By telling that story, one will understand why Brennan turned treasonous in undermining Trump, for when Schumer was speaking to Maddow, Brenner was still the Director of the CIA. And once this tale is told, hopefully you'll understand why there is

no recourse for a resurgent and triumphant return of Trumpism to power but to deracinate the Deep State, beginning with the undergrowth at Langley.

Like beating up on the press, beating up on the CIA is yet another American popular pastime. Isn't it unfair, and a little too easy, to single out the spies? What about all the other agencies: the NSA, the NSC, the DIA, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the whole slew of the "entrenched bureaucracy," or the immensely wealthy private contracting security corporations that altogether comprise the Deep State? A friend once flippantly told me "America does have a Deep State, and they are called colonels"—meaning the class of middling ranks that run the Pentagon; so why not focus on the "military industrial complex" instead, that intersection of the big weapons makers and defense contractors, as well as the congressmen they lobby? They constitute the juggernaut of overlapping interests that Dwight 'Ike' Eisenhower, while heading off to his post-presidency life, had warned Americans about, and whose nefarious intrusions into policy to prolong a state of endless war is a matter that Trump also laments from time to time. Aren't they more representative of the darker depths of the Deep State than the CIA? Better still, why not the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation with its uniquely malevolent collection of Yateses and Comeys and McCabes and Strzoks and Pages who were the tip of the administrative spear in harpooning Trump's presidency?

Well, I need to focus on the CIA because it is there, in its midst, that one can spot the wellspring of the public's mistrust in government institutions that culminated with the shock of 9/11, followed by the mishandling of the Iraq War. And it was the CIA that tried to deflect blame by setting the journalists it had cultivated on a path that eventually wounded a sitting U.S. president in the mid-2000s—the same officeholder that the CIA is institutionally designed to serve above all else within the structure of the U.S. government—and by doing so dissipated a national consensus to fight jihadism. And it is that same dual, contradictory mindset—of serving a president *and* a willingness to undermine a presidency—that had always manifested within the CIA but had festered to a considerable degree under Tenet and his underlings, drifting as it were aboard a larger cultural shift within the country, a mindset that eventually allowed Brennan to satisfy Obama's departing desire to hobble Trump's prospects, partly by allowing the FBI to get ahead of itself in believing the 'Russia-Russia-Russia' nonsense, with the Justice Department running point. And while the public face of the Deep State's 'resistance' to Trump over the last few years featured other high office holders such as General Michael Hayden (of the NSA, DIA, and CIA, *before* CNN) and James Clapper (of the DIA, NGA, and DNI, also *before* CNN) as well as many others, it was Brennan who performed the role of ad hoc coordinator of the counter-Trump narrative, again with subtle direction from Obama. Okay, maybe I don't have evidence for Obama's role here. Still, I am certain of it because this is how these things go, or so experience tells me. And I am certain it will out one sunny, crisp day. Maybe Obama will tell us all about it in Volume II of his memoirs—after all, he can't pass up an opportunity to gloat.

Wait, am I doing one of these underhanded things that experts do by drawing the topic, *any* topic, towards my own field of knowledge? That I'm only focusing on the CIA because I have a few juicy tittle-tattles to share, not to mention scores to settle? You bet your sweet ass that I am. But bear with me, this story has juggling clowns, double-crosses, Chinese honey-traps, and the world's largest butternut squash. Okay, so I may be overpromising here, but I do swear to pare down the story to a bare minimum before sending you on your way. Although, to be honest, we've been in the woods for a long time, and already I'm not sure I know how to get back. But we'll worry about that later. First things first.

The Deep State is not a conspiratorial cabal, lurking in dark, smoke-filled rooms, speaking in a hushed and raspy patter of their own device. It is a looser affiliation, a corporatist identity. There are no nobility tables and titles to this fellowship, no dress codes or lapel pins. Even so, there is a tribal cohesion to it forged out of a shared sense of mission and destiny. Theirs is a keenly providential Americanism—that America was destined for greatness and goodness—and a ruthless determination to pursue and enact that purpose, one that afforded them license, and rank, with due affluence too. They, like the singing folks above, are patriots. They have not sold out to some globalist agenda as Bannon would have it. In their own minds, they *are* America's truest patriots, enshrining her global supremacy bar none. To them, Bannon is a parvenu, a demagogue, a fraud, a coward, a Johnny-come-lately to the task of putting 'America first', though they would never be crass enough to spell out their duties so. Why offend their international allies by saying something gauche but universally acceded to out loud that need not be said?

Yet the Deep State, especially its CIA component, did undergo some changes just as the country changed too, after all, what organization's culture hasn't changed in that time span? What is peculiar about the culture of the CIA today is just *how* dramatically different it is from that at the organization's conception in the late 1940s. Some of that change is good. Some of it is bad. The problem is that the bad part disproportionately impacts the efficacy of the agency's work. A deeper analysis of this lop-sidedness is relevant in our understanding of why the Deep State behaved as it did when confronting a changing country that chose Trump. Such a comparison also allows us to explore whether parts of the Deep State, such as the CIA, are salvageable, or whether its gangrenous administrative decay must be dealt with far more radically. Consequently, it is worthwhile mediating on how the CIA's 'golden era' bogged down into recrimination and disillusionment as early as the early 1960s, reaching its crescendo by the mid-70s, and whether what we are witnessing nowadays is similarly cyclic, or whether it is unprecedented and unique. (I think it's the latter.)

Those golden years prior were years of 'winning.' Americans carried themselves as winners. Many white American men could bank such a claim: they had fought, and fought hard, to beat back European and Far Eastern fascism. Many white American women could also claim to have played a corollary role in achieving victory by picking up the slack at the Homefront. The country was enthused, confident, and prospering. One theory holds that the prosperity of those years had much to do with the destruction of the industries of Europe and the Far East, which

gave American manufacturing its brief moment of global dominance. I think that that was but a small factor, retroactively applied by penny-pinchers and pessimists who claim that those times cannot be replicated. Far more important was the country's swagger, and the way by which that confidence applied itself to everything. The country was determined. There was clarity, especially as a new enemy had emerged, one that challenged the U.S. over the same battlefields of Europe and East Asia, one that had the gall to dock around America's own Caribbean and Central American neighborhood, and one that even entertained the idea of breaking into fortress America. The CIA was the shiny new instrument for winning this new confrontation. Its leadership was to be the Pattons and MacArthurs of the times. This is probably the era of American greatness, or rather a mindset of achieved and achievable greatness that Trump's MAGA-ness invokes.

A not-so-frivolous question to ask is whether that mindset was a function of whiteness, specifically a particular pedigree of whiteness? After all, Trump's evocation of past-tense American greatness, and the need to resurrect it, is taken to be a racial dog whistle by his opponents. Did something happen to that pedigree that explains the periods of ensuing deterioration? And is a return to that pedigree indeed what America needs to reinvigorate its institutions and get them back to winning, including those of the Deep State?

These questions are made further relevant by an observation that Stephen P. White [shared on The Catholic Thing blog](#) last week: "For the first time in American history, no branch of the our federal government will be led by a Protestant. The president will be Catholic. The Speaker of the House is Catholic. The Senate Majority Leader will be Jewish. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is Catholic (and the Court as a whole is majority Catholic)." He contemplates whether that is emblematic of an important shift and not merely a coincidence, because if it is then that could have indeterminate yet serious consequences. "Mainline Protestantism once acted as the primary ballast in American public life—helping to steady us amidst the choppy waters that attend life in a democratic republic," White wrote, adding: "That ballast is gone, and the long-term effects on American life can be felt all around."

Was the CIA's story a forerunner for those changes?

I imagine the early Deep Staters to be white Yalies, men, in 50s vintage sartorial fittings and preppy haircuts. Many of them had witnessed the worldwide conflagration, some in extremely hazardous ways. The ones with a grey hair or two could tell tales of 'Wild Bill' Donovan, their commander during the Office of Strategic Services days, who had sent them out on derring-do missions less than a decade prior. They wore hats. They attended mainline churches. They were enamored with the bearing and exploits of their aristocratic British 'cousins', so much so that many of them made it a point to drive imported British-made cars such as Jaguars—never mind the ignition problems that *Mad Men's* Don Draper, as good a glamorized prototype for '1950s Man America' as possible, was supposed to paper over. They read T.E. Lawrence's ('of Arabia' fame) *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) as if it belonged on the classics shelf, turning the task of remaking the Middle East into a persistent obsession of theirs, as it was for him. According to

CIA historian Hugh Wilford over at California State University, Long Beach, one of those early Agency officers, Kermit 'Kim' Roosevelt Jr. (a grandson of Teddy's), had a personal connection to the famed guerilla fighter while growing up, which tells you what sort of world formed their early lives: his father Kermit Sr. had gotten a special dispensation to join the British campaign in Mesopotamia in World War I with the rank of captain, prompting another family friend, Rudyard Kipling (—hence the name 'Kim') to send him a congratulatory note. He met Lawrence in Cairo on his way back to Europe from that theater, and maintained a correspondence with him in the years to come. Kim would later chalk up one of the CIA's first major successes as his own doing, that of the 1953 coup in Iran.

Those Deep Staters were deadly serious about what they did; they had the Soviet Empire to contain and rollback. Some of their Yale classmates stuck with hoarding riches on Wall Street during those good times, occasionally reminiscing over wartime exploits, eventually griping about hippies, and arranging a luxuriant nest out of their laurels. But the ones returning to service to their country within the ranks of its newly constituted clandestine agencies had no time for such indulgences: their task was to safeguard the good life for their former classmates and brothers-in-arms, and, I guess, might as well, for the rest of their countrymen and countrywomen too.

I could go on painting this picture or you could alternatively watch *The Good Shepherd* (2006). The screenwriter of that movie was influenced by Norman Mailer's magisterial *Harlot's Ghost*, which had been published in 1991. Mailer uses the novel genre to redolently describe the beginnings of the CIA, which in his rendering offers up a striking portrayal of the WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) ethos that infused that institution at the time. The movie, for its part, has a scene set in Miami wherein Joe Pesci's character, a mobster, asks Matt Damon, who is playing the protagonist, a CIA agent, about what makes him and his ilk tick:

[PALMI]: We Italians, we have the Church and the family; the Irish, they have their homeland; the Jews, tradition. Hell, even niggers have their music...What do you people have?

[WILSON]: We have the United States of America, the rest of you people are just visiting.

I often think back to this dialogue when thinking of those early Deep Staters. Within it one can barely make out part of the elusive answer as to why things veered off, and why the Deep State is what it is today. But how big a part of the answer? That is harder to discern, though it is also useful here to recall what Wolfe, in his own *Back to Blood* novel tried to tell us: the WASPs—for whom Damon's character is a stand-in—have abandoned their vespiaries—they *be gone, old chum*. So, did their departure eventually doom their institutions?

David Brooks over at the *NYTimes* began writing a series of columns in 2010 (stretching to as recently as 2018) lamenting the eclipse of that elite, and suggesting that what came after the

period of the WASP ascendancy was a long slog of mediocrity and self-absorption, and the country is the worse off for it. If one sets aside the litany of bad '-isms' they exhibited, such as racism and sexism, then one can recognize that they did a good job of running institutions, Brooks tells us, and that the corollary to having a generational ruling class, one which had secured its wealth and status, is that its inheritors would take a longer view of history, one longer than an individual lifespan, thus fitting them out with the mindset that put the nation's interest first. Then, in the following era of meritocracy that brought about the hierarchal displacement of the WASPs, new socially mobile individuals took the helm, but they were so focused on their ascent to the top that they had no recourse nor inclination to take in the view, to think big thoughts about duty and sacrifice, and to bask in the accomplishments of those who came before them. In other words, the 'me' generation dissipated America's power with its greed and shortsightedness. But was Brooks correct when it comes to the Deep State, which requires a particular kind of mindset? Was his formula for clocking in the beginning of the end relevant to an institution like the CIA? Brooks may have been over-romanticizing and over-estimating the WASP contribution to America's sheen. For example, American power had been engorged via many tributaries, such as all the immigrants who launched scientific and engineering endeavors (think atomic bombs and jukeboxes), or the skills of warfighting (lots of Catholics involved), or the perfection of American branding through entertainment (cue Adam Sandler to count all dem showbiz Jews) and music (gimme some of dat bop-dee-bebop Harlem jazz). These too were giving America its greatest moments in the 1950s.

But none of *these sorts* of people were invited to join the early CIA. Robert De Niro directed the movie, but he also plays Bill Sullivan, a military man in a wheelchair loosely based on Donovan (who wasn't handicapped). De Niro introduces us to Sullivan just as he begins to put together the first recruits for post-war U.S. foreign intelligence. He quips at the protagonist with a smile: "I'll be looking for patriotic, honorable, bright young men from the right backgrounds to manage the various departments. In other words, no Jews or Negroes, and very few Catholics, and that's only because I'm a Catholic."

The CIA was a WASPian special project in a way that the FBI, its thickheaded, thick-necked older sibling within the security family, could never be. The FBI was J. Edgar Hoover's thing, the scowling provincials working for him were cast in his image. But the CIA was to be the WASPs' gilded gift for the ages. So what happens when their ways and customs are forgotten? It so stands than one way to gauge WASP competence, and to test Brooks' hypothesis, is to study the history of the CIA, their post-Yale clubhouse.

I was always fascinated by these WASPs and their subsects. At one of Tom Toles' Halloween parties—the place to be seen for Washington's media set, thrown by the *WaPo's* lead cartoonist—I went as an eccentric New England Brahmin. I thought I was being very clever, with an over-the-top get-up (World War One medals, a monocle, short-shorts, riding boots, an effetely-long cigarette holder and an Anatolian walking stick) and my best attempt at an authentic accent to match, the existence of which I first learned of when, very early on in my

American experience, I was told all about the Brahmins by one of their own (through a maternal line, but still). She was a professor who I had struck up a friendship with, and she received me at her Beacon Hill home (on the *south slope*, mind you), a home that had American chestnut (or was it something else?) paneling and an antique ground-to-ceiling brass birdcage for the household's parrots, or at least that is how I remember it. Her neighborhood was Jerusalem to the *Boston Social Register* set, their fortress WASPasia, a world now half-forgotten. As a measure of how far they had receded, no one at the Halloween party got my outfit, they didn't even understand the term 'Boston Brahmin' and yet this was supposed to be the densest huddle of what passes for the capital's intellectual class today. One reporter in our party-going group, a producer for a top network news show, who was gay himself, thought I was playing at a homosexual from the 1920s. *Sigh*.

Yet Brooks has it wrong, at least when it comes to the Deep State. The rot there is not a symptom of the failure of meritocracy. Rather it is an indication that an institution, *any* institution, can wither, and that it gets collectively dumber with time and with every hardened bureaucratic burl disfiguring its trunk. Things can turn around with some periodic pruning of red tape and sheering off inflexible logjams, especially with a steady, charismatic leadership at the helm. Things can get even better if they have presidencies that support rather than scapegoat them. Those ingredients for regeneration do not often come together though, as we shall see soon enough. Things can get so bad in the absence of good leadership (and other contributing factors) that the only way to stem the damage is to uproot it all—that too we will get to. And we must also consider that an institution consecrated and launched by WASPs may not have been anything special to begin with, that it had no mystical incantation or potent talisman tied around it branches to shield it from various vicissitudes. For the WASPs could have been, just like any nobility across time, a bunch of poseurs, and in a fake-it-till-you-make-it realm of self-reinvention like that of America's they were a particularly 'based'—to borrow a hip new term—aristocracy. Their pretenses still had Brooks duped decades on.

Those early WASPs may have pulled off a couple of successful coups in Tehran and Guatemala City but they also conjured up flaps (Albania, 1949) and displayed severe analytical flaws (missing Mao's victories in China; being surprised by the lead up to the Korean War). One can chalk it up to the fumbles of institutional infancy. But the balance of success to failure leaned towards failure throughout the latter phases of the CIA's life. Then the adventurous years of a covertly activist agency gave way to the caution and hesitation that comes from one too many burns. That period, one of exuberance devolving into chastisement, was bookmarked by the tenure and leadership of the CIA's longest serving director, Allen Dulles who was at its helm from 1953-1961 (—pay attention now, for he is the yardstick by which to evaluate on of his successors who is most pertinent to our tale, George Tenet).

Dulles was all about adventure and imagination, and he had the auspicious backing of a presidency (Eisenhower's, where Dulles' older brother served as Secretary of State) that gave him full rein. Like many of his class, he had an early fascination with the Middle East, having

served as the head of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State, where he had worked for ten years, before leaving government to prospect on Wall Street and then returning to cloak and dagger jobs in Washington. While Director, Dulles played the media. Those he did not pay directly he established a form of collegiality with as fellow traffickers in the information trade wherein he doled out scoops in return for discretion and favors when needed. Dulles also cultivated congressmen and senators, one of whom was a young Democratic star called Jack Kennedy. But whereas Dulles was social and friendly with JFK and the latter had announced that he would keep him on as director right upon winning the election, Kennedy eventually soured on him because of the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba (what Damon's character was meeting with Pesci's in Miami over) and some other hot potatoes that Dulles had flung into his lap. Allegedly, Kennedy even soured on the CIA as an institution, vowing that he would crush it. How did things go so wrong? Dulles was uniquely qualified to lead this institution just as it was getting going, and yet within eight years he had brought his institution to the cusp of elimination for the sake of political expediency. Was Dulles the exemplar of WASP managerial alchemy that Brooks is so enamored of? The endings of things suggest not.

Dulles was one of those rare institutional leaders whose tenure marks an era, and whose character permeates into the bureaucracy he was managing. Kennedy described him as "legendary." There was something of his ancestor in him: Joseph Douglas, a Scottish settler in Northern Ireland, made his way, and a 'starter' fortune, in what is today Indonesia but was then the Dutch East Indies where his last name was bastardized by unfamiliar tongues into 'Dulles'—he kept it that way. He arrived in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War, continuing his lucky streak to riches, probably by trading in slaves. And, of course, money ennobled him and his progeny by passing themselves off and marrying into WASPhood. If one tracks down the genealogies of many of that first CIA generation who we take to be WASPs, one will find that claiming a social station among WASPs was quite the untidy and loose fitting affair. All that posing, all that daring, does not make for a genuine claim to fine-bred, endemic aristocracy, but it does make for a good spy with a dash of prized eccentricity and panache. And it was exactly the sort of adaptability and improvisation that was needed in an "age of change" as Dulles put it during a speech he gave in 1960 "when nations are being born almost before we know their names or their geography." There was also urgency afoot: He took Nikita Khrushchev at his word when the Soviet leader declaimed "We will bury you" by having Communism take over the world, while Dulles thought Khrushchev's parallel talk of coexistence to be merely an apparatchik's habit of speaking out of both sides of one's mouth. Dulles still had something of Joseph's unblinking wiliness to recognize it too in a man who had survived being at an elbow's length away from Stalin for a decade.

That pretense at being high born despite scrappy beginnings can mark individuals, as well as institutions. Dulles was ancestrally disposed to a flinty swagger, stiff-necked and ever so confident. The CIA under him was bold and aggressive too. It was also sloppy, and Dulles would admit that he had to pull some things together in haste. Journalists picked up chatter out of the

hangouts of Cuban exiles in Miami that an 'invasion' to liberate their homeland was imminent. This talk was published in the U.S. media weeks and days ahead of the event. Too much media attention as the plan unfolded, and then too much public attention when the plan folded upon itself made Kennedy lose his nerve and call the whole thing off. Kennedy even skated very close to the Trump's 'enemy of the people' charge against the press seven days after the invasion when addressing the American Newspaper Publishers Association: there he called for "self-discipline" among his audience's ranks since "this nation's foes have openly boasted of acquiring through our newspapers information they would otherwise hire agents to acquire through theft, bribery or espionage."

Kennedy wanted it all toned down, and tamed, so he ousted Dulles and some of his men from the top echelons of the Agency not a year into his presidency and brought in an outsider engineer-cum-businessman, a fellow who had made his name in industry and massive construction projects, amassing riches during the war years, before becoming chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. Kennedy had purposely picked a man with no military or espionage background, and he did so because he understood that the American public, one that was beginning to get wary of all this secrecy business, wanted it this way.

The Bay of Pigs invasion implanted a seedling of doubt in the public's mind concerning the establishment's aptitude. That egg left dripping off Dulles' patrician face was too powerful an image for them to overlook. It also whet the appetite of a new crop of aggressive journalists—ones who were too young for the action of the great war yet still longed for a warrior ethos—to make a name for themselves by scalping men with such faces. Dulles spent the rest of his days (he died in 1969) defending himself and the CIA, though the furthest he would go in deflecting blame was "the president knew...." Yet it mattered little. The cultural ground was shifting from under him. What scholars call 'the Cold War consensus'—the Grand American Project of the post-WWII era and the *raison d'être* for the WASPian CIA—was beginning to crack, and according to historian Simon Wilmetts of Leiden University it began on the Cuban shoreline, by the CIA's own blundering actions, rather than in a paddy in Vietnam.

What followed the Bay of Pigs were fifteen years of the public's souring on the ruling class. There was too much being reported not to compel them to think that something is 'off' with Washington, and that too many secrets were being kept away from them. The 1968 Tet offensive took the American public by surprise; "Weren't we winning?" most people thought; it turns out they were not. And then it got worse. Luckily for Dulles he was not around to see the worst of it. There were the Pentagon Papers of 1971. Then Watergate. Then the ignoble evacuation of Saigon. Trust was eroding, paranoia was setting in. The Kennedy assassination was retroactively fitted out with all sorts of conspiracy theories and martyrdom mythologies that had the Cult of the Grassy Knoll expanding its ranks of believers by leaps and bounds. The keepers of the Camelot legacy also found it useful to have the CIA playing the role of Kennedy's foil, pegging the excesses and flops of his presidency on a bunch of faceless spies. The 1973 oil crisis was borne out of wars in the Middle East, but it also made the easy riches of that commodity a focus of the

public's imagination, and not far away from that was the CIA and its disproportionate meddling in the region. Consequently, the public was well-primed before it went to the movie theaters in 1975 to watch Robert Redford in *Three Days of the Condor* play a quirky, bookish CIA analyst who suddenly finds himself the target of an evil conjoined bureaucratic twin that he never knew the Agency had. But the plotline also implicates the whole system that allowed this twin to survive. And of course, it's all about Middle Eastern oil somehow. But no worries, the *NYTimes* will expose it all, for Redford's character has bravely double-crossed the double-crossers. Or maybe the Grey Lady is in bed with the schemers, and it won't send his story to print? The last scene leaves this question hanging.

This was an unfortunate turn of events, for just as the CIA was coming under this dark cloud a new generation was coming up in its ranks, a generation reared in professional-grade tradecraft, a generation of proper spies, a generation of non-WASPs.

Milt Bearden was one of them. In his 2003 book *The Main Enemy* (coauthored with Jim Risen of the *NYTimes* then) he tells us that his incoming generation was distinguished by the fact that they were "the first to be tempered by long, hard, operational experience, much of it behind the Iron Curtain." The OSS types had it easy, all they had to do was blow up German trains during World War II. Bearden's colleagues, on the other hand, were "bringing back an up-close-and-personal feel for the KGB and its Eastern European proxies, a streetwise know-how that had been lacking in the early CIA." They were also different in another way from their elitist seniors in the Agency "whose notions of secret keeping or secret stealing had been shaped by Yale and Skull and Bones"; those WASPs were to be substituted out by a crop of Middle American graduates of state universities and the military, "most born just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Many of their fathers had gone to college on the GI Bill after the war, some the first members of their families to climb that once tightly restricted ladder." Sure there were still plenty of Ivy League graduates coming in too but "most of its members came from dots on the map spread farther afield"—Bearden, born in 1940, himself came into the CIA in 1962 from Texas via the Air Force and Yale.

Soon they would rise to the middle management of a defanged, decaying organization where their hard-earned talents found little outlet:

The CIA in 1975 was anything but the self-assured organization with an unchallenged mission I had joined. The DDP had been renamed, this time in plain vanilla, as the Directorate of Operations. It was awash with men and women who'd been run out of Southeast Asia by the North Vietnamese Army and were walking the halls looking for jobs. President Carter's new DCI, Admiral Stansfield Turner, brought the President's moralistic sensibilities to Langley with him, and soon field case officers were tasked with transforming the often ugly business of espionage into a "morally uplifting experience" for both case officers

and their foreign agents. The President thought that America had an “inordinate fear of Communism,” and his DCI agreed. Within a few years, Turner had dismantled many of the capabilities the CIA had built up over the decades, dismissing them as Cold War relics.

There is nothing unique about the CIA's lackluster balance sheet of hits and misses. Intelligence work is plodding, never neat, never follows the script, and always falls short of the expectations set by the spy novel (and film) genre. Much of it relies on dumb luck. It needs poets like the quarter-Mexican James Angleton, another legendary early figure who ran counterintelligence, because spy work needs a lot of imagination. But the ruthlessness and tediousness, the incessant exposure to human frailties and malice, and the high stakes of it all, along with the ritualized scapegoating that politicians and the public periodically demand, does take its toll as exemplified by what happened to the disheveled, half-crazed Angleton in his last years. Angleton's end (also in the pivotal year of 1975) was orchestrated by a new director, Bill Colby, one of those rare Catholics that came in at the beginnings of the Agency whose father was cut in the frontiersman tradition, trading spices with Native Americans in Minnesota, and bucking his WASPy roots by converting to Catholicism. Colby personally detested Angleton and wanted to sanitize the agency with some controlled sunlight after it had gone too dark, too obscurantist, and too weird. He selectively leaked damaging stuff to a number of journalists, including Seymour Hersh at the *NYTimes* (but more often throughout his career at *The New Yorker*), a wacky journalist that I would have occasion to work with years later in the 2000s on a couple of things, again to make things difficult for the CIA (and by extension the Saudis). Colby later denied leaking to Hersh, claiming that he only talked to him to correct his account.

Hersh's exposes touched off a political storm beyond Colby's control, and it drew a big red target on the Agency's back. The nation settled on the CIA as its object of flagellation, a cathartic ablution by which the establishment could atone for those fifteen years of acridness. The rest of the establishment didn't object much—they couldn't believe their luck. So began the year of theatrical hearings at the House and the Senate (1975 again, just making sure you're paying attention) that empaneled Director Colby a whopping and exhausting thirty two times. But the CIA was left dejected and trigger-shy, chastened and emasculated.

Despite the clamor and a forests'-worth of reports, with a smattering of legislative reforms and newly instituted congressional oversight, there were few impediments for the CIA to get back to its old ways once its time in the public's doghouse had passed. And throughout it all, it should be noted that the Agency was primarily being called out on its nefariousness rather than the shoddiness of its product or the cumbersomeness of its action. In a sense, the Agency still held on to some of its mystique. Colby was replaced by George H.W. Bush, which began that family's story into America's. Decades later, Jim Baker (the focus of a new 2020 biography grandly entitled *The Man Who Ran Washington* by the *WaPo*'s Peter Baker), a paragon of the life-long Deep Stater and an enforcer for the Bush family, would effectively place 9/11 at Colby's

feet, accusing him of dismantling the CIA's clandestine effectiveness rather than that being Stansfield's doing. But that is nonsense, and it was just one of the many ways Washington tried to escape reckoning for the terrorist attacks—more on that in just a bit.

And even though Bush was director for only eleven months, his tenure is remembered as one of mending and convalescence for the Agency, so much so that the HQ in Langley would be named after him several historiographic cycles later. The country was looking for healing after those fifteen years. The country was looking for revival, something to lift up its spirits on its bicentennial in 1976. Bush took his cue from Gerald Ford, the president who had appointed him, to cast himself as a healer (...sort of like the unity and coming-together spin that Biden is pushing now). Bush, a former congressman, went out of his way to butter up his former colleagues on Capitol Hill, happily appearing fifty times or so to testify over the short period of his directorship.

The story of the CIA then oscillates between the appointments of 'turn-down-the-volume' directors followed by 'the-OSS-rides-again' types. The Agency rallied under Bill Casey, one of those old OSS hands, by doing its part to defeat the Soviets after Ronald Reagan came in and tasked the agency with bloodying the Evil Empire's nose. Notably Reagan empowered Casey to expand on a program that Carter had started to equip and support Afghan mujahidin in countering the Soviet Union's invasion of their country. Casey creatively subcontracted some of the fighting and the funding to the Pakistanis and the Saudis, but as the program gained traction and racked up successes, he had his CIA taking a more hands-on approach, giving his point-man, Bearden, who he had remembered fondly as his host for a few days in Nigeria years earlier, a mandate to win, at whatever the cost, whatever the twist. And here's a billion dollars to smooth things over. And Stinger missiles too.

Casey was thinking in terms of an endgame. No longer would America be content with a "steady-as-she-goes" bleeding out of the Soviets. Reagan was willing to entertain visions of collapsing the Soviet system entirely, visions that had been whispered into his ears by a set of hawks who he had been chummy with even before becoming president, and he expected Casey to deliver. Casey would go all out: "There were rumors about his discreet meetings in the Vatican with the Polish pope, his deals with the Saudis to keep oil prices down so that the Soviets couldn't reap windfall profits from their oil sales, and his efforts to block a proposed Soviet oil pipeline to Western Europe. And to be certain, Casey had discovered the Soviet Union's Achilles' heel in Afghanistan" as Bearden reminisced in his book.

In the the Middle East, the Agency found itself haunted by one of its first real successes when the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution in Iran was partly fueled by memories (and myths) of the 1953 coup. As if the Agency needed more of a headache in the doom and gloom of the post-Colby years: even its once cherished exploits had percolated into a massive defeat. But Afghanistan was giving the Agency its groove back, and instead of staying clear of an embarrassment, the Agency went after the new Iranian regime with gusto. Iran then had its acolytes in Beirut murder a CIA division chief who was visiting there, followed by Hezbollah managing to abduct the

station chief in Lebanon in retribution. So began the slippery, non-linear slope towards the Iran-Contra affair, which revolved, in part, on attempts to release other hostages held by the Iranians, and which, when it eventually blew up in everyone's faces—both Iranians and Americans—could have buried the Agency too had the Reaganites have chosen to conveniently scapegoat it. But Casey managed to render one more service for his guys—this time by dying. On a hospital bed in May 1987, incapacitated by cancer, Casey allegedly nodded in affirmation as Bob Woodward asked him whether he knew about all what was happening by way of illicit dealings. Casey thus died for the CIA's new slate of sins, giving the institution enough room to duck the brunt of 'shame'.

By the time one of its own—Bush Sr., well, sort-of one of its own—was elected president, the party was over: there was no more Soviet Union. After fatally wounding the Soviets in Afghanistan, Bearden was promoted to Chief of the Soviet/East European Division. He and the rest of the Agency sat speechless as the mighty enemy broke down into bits of concrete and tattered red fabric—an event that they had worked for all their lives but still embarrassingly failed to predict. Their long sought victory laurels wilted when politicians nippily gave them the cold shoulder once the Cold Warrior-ing was done. Bush lost an election to Bill Clinton who famously had little interest in intelligence, mistaking one of his picks for director, Jim Woolsey (we will meet him again a little later), for an admiral at the announcement ceremony (he wasn't), and then never taking a one-on-one meeting with him. De Niro would later hire Bearden in retirement to consult with him on *The Good Shepherd*.

There was another irritant for the Agency: what little glory accrued in defeating the Soviets had to be shared with the emerging clan of neoconservatives, who were then populating defense and other security roosts. In fact, the 'neocons' were initially brought in by Reagan to second-guess the analysts at Langley. This umbrage was never forgotten, and shall color much of what follows.

Should we feel terribly sorry for the frustrations that beset the Deep Staters at this point of the story, thus excusing their lashing out since? No, this happens to all spy agencies that set themselves the task of history-bending, world-changing action: it doesn't pan out. Even when things looked like they did, the aftertaste is bitter and disappointing. Some spy outfits spin their failures better than others: the Mossad, for example, can still get the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen—who cameos these days as an apostle of truth-telling and a castigator of disinformation on social media—to produce and star in the Netflix series *The Spy* that offers its viewers hours of bad history as well as never-happened history about how Israel allegedly infiltrated Syria's top political and military echelons in the early 1960s. Hoorah for the Mossad, but its rank-and-file would still know that the frothy hype was just that, or at least one would hope they had the sense to know. (Skip *The Spy* and watch the eight episodes of the 2020 Israeli espionage thriller *Tehran* on AppleTV instead; whoever wrote that script knows the rhythm and messiness of intel work well.)

So it wasn't the eclipse of the WASPs that did the CIA in, it just happened. It wasn't a matter of pedigree, it was just bureaucratic ennui. The long-drawn out anticlimax went concurrently though with a new officer class coming in after that of Bearden's white Middle America generation: their ranks transitioned into urban, Mediterranean, Slavic, and lots more Mormons. That is probably why some associate institutional decline with a changing of the demographic guard. Some of the internal culture changed, and some of it didn't: for example, even though Donovan and Dulles never were Jew-haters—quite the contrary when compared to others in their class and times—the Agency kept its weirdly anti-Semitic ethos all throughout, maybe due to its early perception, then common, of a long-standing association of Jews with Communism, followed by a later irritation at having to share the victors' stage with the neocons—who were disproportionately Jewish.

I maintain that the 'bad' changes that did occur had less to do with demography and more to do with biography. And you had to endure all this meandering story-telling to get us to one particular biography, that of George Tenet's, the second longest serving director after Dulles, and who like Dulles stamped the agency with his character—for better or worse. Actually there is going to be much more 'worse' than 'better' in what follows.

Tenet, who first came in as deputy director, witnessed an age of change, change around the world, change in America, and change within the intelligence community, on a scale similar to that of Dulles's times. The 'Main Enemy' had birthed a dozen or so new nations right at its demise, some at each other's throats. A security breach that had festered for almost nine years had been discovered just a year before Tenet walked through the doors. The turn-coat had given up almost every agent that the CIA had in the Soviet Union. With no discernable enemy and with fresh embarrassments piled on, the budgets were drastically cut by Congress. Worse still, the Clinton administration indicated early on, in Mogadishu, that it certainly won't bite at the bit when things get dicey, so why risk anything? Then things began to speed up: a new team had been cobbled together at the CIA's Counterterrorism Center to keep track of a certain Osama bin Laden, but their implorations and plans to kill him here, nab him there, were ignored or cancelled by the Agency's leadership, chiefly by Tenet himself. Then 9/11 happened. The Agency was initially spared its due of tarring and shaming, principally by the new president George W. Bush. And then Iraq happened, wherein Tenet found no compunction in conveniently tying that albatross around his savior's neck. Tenet's tenure ends just as the CIA is demoted from its primo rank among America's sixteen security arms, when new structural reforms placed it under a National Director of Intelligence—that WASP-established 'company' was reduced to being one of many taking orders from on top. Was this uniquely Tenet's failing? Was Iraq a catalyst in an already percolating process of corrosion? The answer is somewhere in between. And within that answer we may discover the origins of Trumpism, and the most virulent strains of Never-Trumpism too.

* *

The CIA and Iraq, the unlikely pairing that birthed Trumpism

Tenet's story was intricately tied up with Iraq—he tells us in his memoir, *At the Center of the Storm* (2007), that terrorism and Iraq had defined his term—and it was he who gave a dull, not-going-anywhere John Brennan a leg up at the Agency, positioning him for a leadership role. Tenet also contacted Clinton's former National Security Adviser Tony Lake on Brennan's behalf to get the latter into Barack Obama's innermost circle. And it was Brennan who, in my opinion, was orchestrating or at least enabling the Deep State's illegal bid to take out Trump. And the story is likely to drag on, since an alleged acolyte of Brennan's for whom he has given abundant praise, Avril Haines, has just been nominated as Biden's Director of National Intelligence.

Therein lies Tenet's most troubling legacy: the Tenetians he left behind. The Tenetians subscribed to a culture of self-preservation, going even so far as undermining a presidency. And they will keep at it. Dulles wanted to protect his beloved CIA, but he would never go so far as wounding his president, even though the public imagination (and that of Oliver Stone's) had his guys offing Kennedy in retaliation for the Bay of Pigs ("some people say" that Ted Cruz's father was somehow involved too—*ha!*). In contrast to his predecessor's, the mindset that Tenet instituted may not have physically assassinated a president, but it was willing to conceptually assassinate a presidency. This is why this time around, the CIA's time of troubles is not business as usual. It isn't merely a 'rogue elephant' a-rampaging, as it was described at the congressional hearings of the 1970s, one that can eventually be tamed and retrained. This time around it must be put down. The sickness is no longer one of the head or the body. It is not a symptom of displaced pedigrees or changing demographics. The sickness is inside the soul.

How did it come to this? I'm about to tell you. I had front-row seats.

Unlike Dulles's clandestine background in the OSS, Tenet came into the CIA from the ranks of the Senate staff. Tenet was the loud, brash son of a Greek Albanian immigrant who had married a Greek lady in Queens and, somewhat stereotypically, ran a diner together. Tenet's first job was with a Greek-American advocacy outfit. So, *not* a WASP. He did not take his language skills and wheeler dealer personality and apply to the CIA though, rather he latched on to a moderate Republican senator from Pennsylvania who was an heir to the Heinz fortune. Tenet would do a lot of latching-on on his way to the top. Tenet served in many roles as a congressional staffer, including as staff director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the same body that was established as a result of the excruciation of the Agency during congressional hearings in the mid-1970s, before transitioning over to the Clinton administration where his job became more hands-on in security matters than oversight.

Within a few years, he found himself appointed to the role of Deputy Director of the CIA. But Tenet was effectively doing the director's work, since his boss John Deutch, a scientist who had been brought over from MIT and the Pentagon, was more interested in big-picture stuff. Deutch had been serving less than two months as director, coming in as Woolsey's

replacement, when Tenet joined him—and just by way of a reminder, this was all happening in an administration that cared little for the Agency. And fourteen months later when Deutsch implicitly criticized America's handling of Saddam Hussein before a congressional hearing, thus embarrassing his administration, Tenet moved one notch closer to officially holding the title of the top job. Deutsch was being excoriated in Congress over a failed coup plot in Iraq that the CIA had been midwifing, followed by Saddam Hussein's overrunning of Iraqi opposition bases in the Kurdish city of Erbil, sending tens of thousands on the run, some of whom had been on the CIA payroll or on that of U.S. aid groups, which necessitated that the U.S. take them in—airlifting six thousand of them to Guam and ultimately settling them in America. It was not something that could be hushed and forgotten: Ahmad Chalabi, who was in the thick of all that, was too loud, too well connected, too uncontrollable for that to happen. It also went down less than a week before the 1996 presidential vote, almost having the hallmark of a very late October surprise. Clinton fired Deutsch a month after he won re-election.

Tenet eventually got the presidential nod after the aforementioned Lake's nomination for the position of director was rejected by the Senate, again primarily over what had been happening in Iraq. However, Tenet's career was not only bookmarked by Iraq, it was destined to be entangled with that of Chalabi's.

Tenet's first challenge as director was to counteract Chalabi. Thwarted in his years-long desire to lead an insurgency in Iraq, Chalabi was now leading an insurgency in Washington, and he was essentially leading it against Tenet and the CIA. Dismissing what warnings he may have heard about what the Deep State can do to those who challenge it along the lines of what Schumer had expressed to Maddow, here we had an outsider, an Arab, a Muslim, a Shia Muslim to boot—one of the 'stepchildren' of the Arab World—starting fires along the Potomac. By then he had no money, was a former CIA asset (his categorization was never that of an 'agent' as he kept insisting) with a burn notice, was supposedly discredited by a history of bank fraud, and was derisively dismissed as a man with more supporters in Washington than he had in Iraq, and yet he was drawing blood. The Deep State had never seen anything like this (or since). Thus the CIA added 'traitor' to his list of perfidies. He turned it back on them. Chalabi saw his insurgency both as reprisal and reprise: he would get back at those who betrayed him, and he would again cast the CIA as America's *bête noire* as had happened often in its history, turning Congress against it, a process that Tenet was intimately familiar with. Even with all the tools and talents at Tenet's disposal, Chalabi was uniquely capable and successful in outmaneuvering him and setting all sorts of meddlesome and noisy representatives and senators against the Agency.

His successes in Congress were only part of his thrust: just as the CIA had recruited supporters from under him and turned them against him, Chalabi went about recruiting ex-CIA stalwarts and malcontents for his insurgency. He brought in Linda Flohr and Warren Marik, as well as the legendary (and notorious) Dewey Clarridge to advocate for his plans. He even got one of Tenet's predecessors, the hapless Jim Woolsey to [serve as the his organization's pro-bono lawyer](#) on a couple of issues, such as when the FBI imprisoned six of the Iraqis evacuated from

Iraqi-Kurdistan to Guam after sloppily accusing them of being double-agents for the Saddam regime.

In the same month that Tenet was confirmed by the Senate (July 1997), which also marked the fiftieth year anniversary of the CIA's founding, Chalabi unleashed a media barrage against Langley to striking effect. First there was Peter Jennings airing a 45 minute documentary on ABC with the title '[Unfinished Business: The CIA and Saddam Hussein](#)'. It was followed by a left upper cut from Jim Hoagland, then the *WaPo*'s chief foreign policy voice and a friend of Chalabi's for three decades, with a story three pages of newsprint long. The gist of the media onslaught was summed up by Hoagland who pronounced that "Along with the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Iraq stands as the agency's most expensive and embarrassing flop since it was founded on July 26, 1947"—and here was Chalabi starring in the lead of narrating this story. Chalabi was not accusing the CIA of being predatory, he was accusing it of being dangerously incompetent, which is sort of worse. The sensationalist (Senator Frank) Church and (Representative Otis) Pike hearings of the 1970s, together with the spate of whistleblower exposes in print, painted a picture of a CIA overstepping its constitutional mandate and engaging in soul corroding activities such as political murder and blackmail, things that the 'good guys' shouldn't be doing. They would also callously leave the people who worked with them behind. There was some review of the CIA's fumbles, but the focus was on how it was all so sinister, and un-American. Now Chalabi was alleging that the CIA was staffed and led by a sloppy, slovenly bunch who got people killed by making a hot mess of things *and* who still cold-heartedly left their allies out to dry. He had Tenet on the run across the Potomac.

One of the first things that Tenet did to in response to this insurgency was to blame Chalabi for the unravelling of the Agency's 1996 coup attempt against Saddam, suggesting that either Chalabi had directly alerted the Saddam regime to what was being cooked up, or that the Iraqi dissident had his own surroundings compromised whereby Saddam's spies were listening in on his conversations and constant misgivings about the coup. Tenet, like Dulles, was a master at spinning the Congress and the press, never as capable as Chalabi, but still not bad. This will not be the first time that Tenet employs a 'blame Chalabi' public relations strategy to deflect responsibility away from himself. The backstory in this particular case was that the CIA always preferred a military coup as a means to get rid of Saddam. In May 1991 Bush had signed a presidential finding instructing the CIA to create the conditions for the removal of the Iraqi leader. The CIA funded Chalabi as a public relations gambit, while placing its hopes in "the colonel with a brigade patrolling his palace that's going to get [Saddam]" as Brent Scowcroft, who had been National Security Advisor when Bush's order was given, told Jennings in his inimitable everyone-thinks-I'm-smart-so-I-must-be way. Chalabi had other plans, specifically a plan for insurgency. "Saddam is coup-proof" he would say, and that the Iraqi tyrant was far better at hatching conspiracies than any one left around him. The only way to have a fighting chance was to unite the Iraqi opposition (check), gain a footing on Iraqi soil (check), raise a fighting force (check), get regional backing (half-a-check), and gain America's blessing and air support

(pending). Clinton's National Security Advisor Sandy Berger ridiculed Chalabi's plan as another 'Bay of Pigs'. The commander of U.S. Central Command, General Anthony Zinni thought he was being clever when going further and calling Chalabi's plan a 'Bay of Goats' by way of a zinger to furnish articles and papers written by Deep State stenographers in the media and the think tank world against Chalabi's plan. Never mind that Chalabi had recruited a legend of U.S. Special Ops, General Wayne Downing to vouch for his plan and to act as a foil for the overrated Zinni. (At a time when Zinni's badmouthing reached fever pitch, I wrote an article claiming that he was doing so partly in preparation for a lucrative retirement gig working for Persian Gulf potentates, who too loathed Chalabi. The State Department's representative to the Iraqi opposition, Frank Ricciardone, went ballistic on me in an e-mail. But that was exactly what Zinni did subsequently. Zinni's name was later floated as a possible running mate for Obama in 2008.)

Chalabi did in fact know about the CIA's secret plot, and he travelled to Langley in March of 1996 to warn Director Deutsch, who met him along with his deputy Tenet, that their plot had been infiltrated and that the regime knew everything they were doing. One of Chalabi's sources within the regime had tipped him off, cautioning him to stay away from it because it would end in disaster. The CIA had consolidated all its Iraqi projects into this plot, giving it the moniker DBAchilles. It was aptly named, for they were blinded to its fatal vulnerability. Tenet explained away Chalabi's warning as envy. Chalabi was mucking things up because he was being shut out. Chalabi had been on the outs ever since a year earlier he tried to touch-off a military confrontation between Iraqi opposition forces and the Iraqi regime, hoping to demonstrate that its dispirited forces would melt away in confusion and disarray, and that his plan for insurgency was viable. In his telling, he was partly vindicated, but the Americans had sabotaged his plan, part of which was to get his fellow Iraqis to believe that his actions had the blessings of both the Americans *and* the Iranians. Lake, the National Security Advisor, had sent a cable moments before the operations were set to begin to tell Chalabi's allies that they were "on your own." Fearing being left exposed without American cover, many stood down. Chalabi defiantly went ahead, with mixed results. But he was increasingly seen at the CIA as a liability, a loose cannon.

The CIA's alternative operation to topple Saddam from within hinged on Muhammad Abdullah Shahwani, a native of Mosul with Afghan heritage. He was a former pilot with the Iraqi Army who had very little background in intelligence work, and not much by way of intellect either. Shahwani had left the Iraqi military in 1984 and left Iraq altogether in 1990. This was the man whom the CIA picked to orchestrate one of its most ambitious regime change operations in its history. It was a terrible mistake. For his part, he picked an Egyptian national of questionable mental stability to act as a courier to his fellow conspirators in Baghdad, three of whom were sons of Shahwani's then serving in various military and security outfits. Once tasked, the Egyptian [immediately went off and volunteered his services](#) to Saddam's spies, who had previously employed him for sundry tasks. What follows was laid out in documents detailing the events for Saddam's eyes that his secret police put together, [copies of which I had a hand in](#)

[locating](#) after the war. This record of Shahwani's and the CIA's machinations reads like amateur hour.

The communication equipment the CIA had sent to Baghdad was always under the control of Saddam's guys from the get-go. The CIA also rolled in various unconnected networks into this one plot, thus widening the damage, including that of another of its agents, the former Ba'athist politician Ayad Allawi, who they would later champion as the 'Anti-Chalabi' and place as Iraq's first prime minister after the regime's fall. Saddam's people strung along the CIA for almost two years before closing in on the conspirators in June 1996, three months after Chalabi's warning. Hundreds were arrested. Dozens were executed in the initial batches, with the tallies increasing over time as the regime deemed more of the conspirators' relatives and colleagues potential traitors. Saddam's spies used the encrypted satellite phone to call the CIA station in the Jordanian capital, from where this coup was being managed, to say: "Give it up. We have your guys."

The 1996 coup fiasco has gone down in history as the Agency's biggest fuck-up. Not that anyone would know it. Contemporary standard histories of the CIA hardly make reference to it, if at all. In terms of casualties (those executed, tortured, and imprisoned) it eventually outnumbered, by my estimate, the original Bay of Pigs, whose count among the CIA's allies was around 120 killed during the landing, 360 wounded, a dozen executed later, and 1,202 captured (they were later ransomed by the U.S.). Somehow Tenet escaped responsibility for what happened. Oddly, he kept a bereaving Shahwani, whose three sons were among the executed, around. Tenet then tasked him with burning Chalabi. Shahwani set about finding defectors from the Iraqi National Congress, Chalabi's outfit, to come forward and badmouth their former comrades. He commissioned and published a ghost-authored book-length expose under the name of a disgruntled employee who had been dismissed over accusations of sexually harassing an Iraqi Christian girl in Chicago after her relatives had reached out to the INC and complained. The 'author' later told Chalabi that Shahwani made him do it, and paid him handsomely for the book. But Shahwani was so bad at all he did that he never managed to get the book to circulate widely. Only a few copies survive.

Nonetheless, Tenet also found a place for Shahwani in the run-up to the war. One of the weirdest episodes involved Shahwani sitting by the side of Muqtada al-Sadr in the latter's house in Najaf as a mob dragged another CIA agent to the cleric's door. The Sadrist mob had overpowered Majid al-Khoei, the son of the world's formerly foremost Ayatollah, after a gunfight at the holy city's holiest shrine. They dragged al-Khoei in the streets and stabbed at him repeatedly and maniacally. Sadr refused to have the bleeding man admitted to his home where he could have protected him, potentially saving his life. Sadr's father and al-Khoei's father had bickered back when they were both alive; there is no other explanation for Muqtada's behavior, then that and he believed al-Khoei was a CIA spy—but what about the man sitting next to you, dummy? By most accounts, Shahwani never said a thing during the whole episode. Al-Khoei's attendants took flight and called their CIA handlers, who had no contingency plan to evacuate

them. They told them to find refuge with Chalabi who had just flown into the southern city of Nassiriya 130 miles to the south (again, against American wishes) and was encamped there in an abandoned airbase. They showed up and told him everything. Chalabi was increasingly becoming a go-to confessor of the CIA's perfidies—and this was quite the windfall for someone who had a habit of airing them. Yet Tenet found no one more qualified to appoint as nominal figurehead of the new post-Saddam Iraqi Intelligence Service (that the CIA was tasked with standing-up) than Shahwani. He was predictably bad at his job, to disastrous consequence for a country reeling from hostile covert action undertaken by its neighbors, and the proliferation of foreign terrorists within it.

Shahwani was not the sum of the CIA's screw-ups in Iraq in the lead up to the war, or afterwards. The CIA also relied on an unstable drunk to liaise with a religious Sufi family that the agency believed was plugged up with sources and adherents deep inside the Iraqi regime. The [CIA trusted heavily in this network](#), which we were told by our sources in Iraqi Kurdistan, ahead of the war, was nothing but a front for the regime. Later, Chalabi found documentary evidence that it was being played by Saddam's spies. This network told the CIA where Saddam was to be found, right on the eve of the war, supposedly spending the night in a bunker within his daughter's riverside orchard on the outskirts of Baghdad. His sons Uday and Qusay, who each controlled a slew of security outfits, were alleged to be right there with him. Tenet went with this hotcake to Bush, who ordered that the first strike of the war, optimistically called a 'decapitation strike', would hone in on this specific target. Around fifty Cruise and bunker-busting missiles were sent on their way. Except, there was no bunker. Saddam and his sons were not there. It was another ruse that Tenet had fallen for, hoping as usual that if the top leadership was gone then some group of generals would step-up to fill the void, and the Americans would be able to live with that outcome. There wouldn't even need to be a war, or a march to Baghdad. Chalabi again sounded the alarm in the media, with Colin Powell snipping back on live television with something to the effect of "Chalabi does not know what he's talking about." Except that he knew too much. The CIA continued to use this Sufi network after this debacle, and it would become a fixture of Baghdad's multi-billion dollar corruption industry. One of its 'Rockstars' resurfaced in the Trump era, racking up hefty bills at Trump Hotel DC, hoping to hobnob and ingratiate himself with the new administration.

Not all of the CIA's human assets were infiltrators though, some were mere losers and scammers. They recruited an INC fixer in Damascus whose job was to smooth things over with Syrian intelligence for Chalabi. They sent him to Baghdad to become its first post-Saddam 'mayor'. He tried to steal a quarter of a billion dollars in cash from a bank branch, and may have been encouraged to do so by some 'Americans' as he later told us, but the branch's director implored Chalabi to intervene. Chalabi sent him men, along with a U.S. colonel, to transport the monies from that branch to safer vaults at the Iraqi Central Bank. I later went with two others to summon this 'mayor' and have him report to the INC's HQ. Seeing me, he would assume that the INC was sending its friendlier, more gullible face. We arrived together at the Hunting Club

but he was swiftly and expertly separated from the dozens of machinegun wielding ruffians that comprised his security detail. He then walked across its sprawling lawns to where Chalabi was waiting to receive him. Halfway through, Chalabi's longtime driver ran up and slapped him across the face, screaming traitor. The slap quickly disabused him of any pretenses to a higher standing, whatever the CIA had promised him. The 'traitor' then confessed to Chalabi all that he had been up to with the CIA, including having his men put up posters around Baghdad denouncing Chalabi as a wanted bank thief in Jordan!

Another agent was detained by U.S. authorities on January 3, 2003 for furtively bringing in approximately \$70,000.00 (USD) in cash through Washington's Dulles Airport, in violation of federal law. He failed to [mention this in his customs declaration](#), but the money was found during a routine customs screening. When told that he would be taken into custody, this man broke down in tears and claimed that this money belonged to the CIA. He provided the phone number of his handler who promptly arrived at the airport from Langley to sort out the matter with the chief U.S. Customs agent on duty and the FBI's representative at Dulles at the time. After five hours of questioning in the presence of both U.S. Customs and the FBI, it transpired that this Iraqi politician had lied to his CIA handler about the amount of money he had disbursed during an Iraqi opposition conference in London a few days earlier. The initial amount handed over to him for disbursement was allegedly \$100,000.00 (USD). He had told his handler that he had had doled out over \$90,000 at the conference, and thus would not be "red flagging" himself with the remaining sum if searched by customs. He was mistaken.

I know this story because I myself was detained at Dulles the following day by the same customs and FBI officers. My offense concerned hair-raising documents that a thorough and smart customs official had found within hidden compartments in my bags. He was determined to find something after I stupidly got fresh with him when he inquired about a sophisticated spyglass that I would use to spot surveillance at one of my safe houses in Amman—I told him I used it to peer at hot girls. He didn't like my tone. Minutes later he was rummaging through a file, found what is known as a 'key page' that matched symbols to the actual names of items, and then looked up to say, "Why do you have pricing charts for T-72 diesel engines?" Before I could blurt out "I can explain" I was dragged into an interrogation. Excitable officers with knowledge of Arabic would periodically barge in demanding answers as to why did I have blueprints labelled 'conical reactors'—whatever that was supposed to mean. I really didn't know. I was ferrying documents that another INC team had pilfered out of Amman from a company that fronted for the regime and that worked towards getting arms and spare parts for it, such as Soviet-era tank engines. What I was concerned about was slipping these documents past the Jordanians, who I had a good relationship with. I didn't think twice about getting into trouble with U.S. Customs. At the time, the INC was working with the Defense Intelligence Agency, so I simply told the interrogators that we are a congressionally funded outfit that works in partnership with the U.S. government—all true. Except that the DIA didn't know who I was, and didn't know that I was dabbling in this sort of work, which was done to compartmentalize the

INC's product. Several hours later it was all cleared up, and I even had the gall to demand 'my' documents be returned before leaving the airport (they were returned via the DIA the next day). Once the interrogators realized which side I was on, they wiled away the hours by telling me things like what they witnessed the previous day. It seems they had to learn lots more about these troublesome Iraqis. They never gave the name or any other descriptive feature of the man, like his age or ethnicity or the such. But once I was back in the office I put out word to our guys to sniff around as to who this may be. Word came back from one of my colleagues: he knew a guy working in custodial services at Dulles who had casually told him that he saw so-and-so weeping like a baby and was taken in for questioning by authorities on the same day I was asking about. This fellow had pickpocketed the Agency yet that did not stop his handlers from placing him, like Allawi, right at the top of the Iraqi ruling class hierarchy. Better this sort than Chalabi—"that wily thief!"—they reasoned.

Truth be told, the CIA were kind to the ones who had faithfully served the Agency's efforts to thwart Chalabi in the run-up to the war, even though they had effectively failed at their tasks; the current president and prime minister of Iraq both fall into this category. They later reconciled with Chalabi, and he supported their rise.

Yet the oddest of Tenet's machinations had to do with a defector nicknamed 'Curveball'. Curveball was run by the Germans but he still turned out to be the Agency's mess, especially on the analytical side of things. His testimony was used extensively by Tenet's crew to lend credibility to the administration's claims about Saddam's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. The administration's approach was that it could not risk an alignment of interests between an enemy such as Saddam, who potentially had access to biological and chemical agents, as well as the knowhow to put together 'dirty' nuclear materials, and other enemies of America's such as Al-Qaeda who intended to inflict mass casualty attacks on U.S. civilians. The CIA had missed the warning signals that the 9/11 attacks were in the works. They had missed a whole lot of other things too. They were skating on thin ice and their credibility was shot. What else were they missing? Can they be certain that someone like Saddam, who had constantly surprised and one-upped them in the past, would not work with the terrorists? Can they say for certain that he no longer possessed WMD even though he was one of its most flagrant users in the post WWII era (...the CIA would cover up for those crimes of his against the Kurds, the Marsh Arabs, and Iranian forces)? And how well did the CIA read the intentions of a man like Bin Laden and those around him; was he really above working with a 'secularist' like Saddam? The CIA had to play catch up. Bush had given Tenet and the Agency a reprieve against head-rolling. Bush was surrounded by several aides who long held a jaundiced view of the Agency's efficacy, men like Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. They had tangled with the spies over assessments of Soviet strengths and weaknesses and they felt vindicated by the outcomes of those turf wars of years past. Tenet could not afford to fall behind the bandwagon that was surely bumping along to war. Thus, he seized on Curveball's assessments to show that the CIA can still deliver the goods and be a team player. But after the

war, it turned out that defectors like Curveball were wrong. In fact, it turned out that Curveball was nothing like what he claimed he was. He was faking everything—his past, his education, his jobs—just to get German residency. This was going to get really bad for Tenet.

But if the spooks could somehow pin Curveball on Chalabi then all those gullible, Bush-hating journos out there would follow the mistaken scent. And they did just that. The pack went off yelping like mad and typing furiously, and another neocon-bashing myth was born with Mark Hosenball and Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek*, Jonathan Landay of *Knight Ridder*, and Bob Drogin of the *Los Angeles Times* in the 'lede', so to speak—is it really a surprise then that all of them continue to be conduits for strategic leaks by the Deep State, most recently against Trump? It was not enough that CIA sources had told them that Curveball was somehow related to a top person in Chalabi's crew. They had a longer yarn to spin. Tenet's guys fed Drogin many specifics, which ended up in his book *Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War* (2007). Drogin relates how the CIA claimed to have tracked down Curveball's mother in Baghdad after the war. A CIA team sat down at her home for some tea, pastries and pleasantries, but they were in for a surprise when she told them that her other son worked for Chalabi. The team then met with this brother at Chalabi's headquarters and he told them how he tried to recruit his younger brother for the INC. Drogin even wrote that the "CIA obtained phone records or an eavesdropping report that proved the telephone call had occurred." The implication was that Curveball was yet one more way Chalabi had cooked the intelligence, this time by baiting the Germans. But Chalabi and his team read this stuff in print and kept scratching their heads. Who could this older brother be? They had no clue even though the CIA and its stenographers in the press seemed so certain. It was only with the release of the full name of the Iraqi defector known as Curveball by CBS News's *60 Minutes* during a broadcast in November 2007, a month after Drogin's book went to press, that Chalabi's team had definitive evidence that there is no link between this person and the Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi put out a statement: "The INC can state categorically that there has never been any person at any level of the INC who is related to anyone named Rafid Ahmed Alwan." Drogin and the others have never had to explain the discrepancy; it was only that "lying" Chalabi's side of the story, they must have told themselves, and their CIA sources would never, ever lie to them. Righhhhhht.

These days the far-left journalist Glenn Greenwald is busy tweeting and lamenting how many of his fellow colleagues have turned into shills for the CIA and FBI. Gone were the Hersch days. Nowadays even the leftist component of the media is locked into a partnership with the Deep State in what Greenwald called "a perverse corruption of journalism," all for the ostensibly higher calling of taking down Trump. But why act all outraged and surprised? The genesis of this Ponzi scheme of devil's wages began in 2003, on Iraq, when Tenet mounted a rearguard PR campaign against the Bush administration, and he did so alongside a leftist media class that had been half-crazed by Florida-chads. Greenwald was there. He was in deep. Together they made sure that the Global-War-on-Terror consensus withered within a year among America's elite and the public at large. Contrast that to the fifteen year run of the 'Cold War consensus' that

lasted from 1946-1961. The damage that the Tenetians did in conjunction with the media was long-in-the-making, and immense. And it will persist.

Tenet wisely did not associate Curveball with Chalabi in his memoir. He didn't need to. The toxin had already done its part in the mainstream narrative through his press proxies. He wrote feverishly though to cast off blame onto the Germans for being so gullible. The furthest he was willing to go in terms of owning up to what happened was to throw in a "perhaps"—perhaps the CIA under him should have done a better job of vetting Curveball's information before slam-dunking it on the Resolute Desk. That's it. The rest of the memoir is likewise dedicated to deflecting blame.

Tenet's chief enduring legacy was to scapegoat the neoconservatives for the Iraq War. In fact, he does so on the first page of his memoir, when relating the briefest of interactions with Richard Perle, allegedly right outside the doors of the White House, the morning after 9/11. Tenet claims that right then and there Perle had buttonholed him with the notion that "Iraq has to pay a price for what happened yesterday. They bear responsibility." Tenet was flabbergasted. This was the genesis of the Iraq War, in his telling, and what the media would spin into 'Original Sin' as the standard, orthodox narrative for the Iraq War that still stands. Sadly, as the tale is still told, it happened because Perle got the ear of the president first, right before the CIA had a chance to have its say.

Perle was much hated by the CIA, a hatred spanning decades. Sure, the analysts there detested the wonkish acolytes who hung about Albert Wohlstetter, the University of Chicago academic who took the Agency to task over its assessments of Soviet might, and who came up with the Team B recommendations in the later 1970s that seemingly piled on with the other criticisms they received in that era. It all started when the Ford administration (...remember that whole thing about healing the nation and the world) went ahead with the Helsinki Accords (in 1975—what a pesky year) which Wohlstetter's crew took to be too lenient on the Soviets. But among this crew, Perle was unique. He was a Wohlstetter disciple by way of dating his daughter in high school. He would stop seeing her but he was still taken under the academic's wing. Perle was groomed into becoming an administrative and legislative genius in addition to the high-grade intellectualism that he effortlessly exuded; he took the high-talk and turned it into actionable policy while at the Senate, and later within the corridors of the Reagan administration. Years on, it was Perle's alliance with Chalabi that allowed for the INC to make its plan viable, outmaneuvering the Deep State at every turn. In the fevered imagination of the neocon bashers, Wohlstetter had introduced a young Chalabi to a young Perle as far back as when Chalabi was doing his PhD in mathematics in Chicago, but that is fiction.

The only problem with Tenet's dramatized encounter is that it didn't happen. Perle was outside the country at the time. He did cross paths with Tenet a few days later but the two did not exchange words per Perle, and Perle is not the sort who would back away from something that he had said. Anyone who knew the two men would know that Tenet was lying.

Yet what Tenet was doing with reporters and later in memoirs was more insidious and damaging than simply deflecting blame and protecting a legacy, his and the Agency's. By blaming Chalabi, Tenet was also blaming the neoconservatives who "were writing Chalabi's name over and over again in their notes, like schoolgirls with their first crush" as he put it. But he was essentially blaming his president, George W. Bush, the same man who had saved his hide. Tenet contributed to a narrative that tells a story of how a simple-minded Bush was enthralled, surrounded and manipulated by the neocons, sort of a reprise how the Iran-Contra conspirators had hoodwinked 'the Gipper' (—some characters do overlap between that earlier effort and the slate of neocons who supported Chalabi). Therefore Tenet was undermining Bush to save his own hide and to escape the public's and history's judgement. Herein began the normalization of a mindset that found it appropriate to subvert a presidency, a mindset exhibited later by Tenetians such as Brennan.

Tenet's legacy still rides. His narrative was most recently restated in Robert Draper's tedious book *To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America Into Iraq* (2020). One oddity is that today's professed anti-Deep Staters, especially within Trumpism, continue to cite the Deep State's version of what happened in the lead-up and aftermath of the Iraq War. Which is ironic since, in favorably reviewing this book for the *New York Review of Books*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace scholar Frederick Wehrey ascribes America's deepening division, *including* the rise of Trumpism, to America's experiences in Iraq. Wehrey even managed to link George Floyd's tragic death to the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, asserting that "[t]he abuses we've seen in US policing have deep, homegrown roots, but I am convinced that they are partly a result of the militarization of law enforcement born of the Iraq War and America's other overseas interventions." He went on to say that the "Iraq disaster has rippled across virtually every facet of American life, deepening the inequalities that divide us, stirring a popular contempt for 'expertise' that has opened the door to demagoguery, and contributing to the hollowing-out of our infrastructure and institutions in ways that have left the country dangerously exposed to future shocks." This is a new clownish spin-off of the establishment's doing: after tethering that particular millstone—the diminishing of America's global standing—to hang from the neocons' necks, now it wants to use 'Iraq' to deflect from its overall failure of governance.

However, one should not accept a standard historical narrative just yet. Shortly before his death in 2015, Chalabi added one more intriguing detail to the public record about the CIA's history with Iraq. Chalabi was responding to an Iraqi interviewer, one who was somewhat sympathetic to the Ba'athists that Chalabi had sought to overthrow, and who was taking Chalabi to task over working with the American 'enemy' to do just that, an act which the interviewer took to be a form of treason whatever the evils of the Saddam regime may have been. The interview was not aired at the time, and was only uploaded online years after Chalabi had passed. Chalabi asserted in his retort that it was the Ba'athists who worked with the CIA early on in their bid to seize power in the 1960s. Chalabi gave several examples. The most striking of which was

when he yet again reprised his role as confessor of the CIA's doings: he related what Jim Critchfield, who ran Middle East operations for the Agency during those critical years, had told him in confidence. Critchfield had only said a few things on the record about what the CIA did in Iraq then. The CIA was "better informed on the 1963 coup in Baghdad than on any other major event or change of government that took place in the whole region in those years" Critchfield told an interviewer of his own, explaining that "we watched the Ba'ath's long, slow preparation to take control" and "we knew perhaps six months beforehand that it was going to happen." Critchfield died in 2003, a few months after the Ba'ath Party was toppled. Chalabi says that Critchfield told him that he had traveled to Cairo in 1962 after the CIA's relationship with Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser had thawed a bit. Critchfield had a laundry list of things to do there, one of which was to establish contact with the Iraqi Ba'athist exiles that Nasser had given refuge to. He asked the latter to make introductions. At a later meeting Nasser delivered a twenty-five year-old Ba'athist named Saddam Hussein, who just three years earlier had participated in an assassination attempt against Iraqi strongman, and Nasser rival, Abdul Karim Qasim. The Americans were wary of Qasim's propensity to lean towards the Soviets, hence their interest in striking up a relationship with his enemies.

If Critchfield was telling Chalabi the truth then this Cairene encounter changes our understanding of Iraqi history since. Not that the CIA's relationship with Saddam was determinative of his rise, but rather it gave a virtual nobody the sort of confidence that enabled him to project power and standing within Ba'athist ranks and to give him the confirmation that he was destined for greatness. The history books tell a story of how Saddam partly rose up by virtue of grit but mostly because he was related by blood to a general who would eventually take the Ba'athist helm. Critchfield's story tells us that Saddam put two and two together: if he, an impoverished orphan without even a diploma at the time could be so worthy of Nasser's recommendation to the nefarious power players of the CIA, then he should go for the biggest prizes in the hierarchy of power. And he did. He would even steamroll his high-ranking relative without a second thought when the time came.

The Americans did more than just fluff a would-be tyrant's ego, they sent plane loads of small arms for the Ba'athists as well as lists of leading leftists. I managed to locate a document that looks like the regime's copy of that list. It had my father listed on it. My mother too. My paternal aunt. And two maternal uncles. Almost all of the names on the list were picked up by the Ba'athist putschists in 1963. Most of them were tortured then killed. Thank you, Langley! On another occasion, I unearthed my mother's interrogation record from that time while rummaging through Saddam's archives. She never ceded to her interrogators accusations. She even, in her telling, threatened them with tribal retribution should they do anything untoward. The threat worked since they knew of her clan's reach. Other female prisoners could not pull a similar bluff, and she would hear their shrieks and agonies down the prison's hall for months. I did not find my father's file but he had told me that he didn't need to confess anything: his interrogators knew everything. So they swiftly dispatched him to the firing squads. As he was

waiting his turn, a Ba'athist student of his (he used to teach at Baghdad University's College of Medicine) found him in the antechamber of the blood- and bullet-riddled execution hall and asked, "Professor, what are you doing here?" He then whisked him out and threw him in with another batch of detainees, ones not destined to be shot. And so he was saved.

Chalabi revered history. I have no doubt that he was a scrupulous guardian of Critchfield's account. He would have accurately relayed what he was told. But of course, not many would take his word at its worth as I do. Critchfield is no longer around to verify, and the few researchers who tried to get the Agency to reveal its role under the Freedom of Information Act got nowhere. There is a 94-year-old living in an apartment building in Alexandria, Va., though, who can fill in the gaps. He was a CIA officer under deep cover, it was said, and he seems to have been the liaison between the Ba'athists and his bosses before and during the 1963 putsch, according to published reports and memoirs. He was publicly outed by none other than King Hussein of Jordan, another CIA agent, in September of that year, but alas I do not have Chalabi's knack for getting people to confess to him the innermost secrets of the CIA; the old spy refuses to speak to me despite all my efforts. Oddly, no reporters or historians have tracked down this witness to one of history's closely-held secrets in all those years. So much of America's story with Iraq still exists in a haze. It is a dull, yellowing, and sickening haze that managed to obscure Biden's chief liabilities during the election, but we'll get to how he lucked out a bit later.

My parents never confessed their membership in the Iraqi Communist Party to me. Such was their disciplined secrecy that to this day I've never been sure whether they had been full members (they claimed to be active in other, leftist associations, but not the party itself). I knew of their affiliation, and their underground codenames, through the files. I once showed up at my aunt's house in Baghdad after the war and casually called her by her party name during the course of a conversation; she looked at me cuttingly and yelled, "You son of a bitch!" But my father never affirmed, and my mother outright denies. They claim the files were 'fake news' so to speak. Oddly, my father's path towards leftist radicalization began in America during its golden era for men such as Dulles. A new American generation was being born during his time there when, as a young PhD student in upstate New York, he remembered tagging along with a black friend who was trying to rent an apartment in Manhattan during a summer break and witnessing one landlord's rejection after another. My father decided to return to Iraq, even turning down a prestigious job at Kodak in Rochester that had been offered to him upon completion of his studies; he did not get to see how America, or at least urban America, began to change fundamentally towards the end of that decade as it welcomed its most recent crop of baby boomer newborns. This generation, which included Tenet and Brennan, would come to age and join the Agency in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They would later come into their own as men and women with a measure of middle management authority within it during the 1990s, just as Tenet took the helm. The management maxim that says that 'A'-type managers hire similarly able 'A'-types, while 'B'-types hire less capable Bs and Cs became all too evident in this institution's drawn-out decay then.

This generational shift happened in tandem with Tenet's tenure, and could possibly explain why the Agency drifted into mediocrity. That is, the damage could not have been Tenet's doing all alone. Yet this generation still yielded some interesting and effective spies, even though we start seeing the duds rise up the ranks too. This paradigm was reflected in both pillars of the Agency's work, its analytical and operational sides. Bearden's classmates were retiring in the 1990s, or were being pushed out after the budget cuts took their toll and the decimation of the ranks after the Ames revelation broke many careers. Yet one could concurrently see signs of institutional life, such as a young Michael Scheuer getting the nod to put together his team tracking down Bin Laden, which he allegedly named 'Alec' Station after his son, within the Counterterrorism Center. Scheuer was an intensely paranoid eccentric who signed up for spy work in 1982. In more recent years he would advocate for the murder of his former Deep State colleagues, and peddle in some QAnon stuff. He is, in the parlance, batshit crazy now. But three decades ago the Agency needed his proto-craziness to see patterns that others could not, such as the webs of jihadists coalescing around Al-Qaeda. His weirdness was skillfully portrayed by Peter Sarsgaard (under the fictional character 'Martin Schmidt') in the 2018 Hulu miniseries *The Looming Tower*. That weirdness was matched by Wrenn Schmidt's portrayal of the character 'Diane Marsh', an analyst appended to Alec Station whose oddities and mannerisms were modeled on Alfreda Frances Bikowsky, the woman that Michael Scheuer would eventually divorce his wife for and marry, and whose smoldering sexual tension while working together amplified the general atmosphere of the bizarreness around them. Bikowsky's rise also tells the story of how women would come to play an increasingly vital and substantial role in the analytical and reporting side of the institution. One of them would become Director under Trump.

That the Agency could still recognize and recruit such weirdos was a testimony to its residual agility. Another character, this time on the operations side, was Bob Baer. Staying with the theme of pop culture portrayals, he was played by George Clooney in the movie *Syriana* (2005), a role for which the Hollywood star won an Oscar. Baer was raised by a wandering mother who came from wealth, and who would take her son out to see the world, whereupon he incidentally witnessed, first-hand, massive countercultural events of the 1960s such as the Paris Commune and the Prague Spring. She even took him to Moscow a couple of times, but Baer had not processed all those travels as a training regimen for a future role as James Bond. All he wanted to do was to ski. But the rituals and benchmarks of adulthood for a boy of his class intervened, so he had to go to college, specifically Georgetown, where another would-be alum, Tenet, would watch him from afar as Baer pulled stunts such as riding his motorcycle through the cafeteria with his girlfriend holding on for dear life. Clearly, all that hobnobbing within his mom's leftist countercultural clique had instilled some rebellion in the young man, but the Agency saw value in that spirit and brought him aboard. Baer went on to become one of his generation's most storied covert case officers, cutting his teeth on the mean streets of the Middle East.

But Baer's career ended in rancor. Towards the end, just as the Agency was taking its lumps in the mid-1990s, he was accused by his higher-ups of having been effectively recruited (or 'duped' in their words) by Chalabi. Baer had gone native, gone rogue, under Chalabi's charms, who seemingly used him in a double ruse to ensnare both the Americans and the Iranians as part of his 1995 offensive against Saddam's front lines. Baer completely denies that any of this happened in his 2003 memoir *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism*. Elsewhere in it, he makes an interesting point about generational change at the agency when recalling his reaction as Ames was getting arrested on footage supplied to CNN:

...as Ames stood handcuffed by the side of his new Jaguar XJ6, my first reaction was that no one at the CIA owns a Jaguar. The officers who once could have afforded one - the investment bankers and lawyers who fought with the OSS in World War II, and the few who'd stayed on to establish the CIA in 1947 - were all gone. Ames's Jaguar must have been the only one in the CIA parking lot. How could security have missed it?

Baer had lots of harsh words for his former employer and his colleagues there. America had just been at war with Iraq in the early 1990s, and it was armed with a presidential finding to get rid of Saddam. It didn't have too many other pressing things to do, not with the end of Communism. Yet Baer tells us that:

Iraqi Operations was a Potemkin village. Of the thirty-five officers assigned to the headquarters component, at least 10 percent were documented alcoholics. Another 10 percent had been designated as low performers. Two in five were retirees who had come back to work on contract, and the rest didn't really care whether the CIA had a human source in Iraq or not. Congress dumped millions and millions of dollars on the CIA for Iraq, yet virtually none of it made it into Iraqi hands.

This is how the Agency ended up with its 1996 coup disaster, followed by Chalabi's insurgency against it. None of this forced the Agency to reflect on what was going wrong. Baer, dispirited and disillusioned, fell so far down into the doldrums of bitterness immediately after leaving the Agency that he ended up surreptitiously working for a front organization for the Iraqi secret intelligence service (the *mukhaberat*), one that was trying to lobby Congress to normalize America's relationship again with Saddam. That was before his memoir made him famous. I found him [answering this organization's incoming phone calls](#). I said, "-Hi Bob", "-Yes", "-You are Bob Baer, aren't you?" "-Who the hell is this?" He hung up when I told him I'm with the INC. However, tucked within his memoir's narrative was a lone sentence that would presage even

worse days for the CIA: "The only qualification of the new chief in Riyadh was that he had been George Tenet's briefer when Tenet was at the NSC." Although Baer did not name this person, he was in fact talking about John Brennan, a type 'C' if ever there was one.

Brennan came to the CIA in 1980. Again to the organization's credit, it was not fazed when he blurted out, during a lie detector test, that he had voted for the Communist Party presidential candidate as a protest against both parties. Maybe the young man had an adventurist spark it could make use of? Brennan was the son of an Irish immigrant, a farmer turned blacksmith. On his mother's side he had a pair of grandparents who had also immigrated to America from Ireland. Brennan would speak of a maternal grand uncle who was so hardcore that he became an Irish bootlegging mobster of some notoriety during Prohibition until his career was cut short by assassins in Hoboken, New Jersey. So, another not-a-WASP, but very little of that moxie seems to have carried through the bloodline in this case. Brennan got into Georgetown University, where he could have conceivably overlapped with Baer and Tenet, but he couldn't afford the tuition, so he opted for a less prestigious school closer to home. He studied Arabic for he was fascinated by the Muslim world, courtesy of a few weeks visiting a relative who had been posted as an aide worker to Muslim-dominated Indonesia while Brennan was in his freshman year—his first experience with foreign travel.

While an undergrad, Brennan began a year abroad at the American University of Cairo during 1976 but only completed a semester. This experience allowed him to travel the region, during which he figured out that his favorite city in the world was Jerusalem. And in his recently published memoir *Undaunted: My Fight Against America's Enemies, At Home and Abroad*, which came out a couple of months ago, he tells us that during that sojourn he spent a freezing night at a youth hostel in Amman. All in all, not as exciting an itinerary as that of Baer's youth. Despite his voting record, Brennan was not much of a rebel, even though he liked to cosplay one: in later years, he would ride a motorcycle to get back to his suburban home in Virginia from his CIA desk job, but only after cuffing in a diamond earring for the duration of the ride—again, not too brash if reckoned against riding a motorcycle through a college cafeteria.

Brennan married a lady of Czech extraction before heading out to Texas for graduate school. He planned to write a PhD thesis on human rights in Egypt while there, but he never finished it, deciding instead to apply for a job at the CIA to feed his growing family. He was accepted. He tried his luck at operations but both he and his trainers felt he should stick to analytics. Four years in, he was posted along with his wife and kids to Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia, under diplomatic cover. Back then, the U.S. Embassy was still located there rather than in the capital Riyadh (it would move in 1984). Those were heady times: the CIA was working closely with the Saudis to fund the insurgency in Afghanistan against the Soviets, while the Saudis were maximizing their benefit by offloading their extremists to join the Arab fighting battalions there, keeping them away from challenging the royal house back at home. Moreover, the Saudis preferred that these extremists would do their fighting under the leadership of a rising star in the jihadist world, their own Osama Bin Laden, who they believed could be reasoned with by their own spies. It is

unclear whether Brennan was involved in any of that. It seemed that he was more suited to the task of hand-holding the Agency's Arab and Muslim agents, being nice and courteous to them, adhering to protocols, and generally trying not to offend anyone.

Brennan was made director of the Counterterrorism Center within the CIA in 1990. The CTC was a problem child, since it was bastardized into existence four years earlier by Dewey Clarridge, the same guy that Chalabi would later recruit, who had stamped its nature with his cowboy-ish ways. Brennan was probably brought in as boss to dull down the place. Brennan's big career break happened a few years later when he was picked to deliver the Presidential Daily Briefing to a bored-to-tears Clinton. He worked at the White House as presenter for ten months, during which he interfaced plenty with Tenet, who had yet to make the move to Langley. When Tenet was made deputy director he picked Brennan as his office's point person. But I'd wager that Tenet had something more in mind than making use of Brennan's office managerial skills when he brought him in close (Tenet, famously, was a 'personal space invader' who would get uncomfortably close to the face of whoever he talked to). Tenet, a consummate networker, had figured out that Brennan knew Louis Freeh, the FBI Director, back from the old neighborhood. The FBI was messing about the Agency's internal wiring when Tenet showed up. It was still cleaning house and looking over the spies' shoulders because of the Ames affair. Brennan was six years younger than Freeh, and had gone to St. Joseph's of the Palisades High School too. Freeh's father, a real estate agent, had sold the Brennan family their first home, which was located on Freeh's street. Brennan would watch Freeh walking to school, to college, or to work, for decades. Here was a personal connection that Tenet wanted to put to good use, maybe it would get Freeh to have his G-men ease up a bit on Tenet's crew. Tenet would stroke Brennan's ego by saying things like he was grooming him to take over as director one day, even though Brennan wouldn't have even dreamed of making it to deputy division chief on his own merits. Because of this Levantine-style flattery, Brennan may have felt compelled to let Freeh know that this Tenet guy was alright. The trick seems to have worked.

A grateful Tenet pulled some strings for Brennan. He got him promoted three full bureaucratic grades from G-15 to SIS-3. Brennan made a show of objecting, since it smacked of favoritism, but he gladly took the title, the pay raise, and the new job that came with it: station chief, or rather 'senior intelligence liaison officer', again in Saudi Arabia. This post was usually reserved for operations officers, so this too ruffled some feathers as evidenced by what Baer wrote. Brennan arrived in Riyadh with his family in mid-Nov 1996 and stayed on for three years. Yet again, those were interesting times in Saudi Arabia. There had been the Khobar bombing a few months before Brennan's arrival where nineteen U.S. Airforce personnel were killed. But there was also the first stirrings of Bin Laden's declaration of war against the West, and it seemed that Saudi spies were losing their control over him. Brennan seems to have spent most of his time tussling with Scheuer, who had just begun his Bin Laden-watching vigil:

Michael Scheuer, was strongly derisive of the Saudis and refused to release any relevant information until they became more cooperative. Scheuer's obstinacy led me to lose my cool, and I profanely, and unprofessionally, denounced his position in my correspondence with headquarters, arguing that the CIA was the world's premier intelligence agency and needed to lead by example. I found the views expressed by Scheuer before and after his retirement, when he regularly and publicly spewed anti-Israel and anti-Arab vitriol, a discredit to the Agency.

Brennan should be applauded for standing up against Scheuer's latent Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, but the record will still show that Scheuer was right about Bin Laden, as well as calling out the ways that Saudi obfuscation had actually enabled the terrorists who would eventually strike on 9/11. Brennan was really, *really* bad at his job.

That did not stop Tenet from appointing Brennan chief of staff for the director (now Tenet himself) upon returning from Riyadh. Then he appointed him as deputy to another Tenetian, Buzzy Krongard, who took on the role of executive director of CIA. Brennan kept getting promoted despite his dismal record, especially when it comes to jihadists. After 9/11, he was tasked to stand-up the brand new National Counterterrorism Center, which was part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that had bumped the CIA from its topmost perch. Brennan retired in November 2005, a little over a year after Tenet left the CIA. In the final stretch of his spying career, Brennan again failed to understand the gravity of the emerging jihadist thread then rearing its head in Iraq, this time being led by someone calling himself Abu Musa'ab al-Zarqawi who, together with his band of terrorists, managed to turn Iraq's story into a nightmare for its people, and a quagmire for a superpower.

Brennan left the Agency because he could not stomach the new regime imposed by Porter Goss, a spy-cum-congressman-cum-CIA director who was brought in by Bush to clean up and reform the CIA after its many failures. Goss would also fail at his task, but that is neither here nor there. In 2008, Tenet would put in a call that would lead Brennan to become Obama's guy. Obama contemplated nominating Brennan as CIA Director immediately upon winning but held back, fearing a messy hearing. That is how Brennan came to serve as Obama's Homeland Security Advisor when another massive Middle Eastern event happened, the Arab Spring. America's spies were caught off guard, but so was everyone else. Yet there is no excuse for why America was caught flatfooted by the aftermath. Just a reminder: the region is supposed to be Brennan's specialty. This was his field of expertise. And his performance was really, *really* bad.

But some good news came in a few months later when Bin Laden was killed in a CIA-led raid. Sure, it took a decade to do so after its special operators and spies had lost his scent in Afghanistan's Tora Bora, where they thought they had him cornered, but who's counting? Crowds of millennials aggregated outside the White House chanting "CIA! CIA!" and all was

good again. Obama would deliver on his promise of making Brennan CIA Director two years later, in 2013. And then ISIS overran Syria and Iraq a year into his directorship.

In his last year as Director, Brennan allowed the contaminated Steele Dossier to work itself into America's intelligence bloodstream for no other reason but to hobble a presidential candidate, then leveraging it to overturn a presidential election. What a run!

You may ask whether this was just a case of one bad apple, or a few. That if we manage to deracinate the Tenetians then we can still keep the CIA; after all, it wasn't *that* odious under Trump's picks for directors, Mike Pompeo and Gina Haspell, right?

Were you even listening? This can't be fixed with a few inspired personnel picks. It's in the soul! The sickness! *It's in the soul!* Institutions, decaying already as they were, can be resurrected, with difficulty and some luck, if a unique leader such as Casey is placed at the helm, at the right time, with the right mission and under the right president, but fraying institutions cannot survive the stewardship of men like Tenet and Brennan. How many were hired under them? How many imbued the ethos that radiated at them from the top? How many are about to come in to their own as the new leaders of the Deep State?

Consider the example of Nada Bakos, one of those signatories to the letter telling us that Hunter Biden's laptop was 'Russia, Russia, Russia', and a former CIA analyst turned Trump-bashing, Deep State-ing 'famous for DC' celebrity. Her alarmist catchphrase, repeated often on Don Lemon's show as well as on Twitter, was that "the republic is burning"; America's democratic institutions are too weak and unprepared to confront and withstand Trump's authoritarianism, she warned. She cited her expertise as a CIA analyst to say that if this were happening in another country, she would flag it: "This is what we would call an early warning analysis," she said. "We would talk about the fact that, here are the signposts along the way and the signals that measure authoritarian values that crop up.... you're eroding democratic norms."

I know, I know, it may be unfair to take Bakos as being typical of her generation, one that came into the Agency smack in the middle of Tenet's tenure. But her story is indicative of what was happening to the CIA as an institution, and that should be deeply troubling: we got to know of her story, but what about all the others who are still in there, gnawing at what's left of its sprained sinews?

Bakos was also plugging her forthcoming book during those CNN appearances—a book that remained 'forthcoming' for quite some time, ostensibly because it was caught up in the CIA's review process, suggesting that it was so damning that the Agency was at pains to censor much of it. I was anticipating her book to shed light on a topic that I had long researched: the early origins of al-Zarqawi. She should know plenty, I reasoned, for she was the CIA's lead targeter—an analyst whose job it is to hunt down a particular enemy of the U.S.—for most of her spy career. And such was the title of her book (coauthored with Davin Coburn), *The Targeter: My Life in the CIA, Hunting Terrorists and Challenging the White House* (2019). Jeff Stein reviewed her book for the *NYTimes*, though he clearly didn't read it thoroughly. Stein wrote, "When she tracks [Zarqawi] down to a safe house north of Baghdad in June 2006, she "looked forward to

granting him ... the honor” of martyrdom...” but that was the whole point: she did *not* track him down to that safe house. She was not even on the Zarqawi targeting detail by then, and Zarqawi was found and eliminated by a Pentagon team, not by her former outfit at the Agency. Stein goes on to write: “Now, in the era of the #MeToo movement, this remarkable memoir arrives as another astonishing story of wartime valor.” Huh? Bakos never writes of sexual harassment—the whole point, as I take it, of the #MeToo movement—nor does she relate experiencing gender discrimination at work; the worst she went through seems to have been some awkward dieting advice that she took to be fat shaming by her soon-to-be-husband. It is a memoir thin on actual accomplishments, but it is a celebration of Bakos accomplishing her goal of getting somewhere in life. It is ‘me too’ in the sense that she feels entitled to our adoration for making it professionally—that’s it. As such it is a puerile book covering a most solemn topic: she failed at tracking down a man responsible for hundreds of thousands of victims beheaded, murdered, maimed, raped and displaced, in Iraq, around the Middle East, and around the world. But the good news is that she kept getting promoted. A better title for the memoir would have been *A Selfie Among the Jihadists*.

I found very little of value in the book for my research purposes. Almost all the things she related had been published earlier by others. The one thing that stood out was evidence of how middling the hunt for Zarqawi was. For example, Bakos related how a book by a Jordanian journalist on Zarqawi “would shed further light on Zarqawi’s backstory for our team.” Elsewhere [I had concluded and argued](#) that parts of this book were cooked up by the Jordanian intelligence service, while other parts were cooked up by Iran’s spymasters, with the remainder seasoned by the author himself, an embellisher and huckster. A multi-million spy effort would come to rely on “this most pedestrian of ways”—Bakos’s words—for insight on the most hunted terrorist then. In another instance she mentions a key logistical leader for Zarqawi’s network, a Syrian who had been educated as a dentist. However, she mistakenly identifies him as “Zarqawi’s paternal uncle” when there is absolutely no familial relationship between the two. She qualifies Zarqawi’s home town by writing that “It is sometimes described as ‘the Chicago of the Middle East’ because of its poverty and crime”—I’ve never heard that sobriquet applied to az-Zarqa. Where was she getting this stuff? How many more errors like this were made during her career?

Bakos joined the CIA in summer of 2000, at the age of 31. I thought her last name revealed a Lebanese or Iraqi ancestry, thus giving her a cultural and linguistic advantage when understanding Zarqawi’s world. There are families with such a name in both countries. There’s also a neighborhood called Bakos in Alexandria, Egypt, which has the distinction of being Nasser’s birthplace. And Nada is used as a girl’s name across the Arabic-speaking Middle East, meaning ‘morning dew’. But it seems that she grew up in Denton, Montana, to a family that baked Czech pastries and that picked Nada as a Czech name—there wasn’t any inkling of the Middle East about her. She was raised on wheat farms, riding horses and combines, and mending ploughs. The Bakos surname came from her second husband’s ‘Bakoš’—probably of Hungarian

descent by way of upstate New York. Bacchus was also the name of her dog at the time they both met, as she tells us, so there's that.

Bakos attended Montana State University, then transferred to the University of Utah in her senior year. A professor there arranged for her to enroll in graduate study in New Delhi, India. But enrollment issues, as well as issues with her first husband, cut that plan short, so they took their funds and knapsacked around Europe for a summer as American kids do, before returning to Montana. She found a job as a bank teller, followed by seven years of working human resources issues at a mining company. Divorce triggered her instinct to flee what she knew, so she packed up everything and headed to DC without a plan. She kind of knew she wanted to do some international work, maybe through a non-profit, or over at State, or anything to scratch her wanderlust itch. Eventually Bakos managed to escape from the dreariness of her life into a CIA job ad, one that she had spotted in a newspaper. The Agency needed someone to do restructuring work related to HR, so there she was, a clerk among spies.

After 9/11 Bakos applied to work in analysis. She was in a pumped-up mood: there isn't a job she can't do. She was sent to the sixteen week training course that prepares analysts for the job, graduating in November 2002. Mind you, this is the first round of intelligence training that she was undergoing, ever. But somehow that was sufficient to post her on the counterterrorism detail, looking at jihadist extremism in Iraq. She took a few cursory classes on the general Middle East region, and I assume on the Muslim faith, and was then released to hunt Zarqawi. No language skills, had never been to the region up to this point, doubtful whether she had even read a book about extremism by then, but there she was, the pointy tip of America's spear. So is it a wonder that Zarqawi wasn't caught for four years? Powell had turned him into the James Bond of jihadists when presenting his administration's case for war at the United Nations General Assembly in February 2003. That was probably the point when most jihadists the world over had first heard the name, and they would have gone "Who?" followed closely with "What's with that?" Zarqawi was not on anyone's bingo card for leadership of worldwide jihad, but Powell had turned him into a household name, mentioning it twenty one times. And Bakos was back at a cubicle in Langley tasked with finding him. Splendid.

Bakos spent a total of four months in Iraq 'hunting' Zarqawi. She spend most of her time, it seems, fruitlessly questioning detainees. However, shortly after she returned stateside in Aug 2003, Zarqawi unleashed his most spectacular attacks to date, one against the U.N. mission, while another took out a very important Shia political figure at the entrance of Iraq's holiest shrine, forever changing the trajectory of the war. Within a year, Bakos was promoted to lead targeter on Zarqawi, yet she found her job frustrating and dispiriting. There's a lot of whining in the book in this regard. She left her watch tower in April 2006, taking a job within the Agency that posted her out west in Alaska for a while. It was there, two months into her new role, that she got word, from a CNN chyron, that a Pentagon team had zeroed in on Zarqawi and killed him with a half a ton's worth of laser-guided ordinance. She would retire from the Agency

altogether in a few years. That's it—that's the sum total of her spy career, one that was supposed to fill out a memoir.

Before finding her sea legs as an anti-Trump Twitter and media personality, Bakos was hired by Bob Baer to star alongside him as an on-camera expert and investigator in the History Channel's 25-part series *Hunting Hitler* which spanned three seasons from 2015-2018. Spoiler alert: despite their best efforts, they did not find Hitler. Still, I think Bakos deserves a participation trophy. Isn't that all that we give out now? But yes, do tell us how your expertise qualifies a projection of a republic (or a Reich) aflame.

Again, Bakos should not be taken as a yardstick by which to measure a Deep State generation, and who knows, maybe her novice's approach to the region, as well as her Central European Montanan roots could have brought a fresh way of looking at a problem set. This would be a sympathetic assessment of why her bosses chose her for the assignments and promotions that they did. But as someone who was personally on the receiving end of jihadist hounding, and who had lost a number of friends and associates to it, I can't help but wonder that maybe—*maybe*—they could have been a tad less creative and experimental, less learn-on-the-job inclined, in picking the person who was targeting the person who was hunting me.

Moreover, the vetting system for fresh recruits into places like the CIA had turned timid and cautious. More and more new officers were as bland and as 'safe' as Bakos. The security clearance system is now a determinant of Deep State membership, as well as the quality of its recruits. It was put in place early on to weed out the usual vices—alcoholism, adultery, kinkiness, gambling, etc.—or any other avenues by which an officer could be shamed, manipulated, or turned. But the trip-ups grew more and more elaborate, denying entry over a host of new 'concerns'. Consequently, an institution such as the CIA that had welcomed in adventurers as recently as the early 1990s became leery of them. A great uncle's stint as an Irish mobster was an interesting anecdote then, maybe even a plus for a young recruit such as Brennan. Some sort of second cousin once removed who had been in the Irish Republican Army became, in the late 1990s, a cause for withholding clearance—a particular case I knew of. Or maybe it preferred to pick them up young, before they got themselves into the kinds of entanglements that made it more difficult to investigate every contact and experience they had jotted down in their personal history statements. The thinking was (and continues to be) that you would identify talent, quantify enthusiasm, train them with courses and seminars, then send them out to the field or read them in to an area of interest, and that that was good enough. But once you do that, and especially at an age so young, they'll always know that they are part of a security infrastructure, one that could come and rescue their asses (or at least try to) when things go south. They may lose or never develop a sense of vulnerability that a true adventurer, the 'head-west-and-see-where-the-road-may-take-you' types, can never shake. Others who came up harder paths will spot this sort of complacent softness; they will be able to tell that there is something off with the spy posing as whoever he or she may have to be for the mission. This security blanket also discourages lateral and diagonal thinking, privileging zig-zagging or linear approaches to problem solving

because the spy knows that there is a team out there providing logistical support there that is supposed to furnish shortcuts. Thus the system will embrace and reward a particular type of mindset while overlooking the need for the sorts of eccentrics that bringing a touch of genius to spy work, even though they may bring along a whole lot of unwanted baggage too. For example, those who have been hiding things all their lives make for good spies; that is why the British ended up with a large number of closeted homosexuals in their spy ranks back in the 60s and 70s—back when they were any good, that is to say.

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N. Kazimi, Collage; animation stills from the movie *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968)

The Deep State in its Twilight

There are presently five million holders of security clearances. Their population is larger than what twenty-five American states can individually boast. If the Deep Staters had a state of their own, they would be able to elect two Senators and around seven congressmen (or women) to speak for them (...they have lots more currently in pocket as it is). The District of Columbia has the highest median income in the country, higher than even the San Francisco metro area with all its tech sector well-to-dos. Of the twenty-five richest counties in America, five are in Virginia, and another five are in Maryland—all ringing Washington. That includes the top three richest counties in the country. The biggest tributary into these pockets has been the military and national security industries, and the influence networks that lobby for them. These places, and the wealth associated with them, skewed heavily—and I mean heavily—towards Biden. They are a class, an association, unto their own. And evidently, they do have the characteristics of group think, and group action, even though there is neither visible nor invisible coordination.

Thus, in the sense of purpose and self-preservation, the Deep State is covenantal, not conspiratorial. In the least of it, they perceive themselves as an intermediary class, one that sorts out the expectations a nation has of its politics, and the realities of what can be achieved by government. And sometimes during their more passionate exults of *amour-propre* they take themselves to be the guardians of America, the ones—the only ones—who can and must do something when the republic is in danger of burning, and it is these sets of special skills and generational know-how that they must preserve and bequeath within their guild for precisely such exigencies. It also pays relatively well. And once you leave, you can take your governmentally accredited expertise and do really well in the private sector. The Deep State's leadership gets enthusiastically welcomed onto the boards of government vendors, or into think tanks that are subsidized by these same vendors, or, as usually is the case, by foreign potentates too. This is how Marine Corps four-star General Jim Mattis gets to fold up his military uniform and then sit comfortably on the board of a fraudulent company like Theranos after former Secretary of State George Shultz had vouched for its now indicted founder, *and* Mattis gets a prestigious posting at the Hoover Institution, *and* he gets to consult on the side for the Emiratis allegedly while they were planning their amphibious landing in Yemen. This is also how Tenet in retirement can afford a Mercedes-Benz Maybach that averages around two hundred thousand dollars, if we are willing to [take Kanye West at his rhapsodized word](#).

And there's plenty to do for those at Bakos' level too. In fact, many of the usual Deep State jobs have been delegated to contractor firms in Northern Virginia that suck deep and long on the governmental teat, and they are staffed by persons who had just been trained-on-the-job, as it were, within government. One lands on the sweetest spot of all when combining a government pension with a private sector gig that reprises the work one had just left, and this happens quite often. This splendid syndicate is perfectly legal and within the world of DC utterly ethical. After all, wouldn't you want to take good care of the republic's guardians? Why are you

even making an issue of it, are you some sort of Russian troll undermining our democracy? Huh? Speak up, traitor!

The members of this class initially scoffed at the term 'Deep State' when Trump gave it increased visibility. They said that such terms, and such a way of thinking, were undemocratic, incorrect and dangerous. But Trump has a habit of forcing a measure of clarity in whatever arena he enters. Thus on the occasion when the foreign relations bureaucracy took front-and-center in the effort to impeach him a few years into his presidency, Michelle Cottle of the *NYTimes* editorial board [owned up to the existence of a Deep State](#), though she wouldn't deign to use this "dark" Trumpian term. Cottle argued that 'they' are critical for the survival of these United States, for they are "a collection of patriotic public servants — career diplomats, scientists, intelligence officers and others — who, from within the bowels of this corrupt and corrupting administration, have somehow remembered that their duty is to protect the interests, not of a particular leader, but of the American people...Their aim was not to bring down Mr. Trump out of personal or political animus but to rescue the Republic from his excesses." Who would have known that we owe these swell folks so much?

Josh Rogin over at the *WaPo*, [picks up where](#) Cottle signs off to tell us that Trump's greatest crime was not his freelancing on Ukraine, but rather it was his decision to render the Deep State irrelevant by not taking its advice on how to run foreign policy. Much like the scented and bejeweled-scepter-wielding priest of a dying faith, Rogin thumped out his ominous auguring from on high, atop the temple steps, warning that the 'mob' that brought Trump to power shall rue the day they stopped listening to their Deep State betters.

Trump came in about fifteen years after 9/11. In that decade and a half preceding his 2016 electoral victory, the American public began sensing, again, just as they did in the 1960s and 1970s, that the folks in charge were not all that they were cracked up to be. There might be some deep algorithmic significance in how this fifteen year timeline is similar to the fifteen years of the golden era after WWII which ended with the Bay of Pigs, which was followed by another fifteen year cycle that brought in Jimmy Carter, but that may be too much math for us on this outing. What's that? No such thing as too much on this outing...? Funny.

This most recent cycle of mistrust began with the terrorist attacks, which on their own was a shock to most Americans: Where were the guardians? The public went along with Bush's decision not to punish anyone, and then they bought the line that everything was royally screwed up by the neoconservatives who had hijacked his brain and launched a massively disruptive event, the Iraq War. Alright, then what? Now that the neocons were exposed and excised, surely the experts in Washington will turn things around, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Wrong. The failures dragged on, and suddenly the "neocons did it" excuse was insufficient to buy the Deep Staters any more time. Obama, for his part, had reassured Americans that under his steady hand and expert gaze he will put the pieces in the Middle East back into some sort of order, but then came upheaval upon upheaval, ones that landed hundreds

of thousands of refugees on European shores, and set places like Paris, Nice, San Bernadino and Orlando on fire. The public could see that things were still all screwy.

The Deep State's mindset transitioned too. Sensing that nothing they said held much water in the public's esteem, they found comfort in their own world of Washington. Maybe, they told themselves, we can't understand why the public no longer believes that we know what's best, or that they may be too dull and uninitiated to understand why nothing better can be achieved with such intractable problems, but we do know how DC works, and as long as the levers of power are safe, so are we. Which is to say, as long as the Deep Staters carried water for the ruling class then they got to stay part of it. They didn't need the public's trust, much less its admiration and gratitude, to keep things going as they were. But then Trump shows up, almost out of nowhere, exposing elite complacency and vulnerability. Little did they know it, but America, the one out *there*, was still revolutionary at heart. "This, *this* buffoon gets to decide our fate?" they gasped in disbelief; they just could not believe it. On a shuttlebus taking us from that sing-along gathering back to our hotel, I overheard a voice among a huddled group of dignitaries in the back proclaiming that someone, anyone, maybe even Jeb Bush, should just point at Trump in an upcoming debate and say, "Can you imagine this man as Commander-in-Chief?" It seems many of his compatriots did.

I collected an extensive amount of screen shots of Tweets made by such Deep State luminaries and their circles before and after the 2016 election. I did so with a mind that I would return to it from time to time, finding merriment and cheer in their meltdowns. It was also an exercise in historical record keeping, especially of ambiance and mood—two difficult-to-qualify aspects when looking back—otherwise it would be too easy to forget how events *felt* at the time. I remember reading a tweet by Strobe Talbott, a nice, thoughtful man who at the time was president of the Brookings Institution, and going to myself "What fresh hell is this?" Talbott had written, on October 31, 2016 that the "Trump story may soon involve the Russian word *компромат*: compromising materials about a politician or other public figure useful to regime." My heart skipped a beat. Talbott was as establishment as it gets: he was a former *Time* correspondent, who had served as a diplomat under Clinton, whom he had met when both were young Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, where Talbott focused on studying the Soviet Union and translating the memoirs of its leadership. Years later Clinton would task him with handling the fall-out following the Soviet break-up—quite the tall order. Talbott left the State Department and went back to Yale, where he had done his undergraduate studies, to become its first Director for the Center for the Study of Globalization, just as globalization was becoming a thing. Why would someone of his caliber been talking about *kompromat*? Was Talbott privy to something dramatically damaging to Trump?

On that same day, I had noticed that Julia Ioffe, a gadfly freelancer who had been born in the Soviet Union and then migrated with her family to the U.S. at age seven, was also going on about something to do with a big, sordid secret. She tweeted, "I heard a version of this, too. Are we all talking to one person?" in response to Sarah Kendzior, an expert on Soviet and post-Soviet

Uzbekistan turned freelancing journalist too, who had tweeted: “OK, I guess since it’s out there now, I’ve heard this multiple times as well...with some very nasty details. No confirmation though.” Kendzior, as this chain went, was herself commenting on something that fellow journalist Andrea Chalupa, a daughter of refugees from Ukraine who were brought over to America in childhood, put up on her timeline, where she asserted that “In intel circles, the story goes FSB filmed Trump in an orgy while in Russia. Yes, this all ends in a Trump sex tape.” The occasion for Chalupa’s revelation, the first time I would spot what Talbott was probably referring to, was this line in David Corn’s piece in *Mother Jones* when, referring to the still-unnamed Steele Dossier, he made reference to its claim “that Russian intelligence had “compromised” Trump during his visits to Moscow and could “blackmail him.”” (Corn had co-authored a book with Isikoff, that serial Curveball-er—lots of recurring characters in the Iraq and anti-Trump sagas...)

The following day, on November 1, just a week prior to the election, Anders Aslund, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and a Swedish expert on the Soviet economy tweeted: “Extraordinary that Republicans ready to vote for a likely Russian agent for president. That is normally called treason.” Something was up. But my Spidey sense told me, even back then, that this reeks of B.S. I was right: the Steele Dossier was just that, and the exchanges that I had spotted on Twitter and screen-shotted that day was evidence how this tainted info was percolating around DC. It would later emerge that Talbott was one of its main disseminators, and that an analyst working under him at Brookings, Igor Danchenko, a Soviet-born Russian citizen who became a naturalized U.S. citizen since moving here in the late 1990s, one with a drinking problem and a wild imagination, as well as himself being suspected of manipulation by Russian intelligence, was one of Steele’s principal sources. Danchenko was a protégé of Fiona Hill’s, who was an old friend of Steele’s, and who later testified against Trump during the impeachment hearings.

Ioffe went on to get some very illustrious gigs at publications such as *The Atlantic*—which was turned into a powerhouse of anti-Trump rhetoric—until she went a little overboard by suggesting, on Twitter again, that Trump was sleeping with Ivanka. Kendzior and Chalupa parlayed those early ‘Russia, Russia, Russia’ tweets into media stardom and book deals as official Washington went a-titter looking for a pee-pee tape for a few years.

Strolling through my screenshot collection, I see that Sohrab Ahmari, then at the *Wall Street Journal*, was describing Trump as “a carnival barker” and a “vulgar sexist boor” a week out before the election. Around the same time, Tony Schwartz, the fellow who had ghostwritten *The Art of the Deal* and who had re-invented himself as a headline act in the Trump-bashing show tweeted, “If Trump were to win—and I don’t believe he will—the end of civilization as we know it would be near.” But everyone, and I mean everyone, just knew that that won’t happen. James Fallows, the national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, tweeted “Watching Trump’s last rally. Even he knows he’s lost.” At 6:43PM on Election Day, the Republican pollster Frank Luntz tweeted “In case I wasn’t clear enough from my previous tweets: Hillary Clinton will be the next President

of the United States.” But suddenly, the winds changed, and the unthinkable began to be contemplated. Marc Lynch, director of the Middle East Studies Program at George Washington University, held on to hope, nervously tweeting at 10:20PM that the “Worst of the worst on the brink of seizing power. Every Marvel movie tells us now’s the time for dramatic reversal. C’mon.” But two hours later, Chris Evans, the actor who most recently had portrayed Captain America, wrote “This is an embarrassing night for America. We’ve let a hatermonger lead our great nation. We’ve let a bully set our course. I’m devastated.”

My favorite screenshots capture Susan Hennessey’s spiral of despair. She was a second generation Deep Stater: her mom was a federal prosecutor who had spent three years in Kabul with the State Department. She had been busy during the election canvassing for Hillary, which Susan assisted her with. Hennessey (born Klein) herself had worked as a lawyer for the National Security Agency, and then left government work for a stint at Brookings. She then became a regular contributor to the *Lawfare* blog, which was managed by Jim Comey’s friend and confidante, Benjamin Wittes. All in all, Hennessey was well on her way to becoming a member of the DC elite in good standing. But Trump’s win had her tweeting out things two days later such as “I don’t care if I lose my seat at the table. I don’t care if it means I never work in this town again. I am not fucking normalizing this.” Two days later she would write “He has shown more interest in and thought about *Mein Kampf* than our nation’s—and the world’s greatest—founding document.” There were lots more tweets in the same vein.

But don’t worry, Hennessey did not have to become a luggage handler at Reagan National Airport to earn a wage. In fact, she did fine for herself: she soon landed a writing gig of her own with *The Atlantic*, and was hired as a CNN National Security and Legal Analyst, appearing frequently, mostly to discuss Trump. Naturally, she went back and deleted many of her tweets. Such is the quality of the Deep State at this present time. And this is how one makes it up its ranks.

Tell me, how broken was Washington DC on the eve of Trump’s victory that many of its leading lights were willing to believe in a fictitious pee-pee tape yet did not see his upset coming? Remember, many of these peoples’ jobs, whether they be spies or journalists, involve analyzing data and reaching conclusions. How well-guarded do you feel now?

A friend, revealing his political inclinations prior to the 2016 vote, explained to me why he was supporting Trump then. He told me how he had walked by a half-shorn building in downtown DC that was in the midst of demolition. Carpeting, wires and miscellaneous paperwork draped off where the building was being cut down. He drew upon that image to convey what he wanted Trump to do to, figuratively, to the rest of official Washington. To his nihilistic mind, the place needed a complete remake.

Alas, he did not get his wish in the first Trump term, but may still do so in a future Trumpian administration. Too much, you say? But it is necessary my friend. Consider who the Deep State decided to bandy around: a candidate whose signature issue was Iraq, yet that problem country was hardly mentioned during this most recent election even though it had factored importantly

throughout four prior election cycles. In 2008, Iraq was the topic that jump-started the presidential campaigns of those left standing in the post-primary season: Obama and McCain. Obama's judgment on the beginning of the war, and McCain's support for the surge, are supposedly what set them apart from their respective contenders. In 2020—crickets, even though Biden was right in there in the '08 primary mix.

Consider too how the Deep State fought Trump so sloppily, so inelegantly, and yes, so inanely. Then I need you to consider whether it is this matrix of guardians that you want manning the parapets and loading the cannons as America confronts China, a country that I think is going to 'go for it'—whatever that 'it' may be—within the window of the next four years, when they believe they have a weakling—a 'compromised' one at that—in the Oval.

People forget that when Biden was preparing for his 2008 presidential run his big grandstanding debut was all about Iraq. As Chairman or Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee since 1997, he offered himself to the American people as someone who was uniquely adept at extracting the U.S. from the Iraqi 'quagmire'. He had a plan, a 'Biden Plan', that promised to sort everything out. Ah not *this* guy again, I thought at the time: I remembered him from back in the day when he was slyly undercutting Chalabi in the late 1990s all along the corridors of the Senate, and in my opinion then I thought him to be one of the many being manipulated by Tenet.

I was in the audience when Biden first presented his plan. His choice of venue was, to put it mildly, douche-y. The setting was Philadelphia, the first of May 2006, at the 90th birthday celebration of Bernard Lewis, the abovementioned scholar of Islam and the Middle East. It was held under the auspices of the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, an organization run by Lewis's long-term girlfriend who, to give it a scholarly tinge, titled the event 'Islam and the World' in honor of Lewis's many contributions to the field. The roster of speakers included Henry Kissinger (I caught him not washing his hands after whizzing), Judy Woodruff, Frankis Fukuyama, Fouad Ajami, and several others. Biden was to speak after the first speaker, Vice President Dick Cheney. Cheney's presence was an indication of how revered Lewis was at the White House. It had been reported that Lewis had provided the civilizational case for waging the Iraq war but that too, like much of the narrative, was incorrect. Lewis was, however, sufficiently impressed by Chalabi and by the many Iraqis he had interacted with or had taught over the years to believe that democracy was possible there, even though his impressions of the country itself, formed when he had served as a wartime British intelligence officer, were decidedly unflattering, especially when compared to other locales of the Middle East which had so charmed the young man. A staple of his acerbic witticisms was his memorable description of 1940s Basra, then Iraq's most vibrant and evocative city, which sits a bit downriver from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, itself a perceived Biblical locale for the Garden of Eden, and one of the many places he was posted to, as "the anus of Mesopotamia."

Rather than go along with the birthday party's mirth and its customary rendition of adulations for the man of the hour, Biden picked this event and this crowd to lob his plan to fix

Iraq, which implicitly meant a plan to fix the neocons' mess, the same neocons gathered before him. And to speak in this manner right as Cheney had to sit there and take it, well, the press was just going to love it. An argument for the plan was concurrently published on the Op-Ed pages of the *NYTimes*, with Leslie Gelb, then President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, lending prestige to its byline along with Biden's name. The plan was a rehash of Gelb's original proscription for Iraq that he had advanced in 2003 ahead of the war. Gelb advocated for dividing up the country along three ethnic and religious groups: Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, drawing inspiration from how the aftermath of Yugoslavia's civil war was handled. Consequently, Biden's plan was put forward as a "third way" beyond Bush's insistence on staying the course or the clamor on the Left for withdrawing. It would maintain a unified Iraq by way of decentralizing it. Biden would later claim that his plan did not call for partition, yet when speaking of "giving communities breathing space to cool off" at the Lewis celebration it did seem as if he was arguing for de-facto partition to begin with, then stitching the country back together. That is why observers took his plan to be different. If it were just a prescription for federalism then Biden would not have been proposing anything new—that's already in Iraq's constitution, as stated in the Op-Ed. This confusion as to what Biden was actually proposing is the reason why Senator John McCain later offered this as a rejoinder: "If you did the three different countries, basically what the Biden-Gelb proposal (is) as I understand it, one, you'd be drawing dividing lines in bedrooms in Baghdad because Sunni and Shia are married," McCain said. "The second thing is, the Turks have announced that they will not allow an independent Kurdish state."

Shortly afterwards, Biden stood vocally against the troop surge that Bush proposed and implemented in 2007—a "fantasy" is how Biden described it. Biden said that "[t]he surge isn't going to work either tactically or strategically," and that it was doomed. He was wrong, although I [disagree with the reasons](#) as to why Iraq turned a corner then: it had less to do with the surge itself and more to do with the surge occurring concurrently with internal and ideological strife breaking out among the jihadists. Zarqawi was killed a month after Biden's remarks in Philadelphia, triggering a cascade of events that turned jihadist against jihadist, but that's not what we are discussing here.

Then after his ticket defeated McCain, Biden assumed the role of point man on Iraq. His task was to see the execution of the withdrawal plan that Bush had put in place in his last year in office, after the surge had done its 'winning'. Biden became his administration's chief interlocutor with Nouri al-Maliki, the prime minister that Bush had been speaking with almost weekly during the last couple of years of his presidency. In contrast, Obama did not want much to do with Iraq. Biden then became Maliki's chief backer in Washington, with his staff working overtime as apologists for Iraq's strongman in the making. This was a profoundly stupid thing to do: one can draw a line straight from this policy decision to the resurgence of jihadism under Zarqawi's heirs, who had rebranded their proto-caliphate into a full blown caliphate in 2014. This all happened with Biden ultimately in charge. And this all happened while Antony Blinken—Biden's current pick for Secretary of State—was by his side.

Blinken was staff director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 2002 until 2008. It was during that time that he resurrected Gelb's idea as Biden's stepping stone towards the presidency, one on which he faltered. When Obama brought Biden in, Blinken tagged along, serving as National Security Advisor to the Vice President from 2009 until 2013, the years of fluffing Maliki. Then he served as Deputy National Security Advisor, during which ISIS made its comeback, and then finally was appointed Deputy Secretary of State where his principal role was to sell the Iran deal, an arrangement that turned a blind eye to Iran's malevolent role in Iraq (and Syria as well, another major disaster) and that tacitly, over time, would have ceded Baghdad to an invigorated Tehran.

If ever there was a caricature for a 'cosmopolitan globalist' then Blinken would be it. He is walking-talking bait for anyone who takes 'globalist' to be pejorative, a sumptuous occasion for derision, yet unfortunately it may come with a side dish of anti-Semitism. Blinken cannot be held responsible for his upbringing, but honestly one cannot look away—I mean c'mon already. According to [the Sunday Times](#), his father was an extremely rich banker and arts patron who counted Mark Rothko among his friends, and his mother was an acclaimed art expert and dance troop manager who would casually hang out with John Lennon, reading poetry with him for hours on end. They divorced when Blinken was eight years old, and she shackled up with a French lawyer, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor who had become a fixture of elite Parisian society, serving as a confidante to French presidents and as a lawyer to movie stars and high-profile artists, counting Catherine Deneuve, Jane Fonda, Richard Burton and Christo among his clients and house guests. Blinken grew up "in a palatial Parisian apartment on Avenue Foch, where their neighbours were pianist Arthur Rubinstein and Prince Rainer and Princess Grace of Monaco." Are you fucking kidding me? I'm supposed to just go "that's nice" and move on from *this*? Blinken's youth was consumed with playing in a jazz band, and debating the statesmen and celebrities he found lingering at his stepdad's salon. From then on, it was Harvard, where he edited the student paper, and where he spent late nights strumming his guitar and rocking a beatnik look. His road took a predictable course for a precocious young man born to privilege and access, soon finding himself selected as Clinton's chief foreign policy speechwriter. Clinton had appointed his father, a man who had become a generous Democrat benefactor, as ambassador to Hungary, where their family had its roots in its once large and opulent Jewish community. His uncle was appointed ambassador to Belgium around the same time. And for such easy living, there are always offbeat side projects, such as the time in 1995 when "he helped to produce *The Addiction*, a vampire film set in New York and starring Christopher Walken." He married within the power set, and settled in during the Bush years as Biden's man in the Senate.

This is the man who is tasked with accomplishing the incoming administration's stated goal of rolling back Trump's 'America First' foreign policies. That's nice—you're *killing me here!* Now how will that sassy headline go...? 'Parisian Remits American Industry to Paris Accord'...

Five years ago I sat across from Blinken as he pitched what was to become the Iran deal to a small group of people. Honestly, I wasn't paying much attention to what he was saying. I was

trying to figure out what was wrong with how he was saying it. I could not place my finger on it then. He spoke with the late-night earnestness of zonked college freshmen about the meaning of it all. He also was not calibrating his words to the audience; he spoke at them as if they were meant to listen to him. The half-thought I formed then was that he was taking his cue from Obama, who speaks unto others as if by oracle. It was only when I read up on Blinken's biography that I understood what I could not place. Blinken was a grandee, a peer in the corridors and salons of power. He projects a sense that he is meant for this role whether those across from him recognize it or not. Which is fine, confidence makes up for lots of flaws. But he will have no instinctual understanding of what it took for Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin to claw their ways up. And that may prove to be a problem.

Blinken is not the only face who had mismanaged Iraq that is coming back to the Biden administration. There are lots of them marked for promotion. The same crew that could not turn things around in the most painful of the endless wars, is now back to give it the old college try—again. What is even more astounding is the word 'Iraq' was hardly ever brought up in the conversations predating the election. Sure, the second debate, the one that was supposed to focus on foreign policy, was cancelled because of Trump's COVID19 infection, so that explains part of it, but the only time the word 'Iraq' was uttered was when Trump brought it up, during the first debate, when referring to the one billion dollar housing contract that Biden's younger brother had allegedly clinched for a South Korean conglomerate in Baghdad in the summer of 2011, when Biden was in charge of the Iraq file. That's it.

The Deep State had the gall to bring forth one of its own who had one of the worst records on Iraq, the very topic that had clued in the masses that the elite doesn't know what it is doing, a realization that had contributed significantly to Trump's rise. To top it all off official Washington pretended that none of that record was worth mentioning in the lead-up to an election. One may take that as a sign of the Deep State's power, a show of strength that demonstrated that they can still control the narrative. But one has to wonder at the recklessness of it all. Why not pick a foil for Trump that did not offend so readily? Or was this recklessness a symptom of a deeper problem?

Part of this impudence came out of a need to quickly demonstrate viability, to show themselves, and those who would dare question it, that they still got 'it'. This was their first go-to instinct in fighting Trump, right after he won. In a fit of pique, clouded by fury, the Deep Staters saw that their only recourse to prove themselves was to destroy Trump's presidency. Their tantrum was a measure of virility, every blow delivered stirring a spurt of tumescence down into their pants. Their first target was to be General Michael Flynn. At least there was some practicality in choosing him to be a target.

Flynn was one of their own, sort of. Catholic, Irish, one of nine siblings, and a bit of ragamuffin as a child. His academics were poor, so he cut a path to the military. He found his vocation there in intelligence. It turned out that he had a talent for it, and he made his mark as an intense, forward-leaning skeptic who would push back on info that he found weak or

corrupted. He would reach the pinnacle of his career as Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Now, the DIA is to the CIA what dentistry is to medicine; they can call themselves 'spies' but they are not really 'doctors'. 'Anacostia-Bolling', where the DIA is headquartered (the fact that few know this is telling in itself) always had a sense of being inferior to Langley. So a DIA Director questioning 'real' spies was a discomfiting proposition for all involved, accordingly uneasiness followed Flynn into every briefing room, where it would hang in the air. For example, Flynn was adamant that the jihadists were about to make a comeback in Syria and Iraq, but this was poo-pooed by the Agency. He was later vindicated, but not before getting fired. So Flynn came back into the White House alongside Trump fully prepped on how badly the Deep State was 'off'. He was determined to gut it, and then rebuild.

Therefore, Flynn had to be taken out as a defensive measure. His removal would have the added benefit of denying the Trump team access to the kind of expertise that would spot the means by which the Deep State was conspiring against them. Flynn was a target, but more importantly he was in the way of a larger target: the president.

The issues the Deep State chose to brandish against Flynn were bullshit. They were reaching for *anything*. They told themselves they were justified in doing that because they believed that Flynn had been turned. A well-compensated longtime-Deep State bullshitter named Stefan Halper had told them that the Russians had gotten to Flynn by entrapping him in a sordid affair with a Russian-born British academic called Svetlana Lokhovna. Flynn would be susceptible to recruitment they said because he, per their psychobabble-ish assessment, resented the Deep State that never took him seriously and that had pushed Obama to fire him unceremoniously. It was a lie: there was no affair, and she was no SVR spy. Flynn was a man of honor and deep patriotism. But the story was convenient for marshalling resources to put Flynn in the crosshairs. Never mind that Lokhovna's life and career would be ruined as a result. And in reaching for anything, the best the FBI could do was to question Flynn over a series of static-ridden calls he had with the Russian ambassador while on vacation after the election, consequently tripping him up on so-called process crimes.

Another 'anything' they pulled had to do with a friend of mine. Ekim Alptekin was a young Turkish-Dutch businessman who needed access in Washington to push for an Israeli-led pipeline project. He needed to demonstrate reach for several audiences: Israeli partners, Turkish officials, and as is the case with circular reaffirmations of clout, with the Americans he was bringing on. Alptekin knew an Iranian-American banker called Bijan Kian, they both served on some cultural organization. I happened to work for a company that this fellow was briefly associated with. He was a nice man as far as I could tell by the couple of elevator rides we shared, who went on to try his luck in DC's influence industry. But Alptekin was a close friend, and I knew his mettle. That is why I was surprised by how he was characterized in the media when the outrage over Flynn's associations were fanned by Deep State leakers. Suddenly Alptekin was an 'Erdoganist'—a flunky for the power circles tightly surrounding Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. I knew that Alptekin wanted to get on their good side, for that much was true;

after all, he was trying to do business in a country that was veering toward a thinly-veiled statist oligarchy. But an Erdoganist? No. Alptekin is liberal, pro-EU, had interned at the U.S. Congress, and was definitely not an anti-Semite. His approach to hot-button Turkish issues such as Kurdish and Alevi rights, Armenian grievances, and a woman's Islamic headscarf was as one would expect from a moderate democrat and liberal, even though in many other ways he was staunchly secularist and a Kemalist. Thus, not a natural fit among the Erdoganists. His mannerisms were more Dutch than Turkish, even though he considered himself a proud and patriotic Turk.

Alptekin came from nothing; his family had been part of the Turkish migration to Europe in the 1970s that provided cheap labor for work that Europeans would no longer do. But he was fixated on making it. He was going to work his ass off to succeed, and he judged that he could best do that back in Turkey in the mid-2000s, a country that at the time boasted one of the fastest growing economies in the world, one that had been ranked as seventeenth by size. Alptekin would find his niche in bridging European and Turkish ventures. At his wedding I got to talking with a Greek-Dutch 'mobster' or what counts for mobster on the Dutch scale of toughness. I was told what he did for a living earlier by the bride to be, in a whisper, but he flippantly told me that he was a dentist during our chat. I dished out an equivalent measure of some evasive glibness—I don't remember what cover I claimed to have, but he knew immediately I was pulling his leg and laughed it off. He told a story about Alptekin, then a child, walking past him in a mean Amsterdam neighborhood, dressed all funny. He asked him what he was up to. Alptekin responded that he was returning from ballet practice. The mobster incredulously asked him to show him a few moves, and as he watched Alptekin twirl and do ballet things he told himself that he needs to protect this little guy or this place would eat him alive. So he did. Karmic repayment came decades later when the mobster got the honor-of-a-lifetime, for him at least, in meeting the Greek Orthodox 'Pope' who attended the wedding to act as witness signatory to Alptekin's nuptials. The other witness was supposed to be Erdogan but he couldn't attend because he had another wedding scheduled, that of an AKP party stalwart. He wasn't coming because of Alptekin. Erdogan had given his tentative commitment to attend because Alptekin was marrying one of Turkey's most prominent journalists (she was also a good friend of mine; I knew the pair separately before they met), and she would have wanted the prime minister there as a witness because at the time the Turkish intelligentsia (and many foreign observers too) believed that Erdogan and his party members were some sort of liberalizing, 'Anatolian Calvinist' variety of friendly Islamists who would shore up the country's democracy—I always thought they were wrong but that was the general sentiment. The third signatory, if I remember correctly, was Chalabi, who was also there because he was a mentor figure to Alptekin's betrothed.

So there you have it, an eclectic circle, European proclivities, and an Orthodox Patriarch: this was definitely no Erdoganist apparatchik. Flynn would be held to account for his association with Alptekin in that he did not register as a foreign agent lobbying on behalf of the Turkish

government, even though the money Alptekin was paying him with was not coming from the Erdoganists. Alptekin hadn't told me about what he was up to with Flynn, and hasn't spoken about it since due to legal caution. But I could piece what happened from press reports and what I know of his character. The Erdoganists would not trust Alptekin to carry water for them, but he would have attempted to put on a show for them, to give them the impression that he knew DC in ways they didn't.

Flynn was close to Trump when Alptekin hired the Flynn Intel Group—a poor man's advocacy and vetting firm—to work for him, but no one believed that Flynn was heading back into government because no one believed that Trump had a chance. Furthermore, it was during the summer of 2016 that Turkey was roiled by an attempted coup against Erdogan, which the Turkish president believed was orchestrated by Fethullah Gulen, an Islamist cleric that had been living in America since 1999. Gulen's past lends itself to intrigue or imaginations of such: he seems to have been a U.S. intelligence asset or collaborator in the 1980s. The CIA at the time believed that 'soft' fundamentalists could be a bulwark against leftist encroachment which had been a serious problem in Turkey, a NATO member, in the 1970s. Years later, Gulen's supporters would infiltrate several of Turkey's security services, nesting right at the doorstep of Turkey's staunchly secular and militaristic *derin devlet*—wherein the term 'Deep State' was actually invented. Pretty soon, in alliance with Erdogan, Gulen would get strong enough to challenge the military class, succeeding in defanging them by the mid-2000s. The Gulen network also did horrible things to people who were not vying with them for power such as liberal journalists and intellectuals (an example would be my friend who was to become Alptekin's ex-wife later), and they went out of their way to ruin their reputations and careers, not to mention hauling many of them off to prison. But the top proved too crowded for both Erdogan and Gulen, so they conspired to topple each other. I for one am still not convinced that Gulen originated and led the 2016 coup. And Erdogan's assertion that his nemesis did so in collusion with a retired CIA officer, Graham Fuller, who had been the author of the opening up to Muslim clerics plan in the 1980s, was bullshit—chiefly because Fuller was too much of an intellectual mystic, on the zanier side of that even, for such risky stunts.

There was one meeting though where it seemed that the lines got too blurred, and the Deep State seized on it. Flynn, Kian and Alptekin sat across from Erdogan's powerful son-in-law and Turkey's foreign minister in a New York City suite in September 2016, trying to impress the pair. One can imagine the scene because it would have followed the script of how these things go down: name-dropping, grand-standing, shooting the breeze. Woolsey, the former CIA director was called up to join. He arrived late and heard what seemed like the tail end of a harebrained idea to abduct Gulen and send him packing to Ankara. I think it must have been said as a joke, but it was convenient for Woolsey to tell reporters and, I assume, investigators that it sounded serious, because Woolsey would come to have an axe to grind with Flynn. Again, I can only imagine how it went down: Flynn had coauthored a book recently with someone whose family was close friends with Woolsey's wife. At the time, Woolsey had abandoned his wife and shacked

up with a hot young Ukrainian floozy, or so they thought of her. Woolsey at the time was also trying to get a foot in the door of the Trump campaign. Flynn, being an upright family man, would have formed a negative opinion of Woolsey over the whole issue of the mistress; he may even have thought that the former director, who had been acting increasingly erratic over the years, had been compromised, and Flynn may have acted in a way to cut short Woolsey's rise within the nascent and sparse Trumpian hierarchy. Furthermore, Woolsey was vying for the same Turkish contract that Alptekin was paying for, and he wanted to bump off Flynn from that too. Woolsey later told reporters that he had informed the U.S. government of that suspicious conversation in New York by notifying then Vice President Joe Biden through a mutual friend—an often missed indication that Biden was directly involved early on in the efforts to take down Trump.

And since the coup had just happened, with Gulen sitting pretty in Pennsylvania, Alptekin did ask the Flynn Intel Group to study the issue of extraditing Gulen, and to put together some media materials to influence U.S. public opinion as to the nature of Gulen's network and actions. The coup was a major event in Turkey. Hundreds had died. There was footage of F-16s strafing unarmed protestors on an Istanbul bridge. Any Turk would have felt it their patriotic duty to do something about Gulen who was widely believed to be behind it, so Alptekin turned to his existing contact with Flynn to explore options. There was nothing new here in how these sorts of transactions unfolded. This was the bread and butter of a significant portion of official Washington. But in the retelling, and in a bid to besmirch Flynn, the Deep State made it seem as if Flynn, a highly decorated officer, was nothing more than a mercenary, a law-breaking mercenary at that. Thus, everything Flynn did or said was in due course tainted. Colin Kahl, Biden's National Security Advisor during the Obama years, and now slated to become Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, took to Twitter to insinuate that the reason that Flynn was counseling Trump to rethink Obama's plan for Raqqa in Syria, a plan that Kahl had a hand in shepherding, was because Flynn was paid to do so by the Turks. Sober, reasonable people can disagree or agree with the plan (I thought it was terrible) without being in the thrall of the Erdoganists. Maybe Flynn was being cautious, protecting the incoming president from a policy course that may fail (it eventually did). But such reasoning does not matter when the mind is consumed with bloodlust, as when Kahl—who came to the world of policy and politics from academia, and who had never served his country before that in any capacity—and others had the ropes ready for a lynching, which is exactly what they did to Flynn's reputation and legal standing. Flynn would eventually write a report for Alptekin recommending against Gulen's extradition, but again, none of that mattered. (Biden would later pipe in with a suggestion that Flynn had violated the Logan Act during a White House meeting in early January 2017, a couple of weeks before Trump's inauguration—either coming up with it on his own, or was manipulated into doing so by some Deep Staters. It remains unclear. It would later become clear that Kahl had been one of the most egregious 'Russia, Russia, Russia' disseminators, both during and after his stint at the White House.)

Flynn's fate, as well as that of Lokhovna's and Alptekin's—all three of them now broke, humiliated and discredited, with Alptekin still facing prison time in the U.S.—bespeaks to a mean-spirited mania that permeated the Deep State's reaction to Trump. Did they have to go this far? Couldn't they have achieved some of their stated goals with a more calibrated, gradual, and wiser approach? Their fevered spite propelled them, in haste, towards flimsy, fleeting 'victories'. What effect on the larger questions of national security did that have? And going forward, what should we expect from a feral Deep State that hisses and claws in this way?

We have an answer to that question in John Bolton's memoir, *The Room Where It Happened* (2020) in which he reprised his experience as Trump's third National Security Advisor, the job that Flynn should have kept. Bolton's brand, cultivated over many years, was that he was a rogue operator, a pro, hitting-and-running at the Deep State from the margins of the Swamp. But his memoir reveals that in the final tally Bolton could not unswamp himself. And in his example one discerns the reason why dramatic action must be undertaken in Trumpism's future rematch with the Deep State. For Bolton, in print, unwittingly turned proper traitor (in my book, at least, as well as the president's) by exposing to the world, but specifically to the Chinese, how the counter-China strategy was being run at the White House. He 'divulged the will of heaven' as the Mandarin *chengyu* would phrase it.

Bolton was an interesting swamp specimen, and I confess that I believed that parts of the Deep State could be co-opted by Trumpism through his example. At the onset of his pick as NSA, I thought that he would ably serve the president, believing that both agreed on many issues, as Trump would often say to him. This is [what I wrote then](#):

Bolton is a bureaucratic swordsman from the outer, grey-zone fringes of foreign policy circles. It would have been difficult to situate his way of thinking in the previous constellations, simply because they were not in vogue or wide currency. That is probably why they had been serially mislabeled. But a close examination would reveal remarkable consistency: America should avoid the legal constraints of multilateralism; it should be forward leaning when challenged by geostrategic upstarts; no ground on the international stage should be ceded without a show of might and tenacity; America is not obliged to spread democracy around the world or bankroll "nation-building"; its national security bureaucracy cannot be allowed to exercise a foreign policy independent of the president's vision and must be trimmed down; and America can live with autocrats so as long as they pose no threat to American security. Sound familiar? It should, since it hews to all that Trump has been saying about foreign affairs since the early 1980s. But such ideas did not have a temple or institution to house

them in the corridors of power until, that is, the Oval Office was turned into one with Trump's advent.

But I never liked Bolton, even though he used to greet Chalabi at the entrance to his fiefdom in the Bush State Department (where he served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs) with the words, "Welcome to the Liberated United States of America." I went on to publicly [voice my dislike](#) when Bolton shepherded the Muammar Gadhafi regime in from the cold in the mid-2000s, after the Libyan dictator was willing to forgo his arsenal of WMDs. But what I was actually doing was 'subtweeting' neocons such as Bernard Lewis who went out to accommodate Gadhafi, an issue whereupon I broke ranks with them. But to understand Bolton on the Middle East, where he exhibited his most serious friction with Trump, is to understand one particular thinker who was in Lewis's orbit:

On this, and on many Middle Eastern matters, Bolton would have been influenced by Dave Wurmser, his confidante from back in the late 1990s when both were working as scholars at the American Enterprise Institute. Wurmser has also been pigeonholed as a "neoconservative" but that is not actually correct, and he himself had chafed at such mislabeling. Wurmser explained his approach in a *National Review* article that he wrote on the passing of Ahmad Chalabi in 2015. Although he would have liked to see democracy prosper in the region, he was hesitant as to its viability and inevitability, which would have placed him at loggerheads with actual neoconservatives. However, he signed on to the cause of removing Saddam Hussein because Chalabi represented a once-in-a-generation opportunity, by Wurmser's reading, of being an agent of change in Iraq and in the wider region. And with Chalabi's demise, Wurmser declared the moment over.

Wurmser coached Bolton on understanding America's role in the Middle East to be less about democratic flowering and instituting reforms, and more about being fixated with punishing the regime in Tehran. The plan became one of 'collapsing' it short of military intervention, and somehow that would remove the largest impediment to the prospects of progress in the region. It was a strangely unintellectual and inelegant approach, especially for a genuinely thoughtful strategist such as Wurmser.

Thus, Bolton sometimes reverberated with the thunder of neo-conservatism, yet never shone with its intellectual lightning. And it turned out that he brought to the White House plans of his own that he wanted accomplished, in contravention of presidential inclinations. Bolton tried to manipulate Trump, but Trump broke him. Trump laid waste to him much in the way my friend wanted the incoming president to tear into Washington DC. One could imagine a

disheveled, shell-shocked Bolton, with an eye-ball dangling out of its socket, and what was left of his caramelized soul sparking intermittently in the other, typing like mad his 'I should've said' retaliations every evening for what would be his memoir. For all their conservative distaste towards the nanny state, men like Bolton still believe America needed a nanny Deep State. And by becoming Trump's NSA he was poised, at long last, to crown himself King of the Deep Staters. It was a shortcut to power within the imperial capital, with a know-nothing Trump distracted by his tweeting to do any of the real work, or so Bolton imagined. But Trump had him figured out from the get-go, and it was he who wanted to use Bolton as a prop, not the other way round. Here one could spot the difference between 'power' amassed, with Trump preferring the currency of wealth and fame, and a credit line of powers extended by the state. Trump spotted Bolton's weakness in that Bolton *needed* to have his inguinal heft extrapolated into U.S. force projection.

What emerged from Bolton's memoir, to me, was his exasperation with Trump's savviness: it's not that Trump was not learning, he just was not succumbing. Rather than direct it at the swamp, Bolton brought his tool set to bear against the president, and it all went to shit. All of a sudden Bolton found himself flummoxed and unsure of what he was doing. And to think that this was to be his moment under history's glare as Trump astutely deduced, and as told by him to French President Emmanuel Macron: "You know, John's been preparing all his life for this job. He was a genius on Fox TV, you know, and now he's got to make hard decisions, which he didn't have to do on TV, but he's doing a great job."

Bolton came in thinking that it would be easy to manage Trump upwards, and that in theory, all one has to do to shape the top executive's decisions is to massage the options placed before him. This had been a tactic that mandarins, apparatchiks and ministers had devised early on in organized states, probably beginning with the Sumerians, and as wittily showcased on the *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister* British TV series of the 1980s. Whereas Trump's approach was one of instinct and the personal touch, including showmanship, Bolton would counter and overpower with "[a]nalysis, planning, intellectual discipline and rigor, evaluation of results, course corrections, and the like [which] are the blocking and tackling of presidential decision-making, the unglamorous side of the job." It turned out that Bolton was not very good at the job he had worked his entire life towards. The book is, consequently, an ode to his sense of self-importance. Faced with the enigma of Trump's novelty and his own inadequacy, Bolton the outcast, when tested, could not live outside the confines of the swamp; it was what—*all*—he knew.

Bolton saw himself as a natural for Secretary of State at the onset of Trump's election. Anything less would be beneath him, and wouldn't give him the room to lead. But he didn't get the nod from Trump: "Much was made of his purported dislike of my moustache. For what it's worth, he told me it was never a factor, noting that his father also had one." He thought former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates was lobbying for Rex Tillerson, Trump's eventual pick for State, but it was Condi Rice and Stephen Hadley who clinched it for Tillerson with Trump. For

someone who claims to be plugged in this was a strange thing for Bolton to miss. Trump always had a soft spot for Rice, and on several occasions wanted her back as NSA, though she always expressed a reluctance to do so, including right prior to his pick of Bolton for the same role.

Trump wanted out of Syria, but Bolton thought staying there was necessary for collapsing Iran. Trump wanted out of Iraq too, and Bolton cited the same reason for staying. Trump didn't need any convincing on the need to shred the Iran deal; he had campaigned on doing that. But for Bolton it was not nearly enough: "A lot remained to be done to bring Iran to its knees, or to overthrow the regime, Trump's stated policy to the contrary notwithstanding..." which would have been exactly what Wurmser, now brought in to advise the White House on Iran, would have told him. Bolton wanted to retaliate against Iran for each of its provocations in Iraq, but Trump demurred. Bolton thought that Trump was much like Obama in this respect. Trump for his part wanted to pressure the Iranians to come back and negotiate on better terms. He was never committed to the demise of the regime.

Most of all, Trump wanted out of Afghanistan—the memoir is rife with Trump railing about it, "[t]he first day I took office, I should have ended it"—but on this Bolton stuck with his Deep State colleagues in thwarting the president, believing that the old hands knew better: "I knew what I wanted to achieve in Afghanistan...The hard part was getting Trump to agree and then stick with his decision." An exasperated Trump would harangue them constantly after their latest set of excuses for staying had floundered, saying that "[m]illions of people killed, trillions of dollars, and we just can't do it. Another six months, that's what they said before, and we're still getting our asses kicked." The Deep State was gleeful in how it managed to work around the president to mislead him about troop withdrawals. In his usual this-is-what-goes-for-wit-in-DC manner, Bolton gave one chapter the title: TRUMP HEADS FOR THE DOOR IN SYRIA AND AFGHANISTAN, AND CAN'T FIND IT. Jim Jeffrey, America's top envoy to the multinational military coalition to defeat ISIS, even told a reporter upon his retirement last month that "We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there," adding with what one would imagine to be his signature creepy chuckle, "What Syria withdrawal? There was never a Syria withdrawal." When Trump went rogue and tried to work out a deal with Erdogan to have the Turks fill in for America in northern Syria in December 2018, Bolton confides that it became "a personal crisis" for him. Mattis would eventually resign in a huff over it.

Trump and Bolton clashed on a number of other issues. Trump would tell him, "John, you have a lot of hostility" on North Korea, where Trump wanted to get Kim Jong-un to chill out a little. Trump went along though with Bolton's drive to ignite a rebellion in Venezuela, right up to the point when the president got to size-up Bolton's candidate to lead it. Trump was again very perceptive in believing that Juan Guaido was nothing more than the "Beto O'Rourke of Venezuela" and that he would crash and burn. Bolton had overpromised and misread the situation disastrously, but Trump was willing to forgive him. And on occasion, Trump would even apologize when overstepping: "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm sorry, I have too much

respect for you”—a side of Trump as manager that we do not get to see reflected often in the reporting.

It was Trump's pulling back from punishing Iran over its downing of the Global Hawk that drove Bolton to resign a few months later in September 2019 after only sixteen months at the job of his lifetime. He was so sure that he was going to finally get his fireworks show over Iranian skies that when the president gave the order for the bombers to turn back it was too much for Bolton's shaken sense of importance. If he couldn't get Trump to do this, then what was it all for? Trump reassured him, "Don't worry, we can always attack later, and if we do it'll be much tougher," which Bolton dismissed as "a promise worth exactly what I paid for it."

Trump would tell him, "When you write your book, get it right" instinctively knowing that a man like Bolton would not contain himself from telling his side of the story, quickly. Bolton had a manuscript for his memoir ready within three months of resigning. He was cocked and loaded to show the world what Trump's promises are really worth. Yet, within a month, Trump would give the order to kill the commander of Iran's Qods Force, and the likely heir to the regime's leadership, Qasim Soleimani on the ring road leading to Baghdad International Airport. Trump believed that Soleimani was responsible for the murder of an American—an Iraqi-American contractor working for the military—a few days earlier in a rocket attack on an Iraqi base in Kirkuk. So he simply went ahead and [offed Soleimani](#), which was an incredibly bold decision given geopolitical considerations, an act that Bolton would never have the balls to do. With one move Trump had created openings and opportunities heretofore unimagined in countering Iran, but Bolton wasn't there to press the advantage, and the Deep Staters who had serially [mismanaged the opportunities created by Trump](#) in the past few years fumbled this one too. Interestingly, even though Bolton added more pages to his manuscript right before it went to print, covering last minute issues such as the administration's response to COVID19 (Bolton here negated the media's talking point that Trump had gutted the government bodies responsible for keeping track of pandemics), which occurred after Soleimani was killed, he makes no mention of Trump's decision to take out the Iranian general. Bolton could not bring himself to acknowledge it.

Bolton justified his unseemly haste in publishing his memoirs while Trump was still president by comparing his book's release to that of Gates's memoirs on his time serving in the first term of the Obama administration, which were published as Obama assumed a second one. Bolton wrote, "All histories pose a threat to executive privilege, and insiders have been leaking internal administration battles since Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson propagandized against each other through partisan newspapers." Bolton goes on to explain that the public needed to know certain things before giving a president a second term, faulting Gates for not rushing with publication even before the 2012 elections where he should have revealed to voters that Obama didn't care about Afghanistan and executing the war there diligently. In contrast, Bolton wanted his book to bear relevance on the 2020 vote.

However, if that was truly his justification for the tell-all, then how does he rationalize the inclusion of Chapter 10 of his book? There he exposed for all to see the intricacies of Trump's war of wills with the Chinese. Bolton was giving away the game by identifying the "panda huggers", the "confirmed free-traders" and the "China hawks" and the machinations they unleashed on each other. What need has the voter for such details? Bolton was never really a factor in those debates, so where was the historical *sine qua non* to reveal them as part of his memoir? "Beijing had to know how deeply divided Trump's China advisors were, because they could read about it routinely in the media," Bolton explained, but it is one thing to have it referenced by anonymous sources that would have kept the Chinese guessing at the veracity of the reporting, and quite another to have the person who was privy to those divisions put them on the record only a few months while out of office, at a time when the U.S. was still engaged in a trade showdown with China, and while a new complication, that of COVID19 had arisen to take the U.S.-China relationship into uncharted waters. In the final analysis, it seems that Bolton put all this in to demonstrate his low opinion of Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin by way of settling scores with the latter who seems to have given him pushback on authorizing some Iran sanctions. The price that America would have to pay to scratch Bolton's vindictive itch and to bolster his many conceits shall prove to be incalculable as the showdown with China deepens. Bolton, in writing so blithely about the room where he was momentarily important, had weakened America's hand. His act forebodes a Deep State, one just as vainglorious and petty as he is, unprepared for what is to come.

*

China, China, China

The Deep State has lulled itself into believing that it has a lot of time to confront China. The Deep Staters believe that it is a country coming at its moment of greatness with centuries of memory in the back of its hive mind. That China is playing a long game, a courtly game, a point-scoring game, and most importantly a non-zero-sum game. They reassure themselves that this is a game that both China and America can simultaneously perceive themselves to be winning as it unfolds ad infinitum. In such a game, there is no build-up to 'checkmate'—rather we are engaged in a round of *Go* with the Chinese, playing over a grid made up of thousands of lines across and down, and proceeding until neither player desires to make another move.

The venerability of China's aged and wise approach to strategy is, of course, bullshit. The "centuries-old" mystique is a fabrication, a cheap one, one that Deep Staters had bought into ever since the elder Bush was posted as America's envoy to Beijing during the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Bush parlayed his experiences there—fourteen months living in an isolated concrete edifice within the diplomatic quarter, with occasional bicycle rides through the city along with his wife Barbara, and both developing a taste for Peking Duck—into executive insight into its affairs as CIA director, vice-president, and then president. His interpretations of China's thinking, worthiness as a 'friend', and improbability as an adversary have taken hold of Washington's policies for decades, during which he frequented a place in Baily's Crossing, Va to continue getting his fix of roasted duck. China would join the World Trade Organization during his son's first year as president, something that Trump never misses an opportunity to pick a bone with. "If you look at the history of China, it was only since they went into the WTO that they became a rocket ship with their economy. They were flatlined for years and years," Trump would recurrently say. Adding, "Frankly, for many, many decades. And it was only when they came into the WTO that they became a rocket ship because they took advantage of all -- I'm not even blaming them. I'm saying how stupid were the people that stood here and allowed it to happen"—meaning the Bushes, and those presidents in between, and who followed after, but not him.

On foreign policy, the Deep Staters assure us that the Chinese are obsessively concerned with their internal security, haunted as they were with centuries of Western interference in their affairs. Theirs is not an empire in the making but simply a drive to shore-up sovereignty, for the Chinese are forever extending, in their minds, their Great Wall, as smug Western analysts have a habit of putting it, yet again deploying that fucking overused metaphor. Never mind that new research maintains that ancient states build walls primarily to keep cheap labor from escaping beyond its reach rather than keeping invaders out, an instinct that the current Chinese state also seems to flex from time to time. No, no, no, Xi is not out to humiliate America, they tell us, how could he? He spent two weeks bunking with wholesome heartland families in Iowa in the mid-1980s. He sent his only daughter to Harvard for undergraduate studies. The guy basically adores America.

Yet China is only as old as I am. The China that we know today is in its mid-forties. There was too much disruption and discontinuity in the last two and half centuries of the Chinese experience, chronicles of which record unimaginable human misery and historic upheaval, with every few pages telling the tale of how yet another onset of fighting and famines would compel its people into cannibalism. And it got worse: every other year was in effect 'Year Zero' throughout the decade preceding Chairman Mao Zedong's demise in 1976. It was only after he died that a new China came out blinking into the sunlight. So is China really a society with roots that go hundreds if not thousands years deep? I don't think so. There is probably no historical corollary for how few of China's elite bloodlines survived the last 500 years; maybe the Aztecs and Incas can lay a similar claim, and a few other indigenous African and South East Asian principalities can boast more dislocation, but they are no longer around to tell the tale, and that's the point. So much aggregated memory, wisdom, and strategic patience was lost in such disruptions, which is exactly the case with China.

However, no nation can survive without memory, even though very little memory survives undistorted. But some historiographies can be *too* distorted. This, I believe, is also the case with China. Sure, they do have surviving texts, sagas and chronicles from which they have reconstructed and reimagined their histories. That is true for almost all societies, but most societies have input from legacy-holders among the elite whose contributions to a national conversation usually mediate and temper historical imagination. China's elites were not around to perform that role for a long time, and their current one has not had the time or aggregated enough wisdom to do so either—even the party's current crop of leading 'Crown Princes', whose fathers and mothers were early comrades of Mao's before getting purged, don't exhibit such pensiveness, or even cohesion as a group. This is an important vulnerability of theirs. Pity that the Deep State is not doing its job by working such an angle.

No, they are too busy being afflicted with 'Deep State Envy'. America's Deep State secretly admires the Chinese system of power, for they believe it fetishizes 'experience'. It took Xi forty years to climb up. There was lots of scrambling on the slopes where outcomes were touch and go for him. First there was the national service examination which whittled down the ranks to a thread-bare rate of admittance. Then Xi joined the Communist Party and had to climb ten levels of administrative levels. There was rigorous vetting at each step. His first 'job' was to become the highest official in a county. Then a city official, then a mayor. Then Xi became a governor of a minor province, moving on to the governorship of a major province. He joined the Political Bureau, and became a Deputy to the National People's Congress. Then he worked his way into the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party Central Committee. And then he made a final scramble to the very top of the heap to become president in 2013. Bureaucrats would be mesmerized by such a process upon which selection by peers would ensure that only the ablest would rise, and where someone as "emotionally stable" as Xi can assume full control. America's Deep Staters would begrudge this form of Chinese 'democracy', contrasting it with their system which gave them the instability of Trump. Missing from their

assessment is an explanation for why Xi made sure to burn all the ladders below him once he got to the top. And just how emotionally stable is a leader who feels he needs to break the spirit of the Uighur nation once and for all? (I have a feeling that many of our Deep Staters and their valets in the media and in academia would love nothing less than to administer a similar re-education campaign for all us 'insurgent' Trumpians.)

Xi was confused by Trump. He was confronted by an incoming president who had tweeted things like “Why is Barack Obama delaying the sale of F-16s aircraft to Taiwan? Wrong message to send to China. #TimeToGetTough” as far back as 2011. Xi’s spies had fixated on penetrating America’s Deep State and its ruling class, but what use was their feedback when they too could make no sense of Trump or his rise? What was Trump really saying when commending the Chinese leadership for making fools out of America’s own for so long on trade and many other matters? Why was Trump going out of his way to refer to Xi as “a good friend of mine” while instantaneously smacking on tariffs? Consequently, Xi had to crouch around the crazed American for a number of years. But things are about to change. Whatever benchmarks for greatness the 67 year-old Xi wants to be known for in the new chronicles of Chinese history will have to be achieved, and achieved quickly, within the next window: the Biden presidency. Xi is not playing a long game. Just ask the Uighurs. And Xi doesn’t strike one as the sentimental type that truly longs for those jovial evenings in Iowa—you can ask the comrades he purged just how much of a softie he really is. Scrap that, you simply can’t, because they can’t be reached at the moment for a host of reasons—hint, hint. Xi is in pounce mode, preparing for a sprint, and he knows all that he needs to know about Biden—this old fool does not worry him. Xi may have woken up one day to learn that Trump had signed a formal finding, under Article II of the Genocide Convention of 1948, of genocide in Xinjiang, as Michal Sobolik, a fellow at the American Foreign Policy Center, had [recommended last week](#) that the president do before leaving office. Biden would never do that.

Xi has already witnessed Biden revealing a serious lack of judgement and a squishy measure of pride. Sure, he was no longer vice president when Hunter came to him with a new business prospect that had come his way with some deep-pocketed and seemingly influential Chinese ‘partners’ in early 2017, but he was still the ‘former Vice President of the United States of America’, and that should have meant something. But what does it really stand for if a former VP greenlights a no-interest ten million dollar loan to the Biden family from ‘businessmen’ fronting for Chinese intelligence? The Chinese were ostensibly paying for introductions. There is value in that for businessmen to be sure. But there is massive value in the sorts of networks and associations that these introductions would reveal to trained spies. Bobulinsky, the man Hunter hired to manage the initial phase of the relationship with the Chinese, came to conclude that the former VP was “compromised”. Maybe that is too extreme of a word, but what word would be suitable for a man who was willing to be in business with an entity that an intelligence briefing, such as the ones afforded to former Vice Presidents, would have easily pegged as a spying endeavor? Or maybe the episode points to the failure of a larger system of oversight and

controls, the same system that would inexplicably allow Eric Swallow to sit on the House Intelligence Committee? Were there any red flags raised when the 'loan' made it to one of Hunter's accounts via a channel other than Bobulinsky's? The references made in Hunter's correspondence to the 'big guy' and the ten percent cut he would get would be instinctively and instantly recognized by those conversant in the 'corruptese' vernacular as meaning 'Joe Biden'. Why did the system miss that, and if it didn't then why did it not warn Biden, and if it did then what steps did it take to mitigate the damage done to America's secrets much less to its standing? We have not been given any answers to that. Xi, on the other hand, has plenty.

Would Xi, now that he knows that some of his midlevel spies had actually managed to rent Biden's rolodex at one point, need to crouch around anymore? Of course not. And he also knows that he is unlikely to get as auspicious of an opportunity to get all that he wants to get done as this one. Contrast Biden's recent past with the Chinese to how Trump's Republican National Convention had given a primetime slot to Chen Guangcheng, the attorney and civil rights activist, to rail against the "tyranny" of the Chinese Communist Party, dubbing it an "enemy of humanity." What was Xi supposed to do with *that*?

It is a shame, since there is plenty America can do to outmaneuver Xi's visions, if it only had a capable and focused Deep State. But it doesn't. What we have now is not a capable generation waiting to be unleashed by a Casey-type from the bounds of a moribund CIA, as Bearden's was. What we have is a situation where Trump plainly saying "it's China's fault" and that "China should pay" when it comes to COVID19's devastation is denounced as xenophobia, with the Deep State tsk-tsking its tongue off at him. Again, a shame: America's elite has not factored-in how angry much of the world is towards China now. This sentiment has legs. And it damaged the fledgling China brand in big ways and small. We go out of our way to search for items not 'Made in China' to buy for our household—despite Amazon's best efforts to hide this information, which only shows that many others are doing the same. This is a retributive, angry force that is going unacknowledged, which makes people even angrier. There was someone uniquely positioned to ride this beast on the world stage: Donald Trump. Alas, he won't get to, for now.

Trump would have been uniquely suited to counter China's challenge in other ways too. It is often said by experts that the Chinese are set to dominate the world because of their mercantile outlook and mindset. They are working methodically and carefully to expand their portfolios and markets, and with that comes dividends of hard and soft power, much of it allegedly at America's expense. It is contradictory then when experts decry Trump for his transactional approach to foreign relations, while simultaneously admiring that very same approach on China's part and taking it to be its chief advantage. But Trump would spot that mercantilism isn't going to get the Chinese to where they want to go precisely because they are not that good at it. Consider how their Belt and Road Initiative is dragging down into a serious and expensive miscalculation, one that exchanged trade-deficit cash earned against U.S. and European markets for pointless assets dotting Third World transit points, assets destined to become concrete

landmarks for a new world never lived and a trade never made. It took centuries of economic and banking activity to launch the mercantile traditions of Europe five hundred years ago, traditions which then intertwined with an imperial impetus that discovered then dominated then settled the New and Old Worlds. Where is Chinese mercantilism coming from? Theirs still seems to me to be a peddler and artisan culture, though modernized and enlarged. Again, it is only forty years in the making with little societal or institutional memory underwriting it. Thus, it is too soon to assume that mercantilism comes naturally to the Chinese, with all its power projection appendages in tow.

The experts dismiss such misgivings by suggesting that the Chinese have other tricks up their sleeves that compensate for their lack of institutional memory, principally a willingness to leverage corruption both as a tool for prying open economic opportunities as well as gaining intelligence. But that too is a vulnerability, one that could easily be taken advantage of were our spies swifter than the buzzards hovering around the alleged Chinese espionage dens of Porter Street NW, looking for their marks. Corruption corrupts both ways. A regime such as Xi's will not be comfortable with frontiersmen who've imbibed from the intoxicating nectar of lawlessness and easy riches. His inclination would be to purge and replace, and that simply stirs in more dislocation. Plus, their interlocutors in First and Third World countries will be expecting the quick riches that corruption promises, and those expectations shall increase the competition among them to be on the receiving end, leading to many forms of strife, spite and misgivings.

Once one recognizes that Chinese mercantilism is failing, then the Deep State's qualification of China's end-state as materialistic would have to be reassessed. I never took that to be the case, but even if that had been the goal initially, now it must be substituted with something else, for human nature is bound to get in the way of whatever clinical five-year-plans are set and then abandoned, leaving pride wounded on the floor. Once great nations, or ones that believe that greatness is their deserved destiny, will always be distracted by achieving the benchmarks of greatness—participation prizes just won't do. The Chinese will increasingly get touchy over small things, for example their latest spat with the Czechs over Taiwan. If I were corralling the Deep State into a twenty-first century mission, I'd have teams study Chinese historical dramas, mining them for what they tell the Chinese public about "What went wrong?" as in what is the official version of how greatness was lost. I would then tailor a propaganda campaign to mess with these insecurities. I'd get Hollywood—which like the American sports industry has been more than accommodating towards Beijing's whims—to patriotically redeem itself by producing big production numbers from the Chinese past that celebrate outsized, outlaw characters such as the 'Pirate Queen' Ching Shih. Totalitarian regimes in the making, ones busy leveraging facial recognition software and artificial intelligence to spot a citizen's anti-authoritarian scowl at its inception, just *loathe* that sort of thing.

Trump was also doing something extraordinary with military might: he was hyping it in ways only he could. There's the "I have built a weapon system that nobody's ever had in this country before" line, as well as the "We have stuff that Putin and Xi have never heard about before"

including what he called a “super-duper missile.” The experts may scoff at such antics and limited vocabulary counts but they are effective at keeping adversaries guessing, and allies from stressing. The myth of overpowering and presently unknowable military capability and capacity is what makes Japan, Korea and smaller Asian powers ringing China feel that they can stare down the Chinese, for now.

Furthermore, someone like Trump could have taken Putin aside and told him that Russia should extend its special relationship with its former Central Asian domains into its farthest east, to those arenas called Irkutsk, Yakutsk and Kamchatka on the *Risk* game board, all the way to the ocean; send those migrating Tajiks—Russia’s Mexicans—to repopulate Vladivostok, dear Volodya. The Russians should also be coaxed into thinking of Xinjiang as an extension of their own historic sphere of influence—I mean, why not? Whatever imperial juice is still left in Moscow’s tank should be exploited to rekindle that tense Sino-Soviet split of yesteryear.

The Chinese should also be drawn into the Middle East, especially the parts that the U.S. seems to be vacating. Believe me, rather than China earning global prestige as America’s replacement as some experts would caution, this is a recipe for disaster where the Chinese are concerned. The cultural disconnect shall make for an uneasy experience for both sides. I’d even get it into their heads to make a big bet on Iraq. Actually, this was about to happen: the previous Iraqi cabinet tried to strike a long-term oil-for-infrastructure agreement with China. The Chinese already get 10 percent of their oil from Iraq (with another 16 percent from Saudi Arabia). They were poised to dramatically increase that. Instead of discouraging it as it did, the U.S. should have smiled approvingly.

Trump’s instincts to go full-on protectionist on technology, as evidenced by how far he was willing to go towards subverting Huawei’s global market penetration, would come in handy now too as the U.S. takes the lead on 3D printing and manufacturing. If anything poses a [serious threat to China’s ascent](#), then it is this. I was hoping that such a Grand National Project would become a [central focus of the first Trump administration](#) but I guess neither the technology nor the national conviction was in place that would have eventually extended a Rust Belt across China and South East Asia while standing-up America’s own ‘Mittelstand’ spanning Pennsylvania, Appalachia and the Mid-West, thus ensuring wealth creation for a couple of American generations.

To do such things the Deep State needs a fundamental reworking of its mindset. If the Chinese steal America’s innovations and intellectual property, a counter plan of ‘Stealing Time’ should be deployed against them. Their command economy should be pitched against our ‘Command Disorder’. The genius of the American system is its adaptability to disruption. Xi is building a system and adopting a Legalist cultural and bureaucratic tradition that is its antithesis. Too many in Washington believe that we need to spend time and effort shoring up existing alliances to gain scale and coalesce allies who buy-in to a rules-based world order. Phooey! At this particular moment, when the rules are being re-written, it is to America’s advantage to go rogue against the old international system. America can create a new system at

a time when China is trying to catch up to the old rules and still not strong enough to create its own. Again, Trump's instincts for rethinking alliances and his rhetoric about 'common sense' reconfigurations of power projection fit the moment far better than any of the prescriptions coming for the foreign policy priestly caste.

True to form, Fareed Zakaria jumped in a year ago to parrot the thinking of that caste in an article that was published in the Jan/Feb 2020 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, titled 'The New China Scare'. Zakaria wrote it to counter the argument that U.S. policy toward China has failed, and that there needs to be tougher strategy to contain it. Those making the case are simply being alarmist, and should we follow their counsel then the "United States risks squandering the hard-won gains from four decades of engagement with China, encouraging Beijing to adopt confrontational policies of its own, and leading the world's two largest economies into a treacherous conflict of unknown scale and scope that will inevitably cause decades of instability and insecurity." He added that a "cold war with China is likely to be much longer and more costly than the one with the Soviet Union, with an uncertain outcome." Stand down, America. Don't anger Xi, because you're not going to like him when he's angry! Again, this is not to question Zakaria's patriotism with the now easy-to-reach-for trope that the globalists have simply sold-out long ago to China. I'll be consistent in thinking him obtuse, as he generally is. And on this particular issue, he is just as obtuse as George H.W. Bush had been. I mean, come on, Zakaria commended China in his essay for spending large sums to bolster the international system, marveling at how it is now the second-largest funder of the United Nations and the UN peacekeeping program. A month after his article came out we began to hear about how China's bankrolling of the World Health Organization had dangerously undermined international controls for a pandemic that would soon roil the planet.

Zakaria heaped even more servings from the buffet of genericisms and boiler-plate geostrategic sounding-smart-talkery unto his flimsy paper plate. Don't mess with China, he wrote, because it is "not the Soviet Union, an unnatural empire that was built on brutal expansion and military domination. In China, the United States would be confronting a civilization, and a nation, with a strong sense of national unity and pride that has risen to take its place among the great powers of the world." China is no longer nipping at America's feet: it is destined to overtake it. That combination of civilizational heft and economic might necessitates that outcome. Still, no worries, since Zakaria reassured us that China's alleged menace would seem to taper off just as the worries that the alarmists had tried to peddle about a rising Japan in the 1980s and 1990s did. Why, don't you know about Xi's time in Iowa? And on and on it goes. The Deep Staters will not let go of this narrative. It gives them too much solace and succor; replacing it with anything else would implicitly mean that they had failed to spot this problem looming over the horizon for decades now. They will never admit to that.

This sort of drivel is the reason why the best way to confront China is to completely retool the Deep State itself, probably by wholesale deracination, 'terracing' (consolidating and re-ranking the seventeen intelligence outfits) and then replanting existing talent where

appropriate. If it's going to be our current Deep State vs. their Deep State, then the Chinese version will win, especially given the amount of time and resources they had already expended on infesting our grounds. But if it's something new, something volatile, something messy, and something unexpected, then the Chinese security mindset, insecure and rigid as it is, will get befuddled and worn down. Trump belatedly understood that this is the only way to deal with the Deep State, to defang its threat to our democracy while returning it to some measure of effectiveness against our foreign adversaries. One could see this new approach in how Trump fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and replaced him and his crew with a band of loyal scofflaws, more of a symbolic gesture of dressing down the Deep State than a dynamic one for now, but a useful model nonetheless in the future. This is how we win, and this why Trumpism must win so that Trump returns to finish this business.

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Parting Thoughts

Joseph Nye is a doyen of the foreign policy establishment. He had served as an Assistant Secretary of Defense and as Chairman of the National Intelligence Council under Clinton. He went on to become Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Had John Kerry won an election, Nye would have probably served under him as National Security Advisor, or as Secretary of State or Defense. What he is most known for, though, is a term that he coined in the early 1990s: soft power. Nye began making the case for 'soft power' in a series of publications then. Like many others, he was trying to make sense of America's place in the world after the Cold War. He explained that there are many ways to influence the behavior of others, and that the best method relies little on coercion ('hard' power) but tends to exercise its softer side, such as the control of a seductive narrative.

This same Nye tweeted on Jan. 7—a day after Trump supporters had marched on the Capitol during a joined session for tallying up the electoral votes of the 2020 election—that “Trumpism is a danger, but the center held and institutions worked. Local officials held an honest election despite pandemic and unprecedented turnout that unseated a demagogue. It was sustained in courts and Congress. Does the Jan 6 shock suggest Trumpism may have peaked?”

The optics certainly looked bad for Trumpism that afternoon. And the ruling establishment took the opportunity to wield its narrative tools mercilessly, to finally deliver a fatal blow to Trump and his movement. Soft power, on that day, demonstrated a lot of kick. Trumpism was battered badly. The establishment had been on a roll, its narrative was having its greatest run: even though the ruling class failed to deter Trumpians from voting for Trump, they still managed to mobilize an unprecedented number of new or infrequent voters—if we are to believe their rationale for why the results looked the way they did—to cast a ballot against him. By golly they still got it! Trump lost. Trumpism was defeated. The 'Winner' mentality of MAGAness had to contend with its new station of embarrassing loser-dom.

But Nye's question goes further than a perfunctory gloat: he is, in fact, asking what did Trumpians see that day? Did the establishment's narrative finally break through to them?

It was Stephen Prothero's treatment (in his book discussed above) of what he calls the 'First Culture Wars'—those being the contentious elections of 1796 and 1800—pitting the Federalists (Adams and Hamilton) against the Democratic Republicans (Jefferson's team), that helped me contextualize the stunning moment at the end of Trump's first term, when a few dozens of his supporters broke into (in yet another telling, they were waved into) the Capitol. Forget the nitty-gritty of where the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans stood on a national bank or whether they preferred agriculture over industry and commerce—remember, Trumpism isn't deeply intellectual. The clash at its heart was one between an “ordered culture of deference” that is to be extended to “the well-born, well-bred, well read, and well-wed” on the Federalist side,

and what Jefferson took to be a necessary and intermittent dose of disorder that a complacent, timid elite needed once in a while, just to rattle things up. “The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive,” Jefferson wrote to Abigail Adams from his diplomatic posting in the then red-hot revolutionary Paris of 1787, adding “It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere.” He was commenting on a riot that had broken out, one that the Adamses deemed seditious and requiring of decisive punishment. Jefferson thought a more charitable course, one of pardoning the malcontents, would prove to be the wiser one. President Adams would later sign the Alien and Sedition Acts that was sent up to him by a Federalist-dominated Congress into law.

This correspondence and frank exchange of ideas was happening before Adams and Jefferson had to contend as rivals for the presidency though. The deterioration in their friendliness to one another, and in the respect afforded by one man’s camp to the other, was swift and stark. These two Founders and their retinue come off as foul-mouthed ruffians in the print media of their time: Adams was cast as “hermaphroditical”, an effete poseur with delusions of grandeur, while he in turn described Hamilton, during a dispute between the two, as “the bastard brat of a Scottish pedlar!” Jefferson was denounced as secret Jew or Muslim, or some sort of Illuminati conspirator who kept a “Congo Harem.” Adams wanted to ape the British, the Jefferson camp yelled, to crown himself king and induct a dynasty, while they themselves were charged with ‘French’ collusion with all that that charge carried by way of Jacobinism and godlessness. Adams won in 1796, but then refused to attend Jefferson’s inauguration upon defeat in 1800. Any of this sounding familiar?

The Anti-Trumps sound eerily similar to those Federalists. They warn us of mob rule while extolling the virtues of a caste of high priests tending to the hallowed Republic. The MAGA crowd howls that the money changers and dove peddlers have already besmirched and hollowed out the Temple, and they plan to create quite the stir about it—my house shall be called the house of the people; but ye have made it a den of (ballot) thieves! The walls themselves are not sullied, it is the whispers that echo through them that be profane! Here the Trumpians are cast as the anti-clerical Jeffersonians, but again, this is more about style than substance in its historical precedent. Trump’s rise is a badge of their impudence, a charging yell, not a meticulous ratification of their values, conservative or what have you.

A healthy political order would make use of both camps and styles. When things are good, or good enough, the elite can carry us through with their unique skills and customary rituals. The same, it should be noted, is necessary when things are perilously unstable. But when things turn amiss, dragging out into an extended epoch of plodding decay, and things keep getting worse, all while the elite refusing to answer for it, or even pretending to do something about it, well, “I like a little rebellion now and then.”

In the final tally, how many trouble-makers got inside the Capitol last week? A 100, 150 tops? If it really were an “assault on democracy” how come the 435 Representatives and 100 Senators,

not to mention their legions of staff did not hold their ground and brawl it out? Furthermore, to call a few dozen hotheads and horned-heads, breaking and entering and then staying within demarcated walkways lined by red-rope-and-brass stanchions, an “insurrection” is a bit much. But the enemies of Trumpism were pressing their narrative advantage, and the images coming out were a godsend. Naturally, one would expect them to act in bad faith in taking those intruders as representative of MAGA: the ‘Camp Auschwitz’ sweatshirt and the Confederate flag slumped over a shoulder was all the evidence they needed to show how deplorable this set was—even the slain young lady had a picture of herself in a QAnon shirt, so no hagiographic entries in the annals of martyrology for her, unless, of course, you’re some conspiracy loon. Others in that ‘horde’ tampered with stationery. Someone tore off Pelosi’s office plaque. One immensely exultant Floridian dude walked out with the Speaker’s lectern (...it always has something to do with Florida). Us Trumpians were supposed to recoil in horror, forever hiding our faces, with no measure of denunciation capable of dissociating us from that lot.

No, actually, we will own up to it. We do have these crazies in our coalition; there is no ideological card check when entering a MAGA rally. But they, with their offending sweatshirts and flags, are marching to resurrect the political prospects of a New York City Yank with an Orthodox Jewish daughter. Who knows, maybe they will shed some of their dumb notions. Otherwise, the joke’s on them. These are flawed people. As we have seen, the Founders themselves were flawed, foul-mouthed people. But through their example we witnessed how flawed men can perform and bequeath great things. I’m not holding my breath for what the guy with the horns may contribute to our nation, but I’m also not going to allow a piece of fabric (or lack thereof) determine whether a fellow citizen is teachable, and reachable. Who knows, people may surprise you.

Some details about the other intruders will be left out of the counter-Trump narrative: among the people arraigned for charging the people’s house was Nazeer Qaim, 29, an Afghan-American who, judging by the distribution of his facial hair, is an observant Muslim. Pending his hearing, he is banned from Capitol grounds and any streets containing congressional buildings, but since he is a DC resident, he was helpfully given a map by the authorities of the banned areas he is meant to avoid, but he is allowed to take the underground metro through them provided he does not get out. Also charged was the *other* fellow pictured in caveman furs, but in his case there were no *visible* horns; it turns out he is Aaron Mostofsky, 34, the son of Shlomo Mostofsky, an Orthodox Jew who serves as a judge on the Brooklyn Supreme Court. Similarly, Kristina Malimon, 28, and her mother Yevgemya Malimon, 54, both of Oregon, were banned from DC; they are ethnic Romanians of the Orthodox rite, immigrants to the U.S. from the city of Balti, Moldova. But since they also speak Russian maybe the media will make mention of them since I am sure there are a dozen spies and a dozen reporters working to unearth just how exactly they are tied to Putin. Ashli Babbitt, 35, of San Diego, the woman and AirForce veteran fatally shot in the throat, was married to a black man. Her blood ended up on Thomas Baranyi, 28, of New Jersey, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Albania as recently as last year. This much

diversity confuses the establishment's narrative that demands coherence on how anti-migrant nativism and other white populist traditions—Holocaust denialism, The-South-Will-Rise-Again fulminations, recitals of the 'Snake' poem, and what have you—are the binding agents of Trumpism. But our fringe is our fringe, though in the larger picture it signifies bupkis, and that is why we don't feel it necessary to dramatically gesticulate in self-condemnation. Maybe, just *maybe*, these are not the culture war droids you are looking for. But have you taken a measure of the other side: their core sure is *freaky* fringe. Maybe, just *maybe*, there was a need for a dollop of impudence to even out the scales of state, just a little, after all.

What transgressions the Trumpians saw on Capitol Hill fell short of the hysterics levelled against them. Bobby Chesney, a lawyer who is also a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and who serves as the James Baker Chair and Associate Dean the University of Texas School of Law, as well as the Director of Strauss Center and co-founder of the *Lawfare* blog, tweeted: "January 6th, 2021, a date which will live in infamy. I weep for what our nation has lost." Martha Raddatz over at ABC News chimed in with "It is so horrible to know, we are in America where this is happening, on Capitol Hill. I'm not in Baghdad. I'm not in Kabul. I'm not in a dangerous situation overseas. We are in America." Coming in strong was former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, imploringly tweeting: "On this dark, dark day for the United States my thoughts are with all friends over there who are witnessing their democracy being attacked, looted and disrupted. And my sincere hope is that the evil man who bears the responsibility ultimately will suffer the consequences." Folks who less than a decade ago were encamped in Occupy Wall Street protests enthusiastically retweeted the Bank of America's denunciation of the "appalling events in our nation's capital." Then Big Soda let it be known that it would like a word; Coca Cola put out a statement urging the "peaceful transfer of power." Simon & Schuster cancelled Senator Josh Hawley's book contract, because publishers get to make judgements on what constitutes sedition—this is how we do things now. Mark Zuckerberg told us that he had to de-platform Trump because he was undermining "the peaceful and lawful transition of power to his elected successor Joe Biden." Apple was considering banning the Parler App from its devices. Google Apps went ahead without warning.

Rick Klein, also over at ABC, helpfully clarified that "The fact is that getting rid of Trump is the easy part. Cleansing the movement he commands is going to be something else." CNN's Anderson Cooper, an heir to one of America's most storied family fortunes, could barely hide his contempt for those demonstrators when he quipped that after the hullabaloo "they are going to go back to the Olive Garden and to the Holiday Inn that they're staying at," before the curfew blanketing DC and Northern Virginia took hold.

Adam Kinzinger, a Republican representative from near Chicago and a former AirForce fuel tanker pilot who has pretensions to Deep Statehood and is a crass kiss-up to billionaires, recorded a video—"with a heavy heart"—to tell us that "for the sake of Democracy" he is calling "that the 25th Amendment be invoked." Lady Gaga, a singer and constitutional scholar (I'm guessing), stressed that impeachment is the safer course in dealing with a president who "incited

domestic terror” explaining that “Congress has the constitutional authority to possibly disqualify him from future election—the 25th Amendment doesn’t disqualify him.” Romney, never missing an occasion to display his moralizing fluff, described the event as an “insurrection incited by the president of the United States.” Pat Buchanan mused that the event was such a disgrace and debacle that “[a]fter Trump leaves the presidency, he will not be coming back. The opposition to him inside the GOP would prevent his nomination or would defect to prevent his reelection were he nominated again.”

“The president was trying to stage a coup,” Fiona Hill asserted, and that Trump must have been plotting to get the U.S. military involved in the election dispute but thankfully he was thwarted—remember her? She was the Russia expert and impeachment witness who had mentored Steele’s primary source. So, clearly not the excitable type. Ahem. Alex Miceli, the founder of Morning Read, a daily news website about golfing, implored the Professional Golfers’ Association of America to move its 2022 PGA Championship from Trump National Bedminster in New Jersey to another location. And this was an actual headline in the *WaPo*: ‘In unusual move, top Trump official rescinds cheery exit letter and resubmits a protest resignation.’ Michelle Obama graciously (or is it spelled *gratuitously*?—sorry my English no good) shared her deep, deep thoughts with us: What if the rioters had been black? Melania Trump’s chief of staff Stephanie Grisham resigned in disgust, and a nation gasped—Rome has indeed fallen.

Get outta here already with this *stupid* shit.

Democracy is not a fragile thing that must be bounded and tortuously trained like a bonsai redwood. A vigorous system can handle disorder. In fact, disorder may give political life vibrancy. But no, at 6:21PM on January 8, 2021, Twitter announced that it was permanently suspending Trump’s account. What would he do if he can’t reach his 88 million followers? Is that it, is it really over for him now? Trumpism looks at all this and says to itself: what a bunch of pussies. All it means is that the forces arrayed against Trumpism are signaling that they are terrified of 2024.

Or, maybe Nye is right: soft-serve shit is what the majority craves.

I don’t have doubts about Trumpism, but I do worry. The task before us is to incur a massive sense of buyer’s remorse in the establishment’s victory over Trump. But what if the Trumpist narrative, awesome as it may get, breaks through to the 11 percenters and they still would rather pick the comfort of trusting the elite over our healthy dose of disorder? Maybe theirs is a sense that if one conforms to elitism, one can deem themselves elite too? And that’s grand. Who wouldn’t want to feel special?

Who knows, maybe the lower-shelf retail identity politics that Kamala Harris is peddling, as showcased by her Kwanza greetings video and clumsy ‘Fweedom’ appropriation, is just the sort of thing that the consumer needs right now, reassured as it were by the return of patently-obsequious politicians trying to butter him or her up? A return to normalcy indeed.

Why hold the Center for Disease Control liable for how they wasted seven precious weeks in the manner by which they fumbled early testing for COVID19, and then instinctively tried to

cover up errors rather than fix them as bureaucrats are wont to do? Don't you believe in *science*? Aren't you in awe of *experts*? How many hazmat suits do you own, huh?! Here's a video of (DR.!!!) Jill and 'Regular Joe' Biden singing Happy Birthday to (DR.!!!) Anthony Fauci to set you right. Isn't that much more uplifting than holding the CDC to account, or China for that matter?

What's that, you kinda remember Fauci discounting the usefulness of mask-wearing in those first few weeks? Why would you bring that up? "What difference, at this point, does it make?" What's next? Confessing that masks are uncomfortable? You are supposed to enjoy them. You must embrace the way of the mask. Chop-chop, change your profile pic to one with a mask, all the cool kids are doing it. Pick out a cutesy print and let the world know that you are a dutiful team member. Trump sinned against all that is holy and decent all last year when displaying a hint of agnosticism, that even though no one likes wearing them we sorta-kinda have to suck it up for a while and wear one, because maybe-shmaybe we will get this over with sooner if we do. Trump was speaking to the half of the population—the rebellious “now and then” half—that responds to such crotchety grumblings when authority imparts advice. But we can't have that. You know how it is, we can't have two ways of getting the folks out there to do what we want them to do. It is too confusing for them, and it suggests that the way (DR.!!!) experts have suggested as standard procedure may not be absolutely perfect. Conformity saves lives, don't you know?

It is such a relief that we are getting the GOp back, isn't it? Did you see how Elaine Chow submitted her resignation after Trump signaled disappointment in her husband, the soon-to-be Senate minority leader? Closing of ranks among sweethearts and the powerful is an endearing sight. Remember Paul Ryan? Gee he was some swell guy. Sure, he failed on healthcare and seems to be collapsing Fox News's ratings, but wouldn't it be great to get him back in the mix now somehow?

No thanks.

If it is to be a slapstick clown show and nothing but, then I and many millions like me would prefer to watch our own. And he's really, really good at it, as you may have heard. And a lot more honest about it—ironic, no?

Yes, yes, it is never a good thing when a mass of people disengage and leave the public square. Things can get weird and sectarian out there in the wilderness. Plus, getting back to the square may get harder: the belief that access is rigged may incur a permanent self-quarantine, while the square itself may devolve into a holding pen for conformist totalitarianism, where an individual, at once celebrated and isolated, would shrink under the glare of Big Media, Big Dem, Big Tech, Big Banks, Big Deep State, and now it seems Big Soda too. But do we have a choice when cancel culture is already the law of the land? Lord Jack Patrick of Dorsey had already decreed it.

But I do worry too about Trump. He's it. He's the movement, for now. I just don't think that Ron DeSantis or Howley can—and would ever be able to, amply credentialed as they are—recreate the magic. No one can. Moses has to do his thing before Joshua takes over, and that thing, deliverance, is not yet fully done. Soon we won't even have a good enough Aaron to speak

for Moses, not with Rush Limbaugh sadly ebbing away. I don't worry about Trump royally messing things up with a cluster-fuck gesture or a miscalculation; I'd take his intuition over anyone else's. What I worry about is that he would wander off and apply himself, as is his busybody way, to something else. If one re-reads the chapter in Conrad Black's book *A President Like No Other* (2018) about Trump's business rise and then, more importantly, his improbable comeback from under crushing disaster upon disaster, one would detect something disquieting. Black (who was pardoned by Trump; you've got Wikipedia to fill you in on that) did a masterful job breaking down Trump's business *genius*—yes, I did it again, I used *that* word, read that chapter and decide for yourself—probably because Black was uniquely positioned to explain such complex financial transactions, seeing how he is both a journalist and a banker, and how he had the added benefit of negotiating a land deal in Chicago while sitting across from Trump. He saw the magic in real time, and he realized that Trump has an ingenious instinct for confidently walking in with a winning offer at exactly the right moment. Trump also has the equally ingenious instinct to walk away when he sees that the deal just ain't happening. And he would be ruthless and unsentimental about it. Would he do so to MAGA too?

I hope not. I hope he sees what I see: a comeback for the ages.

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Oh look, that sign up ahead says we are only a 0.2 mile hike away from Mt. Nebo's summit. Wanna come? It's a great view...

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