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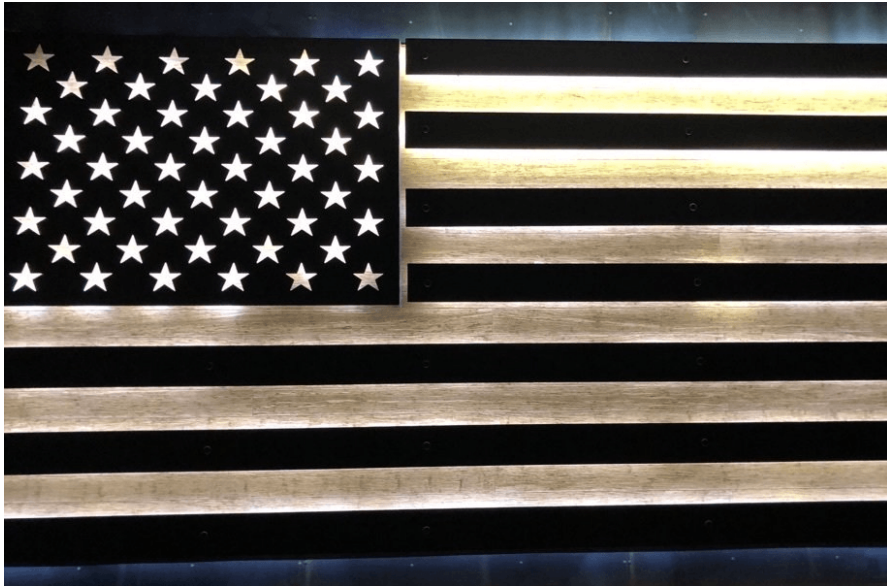
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What Shall We Call It?



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

There was no coup. American democracy worked as designed: it took the progressive energies unleashed in opposition to the Trump administration and entirely neutered them with the orderly election of the avuncular Joseph Biden, protector of the Empire, the military industrial complex, banking and finance, insurance, biotech, Silicon Valley, the revolving door bureaucracies of the Washington swamplands and the wheedling parasites of K Street.

The whole rotten armature of the Republic will be put back together by Biden and his crew despite the overwhelming evidence of its, never mind his, decrepitude. Under Trump, the nation has absorbed extraordinary episodes of domestic chaos – closing in on 300,000 citizens killed in a disastrously mismanaged pandemic, four years of deliberately divisive, white supremacist rule by the Republicans, witch-hunts by the Democrats, an impeachment of the president, and, this year, the most remarkable series of iconoclastic demonstrations

against the country's historically rooted values of oppression, exploitation, enslavement, and the annihilation of indigenous peoples, during the Black Lives Matter uprising.

Yet the recent Federal election is an affirmation of business-as-usual, a celebration of a return to normality – despite the startling indications of the system's bodily corruption. Faith in the restorative power of our democracy remains high, faith in the power of voting remains undiminished and, for a little over half of the electorate, a sense of victory hangs in the air.

The country's revered institution of 'government by the people, for the people' began with the advent of Jacksonian democracy in the 1820's. A dramatic expansion of the franchise had occurred when new states were added to the Union which imposed no property requirements for voting, prompting most of the original states to remove their restrictions on the enfranchisement of white males. For almost half a century, the vote had not extended much beyond propertied oligarchs – men of similar status and the fundamentally aristocratic impulses of the nation's founders, and from whose ranks the first five presidents of the United States were elected. The mobilization of frontiersmen, small farmers and the urban poor into politics was of a piece with contemporary revolutionary movements in Europe, but in the United States, this radicalism was inspired by a pursuit of 'freedom' rather than social and economic equality – its citizens being under the sway of national mythologies that often weighed more heavily with them than their immediate economic circumstance. It was freedom 'from' that motivated them – notably perceived government interference in their competitive commercial, agrarian or manufacturing pursuits. From the start of their democratic engagement, white males in America were, or aspired to be, entrepreneurial and independent such that 'wage-slaves' often considered their lot a bump in the road that would lead to propertied independence rather than a stable economic relationship between them and their employer. Thus, the organization of workers was rarely prioritized and when it was, heavily opposed by factory and workshop owners.

Jackson's election in 1828 established the Democrats as the party of the people and he as the 'people's president'. But while Jackson received a mandate from the vastly expanded electorate of white males, the election exposed traits which continue to characterize American democracy. His election depended on his having crafted a powerful cult of personality largely based on a hagiographic biography that he had commissioned. He celebrated the freedom of the American people whilst ignoring the racial subjugation that shadowed the country, and he entirely dismissed the rights of indigenous people in pursuit of the economic potential of their lands. Specifically, his successful removal of native peoples from their homelands in which Americans speculated, on which they homesteaded, and on which slaves were driven to clear-cut and drain in order to plant cotton, laid the foundation for America's unparalleled wealth. That wealth was, and is, harvested by the few who then, and now, use a portion of it to influence the voting behavior of the many.

In order to understand how we got to this twenty-first century moment, barely more than a month away from the swearing in of Joe Biden as this country's 64th president who is regarded by many as the potential savior of a democracy that was plunged into an abyss by his Republican predecessor, it is useful to consider the road this nation has traveled since the establishment of Jackson's broad, but highly conflicted, 'government by the people'.

From the beginning, the great paradox of American freedom was its practice of slavery. It was an issue not fully broached until the emancipation movement forced the attention of the nation on its horrors, eventually splitting the Union in half over this most basic issue of human rights. Its military conclusion cost three-quarters of a million lives and ultimately denied liberated African Americans full participation in the nation's democracy, and deliberately stunted their economic opportunities. After the war, the southern states practiced the de facto segregation of Jim Crow for almost a century, and carried out terror lynchings, as a strategy of subduing the Black population, for more than eight decades. Despite its defeat, the culture, the military heroes and the flag of the Confederate States of America – a state that subjugated and tortured fully 45% of its population – are still celebrated. The pretense of democracy in such circumstances is a travesty.

Well into the nineteenth century, America remained a substantially agrarian economy, but the massive influx of European migrants not only spurred urban industrialization but also promoted the consolidation of small family producers, which Jefferson had promoted as the bedrock of democratic independence, into vastly more efficient factory farms. Late nineteenth century populism attempted to marshal disaffected farm laborers, factory workers, coal miners and iron workers to resist the increasing concentration of wealth fostered under laissez-faire government policies, while workers questioned whether 'freedom' could survive in conditions of oppression, injustice and poverty.

Economic inequality increased dramatically in this era of technological innovation and the corporate monopolization of essential market sectors. It was a situation that went unchallenged until Congress passed a series of anti-trust legislation in the 1890's tarnishing the so-called Gilded Age and encouraging the social activism and political reform that comprised the Progressive Era. America's triumphant involvement in the First World War, and its leading role in the peace negotiations, resulted in a celebration of its role as a beacon of freedom and a champion of democratic values. It was also a time of rampant xenophobia reflected in the passage of restrictive immigration laws and the total exclusion of Chinese nationals – the mythology of America as the land of freedom and opportunity was again abraded by the harsh reality of its politics.

When the Harding administration, 1921-23, collapsed under the weight of its own corruption, it left the country in the hands of Calvin Coolidge, who promoted policies that fueled the 'Roaring Twenties', a period in which American society finally threw off the social and moral strictures of the nineteenth century. It was a time in which many ordinary Americans

pursued economic opportunity in a careening stock market, but their hopes were dashed when the market crashed in a violent economic collapse which many of the elite were sufficiently savvy to avoid. The Great Depression, which immediately followed, and the economic and environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl, ended conservative, laissez-faire economics and initiated an era of activist, interventionist liberalism, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Despite the New Deal, abstract notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ did not survive in conditions of extreme social need and were only revived by the surge of patriotism unleashed by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The start of WWII ended the Great Depression, and its conclusion opened an era of unparalleled prosperity which mightily favored the nation’s white middle class. Barely drawing a breath at the end of the war in 1945, the U.S. military embarked on a decades long struggle with communist regimes across Asia, a cold war with the Soviet Union and proxy wars across the planet. The armaments industry had not existed in America before the war, but on leaving office in January 1961, President Eisenhower warned of the development of, “an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.” As he correctly predicted, the development of the military-industrial complex has had an immense influence on the nation’s governance – simply put, the economics of Empire favors the corporate elite while pauperizing the precariat. The growth of the defense budget is such that it now consumes close to half of all the federal government’s discretionary spending. It is the line item most favored in the ideologically driven pursuit of draining wealth from tax-paying Americans and redistributing it to defense contractors – a characteristic only amplified by members of Congress who, devoted to the harvesting of arms industry cash to fund their re-election, are much inclined to inflate the defense budget rather than prioritizing the needs of their constituents.

The New Deal had enjoyed a broad consensus of support while the country was in economic extremis, but when good times returned after WWII, conservatives were determined to reclaim the idea of ‘freedom’ to their cause, which necessitated a renunciation of anything that smacked of the enhanced state control of people’s economic lives that FDR had introduced in the 1930’s. Similarly motivated after his experience of German and Italian Fascism, the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek published, *The Road to Serfdom*, 1944, in which he suggested that state interference in its citizen’s well-being would potentially subvert their freedom and return them to an impoverished condition of servitude. Milton Freidman, the influential American economist, took this to mean, in practical, actionable terms, that political power should be decentralized, government limited, and the market economy be given total freedom to work its magic. Thus inspired, conservatives in the 1960’s began to equate individual freedom with unregulated capitalism – in a return to the earliest principles of those frontiersmen, small farmers and the urban poor who had driven Jacksonian democracy.

Goldwater enthusiastically adopted Friedman's precepts and added the notion of law and order as a necessary counterweight to the anarchic student demonstrations of the 60's, and the perceived threats of both the civil rights movement and Johnson's landmark legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. His bellicose nationalism and apparent willingness to deploy the atomic bomb in its pursuit may have doomed his campaign, but his ideas were largely taken up by Ronald Reagan who came to power in 1981. Reagan turned the nation into an avatar of neoliberalism in which both the public good and political engagement are disparaged – leaving a wafer-thin democracy, characterized by the duopoly of supposedly antagonistic parties, with which to paper over an oligarchic state.

Every two years, members of the two parties compete for the approbation of the voting public who, regardless of their choice, give unwitting political legitimacy to the brute force of the market. This process, which Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century historian and philosopher, called the cash nexus, remains at the heart of American democracy – in which a vote for either party ensures the continuation of their *danse macabre*. It is this legacy to which Biden, as the country's next president, is now heir – rightfully so, it may be argued since he has been partially responsible for the last fifty years of its most reactionary manifestations.

In order to heal racial injustice, economic injustice, environmental injustice and to fill the voids of mind, body and spirit that exist in the American commonweal, vast sums of public treasure need to be expended. That intention is currently blocked both by a philosophy of governance that privileges the free market and by the impregnable massif that is the military establishment – the mastodon in the room of a profoundly unquiet American society. Such socially targeted expenditures might prevent America from sinking further into a quagmire of pathological dependencies – the gloss of its over-consumption since WWII having long since been made pallid by the endemic inadequacies of health care, education, infrastructure, nutrition, housing, income distribution and the historically charged racial injustices that haunt the nation. These represent profound failures of state in terms of both remediation and restitution. Such failures demand a revolutionary re-focusing of the purposes of government; a redefinition of democracy; and a relinquishment of the grand myths that have sustained them – myths that have weaponized the base economic impulses of freedom loving conservatives over the life of the Republic. That re-focus will come with a price-tag, but one that is almost certainly less than the inordinate sums channeled to the military industrial complex, now justified by the maintenance of a superannuated Empire.

Redemption from the sins of the past is possible: the nations of Germany and Japan both took the difficult steps to excise their respective historical cancers which metastasized into nightmares of state sponsored horror in the first half of the twentieth century. South Africa, through the processes of resistance, revolution and tribunals of truth and reconciliation, replaced a violent white supremacist government with a multi-racial democracy in the early

1990's. America's historical sins are well known. That its nuclear arsenal further burdens the human spirit with an existential dread that compounds our everyday intimations of mortality is less recognized.

Trump's victory four years ago, and his recent defeat, were both cries for help from the voting public. After the Civil War, a great and noble effort was made by Americans to heal the wounds of slavery. It was called Reconstruction. The effort was destroyed within a dozen years by the mean and ignoble. Old wounds continue to fester, and new lacerations of mind, body and spirit have continued to assail the nation. It is now time again for the country to make a great and noble effort to heal its wounds. Call it Reconstruction II.

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