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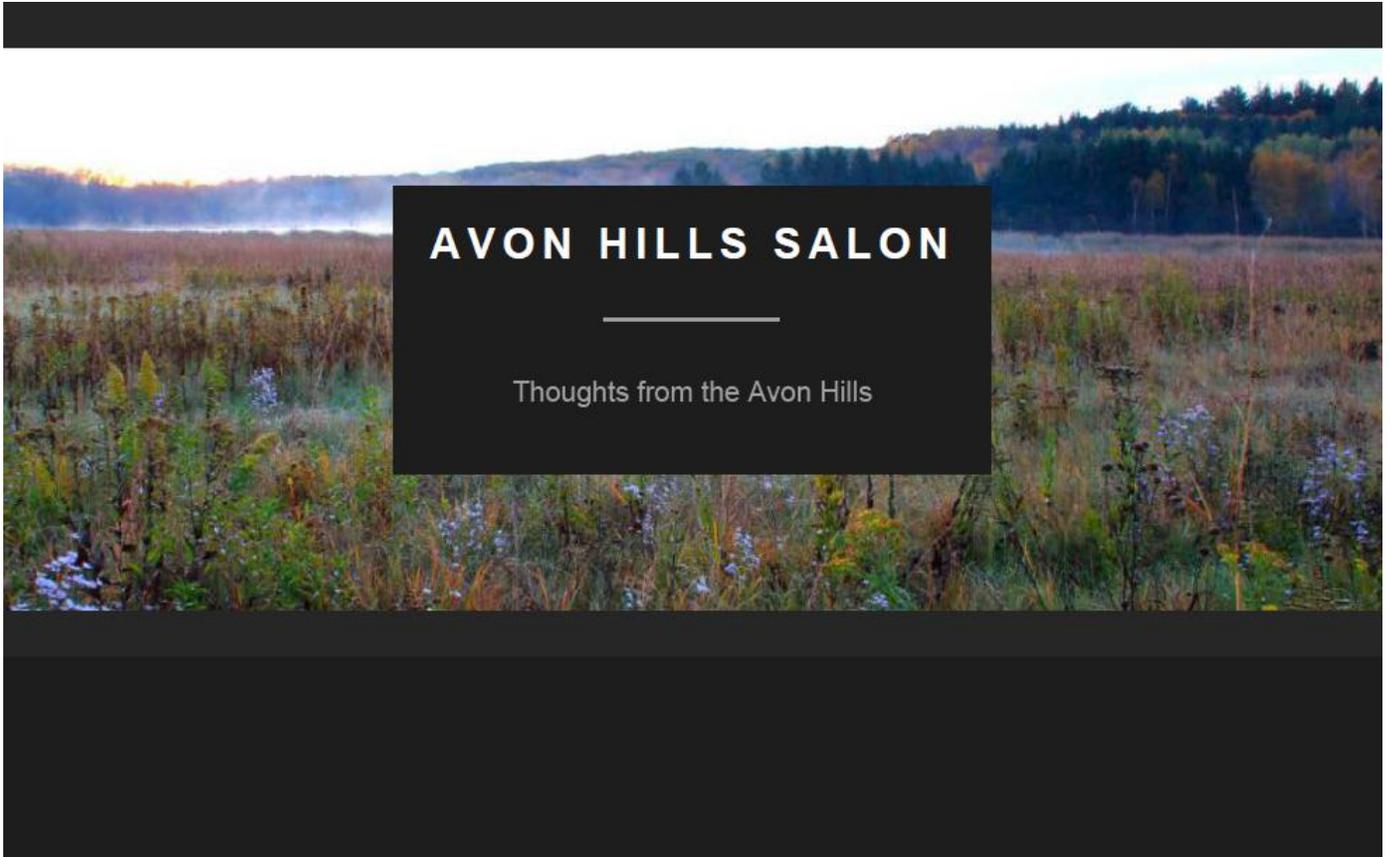
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One Year Retrospective on the State of the Union

February 1, 2018

This week the Avon Hills Salon reflect upon Donald Trump's first State of the Union Address on January 30, 2018.

The Gift of Trump

Anthony Cunningham

Years ago, I had a hard time getting students to take Plato's qualms about democracy seriously. In his *Republic*, Plato describes the disintegration of an ideal state, and a democracy is but one step removed from tyranny, the worst form of government. His democracy comes about when the masses grow disenchanted with the oligarchs who command all the wealth and power. These forgotten people wrest power from the establishment, and eventually, all hell

breaks loose because the democratic man does whatever he pleases, thereby necessitating the rise of a powerful tyrant to save society by quelling the resulting disorder.

Try as I did to give life to Plato's worries, my students could no more imagine serious threats from a democracy than they could imagine being attacked by unicorns. Their faith in democracies was an understandable result of their lived experience and what they knew of American history. They acknowledged imperfections in America's democracy, but they pointed to what they saw as constant progress toward a better America. After all, once upon a time, slavery was legal, Jim Crow ruled, women couldn't vote, and people couldn't come out of the closet. These things never should have happened in the first place, but at least our democratic values of liberty and equality prevailed in the end. And once won, these moral victories were permanent. Americans could be confident that in time, other evils would be eradicated. Justice would prevail, and we would all share in the bounty of America, the unparalleled land of opportunity.

And then came Trump. Of course, he is a variation on Plato's tale. He is an oligarch, not some poor fellow leading the huddled masses against the 1%. But he might as well be one of the downtrodden because he tapped into a powerful wellspring of anger, fear, and dispossession. Trump capitalized on the sense of loss, worry, and resentment amongst Americans who felt like they no longer mattered. His talk of arrogant elites, violent illegals, and globalists who cared less about America struck a chord, and Trump used the vitriol to full advantage. True, he said bombastic things, boasted at every turn, made wild promises, and displayed vulgar sensibilities that would have eliminated a conventional candidate, but all was forgiven or overlooked because he was *their* guy, the ferocious fighter who was willing to throw political correctness to the wind to fight honestly on their behalf. Evangelicals could hardly avoid the conclusion that Trump was a sinner, a profane man who talked about grabbing women "by the pussy," but perhaps this was all part of God's plan. God so loved them that He sent them the unlikeliest hero. Maybe God had a sense of humor. All that mattered was that Trump would deliver them from evil, just as he would deliver all the manual laborers struggling to make a go of it in a different world. He would drain the swamp and give them so much winning that they might just grow tired of winning. Everything would be better with Trump. *Everything.*

One year into the Trump presidency, he has given America a gift, though not the kind he promised. He has destroyed the illusion that democracy is any magic pill to cure all social ills. The progress wrought in American history through the efforts and sacrifices of people trying to make good on the ideals of liberty and equality can be rolled back, and if we doubted this before, Trump is proof in the flesh. The thought that moral progress mirrors the progress of science—after all, once we see into the inner workings of the natural world, we seldom abandon such knowledge—is comforting, but Trump exposes it as a fantasy, and a pernicious one if it lulls us into complacency. Democracy at its best is a fragile thing. The ills of yesteryear can be rejuvenated, and they can be ushered in by people who think they are making America great again. Bigotry can be exalted, precious freedoms can be rolled back, and knowledge can be replaced with convenient lies. Trump did not invent the cracks and fissures in our fragile democracy; he capitalized on them, and in the process, he did us the favor of making us face the fact that the best things about America are never settled once and for all. Donald Trump might just help make America great, though not the way he thinks.

Sins of Omission

Nick Hayes

Dante would have condemned President Trump for the sin of omission, a capital sin. In his State of the Union speech, Trump omitted several things we have come to know about him during his first year in the White House.

For example, Trump really likes *Forbes* magazine. Based on comments by his erstwhile paramour, Stormy Daniels, Trump doesn't actually read *Forbes* but finds it handy for other things.

It was useful, for instance, in the games Trump has been playing with Congress. It had mandated that the Trump administration produce a list of the elite oligarchs in Russia with close ties to the Kremlin and Putin. Congress's purpose for such a list was to identify and impose sanctions on Putin's cronies. The Treasury Department complied by cribbing a list of 96 names from a list published by *Forbes* of the 200 richest businessmen in Russia. Why would Trump prefer to plagiarize from a popular magazine rather than turn to the CIA for the information? His motive might have been to turn the arguments for imposing sanctions into a joke, his staff, not unlike many a college student, did not think its plagiarism would be caught, or he really does like *Forbes* magazine. All three explanations could be true and are not mutually exclusive.

In any case, they are part of a pattern that explains the most obvious omission in Trump's speech. He made one reference to Russia. Only one. Conspicuously absent was any reference to the big story of Trump's first year in office, the Russian meddling into the 2016 election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign. His silence on the Russian controversy revealed that he has no intention of providing an explanation to the American public and every intention of sidetracking, derailing and undermining Congress's investigation.

In the meantime, Trump's silence serves Putin well. His friend in the White House slow walks the call in Congress for sanctions against Russian. There was neither a tweet nor a comment from the White House last week when Russian police brutally assaulted a demonstration by the only feasible opposition movement in Russia. Putin's kangaroo courts have disqualified Aleksei Navalnyi, the last remaining political challenge to the Putin regime.

Dante put those who committed the sin of omission together in hell with those guilty of the sin of sloth. Both, Dante tells us, saw evil and did nothing to interfere or stop it. What might he have to say about the Trump or the Republican Congress?

Christianity Keeps Losing

Noreen Herzfeld

On the morning after the election of Democrat Doug Jones and the defeat of Republican (and accused harasser of teenage girls) Roy Moore for the Senate seat in Alabama, the editor of *Christianity Today* noted that, given the vociferous evangelical support for Moore, the Christian

faith was that election's real loser. "When it comes to either matters of life and death or personal commitments of the human heart, no one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation. Christianity's integrity is severely tarnished."

Has the situation improved in the intervening three months? Evangelicals would be wise to heed the old adage "If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is to stop digging." Recent responses to a variety of scandals and to Trump's own words in the State of the Union Address show evangelical leaders still frantically plying their shovels.

In response to the allegation that porn star Stormy Daniels was paid \$130,000 to remain silent about an affair she had with Donald Trump in 2006, shortly after the birth of his son Barron, Tony Perkins, leader of the Family Research Council said in an interview with POLITICO, "'We kind of gave him—'All right, you get a mulligan. You get a do-over here,'" This and similar statements made by others mark a remarkable sea change in evangelical attitudes toward character in office. According to PRRI, in 2011 only 30 percent of white evangelicals agreed, "an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life." By late 2016, when Donald Trump was running for president, that number rose sharply to 72 percent.

Perhaps this reflects a new inclination toward forgiveness on the part of evangelicals. Sadly, this spirit of forgiveness does not extend to everyone who occupied the Oval Office. Perkins went on to say evangelicals "were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there's somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully." When reminded that Christians should turn the other cheek, he replied, "Look, Christianity is not all about being a welcome mat which people can just stomp their feet on." Perkins language reflects that of "muscular Christianity," a movement that has been part of evangelicalism from the beginning, which sees machismo and stereotypical male behavior as a necessary counterbalance to the feminization of religion.

Evangelical comments on Trump's immigration stand take a similar tone. On January 25 Jerry Falwell Jr. tweeted:

I find these words, and the actions they seem to be inspiring, hard to reconcile with the words of Jesus, who not only called on his followers to "turn the other cheek" but also said they would be blessed "because I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). A recent report that ICE officials were dumping water put in the desert by volunteers for thirsty refugees makes one wonder what part of Jesus' words the current administration does not understand.

The editor of *Christianity Today* ended with the following observation. "What events of the last year and a half have shown once again is that when Christians immerse themselves in politics *as Christians*, for what they determine are Christian causes, touting their version of biblical morality in the public square—they will sooner or later (and often sooner) begin to compromise the very principles they champion and do so to such a degree that it blemishes the very faith they are most anxious to promote." He questions whether the religious right is really about religion or merely about politics.

Evangelicals who prize political power over love of neighbor, machismo over character, would be wise to recall that Jesus' response to a tempter who offered him bread, fame, and political power (Mt 4:1-11) was, "Get away from me, Satan!"

Riding the Wave

Louis Johnston

President Trump hails his economic policy achievements at every opportunity. For example, here is a recent tweet:

No, Mr. President, our economy is not better than it has been in many decades. Instead, we've clawed our way back from the worst economic downturn since the 1930s and you were fortunate to take the reins at just the right time.

Let's take a look at the economy's vital signs since President Obama took office in January 2009. Start with real GDP, the total output of the US economy adjusted for inflation:

GDP for 2017 is the last point on the far right of the graph. If 2017 had seen performance "better than it has been in many decades," that point should be significantly higher and we should see a sharp break in the trend since 2009. Sorry, Mr. President, it's just not there.

Inflation is the next vital sign:

Again, there doesn't seem to be any significant change in 2017 except that inflation is lower. However, the president doesn't have much to do with this number; rather, it's primarily driven by Federal Reserve policy. Unfortunately, the president did not reappoint Janet Yellen, the Fed chair who guided this policy.

Finally, the president touts record low unemployment rates. Let's take a look:

Today's low unemployment is the product of an eight-year trend of falling unemployment rates and steady job growth. The same is true of African-American unemployment, another bragging point for the president.

The economic state of our union is good, but not because of President Trump's leadership. The true test will come when his policies kick in and he can no longer ride the wave created by his predecessors.

Nixon Went There

Derek Larson

Two critical issues our nation faces went unmentioned in President Trump's first State of the Union Address: the ongoing Russia investigation and global climate change. His ignoring the investigation of Russian meddling in the 2016 election is unsurprising. After all, President Nixon did say in his 1974 address "One year of Watergate is enough," and eight months later he resigned in disgrace. But in that same address Nixon also highlighted the fact that "...for the first time ever, we have organized a massive national effort to protect the environment." Faced with the biggest environmental challenge in the history of our species, Donald Trump had nothing to offer about climate change at all in his highest profile speech since his election.

Sadly, the State of the Union was riddled with the same nonsense Trump often spouts about "clean coal," "floods, fires, and storms" that if not already made worse by our changing climate will be so in the future, and references to an imaginary "war on American energy."

Taken in the context of the actual war on environmental regulation led by EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and the president's glaringly misinformed comments to the press confusing weather and climate in recent weeks, this is perhaps what we should have expected. But it is far from what we need if we are to prevent the worst of our scientists' predictions from coming true.

Days before Trump's speech, William Ruckelshaus, the Nixon appointee who led the formation of the EPA 1970 and served as its administrator again under Ronald Reagan, criticized Trump's inaction on climate change as "a threat to the country... If you don't step up and take care of real problems, and don't do anything about it, lives will be sacrificed." It may not be surprising the president spent eighty minutes speaking to 45 million Americans on television without once mentioning climate change. But he should have. Richard Nixon would have, and it seems fair to expect Trump to at least live up to the standard he set.