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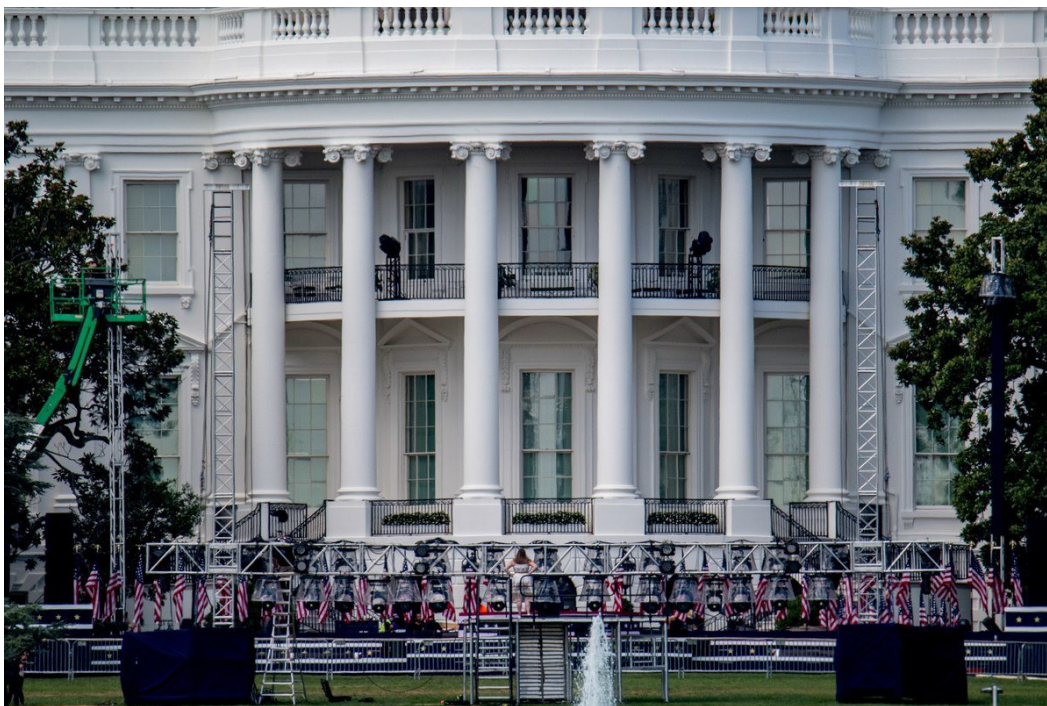
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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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01.09.2020

Trump at the RNC: Echoes of Saddam



angela n. from Washington, DC – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

The Republican convention was a nauseating performance even by the cess-pit standards of the Trump administration. In its cult-like obeisance to the supreme leader it reminds me of meetings of the Iraqi Baath Party that periodically endorsed Saddam Hussein as the national saviour.

The only speeches acceptable in both cases were dollops of fawning praise. Speakers outdid each other in adulation, pretending that shambolic failures were triumphant

successes. Trump's calamitous inability to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, leading to the death of 180,000 Americans, was ignored. Thirty years ago, Saddam Hussein likewise informed wildly applauding Baathists that the "mother of battles" in Kuwait had been a splendid Iraqi victory.

The comparison is not fanciful: the Iraqi Baath Party was an Arab nationalist party and the Republican Party could well be renamed the American Nationalist Party. In each case, anybody whose loyalty to the leader was suspect has mostly been purged and replaced with flunkies and members of the leader's family.

Saddam presented himself as a man of steel, ever alert to defending the national interests of his people from enemies at home and abroad. He also liked to show a softer more empathetic side and would receive joyful members of the Shia or Kurdish communities whom his regime had violently repressed. Occasionally, these grisly gestures of paternalistic concern would go awry, as when, in the run up to the war in Kuwait, a five-year-old British hostage refused to sit on his lap.

Trump now faces some of the same problems as the late Iraqi leader and is coming up with some of the same answers. How, for instance, do you get away with describing a self-inflicted defeat as a glorious victory? The autocrat's playbook is similar in both cases: the supreme leader simply lies and brazenly claims a world-beating success, while blaming foreigners and domestic foes for anything that went wrong. "When the China virus invaded our country, we launched the greatest mobilisation of American society since World War Two," said Mr Trump as the convention got underway.

But Trump clearly felt the need to pretend to a softer side, by having his acolytes testify to his regard for minorities, women and immigrants, an empathy of which the public might have been unaware. Authoritarian rulers down the centuries have likewise sought to show what warm-hearted merciful fellows they are by releasing prisoners (Pontius Pilate is a classic example of this). And, in keeping with this tradition, there was Mr Trump pardoning, as always on live television, a convicted bank robber who works with prison inmates.

Another stomach-turning cameo, televised as it happened, showed Trump overseeing the naturalisation ceremony for five immigrants, the very people whom he routinely – and wrongly – demonises as criminals and drug smugglers.

A weakness of autocrats in power, which makes them so disaster prone in a real crisis like a war or a pandemic, is that critical advice diverging from what the leader would like to happen is discounted or rejected. A Russian diplomat who knew the Iraqi leader's inner circle well, once told me that the only safe position for Saddam Hussein's senior lieutenants to adopt, whatever their inner thoughts might be, was "to be 10 per cent tougher than the boss."

Trump's frequent sacking of senior officials shows that his appetite for contradiction is even less than that of other proponents of one-man rule, thereby guaranteeing serial blunders that have already eroded the status of the United States as a super-power.

One of the many absurdities and denials of reality in Trump's speech accepting the Republican Party nomination was his repeated claims "to have made America great again" when, in fact, he has overseen an implosion of its influence.

Yet on the main strategy for his presidential campaign, Trump and the Republican panjandrums are genuinely united. There is nothing particularly American about the theme. Nativist demagogues from Manila to Sao Paulo and Bucharest to Delhi all claim to be the last bastion against chaos.

The Republicans are seeking to exploit the protests following the shooting of Jacob Blake, though without mentioning their cause or the wounded man's name. Posing as the defender of traditional American values, Trump told voters in his acceptance speech that "your vote will decide whether we protect law-abiding Americans or whether we give free rein to violent anarchists, agitators and criminals who threaten our citizens".

Nationalism in the US and elsewhere always presents itself as a unifying force, and this can be so, but more usually it excludes as well as includes and it is the vehicle for the hegemony of one part of the population over another. This is not to deny the legitimacy of the nation state as the prime source of communal identity and loyalty in the world, but nationalism always has a Jekyll and Hyde quality and nowhere more so than in America.

Americans tend to see themselves as patriotic rather than nationalistic, but it often amounts to much the same thing. More than most countries, the history of the United States has been markedly by intensely-felt but very different variants of its nationalist creed that clash with each other and are at the heart of American politics. Trump represents but a single toxic strand of American nationalism with a long record of intolerance and violence.

Foreigners have long noted that Americans espouse patriotism or nationalism with messianic religious fervour. Rudyard Kipling noted the strength of this belief when he lived in the United States: “Every nation, like every individual, walks in vain show – else it could not live with itself – but I never got over the wonder of a people who, having extirpated the aboriginals of their continent more completely than any modern race had ever done, honestly believed that they were a godly little New England community, setting examples to brutal mankind.”

Anatol Lieven speaks of the dangers posed by this messianic strain, amounting to a detachment from reality, in his prophetic book America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism, published in 2012, which analysed all too accurately the aspects of American nationalism that were to send Mr Trump to the White House four years later. This side of American political culture, which was on graphic display during the Republican convention this week, has a long history of racism, militarism, violence and misogyny.

Such beliefs vie with what Lieven calls “civic nationalism” which includes democracy, belief in the law, equal civil rights and freedom of expression.

Superheated patriotism, fostering myths of racial and cultural superiority, is a potion that has always encouraged national leaders to misrule their countries and lead them to disaster. They exaggerated their own strength and righteousness along with the weakness and duplicity of their enemies.

The regal performance of Trump in front of the White House as he accepted the Republican nomination took place before a myriad of American flags, but it was in the tawdry tradition of autocrats the world over.

CounterPunch 31.08.2020