

Waiting for the Barbarians, “A Sad, Pathetic Period in American History”

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We await the crisis. It could be economic. It could be a terrorist attack within the United States. It could be widespread devastation caused by global warming. It could be nationwide unrest as the death spiral of the American empire intensifies. It could be another defeat in our endless and futile wars. The crisis is coming. And when it arrives it will be seized upon by the corporate state, nominally led by a clueless real estate developer, to impose martial law and formalize the end of American democracy.

When we look back on this sad, pathetic period in American history we will ask the questions all who have slid into despotism ask. Why were we asleep? How did we allow this to happen? Why didn't we see it coming? Why didn't we resist?

Why did we allow the corporate state to strip away the rights of poor people of color and force them to live in terror in mini-police states? Why did we build the world's largest system of mass incarceration? Did we not see that the rest of us would be next? Why did we agree that those defined by the state as terrorists could not only be deprived of their rights but be assassinated? Did we think the state would restrict itself to persecuting and murdering Muslims? Why did we remain silent as the state arrogated to itself the right to detain and prosecute people not for what they had done, or even for what they were planning to do, but for holding religious or political beliefs that the state deemed seditious? Why did we stand by and permit the state to torture? Did we not see that once rights became privileges the state would one day revoke them?

The failure of our capitalist democracy was collective. It was bred by ignorance, indifference, racism, bigotry and the seduction of mass propaganda. It was bred by elites, especially in the press, the courts and academia, who chose careerism over moral and intellectual courage. Our rights as citizens were taken from us one by one. There was hardly a word of protest.

Where were the lawyers, judges, law professors and law school deans who should have ferociously defended our rights to privacy, due process and habeas corpus? Why didn't they challenge Barack Obama's signing into law [Section 1021](#) of the National Defense Authorization Act? Section 1021 overturns the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibited the military from acting as a domestic police force. The section also permits the military to carry out [extraordinary rendition](#) of U.S. citizens, strip them of due process and hold them indefinitely in military detention centers.

Why didn't the legal profession fight against the Obama administration's misinterpretation of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force Act as giving the executive branch the

right to order the assassination of U.S. citizens? How did lawyers and judges allow the misuse of the Espionage Act to target and imprison whistleblowers? How did they permit the Supreme Court to define unlimited corporate contributions to electoral campaigns as a right to petition the government or a form of free speech? Why did they allow those branded as terrorists by the state, and allow poor people of color, to be locked for years in solitary confinement or special detention centers without fair trials? Why were they silent as the state built “black sites” around the globe, including in Chicago, to torture? Why did they permit the state to impose special administrative measures, known as SAMs, to prevent or severely restrict prisoners’ communication with other prisoners, attorneys, family, the media and people outside the jails, crippling any possibility of an adequate defense? Did they not know where the erosion of the legal system would lead?

And where were all the economists pointing out the absurdity of the [neoliberal ideology](#) that told us that human society should be governed by the dictates of the market—that is, until the market collapsed in an orgy of fraud and corruption and needed the government to bail it out? Why did the political scientists chase after “value-free” data, carry out quantitative projects and seek an unachievable scientific clarity? Why didn’t they and others warn us about the dire consequences of eroding democratic institutions? Why did they stand mute as money replaced the vote and lobbyists authored our laws? Where were they when constitutionally protected statements, beliefs and associations were criminalized? Why didn’t they protest when dissidents, even those who broke no laws, were stripped of their rights and imprisoned without due process? Why did they continue to speak and write as if the fiction of our democracy was real? Why didn’t they illuminate our constitutional crisis? Why did those in academia commit intellectual treason? They traded their intellectual integrity and autonomy for tenure, publishing contracts, lecture fees, research grants and coveted deanships or college presidencies.

Why did the press render the poor and the working poor invisible? Why did it walk away from its role as the investigator of corruption and abuse of power? Why did it become a courtier to the elites? Why did it measure the success of its broadcasts and publications solely by the profits produced? Why did it refuse to give a platform to critics of corporate capitalism and imperial war? Why did it serve as an echo chamber for the arms industry and Wall Street? Why did it hide behind the fiction of neutrality and objectivity? Why did it debase reporting to quoting establishment experts—most of whom lied—in order to stay within the narrow confines of opinion sanctioned by the power elites? Why did the press obscure the truth?

Where were the great moral and religious truth tellers? Why did they use the language of identity politics as a substitute for the language of social justice? Why did they refuse to condemn as heretics those on the Christian right, which fused the symbols of the state with those of the Christian religion? Why did they collaborate with the evil of corporate capitalism? Why did they retreat into churches and synagogues, establishing exclusive social clubs, rather than fight the injustice outside their doors? Why did they abandon the poor? Why did they replace prophetic demands for justice with cloying political correctness and personal piety?

The desiccation of our liberal institutions ensured the demise of our capitalist democracy. History has amply demonstrated what was to come next. The rot and political paralysis vomited up a con artist as president along with an array of half-wits, criminals and racist ideologues. They will manufacture scapegoats as their gross ineptitude and unachievable

promises are exposed. They will fan the flames of white supremacy and racial and religious bigotry. They will use all the tools of legal and physical control handed to them by our system of [“inverted totalitarianism”](#) to crush even the most tepid forms of dissent.

The last constraints will be removed by a crisis. The crisis will be used to create a climate of fear. The pretense of democracy will end.

“A fascism of the future—an emergency response to some still unimagined crisis—need not resemble classical fascism perfectly in its outward signs and symbols,” [Robert Paxton](#) writes in “The Anatomy of Fascism.” “Some future movement that would ‘give up free institutions’ in order to perform the same functions of mass mobilization for the reunification, purification, and regeneration of some troubled group would undoubtedly call itself something else and draw on fresh symbols. That would not make it any less dangerous.”

Our ruling mafia will use the crisis much as the Nazis did in 1933 when the Reichstag was burned. It will publish its own version of the “Order of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State.” The U.S. Constitution will be in effect suspended. Personal freedom, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to organize and freedom of assembly, will be abolished. Privacy will be formally eradicated. Search warrants will be unnecessary. America’s emergency decrees will cement into place what largely exists now. When they come, the loss of freedoms will be openly acknowledged and made permanent.

Anyone who is not white or “loyal” will be attacked, first verbally and then physically. Everyone will be constantly watched. The prisons will swell. Militarized police will no longer be confined to operating in marginal communities. Lethal, indiscriminant force by the state will be common. The courts will condemn with little or no evidence. The press will utterly unplug itself from reality and speak to us as if we lived in a functioning democracy. Academics will burrow deeper into their holes of obtuse jargon and quantitative irrelevance. The last remnants of our labor unions will be crushed. Religious institutions, as silent about the evils of corporate capitalism as Goldman Sachs, will take the safe route of spirituality and piety rather than social justice. The lawyers, courts and law schools will serve the law even when the law overturns our constitutional rights by judicial fiat and is a tool of naked repression. Hollywood and the rest of mass entertainment will churn out the usual tawdry fare of sexually explicit and violence-drenched spectacles. The military “virtues” of hypermasculinity and patriarchy will be celebrated.

There will be rebels. They will live in the shadows. They will be the renegade painters, sculptors, poets, writers, journalists, musicians, actors, dancers, organizers, activists, mystics, intellectuals and other outcasts who are willing to accept personal sacrifice. They will not surrender their integrity, creativity, independence and finally their souls. They will speak the truth. The state will have little tolerance of them. They will be poor. The wider society will be conditioned by mass propaganda to write them off as parasites or traitors.

They will keep alive what is left of dignity and freedom. Perhaps one day they will rise up and triumph. But one does not live in poverty and on the margins of society because of the certainty of success. One lives like that because to collaborate with radical evil is to betray all that is good and beautiful. It is to become a captive. It is to give up the moral autonomy that makes us human. The rebels will be our hope.

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