

The Panic Train: Fear before the Elections in Trump's America

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Global Research, November 07, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

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Coming into San Francisco, and a note of spellbinding terror can be sensed. Donald Trump haunts the political landscape with a menace that has become a caricature of terror before the fact. Even conservative bodies like the Hoover Institute run comments of angst such as those of one of its senior fellows, Victor Davis Hanson. For Hanson, Trump offers the United States of the twenty-first century a remedy drawn out from the indignation of the 1930s: "nationalism, crude bombast, mytho-history, and sloganeering."

British historian and Harvard Professor Niall Ferguson, writing in the 2016 summer edition of the Hoover Digest, found much of this historical comparison amusing at best. "Welcome to Weimar America," he quipped.

Theorists such as Danielle Allen ("Watching Donald Trump's rise, I now understand... exactly how Hitler could have come to power in Germany") and Robert Kagan ("the most successful demagogue-charlatan in the history of US politics") add to the furnace of panic.

A better historical analogy, suggests Ferguson, is not the 1930s with the calamities of the Great Depression, but the deflationary period that followed the crash of 1873. "This," he reminds us, "was an age of industrialization, globalization and mass migration." William Jennings Bryan's dislike of economic elites, while not exactly Trumpesque, offered better parallels.

In truth there is very little precedent for this election, and playing around with analogies can rapidly become a naval gazing exercise to be derided. But as the US presidential elections come into their last, exhausted leg, a dominant tone characterises it: panic.

Panic that a catastrophe is about to descend on the United States; a panic that relations with other countries, long held important, will be junked glibly and casually. Panic that social structure of the country will be rented to extinction, replaced by an ever meaner regime of finance and business rationales mad about the bottom line.

The panic of Trump finding some measure of momentum in the polls led Ross Douhat to write in the New York Times in May that panic was far from necessary - "low watt anxiety" perhaps, rather than "total catastrophe" would prevail.

The species of panic is one nurtured in the womb of populism. The product of that populism is often the demagogue whose interest reminds and hectors, a candidate who promises the earth when only meagre soil can be delivered.

The demagogue promises, as Trump does, jobs that will never be recovered. He promises an

undeliverable security regime. He promises the electorate to salve wounds and recover nostalgia. His variant of cynicism is to use the spectacle of historical disaster against his opponents, who attempt to deny that the United States is an internally bleeding entity. The response from his opponents is to ignore that disaster and suggest that there is only one catastrophe waiting to happen: in the form of Trump himself.

Systems deemed rotten with dysfunction tend to encourage radical responses and promises. These are then rubbished by the high brows and the well moneyed as matters of great risk – to change such a system, however deficient, would be far more dangerous than letting it be.

In the words of James Taranto, “The entire reason that Trump is so popular is that the public sees the system as broken and also sees no standard/normal way to fix it. When things are broken, and trending in the wrong direction, that’s exactly the time you want to introduce risk” (Wall Street Journal, Aug 9).

The panic set in within the GOP itself, spreading across the broader establishment. The Republican fruit salad of lunacy that provided such figures of fun as Ben Carson yielded more and more ground before the business, personalised argot of abuse and self-help of Trump. Much of it also made the discussion of policy irrelevant. Everyone was turning up to the party to feel good – or in this case, flamingly mad.

From that perspective, attacks on Trump for being the great risk have failed to find their mark. They fail to explain how Hillary Clinton could be the very answer to a system. With no means to deodorise their own monster, the Democrats are left hoping for a result that keeps Trump out rather than an uplifting victory that heals in providing solutions. What Trump offers is a vessel to allow a country to expectorate, catharsis through vomit. This is the politics of sentiment and nostalgia, and it is not one that Clinton has been able to play well. The only real solution is inducing panic.

Of even greater interest will be what happens after the November 8 election. There is much to wade through till that point, most of it a scream of hypotheticals and terrors. Even before the result is in, no result is going to be satisfactory. The armed and the senseless are readying themselves for whomever finds themselves with the trophy, and a tainted one it shall be.

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