

The Man Behind the Curtain

Although the Grateful Dead told us that “every silver lining’s got a touch of grey” (lyric by Robert Hunter), it’s my nature to look for one anyway. At the risk of being accused of gross naivete, I’d like to hope that the Trump presidency (I still can’t believe I have to type those words) will once and for all sour people on government and politics.

My hope is rooted in Trump’s very being. Barack Obama has been a truly horrible president, both in foreign and domestic policy. But — and I realize I open myself to trouble here — he at least displays a certain dignity and class. Sure, he can be self-righteous and demagogic, but at least in my book, he passes the would-you-have-a-beer-with-this-guy? test. I think I’d like having a conversation with him, if *conversation* means being able to grill him on his autocratic and murderous policies in the Middle East, his provocation of Russia, and his ignorance of even basic economics, among other things. I imagine he’d have some thoughtful — although wrong — things to say in defense of his actions, but it would be a conversation. I might not be able to change his mind, but something resembling a Socratic dialogue might come out of it. (“How do you square what you said here with what you said there?” I think he’d try to answer.)

Trump, on the other hand, fails the beer test miserably. I can’t see that a conversation with him would have any value whatever. It’s hard to believe that he ever learned how to listen and think about what he is hearing. (Agreeing with someone you want to impress or who has flattered you is not the same thing.) *Listening*, in his mind, apparently, means waiting until it’s time to speak again. When he says, “Excuse me...” in that insistent tone, it’s a sign he’s waited long enough and is going to speak NOW.

But that’s just the beginning of why I have grounds to hope Trump will cause a significant number of people to finally lose faith in government and politics. The man not only has no respect for the truth (i.e., reality), he is not embarrassed when caught in a lie. He doesn’t seem to *know* that’s he’s been caught. He simply lumbers on, suggesting that *you* misconstrued *him* or that he never said what he most certainly said. He acts as though reality and history are responsive to his words. He’s not only the smartest man in the universe, not only God’s gift to humanity (his middle name should have been Narcissus), he’s also uniquely powerful. He can make the world conform to his wishes, even when what he’s talking about what has taken place and is clearly on the record. (He insists he always opposed the invasion of Iraq and the bombing of Libya — when we know those are lies. He blames the rise of the Islamic State on Obama’s honoring George W. Bush’s 2011 negotiated deadline to exit Iraq — even though Trump called for a declaration of victory and exit while Bush was still in office.)

Further, he has shown himself to be a man void of conviction. He’s been on all sides of

issues and gave many mixed messages over the course of his campaign. People praise him for speaking his mind, but in light of the contradictions, he has a most disorderly mind. Maybe he speaks *his audience's* mind. What he says at rallies differs from what he tells the *New York Times* editorial board. During his campaign, he often gave the impression he was improvising as he conjured up answers to questions he never thought about before. Someone pointed out that when he reads a speech from a teleprompter, he sometimes says, "So true" — as though he was reading the line for the first time. He probably was.

In Trump, we have a man who knows next to nothing (I may be giving him too much credit) about events and policy — and who seems to believe he doesn't have to know. Why study, why acquire knowledge, if you think that you're uniquely gifted with an intuition that enables you to give the right answer to any question on the spot? (And, hey, if you get something wrong, deny you said it or claim that everyone else misunderstood you. Besides, your people will say you shouldn't be taken literally anyway.)

All this would make Trump one of the most insufferable and unqualified persons alive (not that anyone is qualified to be president), but he doesn't stop there. He's got to be one of the pettiest, most vindictive people around. He's truly a case of arrested development — a spoiled brat and bully who sees the world in zero-sum terms. Others have been notoriously petty and vindictive — Richard Nixon for example. But Nixon indulged his vices largely behind the scenes. Trump is so self-centered, so smitten with himself, that he seems incapable of passing up any opportunity to take down anyone — no matter how powerless — who's said anything less than glowing about him. He's the alpha male who defines everyone else. His favorite word for a critic is *overrated*. He's not satisfied with showing that a critic is wrong. He's got to go for the jugular and accuse the person of being a no-talent loser. That speaks volumes about him. The man is insecure.

What also speaks volumes is how he lies about the election. Someone this great must have set all kinds of records, right? But no, Trump did not win a historic electoral landslide — not even close. And of course, he lost the popular balloting by nearly 3 million votes — which is obviously such a huge burr under his saddle that he blames this on an unsubstantiated illegal vote.

I could on, but let's move to what all this has to do with the coming political disillusionment. Remember the scene in the *Wizard of Oz* when dog Toto exposes the blustering and "powerful" Oz to be nothing but a little cipher behind a curtain? Trump is that man. He can bluster and work the levers of power that constitute the state, but he is unlikely to rise above his petty, petulant, mean, obnoxiously conceited, bratty little self. How will that play with even die-hard Trump supporters as the years wear on?

A Trump fan might say that he will be forgiven any shortcoming because he's working for a good cause. And what cause is that? Liberty? Sorry, no. You are not for liberty if you intend

to stop consumers from buying whatever they want from whomever they want at freely offered prices. You are not for liberty if you intend to build a wall on the Mexican border (on private property) and root out people without government papers. You are not for liberty if you favor a war on drug users, makers, and sellers. You are not for liberty if you like the “stop and frisk” and want guns confiscated in the process. You are not for liberty if you think a president should cajole and bully companies about where to locate factories. You are not for liberty if you like eminent domain. You are not for liberty if you see civil liberties as dispensable. You are not for liberty if you plan to confront China, Iran, ISIS, and who knows who else? You are not for liberty if — well, you get the idea. Peruse Trump’s pronouncements and you will see the point.

Well, he’s going to make American great again, right? Assuming that actually could mean something, how is that desirable if liberty is crushed in the process? The Jeffersonian Abraham Bishop saw through that ruse in 1800: “A nation that makes greatness its polestar can never be free.” A national greatness striven for by a cult-of-personality strongman is to be opposed with all our might.

What this little man is out for is power and glory for himself, and he will do whatever he thinks needs to be done to win. Who knows? Maybe thinks that is the path to national glory too. We have better things to do than speculate about his herculean power to rationalize.

When even his supporters see this, I hope they will run for the exits, retching all the way. They may forswear looking for a “leader” to fix their lives ever again. They may give up the state as a parasitic monster. And they may discover liberty, uncoerced social cooperation, and freed markets.

Or they won’t. Maybe the libertarian movement can make a difference.