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Republican convention opens: An obscene spectacle in Cleveland

Patrick Martin

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The Republican National Convention opened Monday afternoon in Cleveland, beginning a four-day political gathering whose purpose is to nominate billionaire Donald Trump as the Republican presidential candidate, along with his running mate for vice president, Indiana Governor Mike Pence.

The first day of the convention was devoted to support for militarism and police repression under the slogan “Make America Safe Again.” The law-and-order rhetoric inside Quicken Loans Arena matched the police state atmosphere outside, as demonstrators were penned in by hundreds of police and the city center was walled off with steel fencing and concrete barriers.

The entire spectacle was degrading. It is doubtful that more than a handful of Republican convention delegates, if asked a year ago, would have regarded Trump as a credible candidate for any office, let alone the White House. Yet they assembled in their thousands to sing the praises of a fascistic demagogue.

Over the weekend, the ghostwriter of Trump’s one best-selling book, *The Art of the Deal*, Tony Schwartz, gave a revealing interview to the *New Yorker* in which he apologized for the boost he had given a political figure whose rise he now regards with horror. He made public

contemporaneous notes he had taken during the period he was writing the book in 1986 and 1987, showing that even then he had found Trump “hateful” and “a one-dimensional blowhard.”

“He has no attention span,” Schwartz told the *New Yorker’s* Jane Mayer. “It’s impossible to keep him focused on any topic, other than his own self-aggrandizement, for more than a few minutes.” Trump has “a stunning level of superficial knowledge and plain ignorance” and probably has not “ever read a book straight through in his entire adult life.” Trump is a habitual liar who has “a complete lack of conscience about it.” If he were writing a Trump biographical sketch today, Schwartz concluded, he would title it *The Sociopath*.

None of this comes as a surprise to anyone who has observed the candidate carefully in the course of the past year, in his countless television interviews, a dozen or more debates, and campaign rallies marked by appeals to violence and racism. Trump’s bullying attacks on political opponents, on marginalized and oppressed groups like Muslims and Mexican immigrants, on women, on journalists, all confirm the truth of Schwartz’s account.

Trump personifies definite social trends in the United States, above all the rise of a semi-criminal element to the highest levels of the ruling elite. He began his career with a million-dollar stake from his wealthy father, who had built a prosperous housing business developing tract homes for working class and middle class families in New York City and Long Island during the post-World War II boom. Trump parlayed his inheritance into a much larger fortune amid the transformation of New York City into a playground for the rich. He developed luxury housing for the wealthy, as well as casinos, hotels, golf courses and resorts for their leisure time.

Trump’s business career is comprised of one episode after another of a dubious and fraudulent character. His initial rise came in the context of the near-bankruptcy of New York City in 1975 and the massive assault on the working class associated with the establishment of the Emergency Financial Control Board by Democratic Party politicians, with the full collaboration of the trade unions. Workers’ wages were slashed and pension funds plundered to create the proper “business climate” in which Trump and his ilk could flourish. His personal role in this process was of a gangster character, full of shady deals with Democratic and Republican politicians in which political contributions were exchanged for favorable zoning and regulatory decisions.

In 1981, Trump bought a 14-story building at 100 Central Park South, which became the scene of all-out war between the developer and the rent-stabilized tenants who lived there and refused to move out, frustrating his plans to demolish the building. What followed, according to a detailed review by *CNN Money*, was a campaign by a “nightmare landlord” who cut off heat and water, stopped all building repairs, filed harassment suits charging paying tenants with being behind in their rent, and even offered to shelter homeless people in the building in an effort to drive the tenants out. Over a five-year period, Trump spent seven times as much on legal fees fighting his tenants as on building repairs.

The period of Trump’s rise, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, coincided with the increasing financialization of the US economy, as manufacturing and heavy industry gave way to real estate speculation and wheeling-and-dealing in the money markets as the main profit centers of American capitalism. Trump expanded from real estate to casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey,

some branded with his name, all eventually filing for bankruptcy. In all, he made six trips to bankruptcy court, preserving his personal fortune while wiping out countless creditors, many of them small businesses.

This was the era of the celebrity CEO, personified by individuals like Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, Jack Welch of General Electric, and, sleaziest of all, Donald Trump. These were nothing like the robber barons of old, who used ruthless methods to build vast industrial empires in oil, rail, steel and automobiles. These corporate bosses built “shareholder value” by slashing jobs and wages and closing factories. They boosted profits and share prices by decimating the productive forces of society.

What Trump built was a “brand.” Placing his name on properties he neither owned nor managed became his most profitable enterprise. He proved a master of self-promotion, first through a series of books, one of which became a best-seller (*The Art of the Deal*), and then through a lucrative relationship with NBC television, where Trump-centered “reality” programs, *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, attracted high ratings and shaped his public image as a CEO who could make money more or less by magic.

Trump dabbled in politics from the mid-1990s on, at least in part because his business ventures had ceased to prosper and the major Wall Street banks declined to have dealings with him. By one account, he switched parties seven times during this period, while giving freely to many candidates and famously cementing relations with the first family of the Democratic Party, inviting Bill and Hillary Clinton to his third wedding in 2005.

In 2011, his political activity became more serious as he became the main public spokesman for the ultra-right “birther” campaign, which claimed that President Obama was illegitimate because he was supposedly born in Kenya, not in Hawaii. Trump endorsed Republican Mitt Romney in 2012 and began to prepare for a presidential bid of his own in 2016.

A section of the Republican Party establishment, among them four of the last five Republican presidential nominees, including both living Republican ex-presidents, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, have refused to endorse Trump or attend the convention that will nominate him. Virtually the entire Republican foreign policy brigade is opposed to Trump, with many publicly declaring their support for Democrat Hillary Clinton, who in their view is a more reliable defender of the global interests of American imperialism.

The “never Trump” elements, none too numerous among the political mercenaries and thugs who make up the bulk of the Republican Party apparatus, have not made any serious attempt to explain the billionaire demagogue’s success against a field of 16 opponents, which the media had described as the “deepest” and most talented array of candidates in the party’s history.

Trump’s success, however, at least this far, must be understood politically. His campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” admits the failure of American politics and society. He addresses real economic and social problems—factory closures, the loss of jobs and decent living standards, the decimation of small business—which underlie the enormous growth of economic inequality in the United States.

He thus concedes, albeit in a reactionary form, that American capitalism is in disastrous condition. At the same time, Trump promises rescue by means of economic and political alchemy, validated by his billion-dollar personal wealth, which is presented as proof that he can solve the crisis. The paradox here is that Trump's own fortune is a direct product of the very processes whose consequences he now denounces—above all, deindustrialization and the increasing domination of the US economy by financial criminals like Trump himself.

The program Trump offers, aside from his own personality and celebrity, is one of extreme nationalism: autarchic economic policies, through which the United States will supposedly return to the days of self-sufficiency in manufacturing, combined with anti-foreigner chauvinism and outright racism, including the forced deportation of millions of immigrants, mainly from Mexico and Central America, and the erection of a wall along with border with Mexico.

The contradictions embedded in such policies are catastrophic. Trade war measures would shatter the world market and cause a global depression far worse than that of the 1930s. Trump's war against immigrants would require the establishment of a full-fledged police state at home. And his proposed declaration of war on ISIS would inevitably require a re-invasion of the Middle East on a scale that would dwarf the wars waged by the two Bush administrations and continued by Obama.

What does it say about American society that such an individual has become the leading figure in one of the two major parties through which the US ruling elite exercises its political sway? The nomination of such a backward, ignorant, vulgar, self-absorbed individual to fill the highest office in the American government is a testament to the terminal decay of the political culture of the US ruling elite.