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2018 retrospect: person of the year

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2018 Retrospect: Person of the Year

FEBRUARY 12, 2019



2018 was quite a year. In the spirit of Time magazine, the members of the Avon Hills Salon are kicking off 2019 with a look back, at persons of significance for the year past. Time's Person of the Year is usually living (though not, at time of publication, this year's Jamal Kashoggi). We have chosen a mix of persons, some living and some dead, who wrote, said, or did something that made us think, helped us live, stood out or stood up to power. We hope you'll enjoy the variety.

*Noreen Herzfeld

A Good Year for Putin



Nick Hayes

Person of the Year: Vladimir Putin

Person of the year for 2018? Vladimir Putin, of course.

A year ago, The Atlantic kicked off the new year in its January/February 2018 issue with an in-depth article by Julia Joffe on [“What Putin Really Wants.”](#) If The Atlantic had run a follow-up story looking back at 2018 from Putin’s perspective, the lead would probably read, “2018: The Year Putin Got What He Wanted.” Let’s suggest a few items that would have been on Putin’s 2018 to-do list.

First of all, in Putin’s mind the personal is always political. Putin had a grudge to settle with the Obama administration. In 2016, the Panama Papers were leaked documenting and spreading the “dirt” on the illicit wealth of the Kremlin insiders and Putin hidden in off-shore banks. Putin took it as a personal attack by the Obama administration and was determined to retaliate.

Secondly, he had wanted a new way to assert Russia’s influence in international politics. He found it in the successful launch of a new weapon: hacking. The continuing controversy and discord over the Mueller investigation adds further evidence that Putin had been right to gamble that hacking American computers could throw confusion and discord into the U.S. election and tilt it in favor of the Kremlin’s choice. According to Joffe, Putin had “. . . pulled off one of the greatest acts of political sabotage in modern history, turning American democracy against itself.” In the process, Putin acquired a bit of what the Russians call “blat,” or a bit of leverage with the American president. Google the media coverage of the joint press conferences by Putin and Trump last July in [Helsinki](#). Now, imagine that you are Putin watching the nervous and fawning American president. What would you think?

Third, self-congratulations would be in order. You would think that your investment in cultivating Trump was paying off very nicely. Putin’s international agenda did stall a bit in 2018. The Kremlin intended to do to the eastern Ukraine what it had done to the Crimea. Moscow appears to have settled for a long-term stalemate. Although Trump offered little help for Putin’s agenda in Ukraine, the American president more than made up for that oversight in his policies toward Syria. His announcement that he would pull out the U.S. forces in Syria left its future in the hands

of Putin and his protégé Bashar-al Assad.

Fourth, legislative achievements have never been high on Putin's to-do list. This past fall, he did float a pension reform that would have raised the retirement age by five years. In the face of widespread popular protests, Putin blinked. He reduced the proposed increase in retirement age for women, but not for men and has subsequently slow-walked the proposal. Putin did score a legislative victory on another issue dearer to the heart of his base. This past January, Russia's Justice Ministry acted on an earlier proposal from Putin to [decriminalize bribery and corruption](#) in certain "exceptional circumstances." Nether Putin nor the Justice Ministry has offered an explanation or a more precise definition of what is meant by "exceptional circumstances."

Finally, what about Putin's grudge against the Obama administration over the Panama Papers? Putin's payback came in the hacking and interference in the American election.



The Professional

Tony Cunningham

Person of the Year: Robert Mueller

I'm a philosopher by trade. Good philosophers think carefully about things that matter, and by necessity, they doubt their own thoughts and answers. The point of philosophical inquiry isn't to arrive at tidy conclusions, but rather, to track the messy truth, and doubt is a philosopher's best friend. As I tell my students, thoughtful uncertainty beats thoughtless certainty every time. If you are pursuing anything but the obvious, complexity and vagueness are inevitable. The answers you seek may elude you forever, and progress is generally marked by inching toward a better, but imperfect rendering of the world, not the whole story laid bare, once and for all time. Intellectual humility is a prerequisite for any philosopher. You must become comfortable with not knowing; believing you have everything figured out gets in the way of truly figuring things out.

Donald Trump makes a mockery of philosophy. He doesn't read or study or deliberate at all, much less devotedly. He insists that he knows more than thoughtful people who have read, studied, and deliberated. As he sees it, his "gut" feelings track the answers to complex questions that should be entirely beyond him. To call him a Sophist, the skilled orators that Socrates criticized for persuading people with slick appeals to emotion, rather than with reasoned argument, is unfair to

the Sophists. Trump vacillates, exaggerates, and lies shamelessly at every turn. He is all will and no reason, the anti-philosopher in the flesh.

Robert Mueller, head of the Special Counsel investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, is basically everything Trump isn't, and as such, he is my "Person of the Year."

Since we do not know the results of the inquiry, the selection may seem premature. Perhaps they will not amount to anything beyond the indictments, verdicts, and guilty pleas obtained so far. However, the conclusion is less important to my choice than the character of the man and his inquiry.

Mueller and his team have worked methodically, leaking nothing and saying little. They have met Trump's incessant whining about a "witch hunt" and "12 angry Democrats" with stony silence. No matter what they might deliver, they have plugged away tirelessly, relying on reason and the evidence, not the gut feelings of ignorance. The Mueller inquiry has been a breath of fresh air for America so far as reasoned inquiry goes.



Ultimately, the Mueller investigation reflects the man, someone entirely unlike Trump. Like Trump, Robert Swan Mueller was born into wealth. But whereas Trump escaped Vietnam with convenient bone spurs, Mueller volunteered. Indeed, he had to persist to serve as a Marine. Inspired by a Princeton classmate killed in the war, a knee injury rendered Mueller ineligible at first, but he healed enough by the following year to enroll in Officer Candidate School. After his unit's first major battle, his reputation was sealed with his soldiers—"The minute the shit hit the fan, he was there. He performed remarkably. After that night, there were a lot of guys who would've walked through walls for him." Around the same time, Trump went to work for his father. He later joked that avoiding sexually transmitted diseases in the New York dating scene was his "personal Vietnam." Robert Mueller never speaks about the war.

Robert Mueller's entire life has been about professionalism in the very best sense of the word. The work—whether commanding a unit in Vietnam, directing the F.B.I., or heading the Russia investigation—has never been about him. He has set the highest standards, demanding the best of himself and those who work with and for him. In Trump's world of vapid reality television, Mueller would be boring—all content and no show. At a time when we are captive to a president who is all

show and no content, Robert Mueller is a nothing less than a gift to the nation, a merciful reminder that reasoned inquiry and faithful service are not dead. Thank goodness for Robert Mueller and his kind.



Do the Work

Louis Johnston

People of the Year: Joan, John, Judy, Mona, and Pam

Do the Work! That's the title of a book to which I turn whenever I'm frustrated with a project. The cover shows a drawing by Vincent Van Gogh. He called it Man With a Hoe:



Man With a Hoe

Vincent **wrote** to his brother Theo, regarding this drawing and a group of similar sketches, "there are things that are worth doing one's best for, either because they gain approval or because, just the opposite, they have their own raison d'être. Blessed is he who has found his work, says **Carlyle**, and that's absolutely true." He went on, "And as for me, when I say that I want to make figures from the people for the people, then it goes without saying that the course of events will influence me only indirectly, that is to the extent that my work is made harder or easier, but making the drawings themselves is my main preoccupation."

Doing our best work makes possible two key principles of economics: Specialization and trade. Specialization involves finding a task at which a person, group of people, or even nation is relatively good at and then focusing on doing that job well. Trade comes into the picture when two people, groups of people, or nations exchange the goods and services they produce with one

another.

Yet, I too often take for granted the people who do their work day in, day out, week after week, and make it possible for me to specialize and do my best work. I implicitly trust that they will be there. That's the missing ingredient when economists and other discuss trade: that we must trust one another to do what they have agreed to do. If they do not, then the entire edifice crumbles.

My people of the year are the men and women who get up every day and do what needs to be done on our campuses. Clean our buildings. Make our food and clean up after us. Keep the lights on, the heat flowing, and the water running. Supervise our student workers, get the copy machine fixed when it inevitably breaks down, print out our exams.

Mona Gruber and Joan Volkens take care of the Main Building for all of us who work there. I'm constantly amazed how they can keep everything together in the middle of a building-wide renovation but they do it. They clean the bathrooms; mop, sweep, and vacuum the floors, empty the trash, and do dozens of other tasks that I don't even know about. Thank you, Mona and Joan.

I eat lunch 3-4 times per week at Gorecki. I love the pizza, and Pam Marchand is there almost every day running the station, making pies, baking them, slicing them, and just as important she is chatting with both fellow workers and diners. I've overheard her helping out a rookie behind the counter or encouraging another worker when they've made a mistake. Thank you, Pam.

When I'm done with lunch, John Holland and the crew in the dish room wash all of the plates, glasses, silverware, and everything else we who have eaten lunch generate day after day after day. I look forward to seeing John and saying hello as he is usually finishing lunch when I come in. Students, staff, and faculty eat thousands of meals and yet we can always count on clean plates, clean glasses, and clean silverware. Thank you, John.

I've worked with Judy Shank since we were both over in Simons Hall at St John's. I know that if I need something (a quiz printed, an errand run) she'll not only do it but do it well. She's now the Economics Department staff person but I still think of her as my guardian angel, always looking out for me. Thank you, Judy.

I've only mentioned five people but there are dozens more who do the work. I hope all of them know how much I appreciate what they do and how much all the work that all of the staff at our colleges do makes it possible for faculty like me to specialize in what (we hope) we do well. People

like them, who show up every day and get the job done, should be awarded Person of the Year every year.



It Can't Happen Here?

Jim Read

Person of the Year: Sinclair Lewis

My selection for Person of the Year 2018 is the American novelist [Sinclair Lewis](#) (1885-1951). He was the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1930). His first great novel, *Main Street*, was modeled on his home town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, in western Stearns County.

But it is not for these reasons that I have selected him for Person of the Year. It is for his 1935 novel [It Can't Happen Here](#), which depicts a fascist takeover of the United States. In the novel a folksy demagogue, Buzz Windrip, skillfully exploits economic distress, racial and religious prejudice, and xenophobia to win the presidency, whose powers he quickly employs to declare a national emergency, put members of Congress under house arrest, violently suppress all opposition, and establish himself as dictator.



The title of the book comes from the claim made by several characters early in the novel, despite the warning signs, that a fascist dictatorship was impossible in the United States. "Nonsense! That couldn't happen here in America, not possibly! We're a country of freemen!" But it does happen, with lightning swiftness. Most ordinary citizens make no attempt to stand up for the Constitution whose virtues they had been ritually praising. Soon many of the same characters who once claimed a fascist dictatorship was impossible in the United States now treat it as an accomplished fact about which nothing can be done.

The most interesting and unsettling part of the story is the secret of Buzz Windrip's appeal to ordinary Americans, the "Forgotten Men" as he calls them. "Oh, he was common enough. He had every prejudice and aspiration of every American Common Man...But he was the Common Man

twenty-times-magnified by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose, which was exactly the same as their own, they saw him towering among them, and they raised hands to him in worship.”

His economic promises were ridiculous and full of contradictions but nevertheless appealed to people in financial distress. The wealth of the country would be redistributed so that everyone got \$5000 off the bat, but property rights would be respected and everyone would come out ahead. “He had thoroughly tested (but unspecified) plans to make wages very high and the prices of everything produced by these same highly paid workers very low.” By cutting off all foreign trade and producing everything at home, “even coffee, cocoa, and rubber,” Americans would “keep all our dollars at home,” generating a large enough balance of trade to finance the \$5000 promised to every family.

Of course once Buzz Windrip is in power, the \$5000 doesn’t come. The results instead are enormous profits for a few large politically-connected corporations and enormously increased misery for nearly everyone else. But Windrip cleverly pins the blame on blacks, who are targeted for re-enslavement, and Jews, who are targeted for annihilation. This plot turn would seem obviously based on Hitler’s “Final Solution” – except that *It Can’t Happen Here* was published in 1935, long before most people had any idea what was to come.

The novel’s conclusion leaves unresolved the question of whether fascism could permanently defeat democracy in the United States. Buzz Windrip eventually falls victim to an internal coup, but fascist rule continues under new leadership. There is an underground resistance movement promising to restore democracy, but the novel promises only that the resistance will continue, not that it will succeed.

Is democracy threatened in the United States today? This is an intriguing question to pose in the wake of a long and still-unresolved political crisis engineered by a president who in effect said to Congress, “Do as I command, or I will shut this country down.” It is encouraging that at least some congressional leaders still take their constitutional responsibilities seriously. But what are the attitudes of the wider American public?

A special September 2018 issue of *The Atlantic* (published before the shutdown crisis) posed the question, [Is Democracy Dying?](#) Among the eye-opening details reported in the feature was that in an [August 2017 survey](#), more than half of the Republicans said they would support postponing the 2020 elections if President Trump claimed this was necessary to prevent the (supposed) threat of

undocumented immigrants voting.

Political theorist Yascha Mounk in *The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (2018) argues that both in the United States and in Europe, democracy is in process of “deconsolidating.” By “deconsolidation” Mounk does not mean that democracy will necessarily be overthrown (though he considers that a real possibility) but that in the U.S. and western Europe the once-overwhelming consensus across the political spectrum in favor of maintaining a democratic system has evaporated. It now has open opponents as well as advocates. Democracy has gone from being remarkable stable in the United States to increasingly unstable; it has ceased to be the only game in town.

Mounk reports some disturbing survey evidence, especially among younger voters. “In 1995, 34 percent of young Americans aged 18-24 felt that a political system with a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress or elections was either good or very good. By 2011, 44 percent of young Americans felt the same way.” Similar upward trends are evident among Americans who say they favor military rule. From 1995 to 2011 the number of Americans who say they favor military rule increased from one in 16 to one in six. Among young, wealthy Americans the percentage who say they favor military rule had increased to 35 percent by 2011. (Mounk, pp. 108-112). These surveys were taken well before Donald Trump became a presidential candidate.

So these are my reasons for selecting Sinclair Lewis as Person of the Year. I am not saying that the death of democracy will happen here, only that it can happen here. There are many things we as citizens can and should do to restore our democracy to health and reverse the trend toward authoritarian politics. But simply insisting that “it can’t happen here” won’t do the trick.



Where Have All the Niebuhr’s Gone?

Noreen Herzfeld

Person of the Year: Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr did not shy away from hard truths. Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1928-1960), Niebuhr was for the mid-twentieth century something we very much lack today—a theologian and public intellectual who was a conscience for his time, and, oddly enough, for ours.



In his Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he notes that human beings, standing “at the juncture of nature and spirit,” tend to overestimate themselves, falling into the dual trap of pride and an overreaching will-to-power. While an individual may overcome this temptation, nations rarely do: “Sinful pride and idolatrous pretention are an inevitable concomitant of large political groups.” Niebuhr

described modern nationalism as a “daemonic” force that would be the inevitable ruin of nations that espoused it. Of course, he was thinking of Hitler and Mussolini at the time.

But not entirely. In 1937, Niebuhr wrote a prescient piece for the *American Scholar* entitled,

“[Pawns for Fascism—Our Lower Middle Class](#)” in which he envisioned the forces that could bring down American democracy. Niebuhr writes that should our civilization fail, “the chief contributory cause of its failure will lie in the demonic force latent in the lives of all the good little people, so touching in their personal rectitude and



individual discipline, who serve us in the shops, who till our soil and who perform all functions in our social mechanism with the exception of industrial labor.” He believes the lower middle class to be the most “politically inept” of all classes. These voters embrace the social conservatism and individualism of the Right, yet fail to recognize that their position is not the same as that of the wealthy politicians whom they elect, not seeing “the gulf between property as social power and property as minimal social security.”

Niebuhr could be talking about our society today. He describes what modern writers have dubbed “the precariat,” a failing middle class who “are least able to find themselves amidst the complexities of a technical civilization and the perplexities of . . . change.” They are “ignorant of

the cause of, and confused about the ways of escape from, [their] social difficulties.” They seethe with “a profound resentment, which is the more bitter for its failure to articulate itself clearly,” and thus, are easy prey to “the economic creed of the demagogue”, “virulent racism”, and “patriotic passion.” Niebuhr warns that, in an economic downturn, lower middle-class grievance will “undoubtedly express itself in fascistic or semi-fascistic terms.... It may well become the decisive factor in our political life.”

Niebuhr writes: “It is too early to prophesy, and much too early to write, the tragic social history of our era.” That was eighty years ago. Today we see much of what he foresaw. Niebuhr does not prescribe a solution. He saw the world as broken by human sinfulness and democracy as “a proximate solution to insoluble problems.” He does, however, point out that “history is filled with many achievements and constructions which ‘have their day and cease to be.’” In other words, no matter how complicated or broken our current situation seems, this too shall pass.

Reinhold Niebuhr remains popular today, quoted by political figures (Jimmy Carter, Barack Obama, James Comey) and pundits (David Brooks, Andrew Bacevich) alike. He has been [described](#) as “one of the last two indisputable public intellectuals in the United States.” Which raises the question, “Where are the Niebuhrs of today?” Niebuhr rose to prominence in the 1930s after the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and became the “go to” theologian during and after WWII for a media searching for understanding of our civilization’s turmoil.

There are plenty of smart and articulate theologians out there today. Unfortunately, we do not hear them in the clamor of today’s media, which all too often take the easy way out, elevating evangelicals, such as Jerry Falwell or Franklin Graham, who are willing to give their American audience the simplistic answers they want to hear, and to do so in a soundbite. Yet, if we had the likes of Niebuhr today, would we listen? Or has our attention been too fragmented by technology, and too jaded by a media that looks for the extremes that make for a good fight?

[← Nick Hayes on: Brezhnev’s Winter](#)

[Tony Cunningham on “Vengeance” →](#)