**Some of us saw this coming. Others denied it, and us.**

By Jim Sleeper

Long before the final results, many Americans knew that our body politic was suffering a seizure after being injected with a poison that nothing in Hillary Clinton’s politics was potent enough to expel.

The impotence of that politics -- its inability to draw from wellsprings deeper than bromides about breaking glass ceilings, “fighting” for families and children, and slashing college tuition  -- has little to do with Clinton’s character or alleged corruption or even with the undoubted wave of misogyny in this election.

It has a lot more to do with the failure of the American establishment --all of it, from Wall Street to business-corporate management to the pundits and politicians in Washington -- to respect and, yes, to nurture the civic-republican (small “r”) virtues and beliefs that a liberal-capitalist has to rely on but that neither the liberal state nor markets do very much to sustain or defend. The liberal state can’t do it because it’s not supposed to judge between one way of life and another. Markets can’t do it because their very efficiency and productivity depend on approaching consumers and investors as narrowly self-interested for business purposes.

But the business of the American republic is not business, and that’s why we have to rely on the institutions of civil society – the churches, the civic associations, the WMCAs and Little Leagues, the colleges and schools – are being destroyed by omnivorous markets and casino-like financing.

Resentment against that regime won last night. The soulless “New Democrat” neoliberal paradigm has alienated the public as fully as Republicans’ enslavement to conservative fiscal orthodoxy.

Both wings of the political establishment spent 30 years mixing the toxic cocktail that devastated Republicans’ own base and has cost all of us a republic. We've had massacres in our streets and schools, road rage, gladitorialization in our sports, escapism in our entertainments, atomization of communities, and relentless, predatory lending and marketing of fraudulent palliatives to us as “sovereign” consumers trapped like flies in a spider web of 800-numbered, Internet-tracking pick-pocketing machines.

The most telling assessment of these consequences of the privatization, financialization, militarization, and criminalization of American life is AlterNet editor Don Hazen’s [essay,](http://www.alternet.org/economy/4-plagues-getting-handle-coming-apocalypse) “The 4 Plagues: Getting a Handle on the Coming Apocalypse.”

My own explanations came, first, on the Fourth of July, 2014, in a long essay that prompted The New Yorker’s Hendrik Hertzberg to [cite](https://twitter.com/rickhertzberg/status/486254767250108417)  “the Jonathan Edwards of civic-republicanism” (Edwards was the Puritan who preached the sermon “Sinners in the hands of an angry God” five miles from where I grew up), and again [here](http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/how-both-parties-have-nearly-abandoned-us-clinton-vs-trump) last March, in one of the first essays to explain how both party establishments had betrayed us and left us with Trump. His rise in the Republican primaries then signaled the metastasizing of “resentment politics”.)

The spread of nihilism and resentment is also a consequence of a 20-year-long insinuation of fine-spun malevolence into our bloodstreams by the deep-pocketed conservative noise machine, from Rupert Murdoch’s FOX News and New York Post and his Wall Street Journal’s editorial pages to non-electoral campaigns funded by the Bradley, Scaife, Koch, and other truly “right wing” foundations that blamed our national distempers on campus “political correctness,” “voter fraud,” and labor unions.

They sowed the wind, and now they have reaped the whirlwind. Conservatives dined out so long on the follies of reactive, frightened liberals that they forgot how to cook for themselves and abandoned their kitchen to Donald Trump. Liberal Democrats, having lost touch with deeper wellsprings, have bobbed and weaved and crouched defensively, sometimes even outdoing the Republicans at their own games, from drone killings to deportations.

What about those missing, untapped wellsprings of civic-republican strength?

My own answers are somewhat counterintuitive but very American in an old, foundational way that I wish more of us would confront. I sketched them two summers ago in a long essay that appeared [in DEMOCRACY journal](http://www.democracyjournal.org/37/our-puritan-heritage.php?page=all), on how some strands of our Puritan heritage might help us to see through the neoliberal and conservative paradigms imploding all around us.

To “free market” claims that the world is flat –claims the East India Company and some apostles of the Enlightenment were making even 400 years ago -- Puritans answered that the world has abysses, opening suddenly beneath our feet and in our hearts, and that we need coordinates and a faith strong enough to plumb those depths and face the demons in them and in ourselves.

[Here's](http://www.democracyjournal.org/37/our-puritan-heritage.php?page=all) how I described what they’re still trying to tell us, on what I called "the eve of our neoliberal shipwreck." To see someone trying to tap those wellsprings read this passage from the British-American poet W.H. Auden’s ode “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” his contemporary, who’d written of centers that cannot hold as the best lose all conviction and the worst are filled with passionate intensity.

When Yeats died, in 1939, as fascist war clouds gathered over Europe, Auden gave voice to the prescient dread that many Europeans and, now, Americans like me, are feeling today. His only hope lay in an intrepid poetic spirit that carries the Puritan understanding of those worldly abysses and of the divided human heart that has its own abysses, too. We will now have to learn to look into liberal freedom’s dark depths and find something to praise in it.

In the nightmare of the dark,

And the living nations wait,

Each sequestered in its hate.

Intellectual disgrace

stares from every human face

And the seas of pity lie

Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right

To the bottom of the night,

With your unconstraining voice

Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse

Make a vineyard of the curse.

Sing of human unsuccess

In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountains start,

In the prison of his days

Teach the free man how to praise.

===

In other words: Keep the faith, valiant against all disaster.