

Democracy's Afterlife

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Trump, the GOP, and the rise of zombie politics.

It is an
infallible
law that
if
Seamus
Heaney
is the
Irish
poet of
choice,
things
are
looking
up, but if
W.B.
Yeats is
in the
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look



© Barbara Jones-Hogu/Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Barbara Jones-Hogu: *America*, from the folio *Student Independent* 8, 1969

ominous. Joe Biden at the National Democratic Convention in August created great expectations with Heaney's "once in a lifetime/...longed-for tidal wave/Of justice." But there is no blue tsunami. Instead, we must turn, fretfully, to Yeats: "We are closed in, and the key is turned/On our uncertainty." That key was always in the hands of Donald Trump. It has been obvious for many months that his strategy for retaining power would center on the generation of a force field of radical indecision. As Barton Gellman put it in *The Atlantic*, "He could prevent the formation of consensus about whether there is any outcome at all."

At 2:23 AM on the morning after Election Day, Trump turned the key and locked American democracy into an undetermined, perhaps indeterminable, condition. When he declared an election that was still very much alive to be a dead thing, over and done with—“Frankly we did win this election”—he made the United States a liminal space in which a supposedly epic moment in its history both happened and did not happen.

Trump has long framed the immediate post-election period as a temporal no-man’s-land. Neither in his first nor in his second campaigns for the presidency did he ever commit himself clearly to accepting the result of the vote. Asked in the third presidential debate of 2016 whether he would do so, he replied, “What I’m saying is that I will tell you at the time. I’ll keep you in suspense. Okay?” What is being suspended now is both the disbelief of his supporters in the possibility of his defeat and the very concept of a transition of power.

In this frame of mind, there can never be a result of the 2020 election. One thing we can be sure of is that for Trump and his followers there are not five stages of grief, leading from denial to acceptance. The furthest their sense of it can go is to the second stage, anger. Just as there is “long Covid,” there is long Trump. The staying power of his destructiveness lies in the way that disputed defeat suits him almost as much as victory. It vindicates the self-pity that he has encouraged among his supporters, the belief that everything is rigged against them, that the world is a plot to steal from them their natural due as Americans.

He has created for them a wide space to occupy, that great prairie of paranoia that stretches between what happened and what *really* happened. What really happened is what always occurs in every Trump story: he won big. Losing, for Trump, is not possible. It is a category of humanity that he calls in *The Art of the Deal* “life’s losers.” As he exclaimed to his fans at one of his final rallies in Grand Rapids, Michigan, after showing them a video of Joe Biden stammering, “The concept of losing to this guy!” When you define your opponent as a contemptible wretch, that thought is inconceivable.

Usually, at this point, we get the postmortem. But there is no body. The malignant presidency of Donald Trump seems moribund, but also vigorously alive. Trumpism, after all, is a narrative of death and resurrection, in which bankruptcy becomes *The Art of the Comeback* and American carnage becomes American renaissance. Life after death is its governing trope. On its mental map, the point of no return can never be marked. We have, after all, already witnessed the Good Friday and Easter Sunday of Donald Trump. In a grotesque parody of the Christian narrative, Trump presented his contraction of Covid-19 not as a consequence of his own narcissistic recklessness but as a Jesus-like self-sacrifice—he caught the virus on behalf of the people. Trump “died,” was in the “tomb” of Walter Reed hospital for three days and then rose again and appeared to many. This fable seems to have worked for his supporters, electrifying them with its evidence of their leader’s indefatigability. The deaths of others—230,000 victims of Covid-19 by election day—did not prompt a turn against the president who presided over them. His base acted, rather, as the foil for his miraculous, manic display of vivacity in the last days of the campaign.

Joe Biden was also, albeit in very different ways, a postmortem candidate. Politically, he has always defined himself as a relict of 1960s progressivism, a survivor of the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Personally, he carries the cross of the deaths of his wife and daughter in 1972 and of his son Beau in 2015.¹ During the pandemic, Trump defied death but did not acknowledge it; Biden acknowledged death but did not pretend to defy it. Trump’s demeanor and bluster sought to suggest that the US had barely been touched by the virus, Biden’s to show that he himself had been deeply touched by the suffering it had inflicted. These were physical contrasts—swagger versus caution, masked against unmasked. But they also played out as starkly different attitudes toward death and time. Trump, at his first rally after his resurrection, posed as an immortal (“I went through it. Now they say I’m immune. I feel so powerful.”)

This is entirely appropriate. In the Treason Act that remains in force in the United Kingdom, it is treasonous to “compass or imagine the Death of our Lord the King.” If the king’s death cannot be imagined, there can be no interregnum. Biden’s whole bearing, on the other hand, spoke of vulnerability and mortality. This dichotomy may have been accidental but is also highly expressive of a deeper divergence: autocracy (as it imagines itself) is forever; democracy’s outcomes are always temporary. This is where the election has ended up, as a clash between Trump’s immunity to its results and Biden’s fragile appeal to democratic decency.

It is impossible not to think, in this in-between moment, of Antonio Gramsci: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Something is dying, but we do not yet know what. Is it the basic idea of majority rule or is it the most coherent attempt to destroy that idea since the secession of the Confederacy? Something is trying to be born, but we cannot yet say what it is either. Is it an American version of the “managed democracy” or “electoral autocracy” that is the most rapidly expanding political form around the world? Or is it a radically renewed republic that can finally deal with the unfinished business of its history? The old is in a state of suspended animation; the new stands at a threshold it cannot yet cross.

In 1974 upon his inauguration as president, just half an hour after the resignation of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford declared, “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.” He implied that the lawlessness and derangement of Nixon’s presidency, laid bare in the Watergate scandal, had been more traumatic for the United States even than the violence of the Vietnam War, its wounds “more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars.” Yet he also suggested that Nixon’s departure had left the country in a good place: “Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men.” With its institutions intact, the US could quickly return to its natural condition of mutual benevolence: “Let us restore the golden rule to our political process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate.” If you had an air to that speech you could sing it:

*For the house fell on her head
And the coroner pronounced her dead
And thru the town the joyous news was spread
Ding-dong, the witch is dead!*

Many Americans imagined themselves singing that national anthem on the morning of November 4. But long national nightmares do not end in real life as they do in Oz. Donald Trump himself crawled out of Nixon’s political grave, more lawless, more shameless, more openly unhinged. And he will not lie down. Joe Biden, like Ford before him, hoped to arrive in the Oval Office, not just as a healer, but as an exorcist, driving out the evil spirits of suspicion and hate. For many of those who voted for him, the end of the Trump regime, like the banishing of Nixon, would prove that, after all, “our Constitution works.” There could be a great sigh of relief: the system has corrected itself. That was not really true in 1974 and it is emphatically false now.

The established, uplifting alternative to the long national nightmare is the American Dream. Biden evoked it in his acceptance speech at the virtual Democratic convention in August when he insisted that the opportunity for every American “to go as far as their dreams and God-given ability will take them” is one “we can never lose.” But this is a hazy kind of reverie, and it could not stand up to Trump’s Gothic horror version of the trope. In announcing his candidacy for the Republican nomination in June 2015, he both performed its funeral rites and dragged it out of the grave: “Sadly the American dream is dead, but if I get elected president, I will bring it back. Bigger, better and stronger than ever before.” While Biden was insisting that the dream was undying, Trump’s promise to resuscitate its cadaver was, for so many of those who have experienced the demise of industrial America, a much more potent image.

It has, moreover, its own nightmarish history. As Sarah Churchwell points out in her illuminating exploration of the term, in her book *Behold, America* (2018), the first widely disseminated use of “American dream,” in the sense that later became such a staple of political rhetoric, appeared in the *New York Post* in 1900. It was in fact a warning about the threat posed by super-rich tycoons to the very existence of the American system of government. “Discontented multimillionaires,” it warned, form the “greatest risk” to “every republic.” All previous republics, it noted, had been “overthrown by rich men” and this could happen too in America, where the tycoons were “deriding the constitution, unrebuked by the executive or by public opinion.” If they had their way “it would be the end of the American dream.” This—and not a woolly appeal to its benign power—is the sense in which the term should resonate now. The American republic has come close to being overthrown by a discontented multimillionaire. Biden failed to say with sufficient force that America needed not to go from nightmare to dream, but to wake up to the urgent meaning of that threat.

Biden also failed in his framing of Trumpism as a merely temporary departure, not just from sanity and decency, but from the true course of American history. He posited a normality to which the country would return after November 3. Jeff Flake, the former Republican senator of Arizona, proclaimed, in the run-up to the election, that Trump’s brand of politics had no future. “There are no illusions about where the party is going under Trumpism. This is a dead end. This is a demographic cul-de-sac.”

This has turned out to be (pardon the pun) dead wrong. The election has shattered the Democratic illusion that demography is destiny. A far-right nativism can appeal to many voters (including those of Hispanic and African-American ethnicity) who were assumed to be part of an emerging left-of-center consensus. The cul-de-sac is an open road. Trump, win or lose, doesn’t merely have a post-November 3 afterlife. As a political force he has never been anything but an afterlife. One of the reasons there cannot be a postmortem on Trumpism is that Trumpism *is* postmortem.

Its core appeal is necromantic. It promised to make a buried world rise again: coal mines would reopen in West Virginia, lost car plants would return to Detroit. Good, secure, unionized muscle jobs would come back. The unquestionable privilege of being white and male and native would be restored. Trump did not manage to do any of this, of course. But, in a sense, that very failure keeps the promise pure, unadulterated by the complexities of reality. We have seen in Trump’s triumph in Ohio and very strong performance in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania that it still has great purchase on the imagination of millions.

It must be remembered, too, that in 2013, the Republican Party, then chaired by Reince Priebus (who would go on to be Trump’s first White House chief of staff), issued what was widely called an “autopsy” report on itself, the very word acknowledging the death of what the party had once been. Facing the fact that “Republicans have lost the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections” (that is now, of course, seven of the last eight), it concluded that the GOP

is increasingly marginalizing itself, and unless changes are made, it will be increasingly difficult for Republicans to win another presidential election in the near future....

Devastatingly we have lost the ability to be persuasive with, or welcoming to, those who do not agree with us on every issue.

As part of the autopsy, the party conducted focus groups among disillusioned former Republicans in Ohio and Iowa. “Asked to describe Republicans, they said that the Party is ‘scary,’ ‘narrow minded,’ and ‘out of touch’ and that we were a Party of ‘stuffy old men.’” Three years later, the Republican candidate won Ohio by eight points and Iowa by nine. And four years after that, he has pretty much repeated the performance.

If they had been told that this would happen, the authors of the autopsy report would have been sure that this was because the corpse had been galvanized in the way they had recommended—by welcoming female, Black, Asian, and Latinx voters and candidates and by emphasizing a technocratic style of competent governance. What

they could not have imagined is the paradox that the candidate who would restore the body on the gurney to life would be the one who had the audacity to declare it irretrievably dead.

Trump, in 2016, was the child in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," with the twist that rather than blurting out that the monarch was walking around naked, he shouted out the truth that, as a force capable of winning presidential elections, the Republican Party was extinct. He held its cadaver up before his baying crowds. And he presented himself as its sweet (or rather extremely sour) hereafter. Whatever else the 2020 election shows, it proves that he was right.

Trumpism now is the GOP's death warmed over. Like a political remake of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, it has fully assimilated the outward appearances and forms of the dead Republican Party to a new body, a duplicate that looks the same but that has in fact been hollowed out. Trump's White House speech on election night made explicit that what has been excised in this process is the most basic assumption of electoral democracy: that the majority wins and the minority, however, disappointed, accepts the legitimacy of its victory and its right to govern.

This invasion is thrilling for Republicans because it is also a kind of liberation. As the agonized tone of the 2013 autopsy report makes clear, the transformations of gender, class, race, and ethnicity necessary for them to be reborn as the voice of a genuine national majority, even if they had been possible, would have been extremely painful. Trump's delivery of the death certificate freed the GOP from this torment. There was nothing to revive. What Trump stumbled on was that the solution to the party's chronic inability to win a majority of voters in presidential elections was to stop trying and instead to embrace and enforce minority rule. This possibility is built into the American system. The electoral college, the massive imbalance in representation in the Senate, the ability to gerrymander congressional districts, voter suppression, and the politicization of the Supreme Court—these methods for imposing on the majority the will of the minority have always been available. Trump transformed them from tactical tools to permanent, strategic necessities.

As we are now seeing, the difference for a democracy is existential. A tactic of maneuvering to hold power against the wishes of the majority of voters is contingent, opportunistic, reactive. It is innately time-limited. It will advance when it can and retreat when it must. But when the tactic becomes the strategy, there can be no retreat. A program of consolidating the means by which a minority can gain and retain power must try to institutionalize itself, to become so embedded that it can withstand the majority's anger. To do that, it must not merely evade the consequences of losing the popular vote in this or that election. It must, insofar as it can, make those elections irrelevant.

This is the most important thing to understand about the postmortem Republican Party. The logic is not that a permanently minority party *may* move toward authoritarianism but that it *must*. Holding power against the wishes of most citizens is an innately despotic act. From 2016 onward, the GOP has become not so much the RINO Party, Republican in name only. It is the RIP party, repressive in perpetuity. When Trump said on *Fox & Friends* at the end of March that Democrats want "levels of voting that, if you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again," he was openly redefining the meaning of the vote. Voting, in this formulation, is something to be "agreed to"—or not—by Trump himself. Democracy is no longer rooted in the consent of the governed, but in the contingent permission of the indispensable leader.

In all the noise of the 2020 election, it was easy to miss the signal that was not being sent. The incumbent president made no effort even to go through the motions of presenting a future open to deliberation by citizens. He had no policy agenda for a second term—the GOP merely readopted its platform from 2016, without even bothering to delete its multiple attacks on "the current president." Why? Because arguments about policy are the vestiges of a notion that Trump has killed off: the idea that an election is a contest for the support, or at least the consent, of a majority of

voters. Such arguments implicitly concede the possibility that there is another, equally legitimate choice. That is precisely what the posthumous Republican Party cannot and does not accept.

This refusal is shaped by a functioning redefinition of “we, the people.” When Trump spoke on election night about “a fraud on the American public,” he meant that the “public” consists only of his voters. In 1953, after a failed uprising in Berlin, Bertolt Brecht noted in his sardonic poem “The Solution” that the authorities had declared that “the people/Had forfeited the confidence of the government”:

*...Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?*

This is the election behind the election—the GOP’s decision to imaginatively dissolve the American majority and elect another. This has been done in two ways, coarsely and a little more subtly. The coarse method is to simply deny that the majority exists. This is what Trump did on election night and the probability is that his supporters believe it to be true. After the 2016 election, he obliterated the majority by claiming that “in addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” A plurality of his voters actually believed that there was no “if” about it. A Politico/Morning Consult poll of Trump voters in July 2017 found that 49 percent believed that he really did win the popular vote. Now, in 2020, it is not just that the majority does not count, it is that it is actively criminal, engaged as it is in a vast conspiracy to steal his victory.

This could be written off as the usual despotic delusion were it not buttressed by the slightly subtler method of choosing another “people.” The method is to shift between two implicitly contradictory meanings of the same word: elect. Without a capital E, it indicates what is supposed to happen in a democracy—all citizens can vote and whoever wins the most votes is the president. Capitalize the initial letter and it signifies the righteous, those chosen by God for salvation. The real Trumpian transition is from the first to the second. He himself generally does this in a secular form: the typical populist slippage from “the people” to “the real people.” Before he ran for president, when Trump tweeted about “Patriots,” it was almost always in relation to the football team. After 2015, it was almost always about the “Great American Patriots” who attend his rallies. The anti-Trump majority is neither great, nor patriotic, nor in fact American.

This exclusion overlaps with a religious version promulgated most notably by the attorney general, William Barr, according to whom religious belief is the entire foundation of the American political community, so those who are not religious (in a very narrow sense) cannot properly belong in the polity.² In effect, of course, the secular and religious versions overlap and support each other. The majority, deficient in both patriotism and sanctity, is unworthy. If it seems to have won, that can only be because, being outside the polity, it has subverted the real polity by fraud. To deny its validity is both patriotic and righteous. Voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the use of the Supreme Court to hand electoral victories to the Republicans are no longer dirty tricks. They are patriotic imperatives. They are not last resorts but first principles.

The great comfort of this mentality is that, when the majority can be conjured out of existence, so can the whole idea of defeat. The old norm, whereby the beaten party retreats into a period of reflection and considers why it lost, is gone. The only possible response to Biden’s apparent victory is that of Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

*What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?*

If Trump is eventually removed from the Oval Office, the study of revenge and immortal hate, not sober self-criticism, will be the response in Trumpworld. There will be no chastening, just a further injection of resentment and conspiracy-mongering.

This is zombie politics—the life-after-death of a former conservative party. And as Gothic stories tell us, it is very hard to kill the undead. One half of a two-party system has passed over into a post-democratic state. This reality has to be recognized, and a crucial aspect of that recognition is to accept that the claim Ford could make in 1974 —“Our Constitution works”—no longer applies. After the long national nightmare of Watergate, America could rub its eyes and awaken to a renewed confidence in its system of checks and balances.

But the Trump presidency has been no nightmare. It has been daylight delinquency, its transgressions of democratic values on lurid display in all their corruption and cruelty and deadly incompetence. There may be much we do not yet know, but what is known (and in most cases openly flaunted) is more than enough: the Mueller report, the Ukraine scandal, the flagrant self-dealing, the tax evasion, the children stolen from their parents, the encouragement of neo-Nazis, Trump’s admission that he deliberately played down the seriousness of the coronavirus. There can be no awakening because the Republicans did not sleep through all of this. They saw it all and let it happen. In electoral terms, moreover, it turns out that they were broadly right. There was no revulsion among the party base. The faithful not only witnessed his behavior, they heard Trump say, repeatedly, that he would not accept the result of the vote. They embraced that authoritarianism with renewed enthusiasm. The assault on democracy now has a genuine, highly engaged, democratic movement behind it.

Two different kinds of liminality are in play in the very notion of “transition” that is supposed to govern the time between November 4 and January 20, the next presidential inauguration. Trump will try to keep the US “in suspense” between cause and effect, between the votes as cast and their consequence for the holding of power. But Biden, by contrast, is explicitly transitory. In April he said: “I view myself as a transition candidate.”

His reasons did not need to be stated. His candidacy most obviously compassed and imagined his own death. It is entirely understood that, because of his age, he surely cannot, even if he serves a first term, hope for a second one, and indeed that he could die in office. It is not just that a Biden presidency would, presumably, accept the limits placed on the office by constitutional propriety and common decency. It is that it is limited by the remorseless effects of time on the body.

Yet in this very temporal constraint, there is a danger. The idea of a transitional presidency implies a drawing of breath, a period of calm after the Trumpian tempest, America as a giant field hospital devoted to the binding of wounds. This would be a reprise of Ford’s emollient speech in 1974: our self-correcting system has worked its magic and now we may all love one another again. Biden’s entire political persona has been shaping itself toward such a moment. But it cannot be. Trump will not allow it, and the whole structure of permanent minority rule that he has brought to the fore works against it. Biden must continue to fight Trump and, if and when he takes power, he must dismantle that structure, piece by piece.

The historic question that must be addressed is: Who is the aberration? Biden and perhaps most of his voters believe that the answer could not be more obvious. It is Trump. But this has been shown to be the wrong answer. The dominant power in the land, the undead Republican Party, has made majority rule aberrant, a notion that transgresses the new norms it has created. From the perspective of this system, it is Biden, and his criminal voters, who are the deviant ones. This is the irony: Trump, the purest of political opportunists, driven only by his own instincts and interests, has entrenched an anti-democratic culture that, unless it is uprooted, will thrive in the long term. It is there in his court appointments, in his creation of a solid minority of at least 45 percent animated by resentment and revenge, but above all in his unabashed

demonstration of the relatively unbounded possibilities of an American autocracy. As a devout Catholic, Joe Biden believes in the afterlife. But he needs to confront an afterlife that is not in the next world but in this one—the long posterity of Donald Trump.

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1. See my "[The Designated Mourner](#)" in these pages, January 16, 2020. ↵
2. See my "[Enabler in Chief](#)," November 5, 2020. ↵