

American Solstice

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Seems like no one wants to come out and say it: we're witnessing a catastrophic failure of American democracy. Washington, DC and the national media finally seemed to have grasped it in the very last week of the year, after a firecracker string of disasters: Donald Trump shutting down the government because the TV told him to, and abruptly withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria because the president of Turkey told him to, followed by the resignation of James Mattis, last man *compos mentis* in the executive branch, and the subsequent fibrillation of the stock market as the world realized that the wealthiest nation and most powerful military in the history of the planet had been left to the command of a Magic Eightball.

Also, another little girl died in an American immigrant prison.

The failure of democratic institutions that allowed a rough beast like Donald Trump to slouch into the oval office occurred long before his election, over the last few decades, like an abnormal sinus tract finally erupting through the skin and beginning to suppurate, revealing the presence of an infection that goes to the bone. No doubt some future Gibbon will win the equivalent of a Pulitzer for parsing out all the causes of our decline and fall, but it's not hard for even us ordinary schlubs, still cowering and dodging the toppling columns, to see at least some of it clearly.

A joke like Donald Trump could never have bullshitted his way into the presidency in a functioning democracy. But the American government hasn't been responsive to its electorate for decades. Starting with Reagan, the slow repeal of the New Deal, the neutering of organized labor, and the gutting of the welfare state has turned what was once the most prosperous, socially mobile society in the world into a rusting post-imperial wasteland of foreclosures and ODs, a brutal Darwinian dystopia where money is not only power but speech, rights, and lifespan. Newt Gingrich's Republican party turned normal, Mornin'-Sam-mornin'-Ralph partisan politics into a Manichean total war, until even politicians began to believe their own propaganda, to think of their opponents as maniacs and villains who must be stopped at any cost, trashing centuries of rules and procedure, setting anti-democratic precedents in the same way that school shootings make the unthinkable routine.

Antiquated and corrupt institutions—gerrymandering, the electoral college, primaries that allow some of the less relevant states to preselect candidates for the rest of us, and the osteoporotic U.S. Senate, which gives historical curiosities like Delaware and radioactive wastelands like Nevada the same political weight as states with the wealth and population of European nations—have allowed an aging, dwindling, increasingly paranoid and reactionary demographic to dictate the policies of the nation. The Republican Party finally abandoned all pretext of ideology and came out of

the closet in full Grand Wizard drag, while the Democratic Party, which has historically represented people without stock portfolios, has stood for exactly nothing in my adult lifetime.

And as America turned from isolationist republic to a global empire, the tripartite government ceded more and more power to its chief executive, in what people started calling, ca. Nixon, an “Imperial Presidency”—an expansion that reached its Augustinian maximum with Cheney/Bush’s post-9/11 power grab under cover of a “unitary executive theory.” Some liberal weenies fretted about this, but it was all fine, perfectly fine, so long as the President was thoroughly vetted by party fixers, campaign donors, and corporate media, so that whoever ended up in possession of the nuclear codes was sure to be some reliable, prudent technocrat who would only resort to armed force if major oil fields were at stake.

It wasn’t supposed to be possible for someone totally unqualified—an imbecile, a psychotic, a scammer, someone with no regard for rule of law or the separation of powers or due process or even the appearance of propriety, someone who gave not one shit about anything other than himself and his own aggrandizement—to be able to ascend to that exalted office. Now, to the horror of the world, a man who embodies all of the above sits, smirking and pouting, behind the desk named Resolute.

So many of the protections we all vaguely assumed must be enshrined in law turn out to have been mere protocol. A president divests himself of any business interests that might conflict with his duties as chief executive; a president doesn’t urge the attorney general to quash an investigation into his underlings; the President doesn’t stick up for Nazis or simper before the gangster king of Russia; a president doesn’t brag about his dick. These things didn’t need to be laws because they went without saying; violating or ignoring them simply wasn’t done. Richard Nixon would never have pardoned himself after resigning, not because it wasn’t legal or constitutional, but because he would have been ashamed to. Some would not have believed, ca. 1974, that a man more shameless than Richard Nixon could be found, but he at least took his role seriously.

But mostly the failure was ours. The electorate’s. Joseph de Maistre’s double-edged epigram that “every nation gets the government it deserves” has become an indictment, or epitaph. The slow starvation of public education, and its segregation into separate, unequal systems for rich and poor, has left a lot of the populace not only ignorant of civics and history, incapable of critical thinking, unable to distinguish reality from Reality TV, Fox News from news, but so willfully stupid and susceptible to pseudoscience and conspiracy theory that significant percentages of Americans, the same people who landed on the Moon and eradicated polio, now believe the Moon landing was faked and vaccines are poison. By 2016, it was a truism among even those slowest on the uptake that the government was wholly owned and controlled by corporate interests, and had written off vast swaths of its populace as economically obsolescent. The fact that millions of them actually believed that Don-

ald Trump was the man who would solve those problems would be hilarious were it not pathetic, or would be pathetic were it not contemptible.

I don't know whether it's auspicious or ominous that these cascading crises happened to coincide with the winter solstice. I'd like to believe that this is our hour of maximum darkness, and things can only brighten from here on out. But I have my doubts. We all hope the body politic will successfully excise this pollutant, like a splinter or a virus (though, like the body's, the processes of democracy are painfully slow). The real question is, what happens after this malignant thing is gone?

There's no returning to world-order-as-usual, even if we do elect another safe, storebought technocrat. The rest of the world won't forget what it realized in these years: that America can't be counted on. Much as the rest of the West justifiably gripes about America, they've now gotten a glimpse of what the world would look like without us, with no one in charge. Once your dad has abandoned the family, blown your college fund on cocaine, and eloped with the babysitter, it's hard to accept his reassurances when, five months later, he returns, contrite, broke, and fresh out of rehab, promising he's still good old Dad.

Of course we've endured failures of democracy before and come through intact, though sometimes hundreds of thousands of people have had to die first. It could be argued that the American experiment failed when the founding fathers ratified slavery, or when the South seceded, the eventual victory of the Union notwithstanding. This nation was a failure at its inception, its ideals already betrayed, and kept failing—is failing now—but it also keeps succeeding, granting full citizenship and humanity to more and more of its people.

I once drew a cartoon of one Aztec reassuring another, as they watch a sacrificial victim's heart being held high: "It may not be a perfect system, but it's still the best one there is." Vladimir Putin would love to demonstrate that democracy is an inherently weak, chaotic, and doomed form of government—and who knows? history may prove him right—but even so, the worst-case scenario, the American apocalypse, would be to end up an autocratic backwater like Russia.

Last week also happened to be the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 8's Christmas Eve mission to the Moon, whose crew took a famous snapshot of the exquisite blue jewel of the human homeworld rising above our satellite's dead gray limb. There's not a lot to feel proud of as an American these days—it feels more like bringing your girlfriend home to Thanksgiving dinner and your uncle is wasted and ranting about the Coloreds and keeps staring at her breasts—and that photo was a poignant reminder of a time when America achieved something astonishing, transcendent. Not that 1968 was a year of hand-in-hand harmony, either; in a way, we seemed closer to something like civil war or revolution than we do now. But that photo provided a necessary perspective from a quarter-million miles out, showing us where we really are: for all its suffering and turmoil and precarious fragility, this is all we've

got, the only show in town, a single sunlit islet engulfed in an awful and bottomless ocean of dark.



Photo by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders. Taken 24 December 1968.