It’s Happening Here



One of the phrases that keeps popping up over the past three and a half years has been some variation on “I never in my life would have imagined…”, followed by a description or photo of whatever daily excess our government has committed as part of its ongoing stumble to authoritarian rule.

I say we simply have to have a better imagination. No matter how bad we think it has gotten, every new day will bring another excess at which we shall gasp and clutch our metaphoric pearls.

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I know some will accuse me of overstating the case, of amplifying a few unrelated facts into something that is just a fever dream of my addled liberalism. Just as some told me my reaction to the election of Trump was extreme and irrational. Tut tut, silly boy. We’ve been through worse than this.

I admit that my imagination upon the election of Cheeto Don ran riot, that I imagined one preposterous disaster after another during his term, that I imagined a seething subclass of malcontents, racists, and gun nuts taking his election as license to cosplay their more twisted fantasies. You should see some of the failed fictions in my desk drawer.

My imagination, sadly, fell far short of what turned out to be our new normal. Mea culpa.

Despite the warnings of several astute observers (Sarah

Kendzior and Masha Gessen among many), I held out some glimmer of hope that the ‘norms’ and ‘traditions’ of American governance would be enough to save us from the arrogance, malevolence, and sheer stupidity that were Trump’s most apparent qualifications for national leadership in the first place.

Trump’s method is based in his most prevalent personal trait: He’s a fuck up. He has failed in almost every venture he has undertaken, but because he has no conscience and no inkling of personal fault, he always manages to extract himself from the wreckage better off than before; it doesn’t hurt that he surrounds himself with slavishly devoted functionaries desperate for a little of his gold dust to float their way. From Roy Cohn to Michael Cohen, he’s always had “a guy” to take care of his mess. And they always find out too late that he has as much loyalty to them as he does to the guy who gold plates his toilets. Everybody get’s stiffed in the end.

So it is with his consolidation of political power. Incompetence is wedded to rank opportunism. There is no pretense to decency. No behavioral norm is safe. And given that he is a congenital fuckup, he inevitably creates another crisis that lends itself to grift and depredation. One after another flunky finds himself roadside with a tire track on his back. Repeat.

I knew Trump was a simpleton bereft of decency. I know he had been a mobbed up petty grifter and conscienceless racial provocateur. I knew all the things about him, just as I knew the rot at the core of the modern GOP and the conservative movement was perfectly tilled for his brand of resentment and greed to flourish. I had always just figured the decline would continue at a leisurely pace under a Cruz, a Rubio, or a JEB!, more or less nasty, but with at least a whiff of gentility and noblesse oblige to cover the stench.

My imagination failed me.

So here we are. More than 100,000 dead in a pandemic made worse by incompetence and preening ego. An economy in freefall.But hey, the stock market is doing great! Our ability to influence events beyond our borders reduced to almost zero.This may, in fact, be an improvement, historically speaking. The logistics of responding to a pandemic are hard, they tell us. Besides, it's not so bad, just like a flu. We don't have the resources. We don't have the supply chain. We don't have etc. and so on.

Yet somehow we have the ability to mobilize thousands of troops tricked out in riot gear, with full logistic and armored vehicle support, to clear a public park so our president could pose with a borrowed Bible in front of church those troops "liberated" with tear gas and riot gear.And fuck sake, spare me any of that "it wasn't tear gas, you stupid libtard, it was pepper spray." Somehow, we always have the necessary resources to impose order by means of force, wherever in the world we might choose to do so, no matter how much it degrades the situation in the end. But there is never enough money lying around for, oh I don't know, adequate health care for a huge swath of our citizenry or replacing a crumbling school. Hell, we can't even seem to maintain our major airports at a standard equivalent to a Kathmandu bus station.

My imagination failed to warn me that the president would deny that there had been tear gas deployed outside the White House, even though hundreds of people witness that it happened. My imagination totally failed to prepare me for the moment when his Barbie-esque press secretary compared Trumps awkward fondling of a Bible on the St John church steps as equivalent to Winston Churchill's surveying a bomb rubbled London in WWII. Stop believing your lying eyes, peasants.

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Today, June 4, marks the 31st anniversary of the Chinese

governments slaughter of protesters in Tienanmen Square. The world was almost unanimously shocked and revolted by the government aggression. One notable exception was a mobbed up grifter and publicity whore from Queens, NY:

> *When the students poured into Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government almost blew it. Then they were vicious, they were horrible, but they put it down with strength. That shows you the power of strength. Our country is right now perceived as weak…as being spit on by the rest of the world.*
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> *Playboy Magazine, March, 1990*

Since then, Trump has notably praised dictators across the globe: Erdoğan, Kim, Orban, Xi. And Putin, of course. Especially Putin. Always Putin.

Trump idolizes that kind of pseudo-masculine aggression. As a weak man, he longs to express himself in a manner he believes proves his machismo. His crowing about his sexual assaults. His unsubtle braggadocio about the size of his dick. His calls for cops to "not be so gentle" when they arrest people, calls for protesters to be "punched in the face". His longing for the old days, when men were men, and so on.

Now we have Lafayette Park, really only the latest expression of his power lust, but surely the most transparently autocratic. Lafayette Park has long been considered a 'people's park', and there have been peaceful protests there against every president in my living memory. It's kind of like our Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde Park. Anybody can speak their mind.

Some of those protests involved people camping out for weeks and months to make their cases. Some I agreed with. Some, not so much. Some were, frankly, cranks. But no matter their position, it is our First Amendment right to protest that has been on display, and I say "Hell yes" to these folks with the

passion to stand up and speak their piece. And until this week protesters have largely been left in peace.

Contrast this to the armed occupation of the Michigan State House several weeks ago. Where that was all about intimidation and fear – terrorism, in a word – Trump urged Michigan Governor Whitmer to just ease off and let things settle down. As with the torch-wielding white supremacists in Charlottesville, he sees the "good people on both sides" and urges us the let racist bygones be bygones.

But the unarmed, almost entirely peaceful protesters in Lafayette Park expose the weakness and rot at the president's core. Like most men raised in the poisonous atmosphere of macho America, Trump is terrified of looking "like a pussy". So he sent combat-attired troops to teach those people who is boss while he waited out the troubles in his underground bunker, a special snowflake's hidey hole.

As chilling as the scenes in Lafayette Park are to watch – not at all unlike Tienanmen in 1989 or Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring – the scene that gutted me to the core is the one up top of this diatribe.

For me, the sight of fully armed combat troops deployed in formation on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is an insult akin to what an honestly religious person must feel upon seeing a serial adulterer/thief/liar wave a prop Bible in front of a church.

Like all the monuments on the Mall in D.C., the Lincoln is typically open to visitors 24/7, every day of the year. I prefer to visit at night, when the shadows make room for visits from the ghosts that inhabit the Vietnam and Korean Memorials. It's as close to sacred ground this atheist knows outside the Village Vanguard.

It is quiet at night, and unlike the daytime throngs of field trippers and such, the people you see there after dark seem to

share a sense of reverence for the truly horrible burden Lincoln bore to maintain the Union against the forces of treason and racial subjugation. He was no saint, Lincoln, a fact he recognized as well as anyone. He was a flawed man who bore an unimaginable burden. In the end, he paid the price that racism extracts when it is challenged.

This imperfect vessel knew enough to make a plea to our "better angels" central to his project. Trump's project – much like the Confederacy itself – relies on the baser impulses of greed, cruelty, resentment. Sadly for us all, lesser angels are much easier to rouse.

Trump has imposed an occupation force on the nation's capitol city, something the traitors Davis and Lee could never achieve. There are combat troops and military police and personnel from the Federal Bureau of Corrections trained in quelling prison riots. The Drug Enforcement Administration has been mobilized to surveil the protesters. The National Guard is on the scene. At this point, he needs only an excuse – or an invitation from one of his supplicant Republican governors – to spread these forces into other communities.

It's happening. Here.

Today, on this Tienanmen anniversary, the NY Times published an "opinion" piece by Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton. The headline is enough to catch the drift: "Send In The Troops", but it is worth a read to understand the dark sentiments shared by way too many of our neighbors. It would have fit right in during the pre-Civil War years when self-righteous plantation owners warned against the inevitable rape of our precious white women if the slaves gain so much as an iota of freedom.

The government, and the halls of business and industry, are filled with Tom Cottons. Handsome, well dressed, educated at all the right schools (even as they decry the corrosive subversion of Ivy League elites). These are the people who

call for the elimination of American freedoms in order to preserve their own “freedom” to accumulate wealth, guns, and power. These are the people for whom a request to wear a mask during a pandemic is intolerable tyranny, but who also believe that protesters getting shot in the face with rubber bullets are just getting what they deserve for not following police orders.

I realize the American Dream, the promise of all men created equal and such, is a fantasy built upon the great, original sin of slavery. The nation’s prosperity was extracted via the unpaid labor of millions of Black Americans. Our American Dream, the freedom and standard of living that had been a beacon to oppressed people around the world, is a happy face painted on centuries of savage cruelty and greed. The racism inherent in our governance is an entrenched barrier to our progress as a civilized nation. The people protesting in the streets right now – and the people who support them – are demanding that the promise be honored, and that the cancer be removed. Our future depends on their – our – success.

The Tom Cottons of the world demand that these upstarts – us, by damn – be taught a lesson once and for all and that we learn to stay in our place. If we are lucky, resilient, and determined, we might be able to push back against that pressure. If not, nothing in my wildest imagination is likely to measure up to the darkness to come.



NOTE: Not from my imagination. I’m still working on it.