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Trump: the GOP's Exterminating Angel



Anyone with normal sensibilities who does not tune the world out completely cannot help but find the Trump presidency disorienting and upsetting – not only because the fate of the planet is in the hands of an illiberal, willfully ignorant, inept, sleaze ball with a Mussolini smirk, whose modus operandi is to stir up racial animosities, and who delights in gratuitous displays of cruelty towards black and brown people, but also in the way that people feel in the course of a nightmare from which they cannot awaken.

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Democrats and Republicans have so far responded in different ways to this state of affairs. The effect on the Democratic Party has been at least potentially beneficial; the effect on Republicans has been devastating, and could become even worse.

Since even before the Wilson era, the Democratic Party has been, on the whole, more progressive than the GOP. But for most of its long history, it has also been the more racist of the two parties – not so much attitudinally, but at the policy level.

This began to change in the twenties, as immigrants from Europe were increasingly welcomed into the Democratic fold. Some of that good will carried over to African Americans in the larger towns and cities of the North.

However, with the Solid South an integral part of the national party, the Democrats retained a robust white supremacist wing for decades longer. The turning point was the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Southern Democrats didn't give up the ghost right away, but the party's segregationist wing fell into a prolonged decline after 1965, eventually reviving under the aegis of the GOP.

Overtly racist Southern Democrats therefore remained players at the national level well into the seventies and beyond. Since Senators serve six year terms and incumbents generally have a leg up getting reelected, it is not at all surprising that Joe Biden, coming on the scene in the early seventies, would have had good working relationships with Senators like James Eastland and Herman Tallmadge, unabashed segregationists whose racial view make even Donald Trump's look good.

In the course of time, though, that wing of the party died off, and the tables turned. Thank the Richard Nixon – Pat Buchanan “Southern Strategy” for that. It gradually brought the old Confederate and Border states into the GOP orbit, along with much of rural America.

This was what Chester Riley might have called a “revolting development,” but it is not so revolting that Trump couldn't make it worse. Under his aegis, the GOP has become an overtly white supremacist political party.

By no means, however, is it all Trump's fault. The transformation has been underway for years. So has the de facto purge of liberal and moderate Republicans. In recent years, starting out from a bad place already, the Republican Party has moved farther to the right on almost every issue in creation.

Its trajectory has been so pronounced that, even as they too have all but kicked their party's leftwing out, Democrats remain the lesser evil even more plainly than before.

That wretched party's neoliberal turn in the late seventies and eighties has exacted a heavy toll. Many of the achievements of the New Deal and Great Society eras are endangered or on life support. The only exceptions are the party's positions on social issues that cost donors little or nothing.

Even so, the party's leaders have done hardly any leading at all. What has forced Democrats into the fray is public opinion as it has evolved with little or no help from the Democratic Party.

The Clintons were among the leaders of the transformed Democratic Party that took shape in the Reagan era; their name has become emblematic but they are by no means the only ones. The Democratic Party's right turn has been a group effort.

For a while, it seemed that the entire party was Clintonite. The Occupy movement didn't change that, and neither did the Sanders insurgency five years later – not in the short run, anyway.

Having lost in a process rigged against him, Sanders did his best to bring his supporters back into the Clinton fold. And so, he has lived to fight another day. I wish him well in that, but I think he made a mistake.

Had he led his supporters out of the duopoly's stranglehold, we would be better off today; a chance as good or better to do that is not likely to come along soon. But, of course, then he would now be blamed for Trump – falsely, as we know in retrospect – just as surely as Ralph Nader is sometimes still blamed for George W. Bush, also falsely.

In any case, it took Trump, vileness incarnate, to make it possible for there to be candidates with backbones running on the Democratic line. Some of them have been around for a while, but were held back by the pusillanimity that basically defines the Democratic Party's worldview; and some are newbies, untarnished by the party's Clintonite past.

Thanks to Trump too, to his shamelessly nativist and misogynistic calumny, four among them – Ilyan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashid Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley – four exceptionally brave, intelligent, articulate and charismatic women, are laying the

groundwork for the truly militant and authentic left opposition that the country and the world so desperately need.

The old guard and the donors they serve are fighting back with all they've got – including their cable networks and their “quality” press. With Nancy Pelosi leading the way, they have more than a fighting chance of quashing the rebellion. Or they could “get out of the way or even lend a hand ... as the times, they are a' changing”

For the enemies of Trump and all things Trumpian, this is disorienting, but in a good way. For the rest, it is, as Omar put it, Trump's worst nightmare, and therefore their own.

For the Trump Party, formerly known as the GOP, the disorientation is on a different plane altogether.

This is why, like nearly everybody else, I was wrong about Trump.

I was wrong about what is eminently comprehensible, and I was wrong about what defies easy understanding.

In the former category, on the plus side, I thought that there was a good chance by now that Trump would have started a war, very likely a nuclear war, in a fit of pique. We have been lucky, however. So far, all he has done is bluster.

Indeed, up to this point, he has been our least lethal twenty-first century president. Obama got more people killed than Trump so far has, and Bush 43 has more blood on his hands than any American president since Richard Nixon.

And although, Trump has caused incalculable harm to Hispanics and Muslims, Obama is still the Deporter-in-Chief.

On the negative side, in many respects, he has turned out to be worse than I and most other Trump critics thought he would. I had thought that because he was interested only in enriching himself and feeding his grotesquely overblown sense of himself, that, instead of turning the government over to ideologically driven free marketeers, theocrats, and climate change deniers, that he would keep things much as they were.

The premise was correct, but not the conclusion. Trump has turned the government over to nefarious ideologues – not because his base demanded it, but because his cronies did, and because the ideologues were willing to govern, while Trump has no time for such

things unless there is some percentage in it for him. The result is that, if the world as we know it survives, many of the foul deeds of the kakistocrats he has let loose upon the world will continue to harm the body politic for many years to come.

The more subtle mistake that I and others made was to think that the sense of a world out of joint that has afflicted us since Trump entered our lives would dissipate as our understanding of its causes – of Trump himself, of his supporters, and of their discontents – improved.

The idea that it is all a bad dream has been around for a while. But so has the idea that when it was over, as it soon would be, it would be forgotten, as nightmares usually are, and normalcy would return. It has become hard to think that still.

The problem is not that we don't understand what has been going on as much as we should. We understand a great deal, perhaps even all that there is to understand.

It is dawning, however, that mere understanding is of no avail.

Before that day of infamy in which the Donald and his trophy bride stepped off a golden escalator in Trump Tower to announce his intention to run for president and to build a wall, paid for by Mexico, that would keep Mexican rapists and drug dealers –in other words, “Mexicans,” as they say in Trumpese — out of the Home of the Brave, our future Commander-in-Chief was known to the general public mainly through Atlantic City casinos, reality television shows, professional wrestling matches, New York City tabloids, and The National Enquirer.

It therefore took a few days for most observers to realize that Trump is not and never would be like other presidents; that he is “special.”

Before long, the word went out that pundits should keep their diagnoses to themselves; that only trained professionals working with the patient had a right to speak of narcissistic personality disorders or other forms of pathologically asocial behavior.

Fair enough, but since when did we decide that to know which way the wind blows, we do need a weatherman, after all?

What's next: insisting on getting professional advice before saying that a troubled male adolescent is acting out? That is Trump's thing too, after all, even though he is seventy-three years old.

For sheer villainy in an American president, Trump's only rival in modern times is Richard Nixon. But Nixon was a complex and tormented man, a figure of almost Shakespearean depth. Trump is shallowness incarnate, as transparent as can be.

Nixon was a good Republican back in the day. It is telling that he was also our last liberal president – more progressive by far, in many respects, than today's Democratic grandees. Trump isn't even a bona fide troglodyte. He just plays one on TV because his base demands it of him.

We can therefore take it as given that upstairs, our leader, a self-declared “very stable genius” is not all there. This is troubling in countless ways. It is reason to impeach the bastard now — ten times over. But it doesn't quite speak to the sense of dislocation and unease that have become emblematic of the Trump era.

Meanwhile, an entire cottage industry has sprung up explaining the Trump base – why they signed on in the first place and, more mysterious still, why they are standing by their man now – when there is no question what his views on ethnicity and race are, and when, by making America great again, he has turned it into a pathetic laughing-stock.

I've done hard time grappling with these questions; so have countless others – left, right, and center. It is not an edifying topic; two and a half years into Trump's presidency, it is hard to think about the Trump base and not despair for the human race. But there is no way to make sense of our present predicament if the work is left undone.

Whenever one of Trump's pathetic Nuremberg-style campaign rallies is broadcast on TV, it becomes hard to resist the Clintonian explanation: that we are dealing with “a basket of deplorables.” But inasmuch as many of those deplorables are there because they have been snookered by a conman, that smacks too much of blaming the victims. Also, it leads to hopelessness; to the conclusion that just as Trump will never change, neither will the many millions of American citizens who still support him.

Therefore, however much Trump supporters deserve to be castigated mercilessly, the wisest course is to account for them by appealing to factors other than their manifest ignorance and the noxiousness of the views they are psychologically inclined to support.

I am partial to explanations that attach a large part of the blame to the continuing effects of the neoliberal turn of the late Carter years and then to the deleterious cultural and

psychological consequences of “the Reagan Revolution” and the Clintonization of the Democratic Party.

Although this is all part of a global phenomenon, I am more dubious of explanations that speak to a kinder, gentler Zeitgeist gone rogue. It is true that other countries are afflicted with functional equivalents of Trump and his base, but the impetus for this has come mainly from the pressures of neoliberal globalization and the decline of the labor movement and of many of the other institutional protections developed over decades to protect workers and the public generally from the predations of capitalism gone wild.

I would say, though, there is merit in nearly all the explanations out there. For the most part, they are complementary and mutually compatible, and each is explanatory in its own way.

In this case too, however, explanations are not exactly the point; at least not if to explain something is to make sense of it.

At this point, the recovering academic philosopher in me is tempted to quarrel with a remark attributed to Frank Ramsey, a mathematician and philosopher, who, seemingly taking issue with contemporaneous interpretations of the concluding aphorism of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), that, “of that of which one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent,” famously added that “we can’t whistle it either.”

That kerfuffle pertained to issues in philosophical logic and the philosophy of language, concerning such notions as meaningfulness and assertability, none of which bear any direct connection to the ways that, in addition to make everything worse, Trump has made everybody and everything crazy. On the other hand, Ramsey’s celebrated quip is arguably of some relevance.

Wittgenstein scholars nowadays say otherwise, but there are many still who take the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* – he would later alter his views radically — to be claiming that there is nothing that can be meaningfully deemed real beyond matters of fact that the sciences can in principle discover. Unstatable truths cannot be whistled – expressed musically – for example. If they cannot be spoken of, they cannot be expressed; end of story.

Needless to say, from time immemorial – long before anything like modern conceptions of matters of fact or the explanatory strategies deployed today in the sciences or, for that matter, in ordinary workaday discourse, even existed – people have looked to what we would now call the arts in order to find bearings in the profoundly bewildering world we human beings inhabit.

Roughly contemporaneously with Wittgenstein and Ramsey and the logical positivist movement that was, broadly speaking, like-minded, there were artists – poets, novelists, and cineastes mostly – mainly in Spain and France — who identified themselves as “surrealists.”

Freud was a major influence on their artistic productions; not so much his theory of the unconscious, but his account of dream work, of mental processes in which ordinary understandings of space, time, and causality are relaxed or eliminated altogether.

Many surrealists were Marxists or anarchists. Lodged mainly in historically Catholic countries, nearly all of them were anti-clerical and naturally anti-Catholic as well.

Nearly all were profoundly critical of bourgeois society; their hatred of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie was salutary and pure.

Ironically, though, even the most militantly irreligious among them, believed in Original Sin; they harbored no illusions about the depths of human depravity.

Thus their opposition to fascism was legion. The fascism they abhorred was, of course, the genuine article; not just the dime store Trumpian kind. But they would surely have hated that too. No doubt too, they would have been appalled, as I am, by pious Democrats’ calls for “bipartisanship,” for working “both sides of the aisle.”

In short, the surrealist movement has been defunct for a long time now, but the time is past due to appreciate how their work speaks to contemporary concerns.

A case in point is the film “The Exterminating Angel” (1962), a masterpiece written and directed by Luis Buñuel.

I would venture that, notwithstanding the cultural differences and the obvious anachronisms, that “art house” movie can be viewed as a timely rendering of what happens when humankind’s Fallen nature is unleashed, when it breaks free from civilization’s always-fragile constraints.

The movie's plot lends itself to allegorical interpretations, just as dreams do. It can be taken as a story about the human condition in general or about the very particular condition of Spanish aristocrats in the later years of the Franco era, or about anything in between or on the side that, like Trump, brings out "the darker angels of our nature."

Since it has more to do with perturbations of cosmic order than with facts of daily life, it can even now be seen, decades after the Donald was tending to his bone spurs, as an allegory of the condition of the Republican Party today.

The likes of Ted Cruz and Lindsey Graham may be as lacking in "discreet charm" and cultural refinement as Trump himself, but the problems faced by the characters in "The Exterminating Angel" have less to do with their lifestyles or level of culture than with human nature and, as it were, with the games angels play.

The general plot line is unforgettable.

As a formal dinner party at a lavish mansion gets underway, the servants, for no apparent reason, depart. The dinner proceeds, followed by a concert, but as the evening draws to a close, the guests, again for no apparent reason, find themselves unable to leave.

They bed down on couches, chairs and the floor. They do not want to be there, and there is no physical barrier keeping them from leaving. Nevertheless, they do not leave. They simply cannot.

Days pass, drinks and food run out. They become increasingly thirsty, hungry, short tempered, quarrelsome, and hysterical.

When someone dies, his body is placed in a large cupboard. A couple lock themselves in a closet where they commit suicide.

By breaking down a wall, the guests gain access to a water pipe, enabling them to survive a while longer.

Before long, several sheep and a bear break loose from their bonds and find their way to the room. The guests take in the sheep and proceed to slaughter and roast them on fires made from floorboards and broken furniture.

The medicine of a dying cancer patient is stolen. A "Jewess" conducts a mystical ceremony based on the Kabbalah. However, still, no one can leave, and the few remaining veneers of civilization continue to disintegrate.

Before long, the guests revolt against the host, calling for him to be sacrificed. They are dissuaded by a doctor, a man of science, whose sanity seems still unimpaired.

Then a foreign guest notices that everyone is seated in the same positions as they were when the spell they are under began.

The group reconstructs the conversations and movements from the night of the party and, in time, they become free to leave the room.

Once outside, the guests are greeted by the police and the servants who had left the night before. Just as no one had been able to leave the house, neither the police nor the servants nor any of the townspeople had been able to enter it.

To give thanks for their salvation, the guests congregate in a nearby church, but, before long, the exterminating angel strikes again; no one can leave the church.

By that point, the original guests seem to have disappeared; their situation and fate is never made clear.

There is a riot on the streets causing the military to step in. They fire on the rioters. In the final scene, a flock of sheep enters the church in single file, accompanied by the sound of gunshots.

I like to think that the original guests are indeed no longer part of the story, and I like to think of their story allegorically, as the story of the GOP in the Age of Trump.

Buñuel, of course, had Spanish fascists, not GOP Senators and Representatives, on his mind. But surrealism lets us elide the one into the other, *mutatis mutandis*, allowing for all the necessary changes.

In his story, no one tears children away from their parents or forces them to survive on junk food or to drink out of toilets; no one sends asylum seekers back into danger. Ground zero for human depravity in Buñuel's film is more genteel. But the basic point is the same.

I have no idea whether a possible world just like ours but without, say, mosquitoes would be better, from a human point of view, than the actual world. But there is little doubt that a world without Republicans would be vastly better.

Even if they wanted to, which they probably don't, Democrats aren't able to get us from here to there; they are too busy sniveling, kowtowing to donors, and generally being

“moderate.” But Trump might. If he causes himself to fall hard, and if he takes the party he has hijacked down with him, it will be time, in his honor, to sing a hardy Hallelujah.

That third-rate charlatan is not good for much, but he would make one fine exterminating angel.

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