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What Will It Take For Trump to Get His Due?



It is hard to recall now but before the 2016 election, blatant contempt for the rule of law and other longstanding (small-r) republican values, public displays of stupidity, extreme character

flaws, and irrefutable evidence of psychological instability could wreck a presidential campaign; and it was practically axiomatic that no presidency could be headed by anyone to whom those descriptions apply.

No longer. By force of example, Donald Trump has proven the conventional wisdom wrong. The sixty percent or so of Americans whose heads are screwed on more or less correctly have therefore had to face up to the fact that as many as forty percent of their fellow citizens are either too benighted to face the truth about the president they elected, or, if they do have some inkling, that they either don't care, or actually like being led by "a fucking moron."

It was one of the handful of by now long gone "adults in the room," Trump's first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, a man of impeccably nefarious capitalist (and anti-environmentalist) credentials, who described Trump that way. He was spot on right.

Persons outside the Trump base cannot help but believe that there is a tipping-point somewhere; that, while Trump mentally decomposes, the other forty percent cannot maintain their collective idiocy indefinitely. However, this belief, which I share, is based solely on respect for and faith in humankind; at this point, the available evidence does not support it.

It suggests instead that Trump could indeed walk out onto Fifth Avenue, shoot someone dead, and become more popular with his base on that account. When he first made this boast, as his campaign was getting underway, people took it as a joke. Hardly anyone is still laughing. Trump didn't get to where he now is thanks to, pardon the sarcasm, his magnetic face, form or figure. The man is hideous, a walking laughing-stock.

Evangelicals and the alt-right "deep thinker" Steve Bannon say that they forgive Trump's human flaws because they regard him as an instrument of providential design. If they are even just a little bit right, the alleged divinity must really have it in for us.

A more satisfactory explanation would have mischievous gods using us as playthings. Polytheistic explanations generally make more sense of the facts and are therefore easier to believe than invocations of providential design. This case is no exception.

However, there is no need to turn to the heavens for an explanation of the Trump phenomenon.

Neither need we give up trying to make sense of it at all because there are at least two other ways to account for the incomprehensible but nevertheless incontrovertible fact that so many apparently sane persons, individuals, capable of navigating their ways through life's vagaries, have turned Donald Trump, as uncharismatic a figure as could be, into the leader of a sixty-three million strong personality cult.

The first lays blame on Clintonism, the dominant, but no longer exclusive, ideology of America's less odious duopoly party, and on the campaign Clintonite Democrats, including Hillary herself, ran against Trump.

The case for that explanation is hardly news; genuine leftists have been arguing against Clintonism for years, and diehard supporters of Bernie Sanders were hardly the only ones two and a half year ago to oppose Hillary from the left.

It is urgent nevertheless to pursue the case against the theory and practice of Clintonism now – because well-resourced corporate Democrats and their patrons, fearful of losing control of “their thing” to the likes of uncowed, courageous, principled upstarts like Ilhan Omar and AOC, are pulling out all the stops in their defense of “moderation.”

The other explanation is less widely appreciated but, I think, even more important. It is summed up in Democratic Party campaign strategist James Carville's to (Bill) Clinton's campaign workers in 1992: “it's the economy stupid.” In the Clinton years and for some time thereafter, that overused expression became almost a cliché. Even so, it has become pertinent again.

By 2016, the widespread unpopularity of neoliberal, liberal imperialist, Wall Street and military-industrial complex friendly politics, which the Clintons did so much to establish, helped Trump secure an Electoral College victory. So did Hillary Clinton's shortcomings as a First Lady, Senator, and Secretary of State. The tone deafness of the campaign she and her team ran didn't help either.

That “progressive pragmatist” – or is it “pragmatic progressive?” — was born to lose, but even she ought to have trounced a candidate as vile and unfit for the office he sought as Donald Trump.

She didn't, however. Instead, she outdid herself.

For the still continuing debacles that began to unfold on her watch, she is by no means the only one at fault. But wherever she most plainly left her mark – in Honduras, Libya, Syria and elsewhere – she became the most culpable of all the contemporaneous Clintonite politicians; more culpable even than Barack Obama himself, notwithstanding the fact that ultimately the buck stopped with him.

No doubt, retrograde, racist, and nativist populism would be a factor in today's politics even had Hillary left Bill after his fling with Monica, and even if she had then given the rest of her life over to the idle pleasures dear to the Donald's first First Lady, the peerless Ivana, mother of three, not just one, bearer of bad seed.

But had, say, John Kerry been calling the shots instead of Hillary during Obama's first term, there might not now be the refugee crises – in Europe and on the U.S.-Mexico border — that are causing so much strife in the world today.

And then there is Clinton's role in the revival of Cold War anti-Russian animosities and her part in encouraging the Obama administration's war on whistle blowers and, more generally, on First Amendment protections of journalists.

Culpability for the criminally sadistic prison sentence Chelsea Manning was forced to endure, and is now enduring again because prosecutors want her to turn on Julian Assange; and for the de facto imprisonment, and whatever comes next, of Assange himself are on her as much as on any other miscreant in the Democratic and Republican folds.

But reasons to oppose the mainstream Democratic Party from the left don't explain the Trump base, at least not directly. It is that "basket of deplorables," more than anything else, which accounts for Trump's continuing hold over the American government and for the present and future consequences of the Trump presidency.

Perhaps the idea is just to keep "the resistance" alert or perhaps those who make the claim really believe it; whichever is the case, the conventional wisdom nowadays is that Trump will be hard to defeat in 2020. Needless to say, in a sane society, he would lose in a landslide running against a potted plant.

Nevertheless, later-day Clintonites have seized on the idea of Trump being a formidable opponent because, for their purposes, it is useful – for scaring Democrats into nominating someone like Hillary or worse to run against the Trumpian menace. Joe Biden is worse; he just hasn't yet had the chance to do as much harm.

There is ample reason to worry, though, that, as long as the Trump base remains intact, Democrats will again find a way to turn an all but certain victory into a pitiful defeat.

All they would have to do to remain losers is accede to the idea that the way forward is to field candidates of the kind that made Trump and Trumpism possible and even necessary.

That there is an urgent need to win back white working class voters is beyond dispute, even if not all MSNBC and CNN "experts" agree. However, contrary to what they claim, this does not imply "moderation" or "centrism" or any of the other common sense nostrums currently being bandied about. No way.

Let Obama and others inveigh against "purity." Their way is a losing way. It might seem right at first – in the way that avoiding strenuous exercise might seem right for patients recovering from heart attacks or surgeries. But, over time and at great human cost, it has become clear that just the opposite is the case. This has been demonstrated time and again.

These considerations help explain why there is, and ought to be, a left opposition to Clintonism and, more broadly, to the mainstream Democratic Party. However, they explain the existence and durability of the Trump base only insofar as the rising inequality Clintonism encourages does. That is only part of the story.

A very sizeable minority of voters, roughly sixty-three million of them — voted for Trump in 2016. Realizing the enormity of the mistake they made, quite a few of them have defected from the Trumpian ambit. Astonishingly, though, quite a few have not.

The defections mostly happened early on. The size of the Trump base has, by most accounts, remained fairly stable for the past two years, even as the obviousness of Trump's unfitness for much of anything, much less the presidency, has become a lot harder than it used to be to ignore.

Could many of the remaining Trump supporters still be there because they really do see him as an instrument of Providential Design? This is not impossible; ordinary people can be “fucking morons” too.

Or could the fiscal conservatives and deficit hawks still standing by their man be on board because, as some commentators think, stacking the federal courts with Neanderthal judges “trumps” all. If nothing else, this would at least explain Mitch McConnell.

In any case, it is plain that Fox News and other rightwing propaganda operations are more persuasive than anyone three years ago would have imagined. We now know too that identity politics isn't just for persons of color and the LGBTQ community; long in the tooth white males and the women who love them have gone down that path as well.

In a world in which a lot of people who are not making off like bandits on Trump's account stand by him anyway, anything is possible. In this case, that which is to be explained is so bizarre, so hard to fathom, that just about any explanation seems as good as any other.

It is a stretch, but perhaps there are even people whom no court would deem *non compos mentis*, of unsound mind, who support Trump because they think that he is an outstanding role model for their children.

This would be only slightly more implausible than that anyone would think, this far into his presidency, that Trump actually is “making America great again,” whatever that might mean to them.

Insofar as Trump's words (tweets, rants) track reality at all, it is usually the negation of what he says that is closest to the truth. This is the case here as well; it is as plain as can be that so far from making America great, he is turning it into a laughing stock. Only those whose will to believe is absolutely indomitable could imagine otherwise, even for a moment.

Trump is not even taking the lead in perpetrating this deceit. For turning pretenses of greatness into evidence of its opposite, Brexiteers are way ahead of him; so are authoritarian leaders the world over.

Do Trump supporters somehow not see this? Do they see it, but not care? Do they see it and care, but care more about other things – like “recognition” by cultural elites?

Unless the Reality Principle has some been abrogated, none of these possibilities entirely account for what has been going on since Inauguration Day.

And so, again, the question remains: why does the Trump base survive more or less intact?

Why are the victims of Trump’s con still standing by their man?

The best answers are often ones that academic and media gurus deem superseded. The idea that Trump supporters are remaining loyal to him mainly for economic reasons is a case in point.

Trump’s policies plainly harm the “forgotten man” Franklin Roosevelt spoke of; just as plainly, they favor the “economic royalists” whose hatred Roosevelt said he welcomed. He was talking about the Trump base demographic of his time. And yet Trump’s base abides.

To be sure, Trump’s supporters are not the smartest kids on the block. But it is not just ignorance and stupidity that keeps them on board. It is also economic reality.

The ways presidents and their administrations affect the economy, and therefore the economic wellbeing of individuals affected by the economy they preside over, are complicated.

Even so, our override capitalist economy, some ten years after Obama *et. al.* saved it from going under as the world financial system that sustained it was melting down, should be delivering Trumpism its deathblow – partly thanks to the self-serving machinations of the Donald and his minions, and partly for reasons beyond Trump’s or anyone else’s control.

That deathblow is surely coming – probably sooner than later. When it does, thanks to the “deconstruction” of the regulatory state along with nearly all other mitigating factors, the outcome won’t be pretty.

For now, though, the gods or God, always on the lookout for ways to do us mortals harm have been working overtime to keep the economic indicators looking good.

The sad fact of the matter, though, is that there are times when the indicators mislead. Thus Trump’s tax cuts for the rich caused them to improve for a while. But this was because Trump gave the economy the statistical equivalent of a sugar high.

To his supporters, this was viewed as evidence of the adroitness of their man's stewardship of the economy. Rightwing media hosts, abetted by a few academics and journalists who ought to know better, encouraged their delusion.

They even seem to have convinced, or at least neutralized, some of Trumpism's earliest victims. Being unable not to notice how the wrong-headedness and general incoherence of Trumpian kakistocratic rule made them worse off, they nevertheless remained loyal — taking one for the team.

Some of them may only be “values voters” with piss poor values. Most of them, though, are victims of a well-executed con. Their seemingly limitless willingness to be deluded by a venal and sadistic egotist and the kakistocrats who serve him is truly awe-inspiring.

[In a “kakistocracy,” the worst, the least qualified, the most unscrupulous and corrupt rule. The Trump administration is a full-blown kakistocracy.]

Trump or no Trump, capitalist economies go through cycles of boom and bust. On this, all major economic theorists – from Karl Marx to Milton Friedman – agree.

The Obama era ‘fixes’ to the Great Recession, consisting mostly of bailouts to banksters awash in “get out of jail free” cards, restored a semblance of the old regime's economic order. And so, the rich continue to get richer in ways that generate economic data that suggest that a recovery is underway.

In truth, though, the most that most people can say is that they are doing about as well as their counterparts a generation or two back did, and that their share of the nation's wealth is at least not deteriorating more than it already has.

With recoveries like that, our later-day economic royalists hardly even need recessions to keep workers feeling and being insecure!

Thus Trump has been benefiting from what got going, partly with government help but also in the normal course of events in capitalist economies, when Obama was starting out. The resulting statistical rise, such as it is, has been going on for roughly ten years. Unless capitalism has fundamentally changed – which, of course, it has not — it cannot go on for much longer. As such things, go, ten years is already a long time.

When Trump's luck runs out, nearly everyone will find him or herself worse off than they currently are, and worse off than need be. The most ardent Trump supporters will be among the hardest hit.

In the Obama era, there were no soft landings, but there were no catastrophic downturns either. But now, thanks to Trump, the guardrails are mostly gone. When the Donald's lucky streak ends, the "collateral damage" will therefore be worse than a decade ago.

On the one hand, though, it will be glorious to watch him, his children, and his close associates fall. On the other, they will be taking a lot down with them.

The suffering will affect nearly everybody to some extent – but pity, above all, the true believers, the certifiable loonies, and the victims who just won't face up to the fact that they have been snookered.

Trump will continue to menace until either his health fails – thanks God for cholesterol! — or Republicans rise up and desert him.

He knows no shame, and the mean-spiritedness and capacity for self-deception of his supporters seem to know no bounds.

But there is always the economy, stupid. It has a way of concentrating the minds of even the most obtuse among us.

As long as his supporters can convince themselves that the economy is fine, even if it is not, and that Trump's "deals" offer hope for a better future – not for Muslims or Central Americans, of course, but for people like them — it won't matter that their president is a laughing stock.

It just might matter, though, that he is leading them to ruination in ways that, try as they might, they cannot deny.

If that won't be enough to cause at least some of them, enough to make a difference, at long last finally to turn against Trump, then nothing will, and there will be nothing to do but, like souls entering the Inferno, to "abandon all hope."

Take heart, though: we are not there yet, and, in all likelihood, we never will be.

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