

Trump and History: Ignorance and Denial

Ever since Donald Trump became President I have believed his greatest threat to our society and to our democracy is not necessarily his authoritarianism, but his essential ignorance - of history, of policy, of political process, of the Constitution. Saying that if Andrew Jackson had been around we might not have had the Civil War is like saying that one strong, aggressive leader can shape, prevent, or move history however he wishes well into the future. Leadership does matter in crises. It truly mattered that Abraham Lincoln was President in 1861 and not Stephen Douglas or John C. Breckinridge. It truly mattered that Franklin Roosevelt won the election of 1932 and at least had a new plan to help the country fight its way out of the Great Depression. It truly mattered that John Kennedy and a small group around him were determined to act short of nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Those three Presidents and the advisors around them were students of history in their own ways. Presidents adrift without historical knowledge are dangerous.

Trump's claims that Andrew Jackson somehow through his anger and toughness would have made a deal to prevent secession and war in 1860-61 is simply 5th grade understanding of history or worse. And this comes from the President of the United States! Under normal circumstances if a real estate tycoon weighed in on the nature of American history from such ignorance we would simply ignore or laugh at him. But since this man lives in the White House and wields the constitutional powers of the presidency and the commander in chief we have to pay attention. It is possible to reflect on what might or might not have been done at some juncture in America's road to disunion and war from the mid-1840s to the 1860s (during all of which time Jackson was dead), but Trump has no knowledge or perspective from which to do so it would appear. As for historical analogies and understanding, our President seems incapable of even getting something wrong in reasonable or interesting ways.

Trump's "learning" of American history must have stopped a long time ago. I wish I could say this is funny and not deeply disturbing. Perhaps his grasp of American history rather reflects his essential personality, which seems to be some combination of utter self-absorption, a lack of empathy, and a need to believe in or rely upon hyper individualism. President Trump does seem to possess an instinct for the feelings, fears, resentments, and base level aspirations of many Americans who are displeased at best with the country and the kind of society that has developed over the past decades, especially since the civil rights and women's rights revolutions. He further has an instinct for how and why so many white

Americans were uncomfortable or downright furious that a black man could be elected President. The “birther” effort that he led stoked a kind of 21st century racism that appeals to a vast audience of suburban and rural America that takes its information and its values from Fox News and its many media allies. And we must give him credit for capturing the political sentiments of the displaced and the neglected in our globalized economy and in our identity-obsessed culture. They do need a voice. To pull that off as a celebrity billionaire may say more about the culture and social values we have all participated in forging more than it says about him.

Trump has political instinct but little in the way of political knowledge of either institutions or history. Why does this matter? Well, if a President makes history, which he can and does on any given day, he should know some history. He must be able to think in time, to think by analogy, precedent, and comparison. He needs perspective in order to find wisdom. Decisions ought never be made in a vacuum. A President certainly needs to think anew about old problems, but how can any holder of that office consider Middle East peace, or relations with a nuclear or non-nuclear Iran, or the immediate threat of the bizarre North Korean regime, or the social collapse of Venezuela, or the possible dismantling of the European Union, or the increasing rise of Vladimir Putin’s expansionist authoritarianism if he is adrift in history, believing only that great problems are solved by great strong men? President Trump’s uses of the past – nonsensical throw away lines about the revelation that Lincoln was a Republican, or that Frederick Douglass had been “doing an amazing job,” and now that no one bothers to think about “why was there the Civil War” are not merely matters of temperament. They are dangerous examples of ignorance in high places. And we must not let this kind of presidential mis-use and denial of history become normalized or merely the object of humor. Satire is our only tool sometimes, but good satire has always been a very serious weapon at the end of the day. Jackson was too important in American history to be so loosely and ignorantly invoked by the President. For students of the Civil War era, we might even conclude, contra Trump, that had Jackson lived to the time of the Civil War, not only would he have not prevented the conflict, his fellow Tennessean, General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the notorious cavalry leader, might have been out of a job.

The historical profession might consider petitioning the President to take a one or two month leave of absence, VP Pence steps in for that interim, and Trump goes on a retreat in one of his resorts for an educational sabbatical. If he must be President for three and a half more years, we need him to be able to make sense when he speaks of the past. Sometimes CEOs or university presidents need a break from

the daily grind. The President's staff could choose a few historians to go to the retreat and the American Historical Association could choose a few more. A crash course in reading, or perhaps just in watching documentary films, about the history of American foreign policy as well as the history of slavery and race relations in particular could be the core of the curriculum. Some biographies, a good history of women and gender, a genuine tutorial on the Civil Rights era, and even a serious digestion of good works on the Gilded Age and the New Deal legacies might be required. And finally, a primer on Constitutional history would be essential too, and might make that second month necessary. This alone could garner the United States again some confidence and respect around the world. And, one further thing, no tweeting on educational leave. There will be a test at the end of the term.

We are all creatures of both our experience and our education broadly defined. But to resist learning and expertise, to reject or simply appropriate a past as nothing but a tool for manipulating the present is at best contempt for knowledge. Perhaps President Trump will be the gift that keeps on giving to historians, the source of open invitations to try to help the public that is listening to learn more about America as we endlessly fight over its future paths. But a President without a sense of history is a dangerous thing. We need to keep watch on the White House and its denizen lest his pronouncements make history deniers as lethal as climate change deniers.

As in personal memory, so also in the collective memory that historians assemble, resist, narrate and interpret, the past is that thing we cannot live without, but also sometimes the thing that is hard to live with. "History," Robert Penn Warren once warned, though, in a single line of a poem, "is the thing you cannot resign from." Like Warren, one of my other favorite writers, James Baldwin, never stopped probing the nature of the past, the irresistible if at times debilitating hold that history and memory can have on any thoughtful person's consciousness. "History," said Baldwin in a 1965 essay, "is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations." For Baldwin, the non-fiction voice of the civil rights movement, if Americans ever really began to learn and face their past with slavery and racism, they would be entering into "a dialogue with that terrifying deity... called history." Most Americans will prefer never to see history as a terrifying deity, wishing instead for a past that inspires, that makes them feel part

of a triumphal story, that places them in a narrative in which they can find comfort. But history can be both pleasurable and perilous, terrifying and uplifting.

Baldwin left a stunning definition of what it means to have a sense of history. In an interview with Studs Terkel in 1961, Baldwin repeatedly claimed that Americans were “badly educated” and did not know their history. Terkel stopped Baldwin and asked : “what is a sense of history?” After a pause, Baldwin delivered a poignant reply: “You read something that you thought only happened to you, and you discovered it happened a hundred years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a great liberation for the struggling, suffering person who always thinks that he is alone.” Having a sense of history is knowing that whatever happens to us or to our world, we are not alone. It has in some form happened before. The problem we may have with President Trump is that he does not know what he does not know. He seems to like to go it alone, *sui generis*, a tough and angry Andrew Jackson ready to slay dragons in his reality show presidency. Our problem is presidential historical ignorance, power imagined and wielded without bearings or perspective. Presidents can be and feel very alone with ultimate decisions. But they are not without historical consciousness and knowledge, unless they choose to be. For Presidents, history should be part of their daily bread, nutrition to sustain the weary, the basic equipment of their trade.

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