

## Punched Bloody by a Hand We Keep on Pretending is Invisible

By Jim Sleeper

Possibly nothing annoys readers of journalism more than a columnist or essayist saying, "I told you so." But I told you so.

On July 4, 2014, *Salon* posted a lament for the American republic that I'd written during a spate of mass killings. Its sub-headline was: "We're being punched bloody by a hand we keep on insisting is invisible."

That hand belonged to the "free market," which Adam Smith had claimed would orchestrate myriad self-interests to serve general interests in freedom and prosperity. Neither I nor *Salon's* editors anticipated another hand, that of the "invisible enemy" that's now upon us. Yet the 2014 essay anticipated what the Coronavirus has revealed in 2020 about the economic, political, and civic-cultural abysses yawning at our feet and in our hearts.

When I wrote my jeremiad in 2014, most Americans were blaming the massacres, gladiatorial sports, road rage, drug addiction, predatory lending, and more on alien terrorists and cartels, mental illness, gun trafficking, and rogue financiers. I wrote that something worse was in play, more dangerous than even a strain of demagoguery that was mobilizing indignant white, working-class Americans behind a Glenn Beck, a Sarah Palin, and, although none of us foresaw it then, Donald Trump.

Two years later, in March 2016, as Trump rampaged through the Republican primaries, destroying that party's establishment, I took [a second reckoning here in \*Salon\*](#), also presented below. While media focused on Trump, I focused on what had readied millions of Americans to believe whatever someone like him says. That prompted a 20-minute [interview](#) with Brian Lehrer on WNYC-FM, New York City's NPR station.

The 2014 *Salon* warning was re-posted by *AlterNet* and *History News Network*, the London-based *openDemocracy*, the Rome-based *Reset*, and more. The right-wing Drudge Report sent thousands of negative comments to the *Salon* site. The essay drew [this](#) condemnation by conservative theologian Carl Raschke, and praise from the writer Hendrik Hertzberg:



[Hendrik Hertzberg](#) Verified account [@RickHertzberg](#) **Jim Sleeper is the Jonathan Edwards of civic republicanism—and that’s a compliment.** <http://bit.ly/1n8CvBi> [@salon](#) [@OpenDemocracy](#)

Having thought myself pretty much alone in wringing my hands about the republic, I was surprised by the volume and vehemence of the reaction. What surprises me now, on re-reading the essay, is how presciently (I won’t say “prophetically”) it anticipated the crisis that many Americans kept trying to normalize, deflect or minimize.

Later, with massacres of synagogue worshippers in Pittsburgh, white Baptist church worshippers in Texas, and members of a black church study group in Charleston, I kept on naming a still-unacknowledged cause of what's killing us: relentless, intrusive, seemingly anodyne commercial "speech" by shareholder-driven corporations, including news-media companies and social media platforms. Although it’s not malevolent but mindless, it has deranged has emptied speech itself, and recent free-speech jurisprudence has treated business corporations as “speakers” in politics by equating money with speech under the First Amendment.

You might expect people in news media, whose business is speech, to grasp this. But their income depends on their not grasping it. We all need to re-think such non-thinking and jurisprudence about speech from the bottom up, as I’ve tried to do since 2016 in [The Baffler](#), the [Los Angeles Review of Books](#), and here [in Salon](#). But I began it all [right here](#) in Salon, in 2014, and again in 2016. In what follows, I haven't changed a word.

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## I. 2014:

[http://www.salon.com/2014/07/04/we\\_the\\_people\\_are\\_violent\\_and\\_filled\\_with\\_rage\\_a\\_nation\\_spinning\\_apart\\_on\\_its\\_independence\\_day/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/04/we_the_people_are_violent_and_filled_with_rage_a_nation_spinning_apart_on_its_independence_day/)

SALON

FRIDAY, JUL 4, 2014

## **We, the people are violent and filled with rage: A nation spinning apart on its Independence Day**

*We're being punched bloody by a hand we keep saying is invisible, even though its sensation mongering and gun mongering are display capitalism run amok.*

JIM SLEEPER



*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard 'round the world.*

–Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Concord Hymn,” 1837

For centuries most Americans have believed that “the shot heard 'round the world” in 1775 from Concord, Massachusetts, heralded the Enlightenment’s entry into history. Early observers of America such as G.W.F. Hegel, Edward Gibbon and Edmund Burke believed that, too. A new kind of republican citizen was rising, amid and against adherents of theocracy, divine-right monarchy, aristocracy and mercantilism. Republican citizens were quickening humanity’s stride toward horizons radiant with promises never before held and shared as widely as they were in America.

The creation of the United States was really a *Novus ordo seclorum*, a New Order of the Ages -- a society’s first self-aware, if fumbling and compromised, effort to live by the liberal expectation that autonomous individuals could govern themselves together, without having to impose religious doctrines or mystical narratives of tribal blood or soil. With barely a decorous nod to The Creator, the founders of the American republic conferred on one another the right to have rights, a distinguished group of them constituting the others as “We, the people.”

That revolutionary effort is not just in trouble now, or endangered, or under attack, or reinventing itself. It’s in prison, with no prospect of parole, and many Americans, including me, who wring our hands or wave our arms about this are actually among the jailers, or we’ve sleepwalked ourselves and others into the cage and have locked ourselves in. We haven’t yet understood the shots fired and heard 'round the world from 74 American schools, colleges and military bases since the Sandy Hook School massacre of December 2012.

These shots haven't been fired by embattled farmers at invading armies. They haven't been fired by terrorists who've penetrated our surveillance and security systems. With few exceptions, they haven't been fired by aggrieved non-white Americans. They've been fired mostly by young, white American citizens at other white citizens, and by American soldiers at other American soldiers, inside the very institutions where republican virtues and beliefs are nurtured and defended.

They've been fired from within a body politic so drained of candor and trust that, beneath our continuing lip-service to republican premises and practices, we've let a court conflate the free speech of flesh-and-blood citizens with the disembodied wealth of swirling whorls of anonymous shareholders. And we've let lawmakers, bought or intimidated by gun peddlers and zealots, render us helpless against torrents of marketed fear and vengeance that are dissolving a distinctively American democratic ethos the literary historian **Daniel Aaron** characterized as "ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free."

Many Americans have adapted to living with variants of force and fraud that erupt in road rage; lethal stampedes by shoppers on sale days; security precautions in their homes against the prospect of armed invasion; the gladiatorialization and corruption of professional sports; nihilism in entertainment that fetishizes violence without context and sex without attachment; casino-like financing of utterly unproductive economic activities such as the entertainment I've just mentioned and the predatory lending that has tricked millions out of their homes; commercial groping and goosing of private lives and public spaces, even in the marketing of ordinary consumer goods; and the huge, new prison industry that Americans have created to deter or punish broken, violent men, most of them non-white, only to find schools in even the whitest, "safest" neighborhoods imprisoned by fear of gunmen who've been students in those schools themselves.

Abroad, meanwhile, thousands more shots, fiendish and celebratory, are being fired into the corpses of American national-security and nation-building projects by terrorists and fanatics we were told had been

decimated. These projects cost trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives, limbs, homes and hopes, including those of American soldiers, contractors and idealists. Their sacrifices can't justify retroactively what shouldn't have been undertaken in the first place.

Stressed by all this republican derangement, millions are spending billions on palliatives, medications, addictions and even surveillance designed to protect them from themselves. All those vials, syringes, security systems and shootings reflect the insinuation of what Gibbon called "a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire..." until Roman citizens "no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honour, the presence of danger, and the habit of command. They received laws and governors from the will of their sovereign, and trusted for their defence to a mercenary army." Only a few late-Roman republicans, recalling their old freedoms, concluded, with Livy, that "We have become too ill to bear our sickness or their cures."

### **What went wrong?**

You might argue, rightly enough, that "We, the people" have always subverted the truths we'd held to be self-evident, beginning with slavery and continuing with plutocracy. Yet somehow the republic kept experiencing what Lincoln called "a new birth of freedom," thanks only partly to the fortuitous confluence of two oceans' protection, a vast continent's ever-alluring frontier and unending streams of aspiring immigrants:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land,  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates will stand  
A mighty woman with a torch  
Whose flame is the imprisoned lightning,  
And her name: Mother of Exiles*

True enough, the republic thus limned by Emma Lazarus in "The New Colossus," her poem for the Statue of Liberty, needed those exiles for its labor market. True enough, it still had a guiding aristocracy of sorts. But it

was supposedly only “an aristocracy of talent and virtue,” as Jefferson put it, and not one of blood and ill-gotten wealth. What’s also true is that certain lingering Puritan beliefs had nourished in the embattled farmers a conviction that resistance to tyranny is obedience to God. That injunction to defy worldly power sometimes in the name of a Higher Power legitimated individual conscience and autonomy right up through the time when the civil-rights and anti-war movements at their non-violent best defied the governments of the time in the name of the older, deeper republic.

But the American emphasis on individual conscience and autonomy also gestated a liberal capitalism that has become a juggernaut or wrecking ball that would appall John Locke or Adam Smith. It has reduced individualism to market exchanges in ways that are now destroying both individuals and the society.

A liberal capitalist republic winds up relying on its citizens to uphold voluntarily certain public virtues and beliefs that neither the liberal state nor markets can nourish or defend. The liberal state can’t do it because it isn’t supposed to judge between one way of life and another, and markets can’t do it because they approach you and reward you as a self-interested consumer and investor, not as a citizen who might put such interests aside at times to advance larger social goods, from real public safety to a livable, sustainable environment, that self-interest alone can’t achieve.

The moral silence and often incapacity and bankruptcy of states and markets in these matters leaves citizenship to be nourished and trained all the more intensively in institutions that stand somewhat apart from the state and markets. The Puritan founders of America’s oldest colleges understood this, but they expected those colleges’ graduates to serve a theocratic state that would control markets and everything else. The Puritan theocracy was repressive and hypocritical. But its animating spirit could have kept markets from controlling and devouring republican government and even our bodies and ourselves.

### **Symptoms and scapegoats hide the disease**

Having miscarried republican self-discipline and conviction now so badly, we find ourselves scrambling to monitor, measure and control dark and proliferating consequences such as the scourge of mental illness, the drugging and stupefying of children and consumers, and the glorification and marketing of guns, as if these were the causes of the swift implosion of the American way of life.

They aren't. They're symptoms, not causes — reactions to widespread heartbreak at the breakdown of what Tocqueville called republican habits of the heart that we used to cultivate but no longer do.

Equally symptomatic, not causal, are self-avowedly “deviant” and “transgressive” gyrations by people who've convinced themselves that the sunset of civic-republican order heralds a liberating, Dionysian dawn. Sloughing off our bad old repressions, we're swept up by market currents that turn countercultures into over-the-counter cultures and that generate a free-for-all that's a free-for-none, its citizens becoming become customers chasing illusory “freedoms” for sale.

Even our war-makers' and war-mongers' grand strategies and the growing militarization of domestic police forces are symptomatic of the public derangement rising all around us.

Casting the bearers of such frightening symptoms as our primary enemies or scapegoats only deepens our blindness to the disease, which is as old as the biblical worship of the Golden Calf and as new as Goldman Sachs. The disease runs deeper than anything that anyone but the Puritans and their Old Testament models faced squarely: It begins in our denial that the human heart is divided, all the way down – a denial that is rooted not only in “the left's” optimism about human nature but, these days, more powerfully, in capitalism's pretense that accelerating economic growth, accumulations of wealth, and rampant consumption can save us from the certain destruction that comes in worshipping that Golden Calf.

I'm not suggesting we can or should return to Puritanism. Anyone hoping to recover that faith and way of life is stumbling up dry streambeds toward wellsprings that have themselves run dry. But we do need wellsprings that

could fortify us to take risks even more daunting than those taken by the embattled farmers and the original Tea Partiers against an empire and crown. We'd somehow have to reconfigure or abandon the empty comforts, escapes and protections that both free-market conservatives and upscale "progressives" are accustomed to buying and selling.

Our cure would also require reweaving a fabric of public candor and comity strong enough to resist *ressentiment*, a public psychopathology in which insecurities, envy and hatreds that many people have been nursing in private converge in scary public eruptions that diminish the participants even in seeming to make them big. *Ressentiment's* "little-big man" seeks easy targets for frustrations borne of exploitation by powers he's afraid to face head-on. Blaming scapegoats warps a realistic reckoning with of his hardships and options and drives him instead to wreak vengeance on easier victims as soon as there are enough little-big men (and women, of course) to do so *en masse* under a Glenn Beck or a Sarah Palin.

Whether *ressentiment* erupts in racist violence, sectarian fanaticism, anti-Communist witch hunts, totalitarian show trials, politically correct cultural revolutions or sadistic escapism, its most telling symptoms are paranoia and routinized bursts of hysteria. Under the ministrations of gifted demagogues, its grievances and pain assume a fleeting brilliance that soon collapses, tragi-comically or catastrophically, on its own cowardice and lies.

*Ressentiment's* targets often shift. The 9/11 attacks brought a reprieve of sorts to African-Americans, the republic's most enduring scapegoats, when the burden of white censure pivoted toward Muslims. The African-American Chicago impresario Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam lost credibility.

While apocalyptic religious and racist ranting can provoke emotionally disturbed people, so can journalism and entertainment that massage hatreds that are somewhat too diffuse to be called racist, religious or ideological. Some school shooters nurse depictions of violence and lust that are **pumped incessantly** into young Americans' horizons with the help of new technologies and investment strategies, riding reckless misreadings

of the First Amendment. This hasn't been done with malevolent intent as often as it's been done with the civic mindlessness of media corporations incentivized and forced by market pressures to bypass our brains and hearts on the way to our lower viscera and wallets as they exaggerate fears of armed home invasion, government takeover, and vengeful victory by gunplay.

### **The invisible disease**

Even though relatively few young Americans follow these siren songs into acts of destruction, the public fetishizing of sex and violence without context or caring dampens many others' faith in society during their formative years. You don't need to know a lot of developmental psychology or anthropology to know that children crave culturally coherent tests of prowess and loyalty in symbolic rites of passage that ratify communal membership. When such rites and symbols fail, some youths flail about, seeking order in private delusions, Dartmouth College fraternities, and sinister public orchestrations of *ressentiment*.

In 1775, most American communities still filtered basic generational and human needs through traditions that encompassed kinship bonds and seasonal rhythms. In "Common Sense," Thomas Paine could urge his readers to take their recent experiences of monarchy's abuses "to the touchstones of nature" and decide whether they would abide the empire's abuses. Today, those "touchstones of nature" and, with them, republican convictions about selfhood and society have been torn up by runaway engines and developments in technology, communications and even intimate biology that would terrify Paine and the republic's and capitalism's own founders, as well as those who fired the first shot at Concord. This is not what they and Nathan Hale and other heroes of the American Revolution fought for.

This time, we're all in bed with the enemy. In "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism" 40 years ago, Daniel Bell, no anti-capitalist, but prophetic about the worship of Golden Calves, argued that free markets no longer make free men because "economic liberalism has become... corporate

oligopoly, and, in the pursuit of private wants, a hedonism that is destructive of social needs.” He warned that consumer capitalism displaces the needs that the early republic filtered through nature’s rhythms and kinship traditions. It displaces those needs with ginned-up “wants” that “by their nature, are unlimited and insatiable.... [T]he rational calculation of efficiency and return” displace “the principle of the public household,” strip-mining and selling off fragments of cultural narratives.

Without civic wellsprings and narratives deep and compelling enough to strengthen a society’s adhesives and disciplines in the hearts of its young, neither free-market conservatives nor world-is-flat neoliberal cosmopolitans can reconcile their professed commitments to ordered, republican liberty with their knee-jerk obedience to riptides of destructive investment that are dissolving republican virtue and sovereignty before our eyes.

No wonder we’re losing our vision, in both senses of the word:

- American foreign-policy savants across the ideological spectrum were too blind to see that the Soviet Union was so much weaker than American Cold War propaganda and hysteria insisted that it imploded in 1989. The fabled “missile gap” that John F. Kennedy ran on in 1960 was as imaginary as Saddam Hussein’s WMD, but anyone who tried telling either of those truths had been charged with “failure of nerve” or worse by blind war-mongers in our midst.
- The American business press was too blind to see that a tsunami of predatory lending could wreck the national economy while throwing millions from their homes.
- Market-addled congressional committees and blue-ribbon commissions on national intelligence couldn’t discover or acknowledge -- until Edward Snowden revealed it -- that public surveillance had taken on an all-devouring life of its own.
- Neo-conservative and Vulcan conservative advocates of using American military force to spread democracy abroad couldn’t see that democracy can’t be woven that way and that their war-making is destroying democracy

at home in ways that, if unchecked, will destroy the republic whose strengths they pretend that they're spreading.

- Consumer society, addicted to cheap comforts and quick fixes, can't see its own Orwellian ensnarement by commercial sensors, and it couldn't take Al Gore's "Inconvenient Truth" about global warming seriously enough to offset the onrushing damage with the serious sacrifices we have yet to make.
- Gilded political consultants, pollsters and campaign donors were too blind to see the boiling undercurrents that swept away House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and would sweep away Trump's doctrinally correct Republican primary opponents and his neoliberal Democratic opponent. Nor would they foresee that these casualties were caused by an inflammation of *ressentiment* so wild that the specious "Who Lost Iraq?" debate will be superseded by the shot that some military veteran will fire at some other politician who's been left holding the empty bag of our civic-republican hopes.

So we are flying almost totally blind, punched bloody by a Hand that we keep insisting is Invisible. We can see only the sickness of the gunmen and of the proliferation of their guns. Treatment of those symptoms is urgently needed, but it will be insufficient to curb the wrecking ball that global capitalism has become on our willfully blind watch. Triage won't renew the civic fabric.

### **Exemplary defiance has its place**

Whenever republican candor and courage have seemed about to succumb like this to tribal and theocratic delusions or to force and fraud in the past, some citizens have roused others to fend off threats to republican premises and practices:

- In 1776 a young schoolteacher named Nathan Hale was caught trying to track and expose the military and intelligence operations of the only

established, legitimate government of his time. But just before his hanging he said, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country” and became an incarnation of a nascent republic.

- Hale’s dignity in adversity, unfathomable to many of us these days, anticipated that of Martin Luther King, Jr., and black churchgoers who walked unarmed and trembling toward armed men and dogs with nothing but their faith and their long-shot strategy to delegitimize the seemingly impregnable segregationist establishment of their time by appealing to republican principles and an American civil religion whose theology was as vague as that of the founders.
- Hale’s dignity also anticipated that of three Yale seniors I came upon one wintry morning in 1968 as they gave university chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr., their military draft cards to announce their resistance to the U. S. Government on behalf of the American republic.

“The government says we’re criminals, but we say the government is criminal for waging this war,” said one of the seniors, struggling to find his voice. For all we knew, these guys were about to be arrested on the spot, and some of us felt arrested morally by their example because they were ready to pay the penalty of law in order to affirm their commitment to honest law itself.

Coffin, whose Calvinist theology, like King’s, saw resistance to tyranny as obedience to God, was present to bless a courage that few national-security state conservatives understand, in the idiom of an American civil-religion few neoliberals and post-modern leftists understand. When he quoted Dylan Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night; rage, rage, against the dying of the light,” that civil religion seemed to awaken briefly and to walk and talk again, re-moralizing the state and the law, and the silent, wild confusion I was feeling gave way to something like awe. (I described this experience in The Washington Monthly in 2000, during the protracted “election” of George W. Bush.)

- Hale’s courage also anticipated Edward Snowden’s. Both young men may have been impetuous and flawed in other respects, but they showed that

resistance to corrupted power requires not only prowess, means, and will, but an elusive, republican sensibility that's cultivated in civil society and confirmed in little daily interactions long before it emerges in demonstrations of civic courage like theirs that startle and move other citizens.

With a wonderment like Hegel's, the German political philosopher Jurgen Habermas marveled at this "constitutional patriotism" in American citizens who possessed what Gibbon described as "that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command." But when I tell young millennials these stories now, they listen much as they would to tales from days of old when knights in shining armor were bold, long ago and far away. Much closer to today's young Americans are the school shootings and Internet mayhem that make brave citizenship seem archaic and irrelevant to self-discovery and social change.

Still, so many Americans are generations removed from any easily recoverable religious or ethno-racial identity or other adhesive that we have to ask: Where are the touchstones or narratives strong enough renew public virtues and beliefs that neither markets nor the liberal state do much to nourish or defend?

### **Nourishing a new liberal order**

The question should prompt a quest for a political culture that isn't so commercial and vapid and isn't held together only by delusion and demagoguery. No reconfiguring of today's capitalism will be possible without something better than that. Yet no think tank, legislature or foundation can carry that quest or reconfiguration to a just conclusion. Nor can an Occupy Wall Street that isn't grounded in something deeper than its own noble effort to *be* the change it wants us all to make.

Nor can our "illness" be cured by champions of a new foreign-policy "realism" such as Robert Kagan, who **urge us to face the inevitable challenges** of a world where only willpower and force can sustain the liberal order that many Americans take for granted. That's right as far as it goes,

but it begs the question of where the willpower comes from. It doesn't face up to what, within the liberal order itself, is sapping that willpower.

Quoting Michael Ignatieff, Kagan speculates candidly that liberal civilization itself “runs deeply against the human grain and is achieved and sustained only by the most unremitting struggle against human nature.” Perhaps, Kagan adds, “this fragile democratic garden requires the protection of a liberal world order, with constant feeding, watering, weeding, and the fencing off of an ever-encroaching jungle.” But he can't seem to face the challenge posed by the new shots that are being heard 'round the world from America now: The jungle's encroachments come not only from abroad but within our own garden and Kagan & Co. are among their bearers.

Still, what seems our greatest weakness could be one of our greatest strengths: Even 150 years after the founding, the philosopher George Santayana *wrote* that Americans still heralded the Enlightenment's entry into history precisely because they'd “all been uprooted from their several soils and ancestries and plunged together into one vortex, whirling irresistible in a space otherwise quite empty. To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education and a career....”

Although there's plenty to regret and respect in the traditions we've lost, there's no turning back from the “moral condition” and “career” we face as citizens. We have no choice but to keep faith with the republic and one another. If Americans have a manifest destiny now, it's to lead in weaving a new republican fabric that markets can serve but not subvert.

In 2008, Barack Obama seemed to incarnate so brilliantly the promise of weaving our diversity into a new republican discipline — he even invoked Puritan and biblical wellsprings in some of his speeches — that many people around the world considered him a prophet who would satisfy their hunger for new narratives. Probably no national political leader ever can do that.

The narratives the world needs now will have to come from other prophets and leaders yet unsung. I do think that Americans will be strong among

them, if only because we've had so much experience generating that hunger by generating the civic-republican-capitalist effort that has failed.

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[http://www.salon.com/2014/07/04/we\\_the\\_people\\_are\\_violent\\_and\\_filled\\_with\\_rage\\_a\\_nation\\_spinning\\_apart\\_on\\_its\\_independence\\_day/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/04/we_the_people_are_violent_and_filled_with_rage_a_nation_spinning_apart_on_its_independence_day/)

**also at openDemocracy:** <https://www.opendemocracy.net/jim-sleeper/new-shots-heard-round-world>

**also at History News Network:**

<http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/156346>

**also at AlterNet:** <https://www.alternet.org/civil-liberties/we-people-are-violent-and-filled-rage-nation-spinning-apart>

**also at Reset (Rome):** [www.resetdoc.org/story/american-civic-republicanismc-what-went-wrong/](http://www.resetdoc.org/story/american-civic-republicanismc-what-went-wrong/)

## II.

### 2016

[http://www.salon.com/2016/03/10/our\\_politics\\_are\\_broken\\_and\\_toxic\\_how\\_both\\_party\\_elites\\_betrayed\\_our\\_trust\\_birtherd\\_bernies\\_sanders\\_and\\_donald\\_trump/](http://www.salon.com/2016/03/10/our_politics_are_broken_and_toxic_how_both_party_elites_betrayed_our_trust_birtherd_bernies_sanders_and_donald_trump/)

**SALON**

## How both party elites have betrayed our trust

*We need to stop mocking Trump voters and ask why so many are willing to gamble this showman can fix our politics*

by Jim Sleeper



Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump (Credit: Reuters/Craig Lassig/AP/Carlos Osorio/Photo montage by Salon)

MARCH 10, 2016

Bernie Sanders' victory in Michigan on Tuesday may have terrified Democratic Party elites and liberal pragmatists all over, but it reflects something much more fateful than a serve or a curveball in these primary games. It suggests that more Americans than just 20-somethings are

awakening to a reality much harder and darker than anything this election can resolve. Finally, Americans are getting serious, even if they're not quite sure where to go.

It's no wonder that so many are still unsure. Many observers of the 2012 Republican primary debates remarked that the party's cacophonous chorus line of presidential hopefuls resembled a large troupe of clowns piling out of a tiny car in the circus. Sure enough, once they'd mounted the stage, Newt Gingrich proposed that Americans colonize the moon. The late Ron Paul retorted that the only justification for such a venture would be "to send all the politicians up there." Most candidates really did seem to have come from the moon as they prattled on about putting people's money back in their pockets and rewarding their heroism in Iraq as many in the television audience faced declining incomes, home foreclosures, and the war's lies and wounds, and the attendant perversities erupting into American civic and social life.

This year, the Republican clown show became a freak show that may introduce the horror show of Trump vs. Clinton. Trump has said he'll be more "presidential" after the primaries, but Nathan J. Robinson, editor of the new Current Affairs magazine and a Harvard doctoral student, believes that only Bernie Sanders could restore both credibility and sanity to Democrats and to the election itself. Robinson, who happens also to be a brilliant mimic, imagines his way into Trump's mind and mouth in a confrontation with Clinton as follows:

"She lies so much. Everything she says is a lie. I've never seen someone who lies so much in my life. Let me tell you three lies she's told. She made up a story about how she was ducking sniper fire! There was no sniper fire. She made it up! How do you forget a thing like that? She said she was named after Sir Edmund Hillary, the guy who climbed Mount Everest. He hadn't even climbed it when she was born! Total lie! She lied about the emails, of course, as we all know, and is probably going to be indicted. You know she said there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq! It was a lie! Thousands of American soldiers are dead because of her. Not only does she lie, her lies kill people. That's four lies, I said I'd give you three. You

can't even count them. You want to go on PolitiFact, see how many lies she has? It takes you an hour to read them all! In fact, they ask her, she doesn't even say she hasn't lied. They asked her straight up, she says she usually tries to tell the truth! Ooooh, she tries! Come on! This is a person, every single word out of her mouth is a lie. Nobody trusts her. Check the polls, nobody trusts her. Yuge liar."

Never mind that "When PolitiFact was choosing its 'lie of the year,' it found that all its real contenders were Trump statements – so it collectively awarded his many campaign misstatements the 'lie of the year' award," as Nicholas Kristof noted. The cumulative effect of Trump's torrent of accusations is The Big Lie technique perfected in modern times by Joseph Goebbels, adapted in America by Joseph McCarthy,

"I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and my supporters wouldn't leave me," he has said, as if he were a 10-year-old playing King of the Hill, and although he probably won't shoot anyone, his boasts and insults have shot new holes in the liberal democratic fabric of dialogue and trust. He is separating words from deeds more brazenly than most folkloric American political snake-oil salesmen and sleazy senators ever did, leaving words more empty, deeds more brutal, and those of us who try to put words on things more breathless than ever before.

Let's all try to catch our breaths and look at what he's doing to public discourse; at how he has exposed a vacuum in what most Americans once thought of as trustworthy political, cultural and civic-minded business leadership; at how that leadership's default has hurt voters whom it had thought was its base; and at how these voters' loss of trust is metastasizing into a syndrome of resentment as toxic as racism or McCarthyism but more diffuse and free-floating, no longer confined to old scapegoats, and unlikely to be repaired or put into remission, much less reversed, even if Trump's campaign implodes tomorrow and he's exiled to Corsica.

### **The Derangement of Democratic Discourse**

Trump's behavior has highlighted the difference between what children say and do on playgrounds, where they rough out rules for civility and

cooperation, and what grown-ups are supposed to have learned and become committed to do to make a society work. The difference between Trump's kind of free speech and the kind that actually enhances freedom isn't a legal one but a psychological and cultural one: Adults understand that the Constitution rightly protects legally, civil society rightly modulates, and that anyone who lowers adult public conversation to the level of "So's your Mom!" is dragging us all down.

Trump's brand of discourse is even worse than that of the playground. When he said that he could shoot someone without losing public support, he certainly excited the roiling horde of "militia" members, authoritarian police, enthusiasts of "Stand Your Ground" and "Concealed Carry" laws and border walls, mass shooters (who in their derangement are sometimes attuned more acutely to the subliminal signals a society is sending.)

Ranting like his offends not only the decorously and well-organized rich but also the more "liberal minded," because he "cares nothing for reproaches that he is a criminal or a guttersnipe.... Where [he] knifes his opponents is by disarming them with a cynicism and stabbing them with a morality, [H]e twists and turns, flatters and gibes, lulls and murders. ....He raves about 'the brutal and rude unscrupulousness of the parliamentary panders.' He calls them job-hunters scoundrels, villains, rascals, criminals. He screams that 'in comparison with these traitors to the nation, every pimp is a gentleman.'"

Not only that, "he boasts of his tricks: 'Take me or leave me, my object, the resurrection of the ... people, is so much more superb than any contrary principle that to bridle me with morals or sentiment is to lose...' This plausible elaboration of Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again!" could have been written by any discerning observer of his methods. It wasn't George Will or Tom Friedman who wrote these particular words, however, but the writer Francis Hackett, in a forgotten but still-arresting book, *What Mein Kampf Means to America*, which he published in April 1941, when many Americans still excused The Leader's demagogic vitality, vulgarity and brutality and when many American businessmen even thought they could still make deals with him.

It was the German people, not the American, whom he sought to resurrect, and he may have been something of a brute and a clown. But after all, Americans rationalized, Herr Hitler is taking on the greater scourge of bolshevism and shaking up the corrupt, old European conceits and arrangements whose keepers have clung to power even after causing the Great War and the Great Depression.

If Trump were only a little more grandiloquent, he might justify his demagoguery by adding that “all great movements are movements of the people, are volcanic eruptions of human passions and spiritual sensations, stirred... by ... the torch of the word thrown into the masses, and are not the lemonade-like outpourings of aestheticizing literati and drawing room heroes.” Ah, but those words were written by Adolf Hitler himself, in “Mein Kampf,” in 1926. Is that really surprising? When Trump commingles racist nationalism with what sounds like socialism by promising both a wall to keep out Mexican rapists and a cornucopia of “jobs, jobs, jobs” and full healthcare for Americans, he reminds you that “Nazi” was an acronym for National Socialism.

Trump is not and never will be Hitler. Drawing historical analogies is a dangerous game. But it would be just as dangerous to ignore history’s cautions unless one is bent on repeating its follies. To understand the difference between Trump’s understanding of freedoms of speech and entrepreneurship and the kind that American civic-republican civil society would nurture if they weren’t being eviscerated by markets, contrast Trump’s claim that “he gets things done” while lesser people dither with the following poignant observation about civil society that “SPHealy,” an online commenter, posted beneath something I wrote in 2007.

“Back in the playground days we used to play basketball with whoever was on hand: 2-on-2, 3-on-2, 7-on-6, whatever. And people would rearrange and switch sides as needed to keep things even and fun. We were quite competitive and loved to win, but we were playing against our neighbors and schoolmates who were not necessarily our friends (and might even have been our enemies) but with whom we knew we needed to maintain at least non-destructive relationships for 7 or 8 more years.

“The problem is that such a system requires that all parties have a fundamental allegiance to getting along, and specifically to handling losses without developing longstanding brutal grudges. If a small group had ever gotten together and made an agreement to subvert the system and behave destructively in a coordinated manner, they could have done a lot of damage before the rest of us figured out what was happening – and then our only alternative would have been to terminate the system. If trust had been destroyed it could not have been replaced. Strong as our Constitutional system is, I don’t think it was ever intended to resist a large-scale, long-term, tightly-organized effort to subvert it from within.”

Many elite conservative efforts have been large-scale, long-term and tightly organized, all the more so when competing with other conservative efforts. But Trump has torn off their decorous, civic-republican covers and agendas and exposed them as the myopic and destructive maneuverings of plutocrats. It takes one to know one, and they loathe him. But they deserve him, and everyone knows it. They’ve never been able to reconcile their pious claims to uphold virtuous, patriotic, ordered republican liberty with their lust to ride tides of casino-like financing and predatory marketing that are dissolving republican virtues and sovereignty, tides that Trump himself rides as deftly as they do. He just doesn’t pretend that he isn’t riding them.

### **Nightmares of the Elites**

Stunned by the sheer audacity of hopelessness for democracy in his insults and boasts, political and business leaders have finally become alarmed. Fashionable though it was only weeks ago to disparage Trump’s early victories by remarking that no one has ever gone broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people, it’s obvious now that Republican and Democratic elites *are* going broke by underestimating the angry, embittered intelligence of millions of Americans who’ve voted for Trump so far and the millions more who would do so in a general election.

Whether or not they’ll keep flocking to him, they’re deserting both political parties and the airless ideologies of the think tanks and their journals, whose directors cast the voters as fools and blame one another for his rise:

The day after Mitt Romney condemned Trump, the New York Times editorial board, which loathes Trump, condemned Romney, and The Wall Street Journal, which loathes Trump, too, ran a column by former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal charging that he is really a creation of President Obama.

Who are the fools here? Trump is a fraud and a demagogue, but none of these handwringers has faced his or her own side's complicity in the casino-like financing, omnivorous marketing, and other modulations of greed that have made his demagoguery alluring by pumping distress and heartbreak into American life. Nor has either side grasped history's cunning well enough to understand the irony that it's a premiere financier of casinos and an omnivorous self-marketer who is approaching the threshold of the presidency.

Narcissistic and opportunistic though Trump's political heterodoxy is, it has shredded the credibility of conservatives who fantasize about restoring the capitalism of William McKinley, let alone that of Adam Smith and John Locke, and it has sucked the wind out of the sails of leftists who fantasize that a precariat-proletariat will rise again.

Trump, of course, is pumping something still worse. He's no Hamilton or Madison, struggling to devise an order capable of balancing wealth-making with power-wielding and truth-seeking. He's no Lincoln, envisioning a new birth of freedom, no Teddy Roosevelt birthing a "new nationalism" more ecumenical and progressive than anything Europe ever dreamed of, and no FDR cobbling together a New Deal. The problem is that none of the claimants to any of these legacies seems fit to dive into the abyss Trump has opened and face the demons in it and in himself. Instead, the other candidates have been pirouetting at the edge of the abyss, putting on clown shows and freak shows.

Hence the eruption of public rage against these would-be Good Shepherds and the consultants and scribbling minions who've widened the abyss. Neoliberals thought they could triangulate between right and left and restore order to America along Singaporean, state-capitalist lines with democratic grace notes. But, in Trump's hands, "Right before our eyes, like

something on the screen, the vast social fabric [of the republic] has crumbled.... On its ruins, with the speed of a world's fair, [he] and his confederates have run up a political front of startling and provocative modernity... [His movement's] hand has been so much quicker than the democratic eye, and for his violence we have so little precedent."

Again, this is Hackett in 1941, but American elites have been clearing the ground unwittingly for Trump's great encampment, as Romney was doing by calling millions of Americans "takers" in 2012 and "suckers" last week. Takers and suckers some of them may be, but many are also shrewd, angry, bitter, and desperate. Although he was right enough to call Trump a fraud, Romney and his cohort would have to become a lot less fraudulent themselves to discredit him or whoever his successor will be if he implodes. He's an all-too American carrier of a chronic dysfunction that was lathered into our economic and social foundations and that cracked the country open in 1860, when the Whig Party collapsed amid a no-longer deferrable dispute over slavery and states' rights, and in 1929, when the Republican classical economic and political liberalism that "translates pretty easily into... a sanction for popular impatience with governmental restraints on greed," as the late historian Edmund Morgan put it, brought the country pretty close to implosion as fascism was rising in Europe.

Trump is only the match lighting the tinder that many of us have prepared – the Clintons and the Chuck Schumers among us as much as the Bushes and Mitch McConnells, the "lemonade literati" of the prestige magazines as much as the Dinesh D'Souzas and Pat Buchanans. We should stop flattering ourselves long enough to understand why so many fellow citizens are willing to gamble so pathetically that Trump will deflect the torrentially marketed civic mindlessness and malevolence that's groping them, goosing them, intimidating them, bamboozling them, indebting them, surveilling them, and, in so doing, imprisoning them.

### **Trump's troops**

Reckoning with this hard reality in the conservative National Review's symposium "Against Trump," Robert Reno, editor of the conservative

religious magazine *First Things*, noted that the people Romney dismissed as “‘takers’ with no future in the global economy” made him the “failed candidate” that Trump calls him now.

“They suspect, rightly,” that the Chamber of Commerce will sell them down the river if it adds to the bottom line,” Reno adds. “I suppose that that’s the reason for [Trump’s] popularity... The middle class consensus in America has collapsed. This is the most important political and social earthquake since World War II. The conservative movement’s leadership isn’t up to the challenge, and a good number of voters are willing to gamble on Trump’s bluster.”

Reno stops short of acknowledging that the “middle-class consensus” owed a lot to massive public support for homeownership, to vigorous government regulations that supported union organizing and restrained the animal spirits of bankers, brokers, and campaign donors, and to the G.I. Bill and other extensive public funding of universities. From the 1970s on, Democratic as well as Republican elites seduced Americans into surrendering those supports bit by bit. Although there were valid reasons (such as global and technological upheavals) to re-work some protections and let go of others, there were far too many corrupt and destructive reasons, too.

The reckoning we’re experiencing, although it’s being distorted frighteningly by Trump, is about what political and business leaders on both sides of the aisle (and the Atlantic) deserve. At Hilton Head and Davos, they tell one another, sometimes with stagey caveats and sighs, that recent meltdowns prove that most people aren’t capable of self-government and need to be ruled or finessed. But the meltdowns prove that elites cannot even rule themselves, let alone anyone else.

Armed, racist American goons and drooling fools who are circling liberal democracy’s proverbial town meetings in our nightmares don’t even nearly represent Trump’s supporters, most of whom aren’t so different from most of the rest of us. Even the goons and fools among them weren’t born to do what they’re doing now, nor were they all disposed to do it back on the

playground. The quiet little stabs of heartbreak and self-doubt that accumulated in tiny increments in their young lives as their parents lost jobs, pensions, homes, mutual respect, and public moral standing have blossomed into open resentment seeking the right target.

Their losses had many causes, but one seldom mentioned is that too many of us writers and some of you who are reading this have always ignored or dismissed or disdained Trump's supporters, compounded their distress with turns of a phrase, clicks of your brokers' mouses, arching your eyebrows in faint but unforgotten disdain, or simple civic inattention excised with stereotypes, and, occasionally, empty shrugs and solicitous sighs over depictions of Bubba's distress.

Last May, in one of the most revelatory columns I've seen about what's happened to the Republican base, Thomas Edsall recalled that "In the fall of 1969, Merle Haggard topped the Billboard country charts for four weeks with "Okie from Muskogee," the song that quickly became the anthem of red America, even before we called it that."

"We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, we don't take our trips on LSD, we don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street, we like livin' right and bein' free," Haggard declared. "We don't make a party out of lovin', we like holdin' hands and pitchin' woo."

"Times have changed," Edsall observed. "Today Muskogee, Oklahoma., a city of 38,863, has nine drug treatment centers and a court specifically devoted to drug offenders. A search for "metamphetamine arrest" on the website of the Muskogee Phoenix, the local newspaper, produces 316 hits.

"In 2013 just under two-thirds of the births in the city of Muskogee, 62.6 percent, were to unwed mothers, including 48.3 percent of the births to white mothers. The teenage birthrate in Oklahoma was 47.3 per 1,000; in Muskogee, it's 59.2, almost twice the national rate, which is 29.7."

Almost if Edsall were anticipating the irony that people being fleeced by casino financing and predatory marketing have wound up lionizing a financier of casinos and a predatory marketer, he noted that "Muskogee

County voted decisively for Ronald Reagan in 1984 and for Republican presidential candidates in the last three elections. In 2012, Romney beat Obama 57.4 to 42.6.”

Edsall also noted that while riots in Baltimore last year became “a vehicle for conservatives to point to the city as an emblem of the failure of liberalism and the Democratic Party,” in places like Muskogee the “worsening conditions in working-class white Republican communities indicate that the conservative moral agenda has not decisively won the battle for the hearts of America’s youth.”

In another, even-more substantial column called “Why Trump Now,” Edsall notes that “the share of the gross national product going to labor as opposed to... capital fell from 68.8 percent in 1970 to 60.7 percent by 2013” and that the number of manufacturing jobs dropped by 36 percent, from 19.3 million in 1979 to 12.3 million in 2015, while the population increased by 43 percent, from 225 million to 321 million.

“In other words, the economic basis for voter anger has been building over forty years,” including the stagnation of net upward mobility after 2000 and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, which has “imposed far larger costs on American workers than most economists anticipated.”

Then came the financial collapse of 2008, “which many people left and right felt was caused by reckless financial engineering on Wall Street” and which left those who’d not “benefited from the previous boom years” to become “easy pickings for populist rhetoric” because “trust in government was destroyed” by a “widespread sense that all the elites in Washington and New York conspired to bail out the miscreants who caused the disaster and then gave them bonuses, while the rest of us lost our houses or saw their value, the biggest and often only asset of Americans, plummet, lost our jobs or saw them frozen and stagnant, and then saw gaping inequality grow even more.”

In 2010, the Citizens United ruling invited the miscreants to inundate the public decision-making processes and institutions through which citizens are supposed to decide how to license and regulate and channel the very

forces that are enslaving us. The excuse for Citizens United was that, as Mitt Romney would put it in 2012, “Corporations are people, too,” entitled to the same freedoms of speech that citizens enjoy. “If dancing nude and burning the flag are protected by the First Amendment, why would it not protect robust speech about the people who are running for office?” asked Theodore Olson, counsel for Citizens United, the corporation that produced the movie to swift-boat Hillary Clinton’s 2008 presidential campaign.

The subtext: Let people rant, as long as we can drown them out with expensive megaphones and words that titillate or intimidate while they get laryngitis from straining to be heard, and while we buy off or intimidate their public officials at election time. “A Bloomberg poll found that 78 percent of voters would like to see Citizens United overturned,” Edsall notes, “and this view held across a range of partisan loyalties: Republicans at 80 percent; Democrats at 83; and independents at 71.”

By September, 2015, a survey “asked voters if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that ‘More and more, I don’t identify with what America has become.’ 72 percent of surveyed Republicans concurred, compared to 58 percent of independents and 45 percent of Democrats. Two thirds of Republicans, 62 percent, agreed with the statement ‘These days I feel like a stranger in my own country,’ compared to 53 percent of independents and 37 percent of Democrats.”

### **The volcano rumbles**

Some of us saw this coming in 2008, even as the Republican National Convention nominated the decent if limited man whom Trump mocked recently for having been captured in Vietnam. On the convention floor John McCain faced a somewhat unnervingly large contingent of young white men whose repertoire of political expression consisted solely of shouting “Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!” They dominated the convention floor’s reactions as John McCain delivered his nomination-acceptance speech, bellowing “Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!” even when McCain was saying something thoughtful or poignant.

There was something manic and clueless about it, and McCain seemed annoyed by it. He knew only too well the perils of flaunting heroism, as George W. Bush had done in his empty flight-deck, "Mission Accomplished" landing of 2004. Politicians overplay that card when they have little else to run on. McCain knew better than to do that, but Fred Thompson, in a recorded voice-over in the convention hall, thundered that "When you've lived in a box, your life is about keeping others from having to live in that box."

"Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!" the crowd roared.

Sentimentally if not convincingly, McCain identified three hard-pressed American families whose problems he said he'd taken to heart, without saying what he'd actually do help them. He did vow, to a family whose son had fallen in battle and whose bracelet McCain now wears, that he would "make sure their country remains safe."

As the parents grew moist, the crowd cried, "Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!"

Then McCain said that he respects and admires Senator Obama and that "Despite our differences, we are all Americans. That's an association that means more to me than any other."

"Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!", the crowd chanted, though a bit less vigorously than before, as if less sure of what it was cheering.

The uncertainty vanished when a few demonstrators who'd sneaked into the convention hall rose during McCain's speech and shouted out protests until security guards hustled them out. The disruption was barely audible in the cavernous hall and might have gone virtually unnoticed on TV, as the media kept focusing on the podium, had not "the guys" decided to counter the protesters by chanting, "Yoo Es Ay! You Es Ay! You Es Ay!", interrupting McCain far more obviously than the demonstrators had. It was then that a look of annoyance crossed his face. Where was the leadership on the convention floor? Who were these guys, anyway?

McCain spoke of the vanity of young men like him who'd rushed into war to be "my own man," and he recounted that his torturers had cured him of it:

"They broke me," he said quietly, to silence in the hall. "I wasn't my own man anymore," he added softly. "I was *my country's* man, and I will fight for her so long as I draw breath."

It was a difficult, fraught confession. McCain said not a word, as his fellow Vietnam veteran John Kerry had done, against the politicians who'd sent him and others into a misguided, fraudulent, massively destructive, futile venture. Its bitter lesson was that blood that's shed in such folly does not retroactively justify, much less sacralize, a country's betrayal by its misleaders. "I hate war," he said in his speech, adding that good judgment and principles matter as much as the will to fight.

But the convention was desperately seeking a different moral clarity in its fogs of war. McCain's account of his brutal transformation in captivity from self-regarding flyboy to selfless patriot should have gotten strong, voiceless applause from a mature, deeply moved audience. Instead it got, "Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay! Yoo Es Ay!"

All that misplaced fervor and rage reflected a lot more than young men's hormones and older men's uneasy consciences. It was even about more than just men: At the convention, Cindy McCain introduced her husband's running mate as "a pistol-packing hockey mom." Sarah Palin had been "discovered" and commended to McCain by neoconservative field marshal William Kristol. In 2016, she would endorse Donald Trump.

At the 2008 convention, though, she channeled some of the crowd's pent-up indignation and yearning brilliantly, loosing the fateful lightning of their deeply wounded pride and groping loyalty. These guys' buffoonish, boorish chanting was only one side of them. They hadn't all curdled into fascists or even racists. A thwarted decency and clueless love in them, a yearning for something slipping away, was struggling to find some political defense against the affronts and distortions their love had suffered.

In 1990, in *The Closest of Strangers*, I predicted that "the disintegration of white working-class family life, replete with the pathologies of violent essentially homeless youths, ... may well overshadow the problems of the black underclass in the popular mind in the years ahead." Now, 25 years

later, encroachments on their freedom and dignity have generated not only family breakdown and drug abuse in places like Muskogee but countless other stresses and humiliations that erupt in road rage, lethal rampages at store openings on sale days; extreme fighting or cage fighting, the gladitorialization of college and professional sports, and escapist, demoralizing entertainments, including reality TV and Trump's own show *The Apprentice*, which ran for nine seasons.

Not surprisingly, these profit-driven come-ons are accompanied by exaggerations or fabrications of enemies and scapegoats and with justifications for fighting them in the Iraq War and crusades against subversive monsters in our midst. Soon enough, those monsters include kids from places like Muskogee, eager to slay the dragons with variations of the armed violence I've mentioned.

And how much human history and psychology need one know to see that when demoralization and slavery like this are deftly managed, they can become almost as seductive as they are painful? How many Americans now enact subtly internalized humiliations and cravings for vengeance sexually, eroticizing pain instead of challenging its sources? How many Internet ventures are hollowing out children's sense of themselves as sexual beings and reasoning citizens capable of political deliberation and action? Years ago, describing the online blandishments his children were encountering, *The New Yorker* writer David Denby suggested that he and other adults were "parenting against the culture." Under banners of "free speech," this market-corrupted and soul-corrupting "culture" is inundating us not mainly with artists' art, activists' appeals, or other creative or political offerings but with messages from anonymous announcers and decorators and corporate "sensors" (not censors) that have been designed to bypass our brains and hearts on their way to our lower viscera and wallets.

The more that these relentless, demoralizing pressures reduce sovereign citizens to chasing vapid consumer sovereignty, the more we're like flies trapped in a spider's web of those 800-numbered, sticky-fingered pick-pocketing lenders, insurers, pharmaceutical producers, and other swirling whorls of anonymous shareholders whose managers are dissolving our

freedoms, not out of malevolence or conspiracy but out of mindless, mandated, greed.

And the more impoverished and imprisoned we become, the more we resort to palliatives in pills, vials, syringes and empty spectacles that leave us too ill to bear our sicknesses or their cures, capable only of occasional, mob-like eruptions and cries for a strongman who boasts that, having already bought the politicians whose deregulatory excesses and corporate welfare payments have stupefied and imprisoned America, he can “fire” them.

Trump’s supporters even imagine that he’s their megaphone against Citizens United’s rich beneficiaries. But if he wins, they’ll have a letdown too wrenching and violent for the American republic to bear. They may end up doubting that the republic deserves to survive at all. Meanwhile, though, these people whom elites dismiss as knuckle-dragging, featherbedding racists are giving a new twist to the old Gospel line, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water but fire next time”.

### **The volcano erupts**

“Mr. Trump’s brand of resentment politics,” as New York Times reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns called it recently, rides what’s known as *ressentiment*, (in French it’s pronounced “ruh-sohn-tee-mohn”), a public psychopathology in which gnawing insecurities, envy, and hatreds nursed by many people in private converge in public in scary social eruptions that present themselves as noble crusades but that diminish their participants even in seeming to make them big.

In *ressentiment*, the little-big man seeks enemies on whom to wreak vengeance for frustrations that are only half-acknowledged because they come from his exploitation by powers he’s afraid to challenge head on. No wonder that the 2012 Republican National Convention roared with such delight as Clint Eastwood interrogated an empty chair symbolizing an invisible President Obama. No one wanted to know what Eastwood would

have dared to say to the real Obama or what the President would have said back.

*Ressentiment* thus warps the little-big man's assessments of his hardships and opportunities. The same George W. Bush who Trump supporters once thought they'd enjoy having a beer with perpetrated and enabled massive frauds on them. They can barely admit this, but they're determined not to let it happen again. Their problem is that they don't know enough, aren't independent and well organized enough, and lack sufficient resources to prevent it. *Ressentiment* perverts their efforts by stoking and misdirecting their frustrations. Whether it erupts in a medieval Inquisition, a Puritan or McCarthyite witch hunt, a Maoist Cultural Revolution, nihilist extremes of "people's liberation movements" such as the Khmer Rouge, or a strain of political correctness that grips a particular community, *ressentiment's* most telling symptoms are always paranoia, scapegoating and bursts of hysteria violence.

That syndrome was described more recently by George Soros in an assessment of "the power of Orwell's Newspeak" and "the aversion of the public to facing harsh realities" in America today:

"On the one hand," Soros writes, "Newspeak is extremely difficult to contradict because it incorporates and thereby preempts its own contradiction, as when Fox News calls itself fair and balanced. Another trick is to accuse your opponent of the behavior of which you are guilty, like Fox News accusing me of being the puppet master of a media empire. Skillful practitioners always attack the strongest point of their opponent, like the Swiftboat ads attacking John Kerry's Vietnam War record. Facts do not provide any protection, and rejecting an accusation may serve to have it repeated; but ignoring it can be very costly, as John Kerry discovered in the 2004 election.

"On the other hand, the pursuit of truth has lost much of its appeal." But why? In 1941, Hackett noted that people who are stressed, humiliated, and dispossessed become easy prey for demagogic orchestrations of "the casual fact, the creative imagination, the will to believe, and, out of these three elements, a counterfeit reality to which there was a violent, instinctive

response. For it is clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fiction as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond. The fiction is taken for truth because the fiction is badly needed.”

Ressentiment’s gusts of collective passion touch raw nerves under the ministrations of demagogues *and an increasingly surreal journalism that prepares the way for them by brutalizing public discourse*. In the 1976 movie *Network*, which depicts the profit-driven derangement of television news reporting, manager Diana Christiansen tells her staff, “I want angry shows” because Americans want “a mad prophet, denouncing the hypocrisies of our time.” A demagogic network anchor rouses his viewers to shout, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it any more,” even as he herds them like sheep.

A year after that movie appeared, Rupert Murdoch bought the liberal tabloid *New York Post*, imported his savvy Aussie journalism mates as editors, and began mugging and/or titillating the city’s body politic, beginning with a lurid series on the serial murder “Son of Sam.” Now the *New York Post* is a virtual press office for Trump’s presidential bid, as vulgar and relentless as the candidate himself.

When *ressentiment* is only beginning to gather strength, it assumes disguises of civility at first, so as not to incur decisive reproach from a public that isn’t yet too weakened to ward off the disease. Soros cites Fox News’ winking assurance that it’s “fair and balanced,” a signal to the little-big man that Together we’ll crush those pious, hypocritical liberal journalists who prattle on about objectivity and fairness.

Drip, drip, drip: Story after story teaches viewers and readers to fear and mistrust one another, souring the spirit of trust and curiosity that sustain democratic dialogue into the cynicism and defensiveness that clear the way for the strongman. *Ressentiment*’s gloves really come off once there are enough angry little-big men (and little-big women, of course) to step out together *en masse*, with a Sarah Palin or a Glenn Beck. And now Trump is leading little-big man across the Rubicon, signaling that he’ll mow down anyone and anything in his way.

The legitimate grievances fueling *ressentiment* sometimes drive its eruptions to a fleeting brilliance, as when Palin tapped deeply into currents of thwarted love and hope in her speech to the 2008 convention with. But, like her public persona, such gestures soon curdle and collapse, tragically or catastrophically, into their own cowardice, ignorance, and lies.

## Where to?

I've said little about Bernie, whom Current Events editor Robinson contends would disarm Trump more effectively than Clinton would in a general-election contest, because Sanders has so little baggage for Trump to attack and comes closest to naming the beast that has cornered us with the turbo-capitalist derangements and delusions that produced Trump himself.

Sanders' victory in Michigan may signal that Americans are beginning to reject the neoliberal empire's worship of markets and economic growth *uber alles*. But that empire, like any other, appeals effectively to the dark side of human nature and tends to defeat anyone who's naïve about its power and depth.

Supporters of Sanders today get hit with the cynical adage, "If a man is not a socialist at 20, he has no heart; if he's a socialist at 50, he has no head." It purports to explain why so many Sanders enthusiasts are 20-somethings, while so many people who have children, jobs, and mortgages resist resisting what's being done to those children, jobs, and mortgages by the system they can't help but depend on. It takes time, inner fortitude, and stronger bonds of trust to recognize that that system is becoming illegitimate and unsustainable and that really it's the 50 somethings who are naïve.

That assertion requires a much longer, deeper discussion than I can undertake here. I began it last summer in an essay on American Puritans and capitalism in Democracy journal (part of it was posted by The Atlantic ) that I hope you'll read if you want to think more with me about the roots of our distress.

Meanwhile, conservatives should acknowledge that the reverential, or republican, or corporate strains in capitalism described by Adam Smith, John Locke, Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, Clinton Rossiter, and others have been transformed almost beyond recognition by casino-like financing, omnivorous marketing, and worse. Only radically different arrangements can give classically liberal freedom, let alone “free enterprise,” a chance to live another day.

The time for being right only about how the other side is wrong has passed. Trump, the opportunist, seems to see this more clearly than many of his critics on the right and left. No wonder so many people flock to him. But challenging what markets and free enterprise have become and re-crediting democracy instead of crimping it would require a national effort more “yuuuge” and inspiring than anything that Trump would or could lead.

The best book I've read about how others have restored societies to a balanced stride against daunting odds is the late Jonathan Schell's *The Unconquerable World*. It recounts, assesses, and theorizes about how unarmed, democratic movements brought down vast national-security establishments against what seemed insuperable odds – in British India, in South Africa, in the American Southern regime of segregation, and in the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc – because they understood power in ways that elites and strongmen always misunderstand.

Those movements' leaders often seemed to others like fools or saintly martyrs to others' indifference. They proved the realists wrong because they understood, as Schell put it, that political power “begins with the capacity to create or discover something... that other people cannot help but love.” As the sociologist Alan Wolfe puts it, “People adhere to social contracts” – and they participate in political projects – “when they feel that what lies behind them is a credible story of who they are and why their fates are linked to those of others.”

Trump is betting that Americans cannot help but love and believe in his “Make America Great Again” nationalism. He wants us to love him as its savior, even though, in “getting things done,” he'd crush our democratic opportunities. He's credible only because our current, corrupted regime

already crushes so many such initiatives and needs to be shaken to its roots and reconfigured. It will require more than idolizing a deal-maker who already idolizes himself. It will require, at the least, listening to what Bernie Sanders is saying.

Schell shows that democratic movements have benefitted from knowing some history, from having some clear principles, and from finding ways to weave enough mutual commitment and trust to stick together against obstacles and allurements that seem insuperable. Crafting stories that people can love without hating requires the seasoned narrative and political strengths that Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln, the two presidents Roosevelt, Gandhi, Mandela, King, Havel, and others have had in abundance and that Trump does not.

Sanders has many of those strengths. He has striven admirably to tell a national story that people with democratic inclinations can love and to be a leader whose skills and strategies they can trust. Absent many more like him, though -- and many more citizens who can find enough dignity in adversity to tell the difference between wise leadership and buffoonish demagoguery -- we will have more Trumps. Who knows if good citizens and wise leaders can weave a new social fabric? One of history's lessons is that, time and again, they have. We're about to find out if they can again.

[http://www.salon.com/2016/03/10/our\\_politics\\_are\\_broken\\_and\\_toxic\\_how\\_both\\_party\\_elites\\_betrayed\\_our\\_trust\\_birthered\\_berniesanders\\_and\\_donald\\_trump/](http://www.salon.com/2016/03/10/our_politics_are_broken_and_toxic_how_both_party_elites_betrayed_our_trust_birthered_berniesanders_and_donald_trump/)

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