

www.newyorker.com

Donald Trump and the Death of American Exceptionalism

By Jelani Cobb November 4, 2016

7-9 minutes

In the sixteen months since he declared his candidacy, Donald Trump's Presidential campaign has elicited comparisons to those of George Wallace and Barry Goldwater, to the hallucinatory paranoia of Joseph McCarthy, to the fascist preoccupations of Charles Lindbergh, and to lesser lights of American demagoguery like Father Coughlin and the Know-Nothings of the nineteenth century.

The unifying theme among these figures, beyond their disdain for democracy, was their common residence in the loser's aisle of American history. McCarthy's conspiratorial manipulation of the public eventually earned him the enmity of both Republicans and Democrats and a vote in the Senate to censure him. Wallace carried just five states and garnered thirteen per cent of the popular vote. Goldwater lost to Lyndon Johnson by sixteen million popular votes, winning just fifty-two Electoral College votes to Johnson's four hundred and eighty-six. Richard Hofstadter's 1964 classic "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" charted the lunatic genealogy of fringe movements dating back to the early years of the Republic, but the more sanguine assessment of that lineage is that few of these movements—anti-Catholicism, anti-Freemasonry, or Know-Nothingism, for instance—managed to sustain themselves in the long term or to fully inhabit the political mainstream.

Goldwater is heralded as the father of modern conservatism, but he could occupy that niche only because successive generations of his heirs refined and streamlined his message, buffing away the elements that the public saw as extremist. The modern Republican Party staked its claim on conservatism, not on Goldwaterism__.

All this points to yet another reason why Trump represents a unique danger in American politics. Trumpism does not seek simply to make a point and pass on its genes to more politically palatable heirs, nor is it readily apparent why he would need to settle for this. When George Will [announced](#) his departure from the G.O.P., last summer, he offered a modified version of Ronald Reagan's quote about leaving the Democrats—"I didn't leave the Party; the Party left me." But a kind of converse narrative applies to Trump; he didn't join the Republican Party so much as its most febrile elements joined him. Trump is partly a product of forces that the G.O.P. created by pandering to a base whose dilated pupils the Party mistook for gullibility, not abject, irrational fear that would send those voters scurrying to the

nearest authoritarian savior they could find. The error was in thinking that this populace, mainlining Glenn Beck and Alex Jones theories and pondering how the Minutemen would have fought Sharia law, could be controlled. (For evidence to the contrary, the Party needed look no further than the premature political demise of Eric Cantor.) The old adage warns that one should beware of puppets that begin pulling their own strings.

In this light, Trump represents a kind of return to the old-time religion, a fundamentalism that rejects the effete nature of dog-whistle politics the way the religious right defined itself by rejecting the watery tenets of liberal Christianity. Implicit within dog-whistling is enough respect for democratic norms and those outside one's base to speak to that base in terms that the mass populace can't readily decipher. Here, plausible deniability is at least a recognition that there are people with interests different from one's own and that their influence, if not their interests or humanity, warrants a certain degree of respect. Trump is doing the opposite of this. He is an exhorter in a midsummer tent revival: direct, literal, and speaking at a decibel that makes it impossible to misunderstand his intentions. The end result of Trump's evangelism is that a xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, serially mendacious narcissist is poised to pull in somewhere north of fifty million votes in the midst of the most bitterly contentious election in modern American history. The easy analysis holds that Trump's jihad against decency has wrecked the Republican Party, but the damage is far more extensive than this.

Two months ago, the French President François Hollande remarked that Trump's excesses made him "[want to retch](#)." It was a notable moment not only for the imagery but also for the implications—a foreign head of state was criticizing a current nominee for President of the United States—and, by association, the millions of Americans who had seen in him a potential leader. It might be said that Hollande, whose own country has witnessed the increasing prominence of Marine Le Pen's reactionary, nativist National Front, has plenty to attend to on his soil. But this is precisely the point. The anti-immigrant, authoritarian, and nationalist movements we've witnessed in Germany, the U.K., Turkey, and France, troubling as they may be, do not violate a broader mandate that those nations have assigned to themselves. The United States' claim to moral primacy in the world, the idea of American exceptionalism, rests upon the argument that this is a nation set apart. In June, Pew reported that [eighty-five per cent](#) of Europeans who were polled had no confidence in Trump's ability to "do the right thing" in world affairs (compared with twenty-seven per cent who lacked this confidence in Hillary Clinton and twenty-two per cent who saw President Obama this way).

The old presumptions hold that some element of national humiliation and decline predisposes nations toward fascism, or at least the appeals of fascistic movements. But in the U.S. this movement sprang up on the contrails of the first black Presidency—a moment that was, perhaps naïvely at the time, thought

to be one of national affirmation and triumph. The unsavory implication here, of course, is that, for the cornerstone elements of Trumpism, that triumph _was _a national humiliation, that the image of an African-American receiving the deference and regard that the Presidency entails invalidated these Americans' understanding of what the U.S. is, or at least what it is supposed to be.

In the broader context, Trumpism represents the demise of American exceptionalism, or at least the refutation of the most cogent arguments for it ever having existed in the first place. An exceptional nation would have better reflexes than this, would recognize the communicable nature of fear more quickly, would rally its immune defense more efficiently than the United States has in the past sixteen months. At a quaint moment in the recent past, it was possible to think that a decisive Clinton victory would exorcise Trumpism from public life. But, on the verge of the election, that idea increasingly seems like an indulgent delusion. The problem of Trump is not simply that his opinions far exceed his knowledge; it's that what he does know is so hostile to democracy, not only in the Republican Party or the United States but in the world. Whatever happens on November 8th, we are at the outset of a much longer reckoning.