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# The Unbearable Lightness of America's 2016 Presidential Campaign

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The current American presidential campaign unfolds embarrassingly before an incredulous international public whose *schadenfreude*, however satisfying in some quarters, should be tempered by concern for the future of the nation and the world after the November election. If the coarse New York businessman is the most bizarre of the candidates, let us not forget that the Democratic front runner has been under investigation by the FBI for months now, with new revelations of alleged misdeeds and improprieties constantly emerging. Both candidates, moreover, pander to populist demands for “fairness.” That slogan has been long favored by Democrats, whose strong socialist core is especially visible this year thanks especially to Bernie Sanders. “The Donald” is not far behind as he trumpets tariffs and taxes, unencumbered by his nominal party’s traditional support of free trade. To the credit of many voters, both front runners have record-high negative ratings. But the inability of such a great nation to come up with anyone better from either party suggests a civilizational angst of truly monumental proportions.

The Trump “phenomenon” (for lack of a better word) is actually related to the Sanders–Clinton phenomenon: It is not about the message, nor even the persona, but a virulent form of know-nothingism exacerbated by the cult of glibness, image, and an unserious form of nihilism. In many ways unprecedented, it is especially dangerous, as barely literate voters, electronically accessorized, twittering their way to the apocalypse, appear ready and able to drag along whatever is left of civilization.

Speculations about how we got here are all over the map, as pundits take the opportunity to reinforce their pet presumptions; pollsters peddle the mystifying results of their increasingly obsolete methodology; social media manages to further muddy the already fetid waters of largely *id*-driven drivel; and academics opine in academese, clueless in their ivory tower isolation. What does emerge with considerable clarity is the depth of mass ignorance. For the illusion of knowledge fostered by a prolific internet is only exacerbated by a mercenary media that has long abandoned responsible journalism. Some of the “information” out there is mere junk, but quite a bit is subversively misleading.

Many consumers of all this data and pseudo-data are at least dimly aware of the problem, but no solution is in sight. The result is a severe loss of trust, even cynicism, and a paucity of thoughtful, rational assessments of how best to address the daunting challenges of globalization. If during the Cold War we were threatened by an atheist superpower ideologically committed to world domination, at least its leaders were not suicidal. On the contrary, they were completely rational. The same cannot be said of today’s non-state religious fanatics who believe death by jihad guarantees eternal bliss. The rational calculus has changed radically, demanding recalibration.

Faced with a hard choice, President Barack Obama decided to retrench. He sought and continues to seek to placate America’s (and, as it happens, Israel’s) archenemy, Iran, by lifting sanctions and making breathtaking concessions. He issued red lines that were drawn, as it turns out, in invisible ink. Of late, he reestablished relations with the Castro regime in Havana while receiving less than nothing in return; in fact, repression of human rights on the island has only increased. The pattern suggests to our enemies—to say nothing of our friends—a lack of resolve. No wonder vows “to make America great again” resonate with so many Americans. Admittedly, Trump’s primary rivals had championed the same goal, but none could match the casino mogul’s rock star magnetism, his bravado proving ratings-honey for media bees.

The last time the electorate fell for a similarly vacuous cliché, the mantra was “Change.” Much of the public was sick of waging unwinnable wars without a post-military plan or a strategy—for which no amount of hastily deployed billions could compensate—and they wanted no more bailouts of banks whose failure was due in part to the decisions of an executive agency, the Securities and Exchange Commission. What the electorate did not expect was that the “change” in store for them was based on an ideology that ran counter to the worldview of the Founders that had served America well since its inception.

It could have been discerned from the candidate’s books, speeches, and history. But many ordinary people, who, to their credit, were elated to be able to elect an African-American and thereby declare bigotry a thing of the past, did not

notice. The steady infiltration of that ideology into the mainstream media and the academy had camouflaged and sanitized it.

Eight years later, the electorate is again more than ready for “change.” But to what? The wirelessly connected *lumpenproletariat*, tired of obfuscation and political correctness, is eager for some kind of authenticity. Fed up and frustrated, it draws inspiration from what looks like a “politics of hatred.” The congressional journal *The Hill* describes it as follows: “The right wing has created an environment in the GOP—and increasingly in our society—where racism and hate speech are somehow chic and accepted as legitimate within mainstream politics.”<sup>1</sup>

The reality, however, is far more disquieting. In truth, it is not Republicans but their opponents who condone the anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian venom increasingly common on American campuses. According to Richard L. Cravatts, author of *Genocidal Liberalism: The University's Jihad against Israel & Jews*, the University of California system has earned the dubious distinction of being “the epicenter of anti-Israelism on campus.”<sup>2</sup> The identity politics championed by the left is arguably even more dangerous than the politically incorrect expletives spewing from the right. It is identity politics that underlies the double-standard that condones parading blood-strewn Israeli flags, the ubiquitous apologies for Palestinian terror, and chants of “Long Live Intifada!”—all conspicuously exempt from the category of “hate speech.” That said, it is true that the inconsistencies of the left are at least predictable; not so Trump’s.

While the rhetoric of both Clinton and her Democratic rival is calculated, Trump’s—calculated or not—is essentially incoherent. That makes it particularly alarming. This charismatic demagogue, whose insults capture headlines as no sober policy deliberations ever could, flip-flops with impunity. He wears his inconsistency as a badge of honor, attacking principled opponents for their inability to “adapt.” When pressed for specifics, he promises to hire the “best people, tremendous people,” sealing the deal with the signature guarantee “believe me!” of the snake-oil salesman.

Trumpism is like Groucho Marx’s infamous password: nobody, least of all he, knows what it is. Will he dismantle NATO? Will he be “neutral” in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict? Who knows? Trump’s reality is as elusive as a shadow. Exasperating indeed. “How do you put pressure on a shadow whose shape changes from hour to hour?” asks historian and archeologist Alex Joffe, writing about the AIPAC conference on March 22, 2016. Continues Joffe: “But is he so different than Hillary, who said more or less the same things as he did, minus the embassy moving [from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem] and the rhetorical flourishes and the orange face? The most frightening thing to pundits was that Trump could be under control, that he could calibrate, that he sounded almost sane and plausible, that he could connect even with this audience.”<sup>3</sup> Equally frightening is the recognition

that nobody can predict what either Trump or Clinton will do as commander-in-chief.

Is this perhaps the end of Western civilization as predicted more than a century ago by Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler, and Friedrich Nietzsche? The one saving grace is the remarkable decency of most Americans. For no matter how angry people get when they feel betrayed by their leadership, this nation is fundamentally *not* driven by hate. Americans would rather be left alone than run the world. When Americans say they want their country to be great again, it does not mean they want to annihilate all their enemies. That is what Islamists do, not the descendants of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The average Yankee defines greatness not by killing, but by prospering, which may help explain, at least in part, the appeal of the candidate who shamelessly exhibits his wealth, along with his stunning wife, as incontrovertible proof of his tremendousness.

True, the proverbial Yankee is indeed often uncouth, a trait Mark Twain gently satirized in his 1869 book *Abroad*. Benjamin Franklin, the scientific as well as diplomatic genius, shrewdly turned that handicap to notorious advantage. Fiercely democratic, Americans do, alas, sometimes forget that a classless society is not a society that lacks class. But the contemporary coarsening of culture is a symptom of something far more serious: the demise of civilized public discourse caused by widespread ignorance and ideological subterfuge. What sort of deluge comes after the November election is anybody's guess.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kica Matos, "The Politics of Hate," *The Hill*, June 24, 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/245867-the-politics-of-hate>.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard L. Cravatts, *Genocidal Liberalism: The University's Jibad against Israel & Jews* (Boston, 2012), p. 149.
- <sup>3</sup> Alex Joffe, "AIPAC, Trump, and the Land of Shadows," *Medium*, March 23, 2016, <https://medium.com/@alex.joffe/aipac-trump-and-the-land-of-shadows-cee7bd2a838f#ubyoZr0c>.