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The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The name Homeland Security grates on a lot of people, understandably. Homeland isn't really an American word, it's not something we used to say or say now. It has a vaguely Teutonic ring – Ve must help ze Fuehrer protect ze Homeland! – and Republicans must always be on guard against sounding Teutonic.

–Peggy Noonan

The federal government has absolute power. As to whether I'll use that power, we'll see.

–Donald Trump

There is a real discrepancy in how you react as attorney general when white men with Swastikas storm a government building with guns. There is no need for the president to, quote, 'activate you' because they're getting the president's personal agenda done. But when black people and people of color protest police brutality, systemic racism and the president's very own lack of response to those critical issues, then you forcibly remove them with armed federal officers, pepper bombs because they are considered terrorists by the president.

–Rep. Pramila Jayapal addressing Attorney General William Barr

Wake up, America, the signs of the police state loom large. Of course, for some, America has always been one; now, increasingly, they have the videos to prove it. But now it's no longer only a matter of local law enforcement.

In his never-ending efforts to transform America into a banana republic, Donald Trump, our lawless and chaotic law and order president, has deployed federal agents to Portland, Chicago, Kansas City, and Albuquerque to sweep up protestors as he attempts to distract us from the deadly toll of the coronavirus.

What next? Will protesters be disappeared? Will renditions follow? Will the feds, following the lead of the Baltimore Police Department, use their unmarked vans as mobile Abu Ghraibs? Indeed, are the feds fundamentally any different from local police? Does Congress care? Do we?

We should. Trump's incessant attempts to make America into the kind of "shithole country" he once notoriously decried are tolerated with the same benighted resignation, the same complacent inevitability with which we greet global warming. Ivanka Trump hawks Goya products; her sugar daddy follows suit, turning the Oval Office into bodega. Hatch Act? Shmatch Act. Don't kid yourself: Trump will neither fine nor fire his daughter and the president himself is comfortably ensconced beyond the rule of law, protected and abetted by his attorney general. In resolutely giving Goya his two thumbs up, Trump once again thumbs his nose at us, or more characteristically, flips a pair of birds at us, daring us to do anything about it.

And why shouldn't he? He knows he can get away with it. The impeachment debacle told him as much, so now there is nothing to rein in his abuses. As president, he is above the

law – where he will remain unless enough people rise to challenge him and prove otherwise. Impeach him again? Only in an alternate universe where our political leaders possess spines and heed the will of the majority of the American people. Instead, the “opposition’s” strategy seems to be to bide time until the November election with the expectation that Trump will be defeated, an overly wishful scenario that, were it not for our collective national amnesia, we would recognize we have witnessed before.

Some presidents are scandalous, others have scandals thrust upon them. When there was a black president in the White House, the right and corporate mainstream media were scandalized that he wore a tan suit, bowed to a Saudi king, and occasionally used the Resolute desk as an ottoman (as did his predecessors) not a sales counter. Today, news that Russian military intelligence allegedly paid bounties to the Taliban to kill U.S. troops fighting in Afghanistan elicits the usual chatter from mainstream media magpies and little else from our putative political leaders. The fact that the white man in the artificial tan skin knew about it – or didn’t, according to press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, who, we should recall, on her first day on the job also promised never to lie to the press corps, her first of many – generates only a modicum of outrage from the right and no effective response from the left. According to CNN, a “bipartisan group of congressional leaders demands” answers. Politico, on the other hand, reports that these same “leaders...appear poised to do little – if anything – about it.” Which is it? Will they hold more congressional hearings? Probably not, because they know this would only end in more absurdist political theater and, ultimately, paralysis.

How things have changed! Hilary Clinton faced ten investigations ostensibly over the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi. And while we do not know the number of soldiers killed as a result of Russia’s alleged intervention, there’s another death toll for which the president is himself responsible, though here, too, he has not been held accountable: According to Worldometers, as of 11:52 p.m. GMT, July 30th, 155,019 Americans have died from COVID-19, That’s over 50 times the number of Americans killed in terrorist attacks since 9/11 and 155,018 more than the hypothetical Fifth Avenue victim the President claimed he could shoot with impunity. The blame for many of these deaths can be laid at the feet of ze “Homeland’s” feckless fuehrer. As the body count mounts, it appears that Trump has sorely underestimated the amount of lethal leeway the people’s elected representatives would grant him, which says more about the nation than it does the feeble-minded man-child who “leads” it. (Well, in light of his self-proclaimed

“amazing” ability to remember in sequence five words, he may not be so feeble-minded after all. We can only hope that one day he will make a song of this particular skill set and serenade us from his prison cell if and when he is removed from office.)

Meanwhile, the nation frantically hobbles from one constitutional crisis to another. “I wish we had an occupying force there,” Trump told Minnesota Governor Tim Walz during a conference call. Trump’s not so secret secret police now patrol a number of Democrat-controlled cities and he has threatened to deploy them in others to turn them into his own private Crimea, his personal Palestine.

This is the same man who argues that the coronavirus response – but not law enforcement – should be left to the states, while falsely claiming that he has “absolute authority,” which explains why he refused to consult these states before deploying federal agents. However, Trump telegraphed his move as early as June 1st when he pressed governors, law enforcement and national security officials to “dominate the protestors” and later threatened to do it for them if they didn’t.

Wake up, America: it’s time to take Marmalade Mussolini at his word.

In pursuing this course of action, Trump is acting on the authoritarian impulse that began in 2002 with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and that gave the department its ominously prophetic name. As he did ICE before it, he is corrupting an already suspect institution for his own political ends.

You don’t have to have aced the Montreal Cognitive Assessment test to see that Trump has already laid the ground work for contesting the election in the event he is defeated. These deployments test the waters. Every step of his career, Trump has been testing limits—the limits of indecency, credulity, cruelty, corruption, and power – limits with which he has seldom had to contend. He has already launched a preemptive strike against the 2020 election by insisting it will be rigged in the event he fails to cancel it outright.

Is there any doubt that a defeated Trump will contest the election and refuse to leave the White House? Given the laws that he has broken both before and after he assumed the presidency, he has little choice if he hopes to stay out of jail, assuming, of course, that any legal action against him will actually be pursued and that if prosecuted he will actually serve even a token amount of time before he is released from a criminal justice system that privileges the rich, powerful and connected. Just ask Roger Stone, Michael Flynn, or any member of the nation’s murderously impervious thin blue line.

Trump's current experiment with federal agents is a practice run: Ultimately, he will deploy them to run inference to impede his eviction from the White House. Those who doubt that federal agents would carry out his instructions need look only at how these gutless golems responded in Washington, D.C. to Trump's orders to forcibly clear Lafayette Square of peaceful demonstrators so he could have his Bible-brandishing photo op. Remember, it took eleven days for General Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, to apologize for his gaffe de guerre. And while Milley's apology suggests he has learned from his mistake, DHS Acting Secretary Chad Wolf and FBI director Christopher Wray have learned nothing, except to prepare their own perfunctory mea culpas to preserve their careers in the post-Trump period, assuming, of course, there is one. Indeed, if we are to believe Defense Secretary Mark Esper, during the same photo-op excursion, he "didn't know where [he] was going." Apparently, he was just obeying orders, the oath he swore to protect the Constitution that he now invokes to assuage his critics and his conscience forgotten in the fog of "battlespace" and flashbulbs. A couple of days later, however, Esper still didn't seem to know where he was headed when he ordered federal agents removed from Washington, D.C. only to reverse his decision the next day. While Trump invokes the Insurrection Act in all but name, Esper and other agency heads eagerly comply. According to The New York Times, as early as June 2, a day after federal troops cleared Lafayette Square, David Bowdich, the deputy director of the bureau, "demanded an immediate mobilization" in response to the national protests. So much for constitutional rights, which, as Pramila Jayapal reminds us, need protection only when protesters invoke the Second Amendment not the First.

Uniforms are not the only camouflage the feds don to cloak their presence. Another is their assertion that, like local law enforcement, they are there "to serve and protect." Yet according to Clint Watts, a former FBI agent, DHS and other federal agencies are "not trained to deal with protests." Soak yourselves in the irony of that for a second, since one of the issues that precipitated the current wave of national protests for police reform is that state and local law enforcement aren't adequately trained (or trained all too well if the goal is to demoralize and intimidate the communities they "serve"). So, by pouring federal troops into these cities, Trump is essentially pouring fuel on a bonfire in a cynic bid to paint himself as the law and order president and solidify support among his base. But it's not as if there were no warning signs: according to Watts, Trump "always turns to the DHS whenever he wants to get something done. He sorta forces them into this."

The fact that they have not pushed back but instead relish the opportunity to dominate should give us pause. In the face of such rampant corruption, we try, like Jayapal, to contain our anger as we interrogate the brazen daily spectacle of mindless power displays orchestrated by an erratic, incompetent infant terrible who grabs pussies, lies, endorses medical quackery, and skulks away when called out on it, but who, despite his abjectly abnormal behavior, remains commander-in-chief with access to federal troops. Our would-be Fuehrer and the Homeland don't need protection; the people and its Constitution do.

Wake up, America, for as you slumber, monsters rule.

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