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TRUMP'S EVIL YET TO COME 2.0

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These days we find heartbreak and misery everywhere we look. We also find courage and sacrifice.

Though we have no right to be surprised by the murder of George Floyd (one of many who have died) at the hands of police, we try to imagine the terror of such a death. We are numbed by the effort. And yet, we are inspired by the many rising up (at risk of police violence to themselves) to protest his death.

Unhappily, it comes to us in the midst of so many other deaths—117,654 and counting due to COVID-19—and similarly so many of those deaths unnecessary, and thus immoral, perhaps even criminal. We try to imagine the terror of those deaths. Again, we are numbed by the effort. And yet, we are inspired by the many who rise up—doctors, nurses and first responders who labor to save lives at grave risk to their own. And they are not alone: stand-up political leaders, food-bank workers, cashiers, bus drivers and volunteers (the list is endless) have risked their lives to help others.

It may be that by the end of all this wretchedness, all of us will have known someone who suffered, and someone who helped. Perhaps it will be us. And yet . . . there is one who may view *all* this suffering as an historic opportunity. While we struggle with the calculus of physical survival, Trump envisions a new order with himself at the head, unencumbered by law, unhindered by critics, unrestrained by truth, and untroubled by the consequences for others.

And while we may perhaps forgive ourselves for ignoring his madness in the midst of all this misery, it is dangerous to do so, for he is *always* calculating how best to serve his own interests, driven as he is by a perverted need for self-aggrandizement. And, given the history of the corrupt lawyers who have served as his mentors and the totalitarian dictators who have served as his idols, it is no stretch of the imagination to think that he is now calculating the timing and the tactics necessary to declare martial law—the precondition needed to cancel the November election—and keep himself in the office of the President without the bother

of an election. His jackal of an attorney general, ever ready to serve the cause of expanding executive power, may even issue an opinion that the President is *obligated* to use the emergency powers of his office to protect the integrity of the election by “temporarily” canceling it, which action could then be endorsed by a pliant Supreme Court.

We can't say we haven't been warned. Numbers of American scholars, public intellectuals, and award-winning journalists have described our progress down this path for the last couple of years. They have been telling us that we should expect the suspension of habeas corpus—in order to “temporarily detain” opposition without charges—explicitly modeled on the actions of President Lincoln, and arguably on similar grounds, for the protection of the nation at a time of national emergency. And, given Trump's alacrity in sending the army to the border for what was patently a manufactured emergency, we should assume he will not hesitate to use the Army against any serious, organized threats to his plans.¹

Trump's recent and earlier attacks on the independence of inspectors general and his largely successful attempts to eliminate opponents in the White House, the Cabinet, the federal bureaucracy, the Congress, and the courts, have laid the groundwork for the evil yet to come. Should the pandemic remain highly disruptive to normal life and should Trump's hopes for reelection continue to look forlorn, the prospect of a coup-scenario could gain appeal. More disturbing yet, as Elizabeth Goitein and Andrew Boyle have pointed out in their April 10, 2020 *New York Times* article, “Trump Has Emergency Powers We Aren't Allowed to Know About.” This scenario has the earmarks of the 1933 Reichstag building fire, which Hitler used as a pretext to seize emergency powers, and which has been used by would-be dictators many times since.

For those who doubt that the President could ever accomplish this by himself, we should remember, he will have help. There is ample evidence that the Senate

enablers of his past evildoing will view the pandemic as an historic opportunity to solidify their own hold on the powers of the national and state governments. This would help to realize the century-old reactionary ambition to transform this democratic republic into an oligarchic empire with themselves as the rulers. Further, they have shown a remarkable willingness in their official capacities to jettison any semblance of righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, or compassion. When confronted publicly, they have shown themselves ready, willing and able to lie.

Neither should we imagine that protests, the disintegration of the economy, or even mass sickness and death will cure Trump or his cronies of their boundless power-seeking. Such venality in regard to one's own citizenry calls to mind images of Syrian death and destruction, under the boundless ambition of its ruler. Ordinarily, the calculus of evil is determined by the extent to which the innocent suffer, and the innocent have certainly suffered here.

But, as tragic as that suffering is, it is possible that history will most remember Trump *not* for his having compounded that suffering, but for having brought about an end to the world-changing, historic American experiment in self-government. In fact, we might expect that from now on, any behavior which represents unalloyed political evil could come to be described as "Trumpist."

Is it inevitable? Have Trump and his Republican enablers wired the outcome with their Supreme Court and other federal judicial appointments, with their corruption of state legislatures, with their gerrymandering of Congressional districts, with their suppression of the franchise, with their crippling of the federal regulatory bureaucracy, with their attacks on the free press, with their sabotaging of Congressional oversight, and with their tax-handouts to the billionaire brotherhood?²

On December 19, 1776, Thomas Paine published his first paper on the crisis that threatened the nascent American Revolution in its struggle against the rule of King George. At that moment, when the birth of the nation was in doubt, he wrote: "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered. . . ."

It is now the summer of the year 2020, some 244 years later, and these are *yet* times that try our souls. A constitutional crisis threatens. The survival of democracy hangs in the balance. And we, who are dedicated to empowering the demos, must ask ourselves: who or what are we now, in this moment of crisis? Are we but summer soldiers who shrink from the service of our country? Are we forever trapped, methodologically speaking, in a box of our own making? Will future historians view our actions now as sadly symbolic or pathetically rear-guard?

Tyranny is not easily conquered. None of the well-

tried remedies of the past, from electoral victories to armed revolution, offer believable promise to restore the United States as a *functionally* democratic republic. The only plausible antidote to oligarchic rule is its diametric opposite, an increase in citizen rule.

We must permanently and institutionally increase the power of the demos by giving every citizen direct control of *some* of the public powers of government. As a practical matter, this may be accomplished by creating directly democratic assemblies, which may function as an additional, lower tier of urban government, guaranteeing the rights, roles, and resources of citizenship, and, most notably, a vote for *every* citizen in the decisions to use public powers.

For those who say it simply cannot be done, that direct democracy isn't practicable, we say: It has been done. The United States already has a well-tested, directly democratic governmental institution, a highly serviceable model which may be adopted to meet contemporary needs—the "open," directly democratic New England town.³

This directly democratic assembly, with its practice of *advisory* leadership is particularly well-suited to an era of massively corrupted representative government. Since they occupy the roles of both legislators and taxpayers, the citizen-members of these assemblies have powerful incentives to make their government equitable, effective, and efficient. Perhaps for this reason, their assemblies are intolerant of partisanship and ideology.

Further, the "selectman" model of leadership, limiting the role of leaders to proposing actions, which then must be approved by the assembly at-large before they become actionable, inherently biases leaders towards service rather than self-aggrandizement. Honesty, integrity, and giving of the self (not unlike that of the risktakers referred to at the beginning of this article) are the measures by which citizen-legislators tend to appraise one another. In fact, there is no verified history of systemic corruption of directly democratic assemblies with public powers, such as the open New England towns.

Moreover, the character of the popular assembly is that it finds its own will in face-to-face deliberations, thus transforming the foundation of urban government. That these assemblies will use their powers in combination is a certainty. When common interests are at stake, they will speak with one voice as the most potent constituency of urban government. City, state and national politicians who ignore this voice will do so at their peril, because it will ultimately have effect at the ballot box. Thus, to the extent that the government of major cities becomes driven by the combined initiatives of directly democratic assemblies, the dynamics of state and national policy-making will be effected—if millions are brought into direct engagement with the exercise of public powers, they will become an implacable force for holding accountable all the higher levels of government.

For those who say it will be extraordinarily difficult to build such assemblies, we say: You are right. Tyranny is not easily conquered.

If the nightmare of a Trumpian coup actually comes to pass, its supporters will include more than the billionaires and their mercenary army of political enablers. A reactionary media- and Internet-promoted army of their watercarriers will rise up to rationalize acceptance of the *fait accompli*. They will claim that we have always had presidents with monarchical ambitions, that everything will work itself out in time, that we don't want to risk another civil war. They will even argue that the United States has been in decline because we have had *too much* democracy and we need a President with more authority, not less. Further, we may expect this right-wing "populism" to be bolstered by the billionaire-funded network of reactionary research, public policy, reform, and advocacy organizations.

How do we imagine launching and sustaining a movement to build directly democratic assemblies in the face of such overwhelming opposition?

We do not doubt that movements with the staying power to bring about such institutional change are those grounded in long-lived community, such as that provided by the churches, barber shops and beauty parlors for the civil rights movement, by the workplaces for the labor movement, and by the villages for the Indian national liberation movement. Gandhi withdrew from national politics from 1933 to 1940, during which time he worked with villages throughout India: "Gandhiji firmly believed that self-reliant villages form a sound basis for a just, equitable, and non-violent order. . . ."⁴ What is required here and now is such a movement grounded in the low- to middle-income urban neighborhoods of our own country.

Neither do we doubt that victorious movements achieve institutional change through long struggle. Only those movements which inspire us to persist and to pay the freight survive such struggles. "A potent, sus-

tained movement must . . . draw upon the values that emanate from our deepest human emotions and desires for justice and community. The call for spiritual morality, whether advanced by organized religion or secular humanist yearnings, has played a decisive role in leading struggles throughout history,"⁵ and it must here. Such a spiritual foundation will, while respecting our different traditions of belief and practice, recognize our common hopes and humanity, and thus acknowledge the need for our common participation in creating a better life.

It benefits us here to acknowledge the sacrifice required to achieve such a vision. As Machiavelli recognized nearly 500 years ago, "It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favour; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had the actual experience of it."⁶ There is no doubt that our own generation and perhaps one or two after us will pay a heavy price in accomplishing such a transformation. And, of course, in this, as in all things, we may refuse to bear the cost. But if we do, we should ask ourselves the following:

If the worst should come to pass, if the President should crown himself "king," shall we be content to abandon self-governance and independence to make ourselves *his* dependents? And, in subjugation to that "king," *should we or should we not* be willing to "pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor,"⁷ for a government which no longer represents us, which is no longer accountable either to its own constitution or to the will of its people—a government which is no longer of, for, or by the people?

¹ Notwithstanding misgivings and criticisms of retired generals and admirals after Trump's use of the military to clear a peaceful racial justice demonstration from Lafayette Square for a photo op in front of St. John's Church, we don't imagine that the top brass of the military services will refuse to follow their commander-in-chief if Trump orders them to put down "insurrection," especially if his orders are upheld by the Supreme Court.

² Our reference to a "brotherhood" is meant to convey not only that U.S. billionaires have common interests about which they communicate with one another, both formally and informally, but that they have a common purpose, plan, and operation, with roots extending back more than a century and a half, and on which they have been singularly focused for much of the latter half of the 20th century and up to the present. It is in their libertarian ideology and economic self-interest to unalterably oppose ". . . any group [such as unions and political reformers] or government meddling with the market" (loc. 36 in citation below), and to use any available means to manipulate law and policy to insulate themselves and their wealth from government regulation—thus enjoying, deservedly in their opinion, the benefits of their elite status as an entirely unencumbered propertied class. See Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains, the Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017) [Kindle version].

³ See our *Social Policy* articles: "Public Powers for the Commonweal: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing" (Winter 2015), "Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform" (Spring 2016), and "The Promise of Radical Municipalism" (Winter 2018).

⁴ “For him, rebuilding of the nation could only be achieved by reconstructing villages.” See Divya Joshi (ed.), *Gandhiji on Villages* (Gamdevi, Mumbai: Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya Mumbai, 2002) [http://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/Gandhionvillages.pdf], p. 2. For a description of Gandhi’s seven years of village work, see Mahatma Gandhi, “Mahatma Gandhi’s writings, philosophy, audio, video & photographs” (n.d.) [http://www.mkgandhi.org/revivalvillage/article1.htm].

⁵ See Jonathan Rosenblum, “Unions in the Trump Era” *Tikkun* (January 2, 2017) [http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/unions-facing-the-trump-era].

⁶ See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses* (1513) (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1950), p. 21.

⁷ The Founders of the United States, when they signed the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776, declared: “. . . with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

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