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## Roaming Charges: Populism With an Inhuman Face

By Jeffrey St. Clair  
January 27, 2017



“The secret of being a top-notch con man is being able to know what the mark wants, and how to make him think he’s getting it.”

Depending on where you sit, a Barcalounger or a yoga mat, the first episodes of Trumplandia either fulfilled every expectation or confirmed your worst nightmares. With Trump there is no middle ground, no grey areas. Responses to him are purely binary, intensely so. And that’s the way Trump—and his opponents—want it. Total war from day one.

There will be no apologies, no revisions, no concessions. Refreshingly, Trump offers no rhetorical filigrees about unifying the country and healing its divisions. The point is not to

reassure, but to enrage. Trump the President is the same person he was on the campaign trail, only more so.

In his first week, Trump has blasted out a blitzkrieg of divisive executive orders to the silence of GOP members of congress, who only a week ago were howling at the dictatorial nature of Obama's executive actions. Trump's rule by decree makes the Theory of the Unified Executive from Bushtime seem quaint, almost cautiously legalistic.

But how much force do these Executive Orders actually have? On his first day in office, Obama signed an Executive Order "closing" Gitmo. Eight years later he transferred 41 prisoners there into the custody of Donald Trump. Most of these orders are merely ornate memos from the Big Boss, glorified press releases that are treated as imperial diktats.

The strategy of the Trump presidency is to divide and subdivide, not to unite. Why? Because Trump understands that he is weak and that he is where he is only because his enemies are weaker. So he needs to keep feeding his raging base raw meat, the bloodier the better. Trump wants to agitate both his acolytes and his opposition, to stir up tumult and chaos, creating a kind of toxic fog to distract from the actual policies—a wishlist of the old right—that are being pushed forward by the likes of Paul Ryan: privatization of Social Security and Medicare, gutting of regulations on air, water and food quality, restricting abortion and family planning and slashing corporate taxes.

Trump needs enemies the way the Democrats need scapegoats and the scapegoats keep mounting in number: Bernie Sanders, Susan Sarandon, Jill Stein, Julian Assange, Vladimir Putin, James Comey and now Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, who many Hillary diehards blame for legitimizing Trump when he met with him in Mexico City last August.

We've previously established that Trump doesn't read, not even the guilt-edged volume of Der Fuhrer's speeches his ex-wife Ivana claimed he kept on his night table. But Trump is no Hitler, at least in the oratory department. In his natural mode Trump speaks in a recursive syntax that stops, starts, reverses and runs back over itself like a remote control car operated by a 5-year-old on a sugar high. Try diagramming these sentences from Trump's interview on ABC News with David Muir:

I would've easily won the popular vote, much easier, in my opinion, than winning the electoral college. I ended up going to 19 different states. I went to the state of Maine four times for one. I needed one. I went to M— I got it, by the way. But it turned out I didn't need it because we ended up winning by a massive amount, 306. I needed 270. We got 306. You and everybody said, "There's no way you get to 270." I mean, your network said and almost everybody said, "There's no way you can get to ...". So, I went to Maine four times. I went to various places. And that's the beauty of the electoral college. With that being said, if you look at voter registration, you look at the dead people that are registered to vote who vote, you look at people that are registered in two states, you look at all of these different things that are happening with registration. You take a look at those registration for — you're gonna s— find — and we're gonna do an investigation on it.

Even when tethered to a prepared text, Trump grunts and growls his way through his teleprompted remarks like a bear awakening from months of hibernation, hitting hard on his keywords and stock phrases, even as much of the speech remains entangled, hopelessly enjambed and largely unintelligible. Even so, Trump has the gift of turning his own incoherence into an advantage. Trump placed his tiny-hand on Lincoln's Bible to take the oath of office, but his speech, what I could make out of it, was to Lincoln what the prose of Thomas Friedman is to F. Scott Fitzgerald's. It sounded like 50 shades of animus, which is, of course, precisely what his audience wanted to hear and *only* what they wanted to hear. People, on both the left and right, don't tune into Trump to learn anything but to have their worst instincts confirmed and vivified.

Suddenly the once chilling notion of a "deep state," the permanent shadow government that really runs the show, is being viewed by many liberals in a more comforting light, as a stabilizing force, a hedge against Trump's mad impulses. How else to explain the hyperventilating reaction of elites to Trump's amusing rant at Langley, as if he had somehow sullied the reputation of the CIA.

Trump may be a functioning illiterate but his sinister consigliere, Steve Bannon, does read. In fact, he reads texts that the Left once memorized and has now forsaken. The works of Vladimir Lenin, for starters. Revealingly, Bannon once described himself as a Leninist, and not in the way that creeps like David Horowitz once grazed in the pastures of Trotsky. Bannon, of course, has no interest in the nuances of Lenin's political philosophy, but he absorbed Lenin's discourses on power: how to get it, how to keep it, how to wield it. Unbridled power, not popularity, is the key to ruling (and looting) the empire.

Steve Bannon and Trump know that as president you have the power to write your own history and smear anyone who questions that version as an opponent and enemy. Trump needs a sustained-yield of enemies and a steady state of fear. He is the president that post-modernists have been waiting for. Press briefings are presented in the style of infomercials for weird products on the Home Shopping Network. A Trump anecdote, pieced together from clubhouse gossip, pop culture references and clips from TMZ, becomes a fact once he tells it. Some will denounce it as heresy, while others recite it as gospel. But it exists nonetheless, exerting its power over the public consciousness: The crowd was huge. The crime rate is rising. The border is porous. Debunk them at your peril or, in Bannon's words, "keep your mouth shut."

As a politician Trump remains an oddity. There's nothing cool about Donald Trump, nothing smooth, inviting or charming. Trump is not someone you'd like to have a beer with. He doesn't drink, doesn't like you or even pretend to like you and he would hit on your date, spouse or daughter right before your eyes, tell you to get lost and stick you with the bar tab. His appeal, such as it is, is in his brutality, a personality as oversized and overbearing as his buildings, which uniformly exhibit an architecture of dominance and intimidation. Trump desperately craves the prestige he has always been—and will forever be—denied.

But he remains a coil of contradictions. For most of his career, Trump was a builder, a booster, a pitchman. Traditionally, such characters—PT Barnum, Ronald Reagan, Benito Mussolini—have sold optimism and progress, even as they plot to rip you off. But now Trump acts more like Melville's Confidence Man, a dark cipher, who sells dread and retreat. His vision of America is a

landscape of blight and terminal decay, a country despoiled by the kind of people his father, Fred Trump, warned him never to permit to become tenants in his buildings.

One searches for a word to describe Trump's politics. I've begun to think of him as a post-fascist, a practitioner of populism with an inhuman face, a bully who makes promises that sound like threats and threats that sound like promises. He is president as slumlord—and the rent is already past due.

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Democrats are giving invertebrates a bad name. Only one Democratic Senator (Kirsten Gillibrand) voted against Mad Dog Mattis. Why only one? Because, according to Al Franken: "Mattis is a well-respected intellectual." Franken was once an alleged comedian, but he wasn't joking.

+ Remember when the Democrats hired George Lakoff to help them "frame" neoliberal austerity measures so they'd sound more palatable for their base? Now the leadership of the party is attending seminars on how to "talk to real people."

+ Trump's Syrian "safe zones" sound a lot like HRC's Syrian "no fly zones." Has someone checked to see if Samantha Power really left the building? Democrats curdle at such comparisons, saying its unfair to lump Hillary with Trump. True enough. HRC's Syrian plans risked nuclear war with Russia. But give Trump credit, he's catching up...

+ On the eve of Rexxon Tillerson taking over the helm of the State Department, the entire senior level management of the Department resigned en masse, the largest exodus at Foggy Bottom in history. There goes that "diplomatic immunity." The obvious question is: can they now be indicted for war crimes? Foggy Bottom is just a little less foggy today.

+ For one of the first dinners at the Trump White House, the Congressional leadership was finally fed something close to what they deserve: "tiny meatballs and pigs-in-a-blanket." Tiny hands, tiny meatballs.

+ New FBI crime stats show that the murder rate not Chicago is 11.6 killed per 100,000 residents, which is not even in the top 10 for large American cities. Nine of the top 12 cities are in states that Trump won, including St. Louis (27.75), Orlando (24.21), New Orleans (17.03), Jackson (15.85), Charleston (13.76), Memphis (13.38), Atlanta (12.27), Savannah (11.66). Will Trump send National Guard to the Orlando or Savannah?

+ Beware La Cruelle Dame Sans Merci claiming solidarity: Madeleine Albright: "I was raised Catholic, became Episcopalian & found out later my family was Jewish. I stand ready to register as Muslim in #solidarity." After supervising the deaths of 500,000 Muslim children in Iraq, it's now safe for Albright to "register as a Muslim." As my friend Farrah Hassen said: "Why register at all? It only lends legitimacy to an unconstitutional and racist policy." Well said. "...the sedge has withered from the lake / and no birds sing."

+ Look at the icy look Melania shoots at Donald behind his back at the inauguration. The First Lady's transformation into Medea may be our last, best hope...Of course, Uday, Qusay and Marie Antoinette Trump may end up as collateral damage. *C'est la vie*.

+ So scientists are planning their own march on the Capital. Let's hope they replace the Pink Pussy Hats with Einstein and Madame Curie wigs. The Curie wigs, naturally, will glow in the dark.

+ I know it's impolite to say so (and may seem like an Alt Fact to some), but let the record show that HRC supported *both* the KXL and Dakota Access Pipelines..

+ A couple of years ago, the State Department review of the Keystone Pipeline estimated that the project would create 35 permanent jobs. Sure that sounds puny, but it doesn't include the 100s of jobs for pipeline rupture and clean-up crews who are certain to be in high demand for the next several decades....

+ It shouldn't surprise anyone that National Park Service employees are putting up more of a fight against Trump than Democratic Party politicians...

+ Since presidents are so easily replaceable, you have to wonder about the psyche of the Secret Service agent who *would* "take a bullet" for one of them. It's more of an agency myth, promoted by Hollywood, than a job description isn't it? I wonder if there's been a psychological study of Secret Service agents who see their role as being "willing to take a bullet" for politicians. It's not exactly altruism, is it?

+ Since Trump took the oath of office, the initiation fee for membership Mar-a-Lago (the Winter White House) has doubled from \$100,000 to \$200,000. No word yet on whether the Initiation Rites include Male Genital Mutilation...

+ It's sobering to realize that Hillary performed better than the Democrats' senatorial and house candidates. The Democrats could lose another 10 senate seats in 2020. This is what happens when your "ace" was a dud and there's no one in the bullpen....

+ During the Women's March on Washington, which put nearly a half-million people on the Mall, most of the candidates to lead the Democratic Party in the Trump Era were AWOL, prostrating themselves before millionaires at an exclusive retreat for big donors.

+ A Swedish study purports to show that in terms of toxic chemicals sex toys are safer than kid's toys. This makes sense to me. You can always have more children, but you can't replace your orifices. But be warned. If you gave your toddler a dildo to play with or a butt plug to teeth on because it was safer than a Transformer doll, you'd almost certainly be arrested for child abuse here in the Nanny State of Oregon....

+ I've been thumbing through the latest collection of the letters of Samuel Beckett. In the ominous year of 1984, five years before Beckett died, the *New York Times* asked the writer about his plans for the new year. From Paris, Beckett replied thusly by telegram: "resolutions colon

zero stop period hopes colon zero stop Beckett.” Too bad Sam’s not around to lead the Democratic resistance.