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Political Turmoil and Personal Refuge: Trump Presidency at 100 Days and Beyond

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

COLLABORATIVE POSTS

Political Turmoil and Personal Refuge: Trump Presidency at 100 Days and Beyond

JUNE 1, 2017

This week the Avon Hills Salon reflect upon where we are headed and what we have experienced, politically and personally, since Donald J. Trump became President on January 20, 2017.

Stupidity or Treason?

Nick Hayes

In October 1916, as the Russian war effort in the First World War stumbled from one catastrophic defeat to another, the leading liberal voice of the Russian Parliament (or “Duma”), Paul Miliukov, rose to the floor. He was an eminent historian, a leader of the Russian “Cadet” Party (the dominant liberal party), and future foreign minister of the ill-fated Provisional Government. He excoriated the unseemly corruption of the Kremlin regime and summed up its foreign and military policy with a question: “Is this stupidity or is this treason?” Take a hard look at the Trump regime’s foreign policy since his inauguration in January and ask yourself the same question. Stupidity or treason?

Now, I admit that Trump’s performance in office to date makes a good case for defending him on grounds of stupidity. Only a below average guy would have said, “Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated.” Trump’s comments on Andrew Jackson brought back to my mind the 1960 rock hit by Sam Cooke, “What a Wonderful World” with its line, “Don’t know much about history.” Trump spoke of how Jackson agonized over the Civil War. Jackson had been dead for sixteen years before the start of the Civil War. Appealing to his supporters on the Christian right, the President attempted to show case his knowledge of scripture by referring to “2 Corinthians” leaving the impression he was talking about two guys from Corinth. Angry over the appointment of a special counsel to investigate his campaign’s ties to Russia, Trump tweaked his outrage over the appointment of a special “council.” (It’s too late to check. Someone removed the misspelling from the twitter account.) On his arrival in Tel Aviv during his recent trip abroad, Trump announced that he had just left the Middle East. He might want to check to see where a map places Israel.

By now, team Trump’s Russia hands are household names. Paul Manafort. The onetime campaign manager for Trump colluded with a Putin crony, billionaire, and reputed Russia mafia figure, Oleg Deripasha, to the tune of a \$10 million annual contract. Manafort received \$12.7 million in 2007 as a consultant in the campaign and election of Vladimir Yanukovich. Backed by Putin, Yanukovich won a highly fraudulent election. In 2014, popular demonstrations deposed Yanukovich and sent him into hiding in Russia. Carter Page. An advisor to the Trump 2016 campaign, Page received an offer of a 19% stake in Rosneft, a Russian oil company, if after the election he could convince Trump to lift the sanctions on Russia. Michael Flynn. Is it necessary to list again Flynn’s nefarious record? For starters, recall Flynn’s \$45, 000 payment for a speech and a photo op with Putin at a celebration of RT, the state sponsored Russian television station.

The White House has attempted to distance itself from Manafort, Page, and Flynn as a bunch of out of control clowns. Then, last week the news of another Trump-Russia connection broke. The President’s son-in-law and special advisor, the occupant of an office adjacent to the Oval Office, the voice on foreign affairs that Trump listens to, Jared Kushner, had met twice with Russians, a banker with a dubious portfolio and the Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Kushner’s agenda was to set up a direct line of communication based in a Russian property in the U.S. to establish a direct link between Trump and Putin.

As I write this article, on the morning of May 30, CNN has broken another story. US intelligence sources have evidence that the Russians believed they had sufficient “derogatory information” on Trump’s inner circle to give the Kremlin leverage over the Trump administration. The “kompromat,” or incriminating information, the sources say, is “financial” in nature. Manafort, Page, Flynn, and even the pet son-in-law, Kushner naively and gladly have walked into a classic Kremlin trap.

Stupidity or treason? Actually, you don't have to choose one over the other. Trump's policy is both. The Russian Miliukov gave his speech on the eve of Russia's singular national catastrophe, the Russian Revolution whose 100th anniversary we mark this year. The Trump team's stupidity and duplicity are the stuff that a nation's nightmares are made of.

Gatsby

Noreen Herzfeld

In the first 100 days of Donald Trump's presidency numerous commentators suggested we read Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, propelling it to the top of Amazon's best seller list. Lewis's novel traces the rise of a populist president with autocratic tendencies and the resistance movement that fights him.

While it has resonance for our political situation, the novel that comes to my mind is not Lewis's, but that of another Minnesotan: *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's examination of wealth and morals in the Roaring Twenties. The following quotations capture something central to the Trump presidency:

I suppose he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then. . . The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God – a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that – and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.

Just as James Gatz changes his name and invents a background to fit his persona, so, while it was not Donald who changed the family name, he did change the family heritage from German to Swedish. And while Trump downplays the perks of his privileged upbringing, he echoes Gatsby's display of ostentatious wealth as part of an image he has studiously curated. Who, but someone with a Platonic conception of himself, would speak of himself frequently in the third person?

Yet while it is easy to compare Trump to Gatsby, it is Tom Buchanan, the large and wealthy husband of the woman Gatsby loves, who channels the same Zeitgeist in the twenties that Trump does today.

Consider the following statement Tom makes early in the book:

Civilization's going to pieces. I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things.

The baseball caps proclaiming the need to "Make America Great Again" showcased the premise underlining Trump's campaign—that America is in decline and needs to be rescued, and only Trump can do it. This pessimistic vision came out even more strongly in Trump's inaugural address, in which he spoke of an American "carnage," proclaiming that for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and

beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

Tom continues:

The idea is, if we don't look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged...It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.

A wall on the Mexican border, his dismissal of a judge of Mexican heritage as biased, his early executive order to restrict Muslim immigrants, his recent call for a commission to look into election fraud—each looks as if it has racist intent. As Nicholas Kristof puts it, “we have a man who for more than four decades has been repeatedly associated with racial discrimination or bigoted comments about minorities, . . . While any one episode may be ambiguous, what emerges over more than four decades is a narrative arc, a consistent pattern.”

Near the end of the book, Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's narrator, sums up the impact of Tom's actions:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

A string of six bankruptcies in Trump's past all too often left investors, lenders, and workers holding the bag. In light of Trump's leaking of confidential matter to the Russians, David Brooks notes, “the vast analytic powers of the entire world are being spent trying to understand a guy whose thoughts are often just six fireflies beeping randomly in a jar. . . And out of that void comes a carelessness that quite possibly betrayed an intelligence source, and endangered a country.”

And one almost pities Mike Pence and Shawn Spicer, recipients of lies and shifting truths, who are, nonetheless, expected to represent and explain the administration to the public. The rich don't have to clean up their own messes. They always have someone else to do that for them.

Fitzgerald captured an enduring element of the American character that Trump embodies in a way that resonates with his base. The Great Gatsby ends with the line:

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Trump believes in a glorified past, a past of American greatness built on coal, on manufacturing, on small homogeneous towns. That past, like Gatsby's imagined past, never existed. Gatsby's dream of making his imaginings real ends in tragedy. I hope Trump's equally illusory dreams will not lead to a similar end.

Icebergs Ahead

Louis Johnston

What will block the Trump Administration's policy agenda: Russian interference in the 2016 election? Executive orders regarding immigration policy? Firing the FBI director? It's a parlor game pundits and prognosticators play almost daily.

These matters might grab the headlines but the submerged state may be the ultimate barrier to enacting the Trump program.

Suzanne Mettler defined the term in her book of the same title. She writes, "The 'submerged state' includes a conglomeration of federal policies that function by providing [regulations,] incentives, subsidies, or payments to private organizations or households to [require,] encourage or reimburse them for conducting activities deemed to serve a public purpose." In particular, it consists of "existing policies that lay beneath the surface of U.S. market institutions and within the federal tax system."

These government benefits are generally not delivered directly to citizens. Rather, government encourages or mandates that private actors must follow these standards. They are now part of the submerged state, invisible to most of those who benefit from these policies.

This stands in contrast to more direct state programs, such as unemployment benefits or Social Security, in which the government issues a check directly to the recipient.

What is the result of these different pathways of state aid? According Mettler, "Many Americans express disdain for government social spending, incognizant that they themselves benefit from it," particularly if their benefits arrive via the submerged state. Furthermore, "even if they do realize that benefits they utilize emanate from government, often they fail to recognize them as 'social programs.' People are therefore easily seduced by calls for smaller government—while taking for granted public programs on which they themselves rely."

Government policy plays a central role in the US health care system. Medicare and Medicaid are single-payer systems, and the Veterans Health Administration is part of the federal government, but public policies shape the private health insurance market as well. For instance, companies that provide health insurance to their employees can deduct the costs from their corporate income taxes, and state and federal regulations determine minimum levels of coverage for insurance plans.

Many Americans simply do not understand this, and thus our health care systems are a prime example of the submerged state. Americans benefit from an array of government regulations, but often do not recognize this reality. Mettler describes how Americans frequently believe the system, e.g. as in

health care, has emerged as a result of private, market actions when, in fact, it is the product of complex public and private interactions.

This fed into the opposition to the Obama Administration's health care reform efforts, with citizens haranguing their representatives about government interference in what they seemed to think was a private, competitive market system.

Republicans continued this line of attack even after the ACA was enacted. They spent seven years demonizing Obamacare as a government takeover of health care system, and thought they could ride that demon through Congress.

However, to their surprise, by the time President Trump took office, the ACA was more popular than it had ever been.

The ACA created public benefits that Americans started taking for granted. They like the idea of keeping their children on the family's health plan until age 26; they accept the notion that pre-existing conditions should not affect one's ability to get health insurance; they increasingly recoil at the idea that a family's ability to afford health care should affect their chances of being covered. The submerged state shaped their perceptions of what is right and necessary.

This is why the House Republicans barely passed the American Health Care Act (AHCA) in April. The AHCA reduced the minimum benefits required of private health plans; once again, allowed insurance companies to factor in pre-existing conditions when setting premiums; and started tearing at the fabric of what Americans now took as natural, settled parts of the health care systems. Americans were enraged and started calling and e-mailing their members of Congress in opposition. They were not coming to the aid of a government program; rather, they were angry that Congress was messing with what they now took for granted. The Republicans ran smack into the submerged state.

Icebergs ahead.

President Trump, Speaker Ryan, and Majority Leader McConnell will find many more icebergs in their path over the month ahead, most of which are part of the submerged state in their path. Tax reform and Trump's budget proposal both promise to affect policies that large numbers of Americans accept as normal such as college saving plans, mortgage interest deductions, and myriad programs administered by private organizations but funded by the federal government.

Russian-American intrigue may dominate the news and congressional hearings, but the submerged state is probably the strongest part of the resistance to Republican policies.

I thank Susan Riley for extensive help with this essay.

What Would Lincoln Do? Action and Reflection in the Age of Trump

Jim Read

I am under contract to write a book about Abraham Lincoln, and I should be spending every available moment on it. But current political events make it difficult to concentrate. I ask myself, “What would Lincoln do?” Answer: he probably wouldn’t be writing a book about Abraham Lincoln.

Donald Trump’s presidency has motivated many people to follow political news and engage in political activity to a much higher degree than usual: marches, demonstrations, blogs, phone calls to elected officials, billions of posts on social media, meetings, meetings, meetings. If nothing else, Trump’s presidency has reminded many people, including those who were disengaged during the fall campaign, that elections have consequences.

Did Donald Trump or members of his campaign team collaborate with Russian operatives to interfere in the U.S. elections? Will the United States renounce the Paris Agreement on Climate Change? Will Muslims become enduring targets of persecution in the United States? Will “Obamacare” be repealed? Will the Environmental Protection Agency be abolished?

Each new executive order, outrageous 3 am tweet, or headline-grabbing leak follows rapid-fire upon the previous ones, without allowing us to catch our breath. Even keeping track of events, much less comprehending them, is time-consuming and exhausting. What happened yesterday? What is today’s headline? What will it be tomorrow?

I personally have been hyper-engaged since Trump’s inauguration in attempting to understand for myself, and explain to others, this fast-and-furious chain of extremely consequential political events. In one sense, it has been thrilling. Why did I devote my life to teaching and writing about politics, if not for moments like this?

But this political hyper-engagement comes at a price. One risks becoming a reaction-machine of the moment. Abraham Lincoln believed that slavery could be peacefully abolished if — wait, there’s a news flash about what Trump said to the Russians! Sorry, Abe — catch you later.

Of course, the political crisis of the 1850s that preceded the Civil War was very much like our own time in this respect. Then, too, event rushed upon event: Fugitive Slave Act, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Kansas-Nebraska Act, “Bloody Kansas,” collapse of the Whig party, formation of the Know-Nothing and Republican parties, the Dred Scott decision, John Brown, the Democratic party’s self-destruction, Lincoln’s election, secession, war.

The essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (Lincoln’s contemporary) found himself participating in politics to a much greater degree than he had before the 1850s. Emerson felt a strong moral obligation to

actively oppose the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which forced citizens of free northern states to become slave-catchers. He spoke at public meetings, rubbed shoulders with abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips (the latter of whom Emerson privately described as having only “a platform existence, and no personality”), stumped for congressional candidates, and raised money for John Brown’s dubious activities in Kansas. He was puzzled by his friend Henry David Thoreau’s record of never once voting in an election.

However, at the same time Emerson feared that for him the moment of quiet reflection, of generating new ideas and modes of experience, of true self-reliance, was being suffocated in the press of antislavery politics. Even as he participated in it, Emerson saw antislavery activism as a distraction from his own proper work of freeing “imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man.” His preferred form of political engagement was the individual conversation. Mass antislavery meetings, though he attended them and recognized their effectiveness, left him cold. (See my 2011 essay “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*.)

Emerson never satisfactorily resolved the tension between activism and reflection. He took up his pen in support of the Union war effort, especially after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and lived another 17 years after the war’s end. But his significant work as a writer was finished by 1860.

Does this mean that political action and philosophical reflection are incompatible? Not necessarily. Ralph Waldo Emerson was never able to reconcile them. But Lincoln himself as president, pressed on all sides by duties and time demands far greater than Emerson’s, found the inner resources to compose prose-poems like the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address that are more enduring than anything Emerson penned. Lincoln could do this because his writing was inseparable from his political-moral vision for American democracy: action and reflection were inseparably fused.

What would Lincoln do? He would act, of course, but he would also reflect. Somehow, amid the crisis and chaos and personal grief, he was able to find that quiet center from which all his words and actions radiated. I find there a measure of reassurance for our own troubling times.

Practicing Silence

Kathleen A. Cahalan

The day after the 2016 presidential election, I took a day of silence.

When the world gets too noisy, it is not unusual for people to turn to the spiritual as a source of solace. The spiritual life director at the Saint John's Abbey Guest House reported to me that after the election there was an uptick in people coming for personal retreats. I began to ask other spiritual directors if they saw the same phenomenon. Yes, many said. People are confused, hurting, angry, searching. They seek a time and place set apart.

Silence, as a spiritual practice, is embraced by most religious traditions. Most hope that silence will bring them a sense of peace, calm, and rest away from society's disarray and rampant confusion. That's what I sought.

* * *

But not before all hell breaks loose.

In turning to silence, peace is about the last thing I find. I don't know about others, but my inner life, especially on the day after, was as loud and noisy as any newscast. Arguments bounced back and forth between foes as I told someone on the other side, in a spiteful and self-righteous tone, how wrong this all is.

One wise spiritual director told me: "Beware. In times such as these, people's afflictions are on the rise." She was referring to the ancient teaching of John Cassian, an early Christian monastic teacher, who taught that afflictive thoughts are the main obstacle keeping one from obtaining true silence in prayer.

My experience resonates with several of the afflictive thoughts on Cassian's list, such as anger, dejection, and pride. To his list, I would add fear. I recognize that my stream of consciousness is littered with afflictive thoughts; I can see them seeping out in my chronic tendency to constantly check the headlines, or the ease in which I name enemies, and my gleefulness when I hear that they are losing out. I'm not above mocking or belittling, either.

Cassian taught a basic practice to deal with afflictions: counter this stream of thoughts with another. When afflictive thoughts arise, repeat the words, "O, God come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me" (Ps 70:1). Early Christians adopted such spiritual exercises partly from Greek philosophers who were seeking wisdom, and we can find similar mantra practices in other faiths as well. The practice of silence is quite rigorous if one is to detach from one set of thoughts and attach to another. You become what you think, in order words.

* * *

Much has been said in these 100 days about how to live with integrity in the face of so much duplicity, hypocrisy, and fear-bating. Rod Dreher, in *The Benedict Option*, opts for one version of the monastic as living apart from the world's chaos and focusing on local communities. And David Brooks articulated three ways to resist the chaos in Washington: non-violent protest; also going local and building up a community; or supporting prudent and wise public leaders, of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Saint Benedict, and Gerald Ford, respectively, served as an example of each (marking the first time those three appeared in the same piece together).

But such depictions of the monastic miss an essential point. The step away—in the early desert community or today—is not a rejection or separation from the world but rather a time to face our own inner chaos, struggle, and fake news sources that are rumbling around in our consciousness. As Thomas Merton notes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, “The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to see. Unless we see, we cannot think.” (77).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew the same. To resist the growing Nazi influence over this country, he created a school, Finkenwalde, where a generation of Christian pastors could be trained in a place set apart in order to be strong enough to face their country's future. As a Bonhoeffer biographer, Charles Marsh, notes, “Dissent and resistance, they were taught, required spiritual nourishment: prayer, Bible study, and meditation on the essential matters to expand the moral imagination” (232).

* * *

Practicing silence, then, is an intentional choice to step into a world of deep conflict and affliction. But it is not a permanent place to reside. It is to prepare for stepping back out into the world, ready and willing to embrace the news of the day and be more discerning about which kinds of resistance are called for and on what scale.

In my own Christian practice, I can recognize the afflictions that rumble around in me and they were on the warpath back in November. When I felt my own afflictions rising up, I knew I had to get back to my practice. And the practice I share with other Christians is to seek divine aid by keeping the Word on my lips, in my thoughts, and in my heart. Without this focus, I too easily become my afflictions and am not able to face the challenges that come from a world turned upside down. As the spiritual writer Howard Thurman notes, “In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.” For the next 100 days, and the next, and the next, practice silence when needed.

The First Hundred Days and the Future of the Planet

Derek Larson

The now-routine evaluation of the first hundred days of a presidency dates back to the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt's radio address of July 24, 1933 (recall that until 1937 presidents were inaugurated in March, not January). In that broadcast FDR looked back on the launching of the New Deal and the appropriation of \$3.5 billion (about \$65 billion in today's dollars) to support relief and efforts to revive the economy. After a brief assessment of the unprecedented productivity of the first hundred days of the legislative session, he offered a proposal for the next stage in the economic recovery, suggesting that "If all employers will act together to shorten hours and raise wages we can put people back to work. No employer will suffer, because the relative level of competitive cost will advance by the same amount for all."

Roosevelt's address was less a look backward than a bold call for action going forward, proposing the National Recovery Act (NRA) as the New Deal's greatest leap of faith, a program dependent on voluntary cooperation from businesses and consumers alike. Americans would join in the effort, FDR believed, because they understood the concept of shared sacrifice and need for collective action to address the economic calamity they faced. He closed by saying "I am asking the employers of the Nation to sign this common covenant with me—to sign it in the name of patriotism and humanity.

I am asking the workers to go along with us in a spirit of understanding and of helpfulness." The official slogan for the NRA would be "We Do Our Part."

While others have addressed the long list of failings evident in the first hundred days of the Trump presidency, none will have a more serious or longer-lasting impact than his refusal to accept the scientific consensus on climate change and the political solution embodied in the Paris Accord. By even suggesting that the U.S. might withdraw from the accord, Trump has undermined the only global effort we have to stem the impacts of centuries of fossil fuel consumption that has literally altered the planet's atmosphere in such a way that the collective future of civilization is threatened. While FDR could reasonably expect Americans to accept shared sacrifice and make some concessions to unbridled capitalism to save the economy, Trump and his supporters cannot even be moved to "do their part" to save the planet by accepting their role in a voluntary accord.

President Trump's nascent environmental record has sometimes been overlooked within the well-deserved flood of criticism surrounding his controversial cabinet appointments, concerns about Russian influence in his campaign, the ill-advised Muslim ban attempts, his cartoonish budget proposals, and the seemingly endless parade of headlines stemming from his unfettered use of Twitter to make policy or attack perceived enemies. But lurking behind his appointment of Scott Pruitt as EPA administrator is the most anti-environmental agenda of the modern age. While other presidents appointed political figures

who were hostile to environmental regulation and recommended significant budget cuts for environmental agencies, none have been as boldly oppositional or draconian as Trump's. Even Reagan's first EPA administrator, Anne Gorsuch, only called for a 22% reduction in the agency's budget before being forced to resign after being cited in contempt of Congress. Trump and Pruitt want to slash the EPA budget by nearly a third, which would cripple both cleanup and enforcement efforts nationwide.

Our deepest concerns, however, should be reserved for Trump's pending action on the Paris Accord. He and his advisors have repeatedly stated the goal of withdrawing from the accord and not only rejecting the scientific consensus on climate change but actively working to purge mentions of climate change from federal web sites and to curtail federal spending on climate research. The abdication of U.S. responsibility to address the future health of the planet and the human species will be the lasting legacy not only of Trump's first hundred days, but of his presidency: he will be the person most directly responsible for our failure to, in FDR's words, "sign this common covenant... in the name of patriotism and humanity...to go along with us in a spirit of understanding and of helpfulness." The rest of the world is watching and they have found us lacking—while Europe, China, Japan, Australia, Canada, indeed the majority of the world's people can say "We do our part" –the United States no longer can. The blame for that does not rest solely on Donald Trump, but his failure to address the climate crisis will undoubtedly be chief among the criticisms future historians lay on his administration.

Participants in the Paris Accord were asked to write letters to their descendants six generations in the future. What can we say to ours?

Speaking in another age, Franklin Roosevelt said "This is no time to cavil or to question the standard set by this universal agreement. It is time for patience and understanding and cooperation." Unfortunately, during his first hundred days in office, President Trump has evinced no patience, understanding, or cooperation at all when the future of the planet is in question. History will judge his record but the world is watching today and has already found him lacking just months into his presidency.