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by JOHN G. RUSSELL  
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## *The Devolution Will Be Televised: Our Body-cam President*



Gil Scott-Heron was only partially correct when he predicted the revolution would not be televised. “There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers in the instant replay,” he sang. While the revolution may not be aired live in prime time, in the age of mass surveillance, the abuses that may give rise to it are. Yet despite our body-cammed, go-to-the-video response to police brutality and other overt authoritarian abuses, there are few signs of a brewing revolution, televised or not.

Donald Trump is America's body-cam, the not so smart smartphone streaming medium through which the nation glimpses itself. Like these instruments of public surveillance, Trump presents to us a portrait of American life that is as unrelenting in its ugliness as it is gruelingly uncomfortable to watch, prompting swift if disingenuous denials of a reality that for far too long had been rejected in favor of national hagiography.

Decades before these devices, Americans of color had complained of police malfeasance only to be met with condescending skepticism. Today, these technologies have helped to mitigated such skepticism, providing a digital archive of atrocities that make what was once hidden glaringly apparent to all but the most flagrant deniers. In a similar way, Trump has exposed the perennial undercurrents of American racism, bringing them to the surface for all to see: Torch-bearing white supremacist march in Virginia; nationally, an alphabet soup of negrophobic whites (BBQ Becky, Cornerstore Caroline, Coupon Carl, ID Adam, Pool Patrol Paula, et al.) take up the white wo/man's burden of policing black and brown bodies; the sordid tragedy of humanity caged at its southern border.

With Trump in power, the devolution has been televised, in 4K, 24/7/365 as the nation binge watches the erosion of its deceptively adulatory national self-portrait. In those halcyon pre-Trump days, we liked to speak of "polite racism," a gentlemen's agreement for the new millennium, the perfect anodyne for the "post-race," Change-and-Hope Obama years. The days of raw, unapologetic racial animus, white America told itself, were a relic of its past. To a large degree, the corporate media promulgated this myth, until the internet, social media, smartphones, and body cams belied it, and a narcissistic, camera-hungry plutocrat replaced the man who gave it a semblance of naïve credence. Trump has become the personification of this new-yet-old America: boorish, bigoted, undeservedly boastful, the buffoonish embodiment of a nation that benefits from the exploitation of others while vigorously denying that it does.

Salon's Amanda Marcotte observes, "What drives the Trump base isn't actually Donald Trump himself. It's the bigotry. Everything else is gravy." It is not that Trump has demonstrably made America more racist but that he has given racists – and those who refuse to see them – a face to rally around. Indeed, it is all too easy to dismiss Trump's base as "trolls" – both among the general public and in attendance at his recently convened "social media summit" – as MAGA-hatted troglodytes with a penchant for white extremism and xenophobia, since this would spare the rest of America the discomfiting but necessary angst of unflinching self-reflection. However, while their

views may arguably be fringeworthy, they themselves are not marginal; instead, they occupy positions of power and authority, as they have historically, from the days of slave patrols and paddyrollers, Jim Crow and more recently Stop and Frisk and Broken Windows. In each case, they view themselves as Guardians and Defenders of a threatened republic and the whiteness for which it stood – and defiantly still stands, the same roles that Trump envisions himself performing with every snuffle-punctuated vilification of its citizens of color.

A number of recent reports expose the extent to which normalized extremism permeates the ranks of those who serve and protect the state. The investigative website Reveal reports it was able to join dozens of closed Facebook hate groups which have as its members hundreds of active duty and retired cops “at every level of American law enforcement, from tiny, rural sheriff’s departments to the largest agencies in the country, such as Los Angeles and New York police departments.” Currently, over 50 police departments across the nation are under investigation.

The Associated Press reports that police departments in five states (Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Missouri) have launched investigations into their officers’ public Facebook accounts following the publication of a database that revealed racist, Islamophobic, anti-immigrant posts, some glorifying police brutality. In Philadelphia alone, 72 police officers have been placed on administrative duty, with “several dozen” possibly facing disciplinary action and termination for racist Facebook posts.

There is nothing particularly new here, save the spate of coverage. As the Intercept reports, a 2015 classified FBI Counter Terrorism Policy Guide noted law enforcement’s “deep historical connections to racist ideologies” and the “longstanding strategy [white extremist groups] “to infiltrate the law enforcement community.” The report also called out the practice of such groups of encouraging “ghost skins” – those who publicly conceal their white supremacist views so as to pass undetected into the mainstream and covertly advance their cause – to pursue jobs in law enforcement in order to alert them to police investigations.

Of course, extremist infiltration is not confined to “America’s finest.” In 2006, ten years after the armed forces cracked down on white extremists in its ranks, the Southern Poverty Legal Center reported that these groups had once again infiltrated the military. According to a Department of Defense investigator cited in the report, “Recruiters are knowingly allowing neo-Nazis and white supremacists to join the armed forces, and commanders don’t remove them from the military even after we positively identify them

as extremists or gang members.” During the Iraq War the military cast a blind eye to such individuals in order to meet its recruitment goals.

More recently, ProPublica reported the existence of “I’m 10-15,” a secret Customs and Border Protection agency racist Facebook group whose membership consists of 9,500 current and former Border Patrol agents.

This not a matter of a “few rotten apples”; this is the orchard: When Mark Morgan, former acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the newly installed acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, justifies such confinements on the grounds that he could “unequivocally” tell just by “looking at their eyes” that “so-called minors” held in detention were “soon-to-be-MS-13 gang members,” there can be no doubt the rot is endemic, infesting both the rank and file and the top.

The devolution will be televised.

On July 4th, the world had foisted upon it a “Salute to America,” with Trump as three-ring carnival barker, a gauche spectacle that featured tanks stationed in front of the Lincoln Memorial and waves of military aircraft flying over the Washington Monument – indeed, if you look closely, you could, despite Trump’s previous insistence to the contrary, even see an F-35 fighter, though if he actually believed in their literal invisibility, it would make them a poor choice for an air show. (Still, Trump probably defended his choice to include them by insisting earlier versions of these Wonder Woman jets were used by American militias to secure British airports during the Revolutionary War.) All that was absent were clear skies and goose-stepping soldiers, though given Trump’s authoritarian proclivities, the latter may not be far behind.

Yet, as Americans sat before their TVs to celebrate their independence, immigrants and asylum seekers lingered – and continue to linger – in standing-room-only cages in unsanitary condition and drinking from toilets as their children grow sick and die. And when members of Congress toured detainment centers in El Paso, Texas, the “trolls” emerged from beneath their cyberspace bridges to greet them with jeers and Islamophobic slurs. Actions speak louder than words, or, it seems, Facebook posts.

It is telling, however, that some prefer to debate the nomenclature of exclusion rather than act against policies that repeat the nation’s historical mistakes and confront its ugly past. Some were offended that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referred to these facilities as “concentration camps,” claiming she callously invoked the Holocaust and Nazi Germany. However, concentration camps did not originate in Nazi Germany but in South Africa’s

Boer War and America's own racist, genocidal past, one whose legacy includes not only the internment of Japanese-Americans at Tule Lake, Manzanar, Gila River, and Granada, but also Native Americans to Ross's Landing, Fort Cass, and Fort Snelling, and the "sheltering" of freed African Americans slaves so-called contraband camps, many of whose conditions resembled those of today's detention centers, though we have tended to describe these facilities with a variety of palliative euphemisms: "relocation camps," "internment camps," "assembly centers," "Indian camps," and "reservations" that minimize their role in the removal, confinement, and, yes, death of people of color in America. And in the shadow of this bowdlerized history, FOX News apparatchik brush off their present-day iteration as "overcrowded luxury hotels," "border schools," and, as Laura Ingraham dismissively described them, "summer camps."

If the above names are not as familiar Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka or Buchenwald, it is because they reflect a history that Americans would prefer to ignore, as well as the fact that Nazi concentration camps and the racial policies that preceded their construction were inspired by America's. As Yale Law school professor James Q. Whitman notes in his Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law, in 1928 Hitler "spoke admiringly about the way Americans had 'gunned down the millions of Redskins to a few thousand and now keep the modest remnant under observation in a cage.'" In Adolf Hitler, historian John Toland goes a step further, explaining, "Hitler's concept of concentration camps as well as the practicality of genocide owed much, so he claimed, to his studies of English and United States history. He admired the camps for Boer prisoners in South Africa and for the Indians in the wild West; and often praised to his inner circle the efficiency of America's extermination – by starvation and uneven combat – of the red savages who could not be tamed by captivity." And while the debate over nomenclature and "false equivalencies," has been reengaged, we should not lose sight of their similarities. In 1998, the Japanese American Nation Museum and American Jewish Committee issued a joint statement that emphasized these commonalities, pointing out that "[d]espite differences, all had one thing in common: the people in power removed a minority from the general population and the rest of society let it happen" (my emphasis), which seems as apt a description as any of the shared intent of those who create such facilities and the complicity of those who permit their use.

Body cams can be turned off; our body-cam president has not – and arguably should not, at least until Americans have fully inspected the toxic reality of what their nation is. I am

tempted to say “has become,” but it has been this way for some time; it is simply that Trump has brought its racism out into the open.

As the 2020 election approaches, the question facing Americans is often framed in terms of whether, they will ignore Trump’s all too obvious flaws and grant him another four years (that this remains a serious possibility after two and a half years of lies, scandals, and overtly racist tantrums, including his latest slander of Reps. Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley, is frankly stupefying). What this question fails to address is the far more unsettling matter of why, through our inaction and that of our political leadership, we allow him to remain in office when constitutional mechanisms exist to remove him. And yet, even if Trump were successfully ousted, I cannot help wonder if this would be the equivalent of turning off a body-cam so that we can once again indulge our perpetual state of denial, for in the absence of political will directed at eliminating the systemic sources of our dysfunction, changes at the top of the hate chain will only be cosmetic and placatory.

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