

Gray Mirror Articles

Paul Graham's error

Published on 2025-01-16

It goes without saying that I have enormous admiration for Paul Graham—as a writer, a coder, and a businessman. In fact, he is much more successful than me at all three of these things, which is infuriating.

But at least as a historian, Graham is refreshingly out of his depth. It is not his fault. He thinks he is standing on a concrete foundation, not a pit of rubble and slime. He can see that he is wading in slime—but he thinks there is a floor. So does everyone.

There is no floor. There is no foundation of final narratives. No one is ready to read history till they understand this. For instance, I don't think anyone has yet written a really good history of the 20th century. Maybe that will take not just the 21st century, but the 22nd. We understand the Romans better than they understood themselves.

Cringe is anything that lets others see you better than you see yourself. A fundamental principle of history (from Leopold von Ranke) is that every era stands equal before God. One corollary is that every era is, in its own ways, cringe—it has some attributes for which all other periods in history would not just condemn it, but mock it ruthlessly. What are those attributes in our period?

What makes history hard is that you never know where you are. History is like pitch. Even most musicians only have relative pitch, not absolute (“perfect”) pitch. They can hear the distance between notes, but not the frequency of the notes.

Imagine if the political phenomenon we call “left” versus “right” worked like this. You would have no way to sense where you are absolutely on the left-right spectrum. You would only be able to position yourself relative to the local period around you. No need to imagine—this is indeed how it works.

Moreover, humans can hear only a narrow range of the frequency spectrum. Outside 20 to 20000 hertz, there is no sound per se. There is vibration, explosion, etc. When reading the past, our normal reflex is to process events inside the local spectrum as news, and those outside the spectrum as history. This is also a subjective distinction.

Paul Graham entered Harvard in 1982. Coincidentally, he saw “political correctness arise” in the 1980s. At that time it was news to him, and also the world:

When I started college in 1982 it was not yet a thing. Female students might object if someone said something they considered sexist, but no one was getting reported for it. It was still not a thing when I started grad school in 1986. It was

definitely a thing in 1988 though, and by the early 1990s it seemed to pervade campus life.

Imagine if Harvard had, by the same process and at the same time, become Islamist. In 1982, someone might object if female students wore something they considered un-Islamic, but no one was getting reported for it. It was definitely a thing in 1988 though, and by the early 1990s it seemed like everyone on campus was wearing a suicide vest...

Now, it's important not to confuse Islam, which is tolerant, with Islamism, which isn't. The historical phenomenon we need to focus on is the transition between the two. How and when did tolerant Muslim scholars turn into intolerant Islamic prigs? Paul Graham is on the case:

There's a certain kind of person who's attracted to a shallow, exacting kind of moral purity, and who demonstrates his purity by attacking anyone who breaks the rules. Every society has these people. All that changes is the rules they enforce. In Victorian England it was Christian virtue. In Stalin's Russia it was orthodox Marxism-Leninism. For the woke, it's social justice. So if you want to understand wokeness, the question to ask is not why people behave this way. Every society has prigs. The question to ask is why our prigs are priggish about these ideas, at this moment. And to answer that we have to ask when and where wokeness began. The answer to the first question is the 1980s. Wokeness is a second, more aggressive wave of political correctness, which started in the late 1980s, died down in the late 1990s, and then returned with a vengeance in the early 2010s, finally peaking after the riots of 2020.

You see: he completely gets it. Paul Graham has relative pitch. His story of the world that he himself experienced is perfectly distilled. Nothing is wrong in this overview.

And yet—it is an interesting coincidence that the phenomenon he is studying arises exactly when he becomes an adult, and can see the news with his own eyes rather than relying on the history that he was taught. News starts in 1982. Before that is history. News may be a lie, but at least it can be compared with your eyes. History is... words.

Imagine if Paul Graham had grown up in the USSR, and entered college in 1982. In the present, in the world of news, he would have noticed the deviations between the noble ideals and the somewhat grubby praxis of Marxism-Leninism.

In the world of history, though, his understanding of the Great Patriotic War, the Russian Revolution, etc, etc, would be unmarred by his personal experience of the late Brezhnev era. Most important, he would perceive the failures of his era not as consequences of Marxism-Leninism, but rather as corruptions of Marxism-Leninism. Imagine how hard would it be to fix the USSR by making Marxism-Leninism work as well as it should work in theory.

Of course, the USSR was an Orwellian state that lived in its own distorted reality. Lol. So it's obviously completely different. Lol. Certainly, we would

never Frankenstein-stitch a distorted, but still real, present reality onto an almost totally tendentious past.

What is social justice, Paul? What does this pair of words literally mean? Is it clear from the words themselves, or does it require some context? What about progressive? Is its meaning clear from the word itself, or does it require context?

I think both require context. They are labels for an underlying historical phenomenon. “Islam” is a label. The Arabic word just means “submission.” The word predates the historical phenomenon and is obviously not related to it.

Are these words related? Are they related to this word “woke” (which obviously does require context)? Maybe to be “woke” is to be a “priggish progressive” who priggishly makes a “shallow, aggressive” use of “social justice.” Could we agree on this? Maybe:

It’s people being prigs about social justice. And that’s the real problem — the performativeness, not the social justice.

Notice that Graham has neatly mindkilled himself from his original historical insight:

So if you want to understand wokeness, the question to ask is not why people behave this way. Every society has prigs. The question to ask is why our prigs are priggish about these ideas, at this moment.

The problem is that Graham is interested only in “wokeness,” this hypothetical combination of “priggishness” and “progressive social justice.” But priggishness is a human universal. There is no history of priggishness. So why not drop it?

Instead, if we could just focus on the history of these mysterious idea, “progressive social justice,” we might actually get somewhere. Every society has prigs. Islam has prigs. The question is: how did Harvard become Islamic? Once Harvard is Islamic, let’s take it for granted that prigs will make it “Islamist.” We can answer the question in a value-neutral way, forgetting all about our prigs. (There were Nazi prigs, too.)

Graham is even on this one:

A successful theory of the origin of political correctness has to be able to explain why it didn’t happen earlier. Why didn’t it happen during the protest movements of the 1960s, for example? They were concerned with much the same issues. The reason the student protests of the 1960s didn’t lead to political correctness was precisely that — they were student movements. They didn’t have any real power. The students may have been talking a lot about women’s liberation and black power, but it was not what they were being taught in their classes. Not yet. But in the early 1970s the student protestors of the 1960s began to finish their dissertations and get hired as professors. At first they were neither powerful nor numerous. But as more of their peers joined them and the previous generation of professors started to retire, they gradually became both.

Simply forgetting his injunction to follow the ideas and the priggishness separately, Graham keeps using mysterious code words that mean “priggish ideas.”

It will certainly be news to even the most orthodox historians of the 1960s that the student protests “didn’t have any real power.” To their enemies, they were terrifying, and of course their enemies cowered before them.

Not only power, but violence, was far more in the air. Read the story of May Day at Yale 1970. Hillary Clinton! The Black Panthers! The FBI! Read Days of Rage by Bryan Burroughs. Bombs—hippie bombs—were going off in America every day.

To say that the Panthers at Yale—or, more to the point, their young supporters, such as Hillary Clinton—did not have the power to police speech at Yale, in 1970, is true. First: they wanted it, then. Second: they got it, later. Third: they have it, now.

The origin of AIDS is not when you come down with Kaposi’s sarcoma. The origin of AIDS is when you get infected with HIV. Implausible as the idea that HIV does not cause AIDS may be, it pales before the idea that the origins of “political correctness” or “wokeness” are somehow independent of the 1960s.

Actually, Wikipedia has a very useful page for the (proximate) “origins of woke.” Look up the phrase New Left. You will discover that this mysterious essence, “wokeism” or “political correctness,” is nothing more and nothing less than the New Left in power. Or, as it was sometimes called at the time, “the Movement.”

It is far better to say “progressive” and “social justice” than “PC” or “woke.” When in doubt, describe groups with the words they use to describe themselves. The longer they have been using these codewords, the better—the harder they are to change.

Graham exhibits the neat little pretzel that power has turned his brain into:

This [political correctness] was not the original meaning of woke, but it’s rarely used in the original sense now. Now the pejorative sense is the dominant one. What does it mean now?

Recall, if you lived through this time, the three meanings of this funny word, “woke.” In 2015, it was black slang meaning literally “politically conscious,” or in practice “progressive.” By 2020, it had spread universally to white progressives. Then it was noticed by white conservatives, who identified it with all the worst results of 2020 brand progressivism in power.

As soon as its enemies targeted the label, it vanished from the tongues of its acolytes, in an almost terrifying display of reef-squid camouflage. When Elon Musk, at Twitter, uncovered a lost locker full of #STAYWOKE T-shirts from the era of Jack Dorsey and Deray Mckesson, it was like opening King Tut’s tomb and meeting Tut himself. No one in 2023 could quite believe that progressives had once called themselves “woke.” While this was far from the most insane

Orwellian moment of the early 2020s, it was compelling enough that even Paul Graham has retconned his memory of the word.

Curiously enough, “politically correct” followed just the same arc. It was over before 1982—roughly around the time elite American scholars were finding out that in future, they would face academic penalties if they failed to lube up for the New Left. Obedient, they bent—as they probably would for Islam, and maybe yet will.

I actually tracked down one of the earliest usages of “politically correct”—so early that it was pronounced differently. Instead of “politically CORRECT,” at this time, you said “POLITICALLY correct.” But the phrase is the same and the year is 1934. The author is Walter Benjamin. My italics:

I want to show you that the political tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That means that the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency.

For, just to clarify things right away, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency – that, and nothing else constitutes the quality of a work. The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency.

I bet that clarified that for you! Welcome to turgid 1930s Marxist “theory.” It may even be clearer than turgid 1960s Marxist “theory,” though it is basically the same product.

What Benjamin (pronounced “Benyamin”) is telling us is that art, to be good Marxist propaganda, has to actually be good. By “correct” he means correct according to the Party line. This is a common usage in period Marxist jargon. In fact, even Wikipedia—not exactly an esoteric source—is almost right:

The phrase politically correct first appeared in the 1930s, when it was used to describe dogmatic adherence to ideology in totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Early usage of the term politically correct by leftists in the 1970s and 1980s was as self-critical satire; usage was ironic, rather than a name for a serious political movement. It was considered an in-joke among leftists used to satirise those who were too rigid in their adherence to political orthodoxy. The modern pejorative usage of the term emerged from conservative criticism of the New Left in the late 20th century, with many describing it as a form of censorship.

First, Nazi Germany has nothing to do with this word. Second, we have already seen the term being used sincerely by 1930s Marxists. Third, there are a number of missing decades between the 1930s and the 1970s, most notably the 1940s and 1950s. As the previous Wikipedia link taught us, “political correctness” was known then as well:

According to the American educator Herbert Kohl, writing about debates in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s, “[t]he term ‘politically correct’ was

used disparagingly to refer to someone whose loyalty to the CP line overrode compassion and led to bad politics. It was used by Socialists against Communists, and was meant to separate out Socialists who believed in equalitarian moral ideas from dogmatic Communists who would advocate and defend party positions regardless of their moral substance.”

A New Left implies an Old Left. You let Wikipedia teach you about the New Left—now learn about the Old Left. Note: in both cases, the thing is writing about itself.

TLDR: originally, “politically correct” was used sincerely, by Communists, supporters of Stalin, to denote a loyal submission to the Communist Party line, Stalin’s personal whim. Later, it became opprobrious and was used by anti-Communist Socialists as a negative label for this obviously repulsive behavior.

Finally, by around the time Paul Graham was going to college, it was discovered by conservatives, who were obviously puzzled as to why, long after the death of Stalin, their engineering professors were being required to obey this distant successor of Stalin’s party line—now long since detached from any centralized organization, but still with the same maniacal junkie desire to compel and control and dominate that defines the “prig.” Prigs, like Nazis, really like shooting people in the back of the neck.

Well—it was a different time. But if you’re interested in the related American practice of cancellation, there is no better book to consult than Vivian Gornick’s recently rereleased *Romance of American Communism*. Gornick, a New Leftist, is writing in the ‘70s about the Old Left in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Or try Bella Dodd’s *School of Darkness*—she was actually on the Politburo. The American Politburo. Then she was cancelled. Actually for being in the wrong faction, but nominally for racism. Yes, in the 1940s.

In fact, we don’t have to deal with these meretricious labels—we can go directly to the real words. Marxists.org has beautiful archives of the *New Masses*, which was more or less the *New Yorker* of the mid-century American Communist, and *The Communist*, which was actually the orthodox house journal of the CPUSA. Just search for the word “progressive.” You’ll find it means “supporter of the Party, not necessarily a member.”

If you think the Old Left didn’t matter in its heyday—try Eugene Lyons’ *Red Decade*. Heck: you could see a movie that just came out, *Oppenheimer*, in which we learn quite incidentally that almost everyone in the UC Berkeley physics department in 1939, in fact probably including Oppenheimer himself, was a Communist.

So much for Graham:

Did it begin outside universities and spread to them from this external source? Obviously not; it has always been most extreme in universities. So where in universities did it begin? Did it begin in math, or the hard sciences, or engineering, and spread from there to the humanities and social sciences? Those

are amusing images, but no, obviously it began in the humanities and social sciences.

If it began in the “humanities and social sciences,” then, it must be at least 100 years old. Obviously, literal Marxism dates back to the 19th century.

But can we go further? There is another odd clue in Graham’s sincere wonderings:

I think there is: to use the customs we already have for dealing with religion. Wokeness is effectively a religion, just with God replaced by protected classes. It’s not even the first religion of this kind; Marxism had a similar form, with God replaced by the masses.

It is indeed a religion! And if we had to compare it to the closest thing that we call a religion, we might find ourselves saying something like “Unitarian Universalist.” Is UUism a religion? Is it progressive? Is it woke? Hm... what a brilliant insight on the part of Paul Graham.

When we are tracing the history of religions, not ideas, we are on much firmer and better-trodden historical ground. We find that Unitarianism is in fact one small branch of mainline Protestantism, which happens to be the original religion of the United States—or at least, New England.

For instance, Harvard has been Unitarian since 1805. It has been mainline Protestant since 1636. And it has been using the words social justice since the late 19th century.

The ideas of Harvard in 1636 and 2025 are very different! But they are continuous and uninterrupted. Harvard has never been sacked. The institution has been in the hands of a continuous generational society for almost four hundred years. Where else would we find the origin of any dominant American tradition? Harvard has changed; Harvard has never lost.

If dinosaurs are birds and birds are dinosaurs—and they are—progressives are Puritans. Even if they seem like the opposite of “puritanical.” Tyrannosaurs did not fly. Cotton Mather was not transgender, or even polyamorous. And yet—logic is logic. (And the long interaction between Marxism and Protestantism is deeply fascinating.)

Oh, well. Look on the bright side—there’s nothing here that Islam can’t fix.

Washington, January 18-23

Published on 2025-01-14

Because I am a crazy person, I am coming to Washington. But while I am here, I am going to do something even more crazy.

For now, subscribers—who I feel terrible about rewarding insufficiently during this complicated time—only are invited. Please subscribe. Also, buy my book!

I'm not sure there is anything in it you don't already know. But I would like to think I put it well.

(And if you're eligible for the initial-subscriber signed-book giveaway, thank you! Sadly, my travels were mistimed and I only got to sign and number 200 of the 1000. I have to get back to LA and finish the job.)

If you're not a subscriber, I am remiss as usual in informing you of some recent pods. With Fleur Meston. With Daniel Pinchbeck (a lib!). With Lev Polyakov and Vlad Davidzon. And with, of course, Bronze Age Pervert.

<p>

 Read more

</p>

The independent truth service

Published on 2025-01-14

While I remain of course completely blackpilled, I can't think of a revolutionary event in this weird winter more hopeful than Facebook ditching its sinister state-sponsored "fact checkers" in favor of Elon's elegant "Community Notes" hack.

However, like all such events in this weird winter, I still have the unfortunate intuition that what I see is only the mutant, stunted, probably non-viable abortion egg of something that might happen, but actually won't. The abortion pill is the bitterest pill.

By refusing to accept the epistemic supervision of the truth-determining institutions in our regime, Twitter and Facebook have taken a revolutionary step. Yet since they are not revolutionary organizations, they are enormously relieved by any suggestion that this first step could also be their last. But this is how to end up as an abortion.

The unconscious assumption of the conservative is always that his enemy, despite controlling every serious institution on the planet, is somehow deeply weak, probably about to collapse, and can be taken out by a single bold lightning-like blow, such as removing the tampons from the men's bathroom at Facebook. I see this mindset in every WinRed spam text I get as a punishment for giving a few bucks to a politician.

So it's still hard for what President Macron calls our "new international reactionary movement" to gain steam. The revolutionary mindset, universal as it is in our society, is both rather fossilized, and totally foreign to the conservative

mind—which is always seeking some magical way in which it can do as little as necessary.

On the contrary, comrade! As another Frenchman, St. Just, said—he who makes half a revolution digs his own grave. When we enter the revolutionary mindset, we must be looking relentlessly for ways to do as much as possible—not just because this produces more results, but because, in a revolutionary situation, it is actually easier to do more.

No, really: in a revolution, the farther you go, the lighter your steps become. The first step is the hardest step. If you want to stop there, the next step will seem impossible. Once you know where you want to go, though, you will see that it is slightly easier...

What would the next revolutionary step for Facebook and Twitter be? They could put significant energy into creating an independent truth service.

Science is a truth service. Journalism is a truth service. Our society is built on these services in the same sense that it is built on airplanes, bridges, and fiber-optic cables. If our prestigious universities and newspapers cannot be trusted as an information source that can correct 55-year-old soccer moms in Reno spreading medical myths, something is very wrong.

When the leaders of Facebook and Twitter assumed that their “fact checkers” were as reliable as the airplanes they fly on or the Internet they zoom on, it made sense to let them censor the soccer moms. Once they saw how it actually is, they would rather travel by wagon and send handwritten letters in bags strapped to ponies.

Actually we don’t want to travel by wagon. We want to fly. Actually nobody wants lies on their social network. They just disagree on what a lie is. When you discover that you actually don’t have an API which tells you whether a post is a lie, you might decide to make the best of it, and come up with some libertarian ideology that tells you that lies are okay on your social network, actually, because, like, freedom.

But what if you did have that API? And it actually worked? Would you not use it?

My position is: “fact checking” is like medicine. A city needs doctors. A mass-market social network needs fact checkers. But a city needs nothing less than quack doctors. We can agree that strong men with whips must drive the quacks from the hospitals, but the cure for quack medicine is not no medicine. It is real medicine.

When Science (the prestigious meta-institution) diverges from science (the rigorous pursuit of truth), the cure is not no science. It is real science. And so on.

Or you could split the difference, in the Silicon Valley system-software style of finding just the right 80-20 tradeoff point, with a clever hack like Community

Notes. Without spending any money at all, hardly.

The problem with Community Notes is that Facebook and Twitter are still curing the disease that the quacks diagnosed. They are just not using the weird ointment that the quacks prescribed. That ointment worked, sort of. And this ointment works, sort of.

But it works at a terribly low level of power. The power of a truth service is the level of analytic energy it can put into a question—and it doesn't take much analytic energy to keep soccer moms from sharing old wives' tales and urban legends, because it doesn't take much analytic energy to tell whether old wives' tales and urban legends are true.

But suppose soccer moms are sharing the idea that... Covid was a lab leak. At once, the difficulty of knowing the truth, for Facebook, rises to a very high level of cost. As social administrators, we are tempted by any ideology that lets us just not solve this problem. Everyone wants to do less. No, comrades, we must do more!

Suppose Facebook considered it part of Facebook's business, a critical business task, for Facebook itself to have a position on disputed objective questions like this. Facebook, to know whether to treat this idea as a myth or the truth, has to actually know for itself. It cannot delegate this decision—except to some institution that it completely trusts. This is what I mean by an independent truth service.

The astounding situation we find ourselves in is that we have no institution capable of deciding whether Covid was a lab leak. Has the press done it? Have scientific journals done it? Have courts done it? Has Congress done it? In theory...

We could give it to Community Notes. Do people who usually disagree with each other agree that Covid was a lab leak? Heck, we could use the same algorithm in our courts. Do jurors who usually disagree agree that the defendant is guilty? Or even our legislatures. Do Senators who usually disagree agree on this bill? We could replace journalism too. "All The News That People Who Disagree Agree Is Fit To Print."

It's a good heuristic. But all heuristics which matter get gamed. Google's backlink algorithm was a good heuristic. There's not much left of it now. I don't think CN has been successfully gamed yet, but it also doesn't matter much yet. Give it more power, economic power, and the same thing will probably happen. Fundamentally: it's a toy, and Facebook is a game, and all you need for a game is a toy.

But what if we took it seriously? The game needs a toy—that's an economic incentive. Maybe we could spend a little more on this toy than we strictly need to. Maybe the toy could work so well that it became a weapon. Put enough air pressure into a squirt gun, turn it up to 10, and it hurts. Your sister yells. She's

still laughing. Turn it up to 800, and you have a water cannon that can rip her face off in a millisecond. Metaphorically.

Our society is based on “reliable sources.” But those sources have become unreliable—not even randomly unreliable, but unreliable in a predictable way. It turns out that even truth services, including but not limited to the New York Times, will become corrupted by power, and quite unfixable, in the long term.

Here is a small attempt at an independent truth service: Rootclaim. I am not sure I am very fond of Rootclaim—I find the Bayesian math gimmicky and unpersuasive. I feel the goal of a truth service is not only to find the truth, but at the same time persuade. I think the problem could take much more inspiration from historical institutions, especially courts. On the other hand, historical institutions are very far from optimal.

Here’s the thing: because our society is based on “reliable sources,” if you have a real reliable source, people will listen to it. Not at once, not all at once, but—“a city on a hill shall not be hid.”

For example, Wikipedia is based on “reliable sources.” Predictably, since Wikipedia matters, Wikipedia has taken the predictable unreliability of its “reliable sources” and doubled down on it. How could this be corrected?

Well, if we imagine a truth service as far beyond Rootclaim as Rootclaim is beyond Community Notes—using it to settle Wikipedia edit wars would be obvious. In fact, using it to fork and correct Wikipedia would be obvious. The original Wikipedia would shrink into a marginal boomer lefty site—the Utne Reader of online encyclopedias.

Suppose you’re trying to reform the government. The government depends on many, many facts which are established by its truth services. When its truth services mislead it, the government does not execute in reality. Instead, it does wacky stuff. Its form is still that it executes according to the reality provided by its services—the rule of the modern government, like the rule of Wikipedia, is “no original research.” The state, with a few small exceptions, is not allowed to think for itself. It has to listen.

All modern institutions are programmed to scan the airwaves for a truth signal. Right now, the strongest truth signal—the biggest, the loudest, the most listened to, the proudest and most ambitious—is the New York Times. Or more broadly, the prestige media. Or for deep analytic questions, the prestigious university.

The belief that “we don’t need a truth signal, the marketplace of ideas will solve it,” or “the marketplace of ideas, plus a simple heuristic, will solve it,” is conservative cope. Again, the conservative is always trying to do as little as he can get away with, then wondering why he keeps losing.

But actually, if you build a bigger, louder, higher-fidelity truth signal, you have a very good chance of becoming the standard truth signal—especially when the old system is in such obviously parlous shape.

It's more tricky to think of this subsystem as a profit center. And everything that capitalism does has to be profitable. Still: the direct effect of creating the strongest, widest, and most authoritative truth signal is the production of power. And if there is one lesson in history, it's that on a sufficient time scale, power always earns a return.

Migration and the sovereign firm

Published on 2024-12-29

Flushed with pride from an election win—alas, probably still just another cheap hit of publicity crack, huge in the moment and historically ephemeral; but who knows, eh?—the two halves of the so-called New Right, rationalists and traditionalists, have started our new era off in fine American style by squabbling in public over Indian visas. Cool.

For me, this spat just illustrates the inadequacy of the standard liberal framework of political science that history has condemned both sides to live in. Liberalism as we know it is only about 250 years old, a shorter lifespan than some Chinese dynasties. And only for about the last 50 years has it so completely excluded premodern thinking—the shared heritage of the European and antique worlds combined—that even most of us conservative intellectuals have forgotten how to think about political science rigorously within a preliberal framework.

We can still think intuitively, like peasants, about the meaning of the nation-state. There is much to be said for coarse peasant wisdom. But when we think analytically, like lawyers or professors, we have no choice but to think as liberals. “Conservative” politics comes from Locke and, at best, Cicero; “conservative” economics is from Smith and, at best, Mises. Great thinkers, but in a narrow tradition.

In this essay we'll develop an analytical postliberal framework that will let us think as concretely in an illiberal framework, as liberals do in their liberal framework, about questions like open borders and free trade.

The migration question

Very smart conservatives of today, when they think about immigration in specific, have no choice but to surrender to either of these modes. If you are against the free movement of labor, the only mode in which you can express yourself is intuitive, or even downright romantic. The more you do this, the more you sound like Mussolini. This doesn't mean you're wrong, but it doesn't bode well either. However, when you surrender to your analytical side, you can feel yourself turning into the world's worst kind of sperg. You know you are wrong. But all the known formulas say you're right. Wat do? In the end, the choice always comes down to what kind of person you are.

While Trump is a purely intuitive person—a genuine intuitive genius—Musk is something even more rare: an intuitive genius and an analytical genius. The trouble is that sometimes both these geniuses collide, and the latter always takes precedence.

This would be fine if he was using the right analytical formula. Unfortunately, Musk’s libertarian framework is the political-science equivalent of Newtonian mechanics: an oversimplification which works only in special cases. And even more unfortunately, our own time and place does not seem to be within one of these Newtonian envelopes.

Intuition can compensate only so much for bad analysis. Within Musk’s framework, “skilled immigration”—or whatever euphemism stands behind this term—feels like an easy win. Math always beats intuition. But what if the formula is missing a term?

Analytically, it feels like the effect of skilled immigration (abstractly) on productivity is not measurable but is quantifiable, whereas the negative impact (if any) on “society” is neither measurable nor quantifiable.

It’s hard to pick unquantifiable over quantifiable. What is “society,” anyway? What process of scientific government could support this? Once you get used to choosing anything intangible over efficiency, efficiency goes out the window.

Sovereign accounting and labor migration

The traditionalists understand an extremely important analytical principle, But they have no analytical model for this principle, so they can only express it intuitively.

In fact, the negative impact of free movement in labor, while hard to measure, is easy to quantify. The same is true of its close relative, free movement in goods. But Elon’s classical accounting formula is missing the term that would quantify these impacts. Let’s try to correct it by adding back the relativity term.

It is correct to define the government as a company. The nation is a sovereign firm. Or, if we prefer, the firm is a sort of second-order virtual nation-state. The two concepts are clearly different in a clear way, yet clearly related in a clear way. Can we generalize across them? Of course—but we have to do it right.

It is tempting to conclude that the economic purpose of a firm is to create valuable goods and services, whereas the economic purpose of a government is to maximize GDP (the total sum of goods and services created by the nation). This is what I call Newtonian accounting. It is actually wrong for both firms and governments.

This accounting is wrong for firms because maximizing productive output is not the goal of a firm. Maximizing the value of its capital is the goal of a firm. While these goals are directionally similar and often align, they can easily diverge.

Capital is traditionally measured by an efficient equity market. The goal of a CEO

is to make the investors happy by making the stock go up. The market's estimate of the company's capitalization corresponds to its estimate of its future profit until infinity, discounted by the interest rate. Because double-entry accounting, this must equal the total value of its tangible assets (factories, etc) and intangible assets (brand value, etc).

While profit generally corresponds to revenue, they are not the same thing! You can sell a lot of dollars for 99 cents. Moreover, estimating the value of capital involves a little thing called "depreciation." Factories, houses, and other forms of capital wear out when you use them. Some forms of capital can even experience "appreciation"—they get more valuable. Land can appreciate. All this has to go in the quarterly report.

If you ignore the appreciation and depreciation of your capital, you are driving a rented car. No one ever changed the oil in a rented car.

Maximizing GDP, as a national accounting policy, means we are maximizing the total utility delivered by the productive sector to the consumptive sector. All systems of modern economic policy—from socialism to capitalism—are agreed on this goal.

Socialists want to use the visible hand to shift production from luxuries for the rich, to necessities for the poor. This means they measure utility in a different way—a way not captured by summing up dollars. A thousand bushels of wheat sent to Ghana produces more user utility than one Patek Philippe sent to London. Okay, sure. (In case you didn't know, Africa imports 85% of its food.) Capitalists point out that the damage done by the visible hand often exceeds its utility even by the socialists' definition. Okay, sure. But notice what they both agree on: maximizing utility.

Isn't the goal of the productive sector to produce utility? What else could we optimize for? What other kind of formula could we optimize for?

Well, we could optimize for the same goal as a private firm—maximizing the value of our capital. This would involve thinking about—appreciation/depreciation of capital. But—what exactly are the capital assets of the state?

Human capital and the sovereign firm

Here is where Elon Musk and I disagree. Almost everyone today agrees with Elon. Even the traditionalists, almost all of them, agree with Elon—which is why they have so much trouble expressing their point analytically. Intuitively, they get it perfectly. Essentially, everyone today is a liberal—libertarians are liberals, conservatives are liberals, and liberals are liberals. They are all using the wrong analytical framework.

Historically, however, almost everyone agrees with me. The Newtonian or liberal view is in fact an English view from the 17th century. Unfortunately, just because it took over the world doesn't make it true.

The liberal, modern view is that the state exists to serve its citizens. The state, in its supervision of commerce, aims to maximize the utility produced by the economy. The purpose of government is to protect a free people in their pursuit of happiness.

The illiberal, premodern view is that the state owns its subjects. There are no citizens. There are only subjects—to put it as pejoratively as we possibly can, state slaves. The purpose of government is to render these slaves as productive as possible, which (because double-entry accounting) means making them as valuable as possible.

To a modern liberal, libertarian, or conservative, this is the most offensive possible declaration of “authoritarianism” or even “totalitarianism.” To Plato, it is Tuesday. Musk assumes he understands political science better than Plato, just because he understands physics better than Plato.

Actually, Plato is right. The nation is the people. The state is the owner of the nation—the land, structures, and people—which are its sovereign property.

Ownership means exclusive dominion. This is the relationship between the state and the subject. Some arms of the state may sometimes protect the subject from other arms of the state. But every state, considered as a whole, can do whatever it wants to any of its subjects. And inasmuch as it cannot—it is not a state at all.

Since a state is an organization which owns territory and people, the only difference between a state and a plantation is (a) size and (b) independence. On a plantation within a state, the relationship between master and slave can at least be checked by the state. Between sovereign state and individual, the individual has no defense at all. This is the very definition of sovereignty.

Anyone who does not believe in sovereign property is fundamentally an anarchist. That he still believes in personal and corporate private property is only a slight mitigation of his destructive and incorrigible leftism—which does to states what socialism does to companies. Fortunately, this anarchism does not prevent the sovereign state from existing—only from analyzing itself clearly and rigorously.

If the subjects of a government are treated as assets on its national balance sheet, as human capital, that means it owns them. That means it has to safeguard them. It has to protect and nurture them. And it is responsible for their appreciation or depreciation. Here is a way to quantify the traditional responsibility of the state for the common good—which conservatives, but not libertarians, believe in.

A government that does not think of itself as owning its subjects—perhaps some kind of temporary military occupation—can afford to disregard this term in the formula. This is why temporary military occupation can be quite careless of the common good. The general in charge is essentially driving a rented car. To traditionalists, it seems that Musk and his fellow open-borders billionaires want

to drive America like a rented car. But they need an analytical framework that can express this intuitive truth.

What is quantified does not need to be measured. The USG is not necessarily selling its valuable citizen-slaves overseas, like a European soccer team. It is enough to think about the value of a human being in an abstract sense.

But the classical state trades in an exogenous currency (one it cannot create), and its balance of trade is the exact analogue of the private company's profit and loss. When we see a trade surplus, we see a profitable company. When we see a trade deficit, we see a money-burning company. The trade surplus is a measure of the productivity of the state's subjects. Again, compare China to America here.

And we know what makes human beings more valuable—in almost every sense: work. Ideally, complex challenging work that tests the limits of some craft, skill or trade. We sense that a valuable human being, professionally or otherwise, is one who has done the most to develop a lifelong profession at the edge of their human capacity. China has developed not just by building factories, but by building people who know how to build and work in factories. Work and meaning and profit cannot be separated.

Humans, like robots, can be productive. But as capital, they obey very different rules. For a machine, production implies depreciation. For a human, production implies appreciation. There are exceptions—health-damaging trades—but they are exceptions.

We know what does not make human beings more valuable—in almost every sense: consumption. At least, consumption once it gets past the level of basic necessity.

The GDP mindset makes almost zero sense from the standpoint of nation as firm. In fact, the more luxuries you produce for your “citizens,” the softer, weaker, and less productive they get. And they do not just suffer economically—but also, spiritually. The spiritual benefits of challenging, and especially meaningful, work are well known.

Hunter-gatherers rarely feel like they are working. Everything is meaningful and everything is challenging. Is hunting work? Is fishing work? People sell real estate so they can hunt and fish. Who would hunt and fish so they could sell real estate?

When we look at (a) the common good, (b) appreciation/depreciation of human capital, and (c) net production of utility, we are struck immediately by the fact that (a) and (b) are clearly aligned, whereas (c)—the criterion that all modern thinkers agree on, the GDP metric beloved by libertarians and socialists alike—is the misaligned metric.

Analytically, America is being driven like a rented car. If not a rented mule. And when we cast our intuitive eyes across the state of the nation, we see that

it is being driven like a rented car. If not a rented mule. Suddenly, now, our formulas do not deceive us. The old formula was wrong and the new formula, which is even older, was right.

China has been managed on the new formula for 40 years. Whose economy is better? China, for the most part, imports neither people nor goods. They seem to be doing fine without any Tamil-Brahmins at all. Just saying.

Let's quantify the poisonous effect of importing goods and/or labor into an economy. In the new formula, this toxic impact is as clear as day. If the labor demand (elastic) in the economy does not supply quality work to the labor supply (inelastic), we will see clear depreciation in the human capital. We may not be able to measure this effect (eg, by selling random subjects on some imaginary global slave market), but we can define it in quantitative terms.

If there are not enough good jobs for all the Americans, some of the Americans will become useless bums. Or they will have to take shitty bullshit jobs, which will cause them to fall short of their human potential. It will leave them less valuable as human beings—as human capital—as government slaves. See how easy this new math is?

If it seems paradoxical that accepting the principle that “government slavery” is the key to human freedom and flourishing, it seems no less paradoxical that socialism is the way to ruin and impoverish a society. But it always seems to work out that way. Everything rots when it has no owner—human beings included.

Once we realize that, in a 21st-century economy, the goal of matching labor demand to labor supply is much more significant than the goal of maximizing the supply of comforts and pleasures to the population—either because, according to my super-sperry analysis, we are all “government slaves”; or because, in terms Hillary Clinton would be quite happy with, purpose, skill and meaning are more important to human existence than pixel count on your flat screen TV—we get to turn liberal economics upside down and make it make sense again.

For instance, if we have a lot of professional programmers who can't find jobs as such, but have to be Walmart greeters, we are racking up fat losses on these human assets. From a depreciation standpoint, it would be economically ideal to give them fake jobs. But ideally, they would not even know the jobs were fake... Instead, we are pumping all the appreciation energy into these H1Bs, who are human assets of another government, while our own human capital rots on the couch.

The difference between migrant labor and free trade is clearly a difference of degree. In both case, we are using foreign labor to fulfill domestic labor demand. Therefore, the appreciation is being foregone. And human assets depreciate if they are not used. They appreciate when used to the limit of potential. Again, we are driving America like a rented car. It is efficient to change the oil in a car you own, but not one you rent. We own this car, I'm afraid. We should act like

it.

Population acquisition

Of course, there is an easy answer to this question: keep the H1Bs. Then the state is appreciating its own assets, isn't it? Actually, it is capturing assets from other states. Sounds even better. Highly accretive to the balance sheet!

First of all, the H1B is not an immigrant visa. It is a guestworker visa—limited to six years. To the extent that it has become a path to permanent migration, it is simply being misused. The same is true of the famous O1 “genius” visa. There is actually no official USG program for rapaciously harvesting global human capital. If we were to design such a program, it would look very different from the H1B or even the O1.

In theory, there is certainly an economic place for guestworker programs. Labor shortages can render various kinds of activity uneconomic—even military activity.

If you need a rocket program to fight the Soviet Union, and the best rockets are made in Nazi Germany, why not import Nazi rocket scientists to put a man on the moon? Don't worry, you don't have to let them put a Nazi on the moon. And it is hard to blame Saudi Arabia for importing Texan petroleum engineers. What if, instead of importing H1Bs—we imported Aadhaar? We could even give it a name which doesn't sound like you just ran over a frog. And it's like with recipes—you can just import the code, not the coders. But—all these are genuinely special cases.

When we look at the economic conditions under which such programs were once established, we might find them reasonable. However, they are exceptional cases in the modern world. In these exceptional cases, we see that domestic labor supply is being stretched to its edges, preventing some whole new universe from blossoming. This is not at all the normal situation.

Actually, what we are doing with all this mass migration—in both the high-skill and low-skill areas—is a cope for our inability to develop our own human capital. It is especially noticeable that in low-skill employment, we have both a native underclass that does not work, and an imported helot class that does work. While the high-skill situation is more complicated

We cannot pretend that the government is following a rational policy in this one area, when the nature and motivation of the policy has nothing to do with this analysis. The USG is not focused on developing its human capital. To the extent that it is acquiring capital in this way, it is not because it understands what it means to be a country, but for the opposite reason: as a cope for not understanding human-capital economics. It wrecks its own capital as it scours the world for replacements. This is hosed.

Moreover, why would another country let its most valuable human capital emigrate? Especially a Third World country, which needs its Tamil-Brahmins far more, I feel, than we do. This question goes to the very nature of the post-1945

world order, which has always had a bizarre science-fictional Wendell Willkie telos of world government. Is there any life left in that dream? What if we shut down the UN, and no one noticed? Like: what are we even doing here?

Then, of course, we have the well-documented damage that diversity causes to the social fabric—in both neighborhoods and workplaces. This is settled science, so there is no reason to talk about it. It only encourages the deniers. In this house, etc. But we have to agree with the H1B-defenders that the impact here is not that great. Let's talk frankly about race for a moment. In this house, we believe in science—race science.

Within my lived experience, middle-class immigration from India seems reminiscent of Irish and Italian immigration in the early 20th century. While the Irish and Italians were quite uncouth, their children were only mildly coarse. Today their descendants, if they live in a few small cultural enclaves such as South Boston or the Jersey Shore, remain figures of fun; but the normal historical course, aided of course by a 50-year migration moratorium so profoundly racist that it distinguished between Northern and Southern Europeans, is for Irish, Italians, and Indians to assimilate more or less perfectly across generations—modulo a nontrivial decline in the national character. Which is sad, but probably would have happened anyway. Certainly the character of WASPs, Jews, etc, also declined across the 20th century. And while India may be in some ways the worst country in the world, we can't say they're not sending their best. All the evidence is that they are sending their best. Unlike some other regions you, I or Trump could name. And the best Indians can be excellent. Surely there is a racial reason why there are more Indian than Chinese CEOs. So, all in all—a mixed bag. In the Indian case it is less the action that is wrong, than the principle behind the action.

Because finally, across the board, we sense that all the talk of the objective advantages of mass migration is just what my father, with his Sopranos accent, used to call “pissing down my neck and telling me it's raining.” None of this policy is motivated by any kind of noble aim—not humanitarian empathy, and not technocratic governance.

I believe that many intellectuals genuinely believe in these policies for these reasons. Not everybody is a shill. And some live players are even intellectuals. I do not think Elon Musk is motivated by the opportunity to hire a few \$85K dealer technicians. But—the intellectuals are always the exceptions. And they are never the actual cause.

Mass migration, as a policy, is motivated by one of two things: corporate externalities or political ambition. At its most respectable, it is a way for businesses to save money by using cheaper foreign labor. At its least respectable, it is a design to gain power for a small “meritocratic” oligarchy over the whole of society, by disrupting the *philia* and *asabiya* of that society while diluting its vote.

The businesses should realize that they can still win by being the best, so long

as their competitors also must use domestic labor. The oligarchy should be deported to Mars. (Someone told me Elon’s real plan is actually to keep Earth, but send the libs to Mars.)

Alien immigration

The real systemic shock will be, of course, AI.

AI is essentially equivalent to alien immigration. The aliens are a little clumsy with their JavaScript at the moment. Their driving isn’t quite perfect either. In five or at most ten years—what will our Nepalese Uber drivers (here on God knows what visa) do? It was long the joke in Palo Alto that “AI” stood for “actually, Indians.” But now silicon is beating out carbon for reals. Look out below.

The effect of AI will be the same effect that technology has all across the productive sector. It creates tournament-economy effects in which a few rockstars rake in all the bucks. It is a worse destroyer of labor demand than the spinning jenny and the steam engine put together. It will destroy demand for human beings in the developed world, the developing world, and probably even on Mars.

Human populations, to governments, are left as residual liabilities that need to be fed. And, in some sense, pleased. Almost everyone is a zero-marginal product employee.

At this point, to protect any kind of humane existence, it is necessary to restrict the technology of production in a way that maximizes high-quality labor demand. We are essentially turning real life into a videogame—a maximally-engaging videogame. We may even have professional dragon-fighters (once we can bio-engineer real dragons).

The only alternative I can see to such a policy of artificial difficulty is one of “fully automatic luxury communism,” in which the total absence of meaning makes humanity suffer a moral and then political collapse. This political collapse seems likely to result in civilizational suicide, subjugation by barbarians, and a return to pre-pre-industrial technology levels (having lost all the secrets of pre-industrial technology as well). The species may survive, unless there is some kind of technical self-extinction scheme. Which seems likely. Covid, after all, was almost a dry run.

The origin of woke: a George Mason view

Published on 2024-12-28

“Werner”—not really his real name—is my old live-in intern, currently a sophomore studying computer science at a major East Coast university. Werner (follow his Substack) would love a more professional internship this spring and would be happy to chat with anyone who has an interesting slot, paid or unpaid, ideally

in DC. Not only did he get a 1600 on his SAT, but he is both very loyal and very fun to have around—though his views, as you’ll see, are erroneous in some respects.

[epistemic status: mid]

TLDR/On one foot: Like the theory of evolution randomly appearing in an appendix of a pre-Darwinian book on naval architecture, Robin Hanson figured out what woke is in a chapter of *The Elephant in the Brain* about the sociology of religion: an (accurate!) form of virtue signaling powered by Robert Trivers-style self-deception. If this “signaling model of woke” is valid, you aren’t going to kill woke with reason, or by making the government support it less.

For a young, right-wing world of ideas arriviste, writing about the origin of woke is like what the Upright Citizens Brigade was for comedians in the 2010s. This topic made future phenoms Richard Hanania and Chis Rufo famous, and it was on this topic that Bronze Age Pervert recently published his first-ever substack article. The subject so saturated the online right it spilled over onto the mainstream, with Scott Alexander weighing in. Aaron Sibarium is probably right that there is much more alpha in right-wing journalism than right-wing theorizing, but if you’re going to theorize, the origin of woke is an advisable area to work on.

I suspect Nathan Cofnas, a sharp Cambridge postdoc¹ convincingly making a name for himself in online right-wing politics, agrees with my assessment of this issue. I’d encourage you to read his hit articles on the subject—the lovely twin debutantes of his media res Substack—because they are genuinely great. But I will let Scott Alexander summarize the Cofnas Theory of Woke as follows. Since libs and conservatives agree disparities are environmental in origin and thus basically contingent:

“[P]rogressives can win every argument by using the line of reasoning above - “Just look how much inequality there still is, this shows there’s still lots of racism or at least the lingering effects of past racism, obviously our job isn’t done yet and we need lots more civil rights law to combat it.””

Conservatives, ever biased toward explanations that don’t blame whites and indifferent to the coherence of their beliefs, hold to the “Black Culture Bad” model—or ignore the issue altogether. The intelligent find both responses less coherent than the progressive position of rectifying imbalances. Woke is left with an insurmountable marketplace-of-ideas advantage.

Thus, to fight wokeness, Cofnas advocates shattering the “taboo” against discussing group differences which sits at the beginning of his chain of causal reasoning. Thunderously publicizing the behavioral genetics work that proves group differences exist, Cofnas argues, will “[destroy] the intellectual basis of wokism”; and spur an empirically backed “reevaluation of values” that consigns Western egalitarianism to the fate of Wotan and Jove.

A nerdy, Jewish new kid on the block straight out of the play 13, Cofnas

unsurprisingly frames his model against those of the more established Rufo and Hanania:

Rufo traces [the emergence of woke] back to the philosophy of “critical theory” or “critical race theory,” while Hanania points the finger at civil rights law, which in his view made it illegal not to be woke. On my account, both the embrace of critical race theory and the establishment of civil rights laws were more effects than causes of wokism. The driving cause of wokism was widespread acceptance of the equality thesis, and that is what must be explained.

Cofnas’ neat woke etiologies flow chart

To be honest, the online right could do worse than having Nathan Cofnas Thought as its “standard model” of woke. We’ve all read some absolutely terrible shit on this topic. At least the Cofnas model holds up even if you’ve heard the phrase “coordination problem” before and explains why smart people—who have measurably more consistent beliefs² and must square the equality thesis and the existence of racial gaps—are crazier on the issue rather gracefully. I’m encouraged Cofnas’s work has generated as much discussion as it has.

Still, I think we can do better. As Hanania himself hinted at in this pilfered bit of his paywalled podcast with Cofnas (edited for clarity Hanania’s endearing but Turing test-failing cadence preserved out of respect for his noble affliction):

Yeah. So yeah, so I mean, that’s, yeah, that’s, that’s true. It is, it is, you know, I could, I could buy it. I mean, the, you know, I guess the, you know, the other thing is, you know, the assumption there is that smart people buy things because they’re, you know, because they’re smart, right? And, you know, it doesn’t necessarily, I mean, it could be that they just, you know, buy things because they’re adaptive.

Right? They, you know, like, it’s like maybe the spectrum is systemic racism is the most adaptive thing to believe in. So is the second place in the marketplace. And the most adaptive thing for them to believe at a personal level and maybe societal level is that there are genetic racial differences in IQ. Right? Because so well, I mean, so well as I mean, not all smart people, you know, not all smart people reject it. I mean, you have some kind of, you know, constituency for it.

But maybe it’s just like, yeah, it’s not just they’re not following the logic. You know, it’s not, I just don’t get the intuition that they’re following the logic.³

The word “adaptive” is doing a lot of work here, but he’s on the right track. Hanania recognizes that it’s implausible that the logic of the systemic racism thesis proves ideologically decisive even for committed egalitarians—not (just) because the thesis itself is implausible, but also because that isn’t really how or why people form their political opinions. With this essay, I will explore further in this fruitful direction and spell out Hanania’s instinctive intellectual discomfort into a full-fledged model of how woke works.

The Robin Hanson Pill

As a proud person of TESCREAL, I couldn't help but notice Cofnas's model conflicts with one of the stylized facts of our traditional ways of sociology: that people generally form their beliefs not from an analytical weighing of relevant issues but based on what will help them as social creatures. I won't defend this with serious social science here because, one, I am a high theorist and it wouldn't help me as a social creature, and two, Robin Hanson and Kevin Simler do that in their magisterial 2017 classic, *The Elephant in the Brain*.

I am somewhere in this picture.

Following the traditional formula of the George Mason School, *The Elephant in the Brain* takes a well-established mainstream concept—in this case Robert Trivers-style self-deception—and takes it to its radical but patently correct conclusions. In many ways the most ambitious of the Masonian canon, *The Elephant in the Brain* has such radical implications for so many areas of human life that, in less scattered times, one could imagine it spawning an era-defining psychology metanarrative like *The Interpretation of Dreams* or at least *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. The last few chapters probe self-deception's implications for sociology, and I'd aspirationally frame this essay as a coda to those, which extends the framework to the phenomenon of wokeness.

Cofnas suggests that wokeists sort through explanations for disparities between groups, weigh them on their merits, and then unwisely discard the most obvious one because of an exogenous “taboo.” Alas, Nathan, in the cognitive world of the median ideologue, things aren't so simple.

Many beliefs are adaptive because they help us model the world accurately, but, as Hanson and Simler note in *Elephant in the Brain*, “The value of holding certain beliefs comes not from acting on them, but from convincing others that you believe them.” This is especially true when it comes to ideology. Simler lays out the case authoritatively in his short essay “Crony Beliefs”:

When we say politics is the mind-killer, it's because these social rewards completely dominate the pragmatic rewards [ie more accurate world modeling], and thus we have almost no incentive to get at the truth.

You can also find this in Bryan Caplan. In a market setting, if someone holds implausible beliefs (like belief in alchemy or Beff Jezos) and acts economically based on those beliefs, they tend to lose their money.

Multidisciplinary conversations involving economics nigh-inevitably devolve into a debate about the “rationality assumption,” which modern left-wingers—notably in the asylum where I was raised—allege is arbitrary. It really isn't. The tangible threat of losing money directly as a result of “irrational” behavior provides a meaningful check against wacky economic activity.

Things are different in politics. For a political actor, the cost of acting on beliefs that incorrectly model the world is very low; after all, the probability that one voter or activist will decide an election or decisively shape policy is vanishingly small. But your choice of what political team to support still has

an impact: an impact on you! As Steven Pinker notes, “People are embraced or condemned according to their beliefs, so one function of the mind may be to hold beliefs that bring the belief-holder the greatest number of allies, protectors, or disciples, rather than beliefs that are most likely to be true.” Lacking a feedback loop to punish us if our model of reality turns out wrong, on rarefied ideological and moral issues we unrestrainedly psyop ourselves into believing socially advantageous things. Quoth Hanson and Simler:

Consider the belief in an all-powerful moralizing deity—an authoritarian god, perhaps cast as a stern father, who promises to reward us for good behavior and punish us for bad behavior. An analysis of this kind of belief should proceed in three steps. (1) People who believe they risk punishment for disobeying God are more likely to behave well, relative to nonbelievers. (2) It’s therefore in everyone’s interests to convince others that they believe in God and in the dangers of disobedience. (3) Finally, as we saw in Chapter 5, one of the best ways to convince others of one’s belief is to actually believe it. This is how it ends up being in our best interests to believe in a god that we may not have good evidence for. [emphasis mine]

Thus stands the Hanson-Simler Model of Religion. Look upon its logic, its elegance, its psychological realism, and despair!

It’s a beautiful synthesis of what trad Marxists would call materialism and idealism. In Hanson’s graceful narrative, ideas do influence the course of history, but you can directly understand how they propagate in “materialist,” econ-informed—dare I even say rigorous—ways. Ideas are not mere appendages of material conditions. They can have their own agenda, a “direction” they push society in independent of whatever influence material conditions may exert.

It’s also a kind of synthesis of what rationalists would call “mistake theories” and “conflict theories.” You can trace ideological differences back to large groups of people having earnestly different and often unfounded interpretations of issues as in mistake theories. But they are mistaken systematically; their incorrect ideas serve their interests—perhaps not their straightforward, material interests as conflict theorists often allege, but generally their interests as social creatures.

The Microfoundations of Woke

I agree with Hanania that people who compare religion and wokeness usually do a bad job. But understanding the status econ commonalities between religion and wokeness is essential for understanding wokeness as a phenomenon—indeed, it is much more important than understanding civil rights law.

Firstly, the elephant in the Brai—sorry, room: wokeness signals that you are high status (more on that later). But even if wokeness weren’t high status, it wouldn’t be crazy to signal that you believe in the (Cofnas’ term) equality thesis. The equality thesis might not be as generalizably prosocial as belief in a God who damns wrongdoers who commit sins out of view of others, but it’s prosocial nonetheless.

Why? People who take egalitarianism seriously are more likely to behave well toward everyone, relative to nonbelievers. It's therefore in everyone's interests to convince others that they believe in the equality thesis. One of the best ways to convince others of one's belief is to actually believe it.

And wokeness isn't just about signaling generalized niceness. As the online right loves to note, ethnic tension is a veritable human universal that often manifests in costly ways. There are flashy, obvious cases like civil war and genocide, but plain old discrimination is bad for you and your firm, too. This would be the case even if civil rights law didn't make it illegal—just ask Gary Becker (it's not for nothing he made Tyler Cowen's GOAT shortlist). In an unprecedentedly multiracial, multiethnic, and gender-egalitarian society like ours, the ability to treat people well despite idpol-relevant differences is prosocial enough. It makes you a “better”—certainly less invidious—employee, customer, neighbor, and citizen.

How much of wokeness's prosociality comes from signaling your “niceness g-factor” and how much comes from signaling you can avoid offending idpol-relevant demographics (more crystalized) is hard to disentangle and probably contextually dependent. In any case, you don't signal you think everyone has equal potential by being nice to your ingroup—everyone does that all the time. To signal that you think everyone has equal potential, you should be nice to your outgroup out of commitment to your ideals. This sets you apart.

By making a land acknowledgment or posting a black square, I show I'm so moral that I'm willing to take the side of the outgroup over that of the ingroup. I take ostentatious, stylized care to promote the interests of the people who are most different from me. Because I just care that much.

The worse the outgroup behaves, the stronger the signal that my morality is that much more closely held, and I'm that much more discerning, intelligent, and committed to notice their hidden worth. This is what Larry Auster meant when he noted that “the worse a group behaves, the more the left likes it.”

In the transition from “micro” to “macro,” the prosocial memetic kernel of wokeness gives rise to more complex processes (which I'm getting to), as well as rituals and behaviors, many of which are not prosocial at all. But this isn't a unique problem. Belief in the Abrahamic God motivated lots of people to refrain from murder and theft—but it also inspired hundreds of thousands of Russian Skoptsy to mass castration.

Similarly, taking egalitarianism seriously motivates much of the American professional class to assiduously avoid alienating the idpol-relevant groups; groups that—let's be honest—often have a hard enough time in modernity as it is. But it also motivated the most prestigious political science journal to select an editorial staff that's entirely female, for JHU to proudly admit a 2022 Freshman class that's 17% white, and for state officials to plan to distribute COVID vaccines by race until Matt Yglesias told them off.

Macrosocial Behavior: What Makes Wokeness Such a Good Signal

We TESCREALists believe in Yarvin’s memetic evolution, and that wokeness has picked up nifty mind-virus (if that isn’t too negatively connotated) adaptations that make it especially communicable. The most significant of these is that wokeness is high status.

Signaling high status is a good niche for a meme—the universal human desire to acquire and project the greatest measure of status might as well be the foundational “law” of status econ. But status is a fickle mistress. For a meme to signal high status, it can’t be too successful. There must always be a significant and low status group that fails to espouse the meme for the savvy to distance themselves from. What’s more, these divides between the high status and the low status don’t just appear. Since everyone is always trying so hard to signal status, any segregation must be enforced by significant barriers; status signals, in Hanson’s quotable terms, must be differentially expensive—“more difficult to fake than to produce by honest means.”

In the case of clothing, for example, trendy styles change often, which gives the high status (who tend to have high-status friends) a leg up, as the literal information about what the high status are wearing filters through their networks faster. Though there are isolated elements of this in wokeness, too, the main barrier to practicing wokeism is less subtle: how much it fucks with American plebs.

Non-elites are always in the market for ideas that rationalize their hostility (read: jealousy) to elites, and the (in a certain, social evolutionary sense purposefully) flashy, bizarre set of norms and practices promoted by wokeness attract their ire like a Chinese fisherman netting squirming mackerel under a strobe light. This is the answer to the question, “If wokeness signals high status, why don’t the proles just adopt it so they look high status too?” The proles don’t become woke because wokeness continuously evolves to alienate them—that is what makes the status signal accurate in the first place.

Some of the ways woke alienates non-elite whites go against universal human nature. Denigrating your racial and sexual ingroup and praising the outgroups (especially not obviously praiseworthy ones) is a strong signal you’re an egalitarian, but that’s only because it swims so plainly against the current of human impulse. Elites are better placed to swallow this aversion because they are smart and sophisticated enough to intuit wokeness is high status to people who matter. Gary Becker would also probably note that non-elites aren’t as ambitious, and consequently care less about seeming high status in the first place; and that non-elite whites’ cultural, economic, and social spaces simply aren’t as racially and sexually mixed as the hangouts of their elite cousins (media, academia, law, medicine), so they have less incentive to show they don’t alienate the idpol-relevant.

Still, as Hanania understands, much of the emphasis of modern wokeness is just totally culturally contingent; i.e. as the plebs shift their sensibilities, wokeists

land upon new ways to provoke them. There isn't much hard social science in Hanania's article, but as members of a woke society, we can recognize this dynamic:

The upper class supported the public acceptance of homosexuality in part because it grosses people out. When it won that battle, it moved on to trans ideology, because the point is less some abstract moral conviction than it is about feeling superior. It is like this with every other social issue. Today, the "conservative" position on gender and race is always the liberal position from a generation or two ago, but the modern liberal position always has a need to go one step further in order to establish distance between itself and the rest of society.

Anti-wokes often bemoan how wokeness divides people into "oppressors," "oppressed," and "allies," but they don't notice just how important that is for wokeness' memetic contagiousness. Wokeness not only divides people into friends and enemies—it also motivates actions that *épater les bourgeois* enough that they're willing to make conflict—which then reinforces itself as conflict pushes the ideological enemies apart and ideological friends closer together. Divisive ideological Schelling Points like this are how social coalitions are formed.

In a society increasingly dominated by wokeness, we see an escalating "arms race" of signifiers designed to distance oneself from those of lower status. It's a race without a finish line; as status is relative and not absolute, each victory leads only to the next flashpoint. If you're looking for a sociological recipe for everyone to be obsessed with wokeness all the time, lo. Says Hanania:

The upper class supported the public acceptance of homosexuality in part because it grosses people out. When it won that battle, it moved on to trans ideology, because the point is less some abstract moral conviction than it is about feeling superior. It is like this with every other social issue.

What Anti-Wokeness Actually Signals

What does anti-wokeness actually signal? For all anti-wokes' pretensions about the logical unassailability of hereditarianism, most people who subscribe to it are just stupid and racist. As Cofnas noted:

I confirmed [the stupidity of most American racists] with GSS data, which show that, on average, whites who attribute lower black socioeconomic status to genes (i.e., admit to being race realists) have WORDSUM IQs that are 8.5 points lower than whites who espouse environmentalism.

And while there are smart, high SES racists like Cofnas, Hanania, and you, dear reader, their attachment to this belief is a perfectly accurate signal of antisocial things: They are either terrible at self-deception (the self-deception most every smart person you know does) or they don't care enough about signaling identification with the high status ingroup (the Blue Tribe).⁴

Over the last couple years, I've been to lots of right-wing parties and conferences, and I've noticed with amusement that a psychologist would generally have a

pretty easy time explaining the personality and/or neurodevelopmental disorders that cause someone to end up there. The men often have Asperger's or narcissism, frequently accompanied by inflated, caustic resentment against groups like blacks and Jews. The handful of women are even more consistently unusual.

Nick Bostrom infamously touched on this topic a couple of decades ago, though he didn't seem to understand it well enough to avoid the issue.

"For most people, the sentences seem synonymous"—and so they did.

Q. Why do these sentences seem synonymous? And why did the world chimp out at this mild-mannered Swedish philosopher—winner of the Professorial Distinction Award from the University of Oxford, member of Prospect's Top World Thinker list, and popularizer of the famous and trendy simulation hypothesis—for saying he agrees with a claim of unchallenged factual basis?—remember, all Bostrom is noting is the very existence of the black-white IQ gap, not commenting on its causal mechanism.

A. Because in the world we live in, "noticing" a group of people is dumb is a powerful signal that you dislike them and will mistreat them, just as assuming they have equal intellectual potential is a powerful signal that you like them and will treat them well. No wonder it's, in Cofnas' terms, "taboo" to bring up The Fundamental Constant of Sociology: The people who do so tend to be maladjusted, hateful, and crazy!

Early Great Awakening and the Hansonian Model

Thus far I've tried to present a newish theory of what woke is. Interestingly enough, this is not the chief question of Wokeness Studies as it currently exists. Capturing more interest is the historical, chronological question: Why did wokeness so quickly become dominant among Western elites when it did, namely in the 1960s? The two most influential works in this little field trace, and implicate, two fairly distinct 60s-originating trends: Hanania's Civil Rights legislation, and Rufo's the Frankfurt School-influenced American New Left. The title of Hanania's *Origins of Woke* itself implies this historical, even chronological problem; not what woke is, but why woke then.

These narratives, you see, are constructed atop the assumption that woke—whatever it is—isn't older than sixty-four. Yarvin, along with such boffins as Eric Weinstein, have increasingly challenged and litigated this assumption.⁵

Aspirationally, I'll caucus with Yarvin and this ad hoc "Early Great Awakening" bloc: There is striking ideological continuity between the woke New Left and the Marxist Old Left. What's more, for someone who's read *The Red Decade*, it's far from clear that the early 2020s are the global maximum in the influence of the radical left in American politics. And though Weinstein discarded this piece of Early Great Awakening thought like some poisonous gizzard of a puffer fish, there have been elites with proto-woke ideas for at least "two hundred years... and probably more like five." The case is made clearest in this paragraph of 2013 Yarvin:

[I]f you look for Americans in 1913 who have the same basic worldview of an ordinary American college student in 2013, you can find them. But you can't find a lot of them. The cultural mainstream of 2013 is not descended from the cultural mainstream of 1913, most of whose traditions are entirely extinct. Rather, it is descended from a very small cultural aristocracy in 1913, whose bizarre, shocking and decadent tropes and behaviors are confined almost entirely to exclusive upper-crust circles found only in places such as Harvard and Greenwich Village.

So this phenomenon plainly predates the 1960s, and a 60s-focused account of its progress is necessarily incomplete, what is left to explain the real history?

Anchored in universal relationships between signaling, incentives, and status instead of shoehorned historical trends, the Hansonian Model of Woke opens the door to an Early Great Awakening, just as an Early Great Awakening opens the door to the 60s-unbounded Hansonian Model of Woke. Why? The continuity that Yarvin spotlights between the Marxist Old Left and woke New Left extends to their psychological microfoundations.⁶ The Hansonian model, with minor tweaks, works for the characters of *Romance of American Communism*: Caring and knowing a lot about Marx shows you're an egalitarian (a prudent person to cooperate with for reasons described previously).

Why was the Old Left about workers, while the New Left is about BIPOCs? Elementary. Minority issues weren't as big of a deal when the US was 80% white. As the places American elites hang out became the most racially, ethnically, and sexually mixed social groups in human history, the returns to signaling you're good at avoiding intergroup tension increased. Since demand curves are downward sloping (i.e., people respond to incentives)—all things equal—one would expect the contemporary 18% white JHU to have more “look how not racist I am” signaling than 1950's 100% white JHU.

This shift opened the door to profound memetic change. The medium of literature is so significant in world history largely because it's so apt as the coordinating basis of ideological movements. What separates Marxists from non-Marxists is that Marxists have read Marx and agree with him, whereas non-Marxists have not. You could say similar things about Protestants or Rationalists. This gives these massive, variegated groups of people a coordinating coherence. Says Scott Alexander:

An academic once asked me if I was writing a book. I said no, I was able to communicate just fine by blogging. He looked at me like I was a moron, and explained that writing a book isn't about communicating ideas. Writing a book is an excuse to have a public relations campaign.

If you write a book, you can hire a publicist. They can pitch you to talk shows as So-And-So, Author Of An Upcoming Book. Or to journalists looking for news: “How about reporting on how this guy just published a book?” They can make your book's title trend on Twitter. Fancy people will start talking about you at parties. Ted will ask you to give one of his talks. Senators will invite you to testify before Congress. The book itself can be lorem ipsum text for all anybody

cares. It is a ritual object used to power a media blitz that burns a paragraph or so of text into the collective consciousness.

As demographics changed, racial issues increasingly replaced class issues as the main arenas for signaling competition—and the documents that had tied this movement together, screeds and battle plans, as they were, for class warfare, were increasingly irrelevant. Wokes lost the narrative consensus that served Marxism so well. Rufo missed this in America’s Cultural Revolution: the “Cultural Marxism” project was essentially a failure. Marxists can be expected to be familiar with the arguments of Kapital. Wokes can not be expected to have heard of Marcuse, Adorno, or even Angela Davis.

This relative ideological incoherence hinders the possibility of a scary, final boss Woke vision manifest in policy. A woke rendition of the USSR, created to reflect the vision of . . . Derrick Bell(?) is not really imaginable. Compared to Marxism, woke is a lower variance menace.

But perhaps more importantly, the shift away from Marx fundamentally altered the status economics of leftism: Whereas wokeism keeps out the unsophisticated and thus stays high status by being some combination of obnoxious, gross and scary, communism keeps out the unsophisticated with tomes of wordcel bullshit.

Being really into Marx isn’t just (in a certain sense—bear with me) morally impressive. It’s intellectually impressive. A Marxist knows enough about the dense social theory of a 19th-century German econ crank to identify with it. And identify they do! They’re obsessed with this lore—does any other ideology compare? In this respect, Marxism is more akin to Sikhism than fascism. If liberals read and conservatives watch TV, what do communists do? Paath? Literate culture-wise, Marxism is to modern liberalism as modern liberalism is to modern conservatism.

Hanania comparing liberals and conservatives in Liberals Read, Conservatives Watch TV. It’s hard not to see Marxists as “hyper-liberal.”

Ditching Marxism’s lore—and thus the intelligence signal—may have led to woke’s relative confusion, but it allowed woke to become a truly mass ideology. It’s easy to forget that Marxists have never won a majority in a democratic Western election. In the US, communist electoral performance is even more unimpressive. Said Yarvin, according to my handy internal transcript of his debate with Hanania (video to be released soon!):

one of the ways that you can see the strength of American communism in the 30s through the 50s is . . . [that] you can look at the number of votes that Henry Wallace got in 1948, which was about 1.2 million, and basically be like, that’s how many communists you have in America at this time.

Numerically, wokeness is unequivocally more successful than Marxism ever was in the US. It’s harder to find anything that neat to estimate the number of wokes, but I’d reckon it’s somewhere between the 1.6 million who bought White Fragility and the 28% of US adults who support reparations for slavery. Jettisoning the

lore made woke's incarnation of the egalitarianism signaling memplex less coherent (and smart) than its ancestral, Marxist strain, but it accommodated an unprecedented accessibility.

Why It Matters

Cofnas' chart, with my addendum.

In summary, wokeness is a very contagious, sticky meme. Espousing egalitarianism is a reliable signal that you are righteous and unlikely to provoke costly inter-group conflict. The offputting weirdness of the practices associated with wokeness means it filters out the racist and unsophisticated who are not only more likely to hate outgroups but also aren't as savvy about what's high status. Finally, as mainstream social science tells us, people are great at convincing themselves to maintain socially advantageous beliefs. Rufo, Hanania, and Cofnas are missing the true strength of woke religious practice: that it's an accurate signal of, dare I say, virtue.

This model may as well be "standing Cofnas on his head." Cofnas thinks that "wokeness is what you get from taking the equality thesis seriously." I disagree: People "take the equality thesis seriously" so that they have a justification to perform the behaviors associated with wokeness. Cofnas thinks smart people are more woke because they "are more likely to correctly determine that, given equality, wokism follows." I disagree: Smart people are more woke because they are better at noticing the behaviors that signal virtue.

Though Cofnas' articles are but a few months old as of writing, his drive and that of others prove the reality of racial differences animates the projects of Aporia and their sort, who have made it their chimeric empirical quest to demonstrate the genetic provenance of The Fundamental Constant of Sociology to an jury that would sooner reject science itself. I wish them luck, but I doubt that, on the margin, writing another killer paper that moves the—regrettably—hypothetical race and IQ controversy Rootclaim a fraction of a percent closer to one hundred will have an impact on the broader culture on any reasonable time scale. Showing the Kendian "founding equations" of wokeness to be unsound won't directly make wokeness stop being high status or an accurate signal of virtue.

My disagreements with Hanania are more limited but still important. It is obviously true that policy has stacked the deck against non-woke views, but that's not what makes wokeness so sticky and ubiquitous. What makes wokeness so sticky and ubiquitous is that it is a generally accurate signal that you are going to treat people well, and thus are worth cooperating with.

I read Hanania's *The Origins Of Woke* as the apotheosis of the libertarian online publication tradition, and—if Kendian Wokism has "founding equations" that all disparities are caused by discrimination—libertarian column-ism might as well have an axiom, too: that "all problems are either, one, caused by the government or, two, not actually problems at all." (I'll still read that garbage. They're usually right.)

Hanania's loyalty to the libertarian internet article medium meant overstating his case—he shows Civil Rights Law is odious and socially corrosive, but he can't prove it's originating the problem. Says Scott Alexander:

“[Apart from the bits about racial categorization] Hanania doesn't have much to support his claimed thesis - that civil rights laws are upstream of the cultural package of wokeness. . .

Even the book's own history of the civil rights movement seems to undermine its thesis. This history, remember, is that Congress tried to pass reasonable and limited laws, and then woke activist judges and bureaucrats kept expanding them into unreasonable power grabs. And that (he says) was the origin of wokeness. But if a movement has captured the judicial branch and the civil service, it seems like it must have already originated. Grant that this was an older form of wokeness more clearly grounded in the anti-segregation struggles of the 1960s. But that just brings us back to the question of where the new 2010s version of wokeness came from, which the book also doesn't answer.”

After all, the Civil Rights Act of 1965 does not, in its text or in its intent, authorize discrimination against whites. It had to actively be misread by an ideologically committed bureaucracy.

This has important implications, as if woke was created by government fiat, it follows it could be unmade the same way. Quoth Hanania:

The key thing to realize about wokeness is that it has never faced a real stress test. . . Of course, just because something hasn't proved itself to be Lindy yet does not mean that it won't in the future. If I was going to make the steelman case for wokeness eventually doing so, it would be based on the idea that it taps into something deep in human nature by appealing to the tears of women, so something like it was inevitable after they came to play a larger role in public life.

I think we'd be justified in concluding Hanania's steelman case for woke standing the test of time is valid. The world provides too limited a dataset to rely on for questions like “Is wokeness a paper tiger that can't survive without tons of state support?” But we can just see that wokeness “taps into something deep in human nature” (our compulsion to prove ourselves high status and worth cooperating with) and long predates civil rights law. Dismantling civil rights law wouldn't be a silver bullet. It would make anti-wokeness less costly, but wokeness would remain high status and demonstrative of virtue.

Bryan Caplan asks whether we've reached “peak woke”

That's enough for me to sit squarely in the long-term “rising” couple of quadrants of a Bryan Caplan poll. The arc of history is long, but it bends toward everyone acting more like Western elites; their virtue and status-signaling norms are no exception. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a gay businessman in Manila acknowledging the indignity of the Negritos—forever.

I think the right’s understanding of this issue has generally gotten worse over time. Peter Thiel can tell a lot about a company from its name, and subjecting our terminology to the same sort of analysis is telling. The term “virtue signaling” was deadly serious sociologically—have you seen the term “signaling” used outside of LessWrong in any other context? (If you’re sure you have, you’re more sure than me.) “Political Correctness” was certainly less descriptive, but as Curtis Yarvin would love to tell you, it wasn’t that long ago that influential Americans unironically and supportively used it to refer to the phenomenon.

The terms in use now are way higher on the Flesch–Kincaid. “Woke” is straight AAVE. And—believe it or not—the phrase “Cancel Culture” (or at least the term “canceled”) is gay AAVE: originating in “queer communities of color” on social media, generally in the context of the scandals of black celebrities.

As has generally been the trend in American right discourse (and everywhere else for that matter), simpler, flashier, and more monocausal memes have won out: Cofnas-Rufo style idealism and Hanania’s popularization of the orthodox libertarian take have replaced the implicit model suggested by the term “virtue signaling.” In a contemporary world of ideas increasingly dominated by Steve Sailer’s “Good Guys” and “Bad Guys,” this etiology of wokeness suffers from an excess of moving parts and nuance—an antimeme, not a meme, unflattering to wokes, who believe nonsense, and even less flattering to anti-wokes, who are too dumb and/or antisocial to believe nonsense.

On the margin, say “wokeness” less and “virtue signaling” more.

1

A lot of people don’t realize despite recent events, he still teaches classes at Cambridge.

2

I.e. are more politically polarized.

3

I’ll plug friends of the blog at Aqua Voice if your cadence is anything like this; expect consumer surplus.

4

Not only truth-seeking and meta-contrarianism, but very often also a twinge of the same nasty animus that animates dumb anti-wokes.

5

This is Lindy. The dating of historical processes is a worthy theater for competition between factions in a politicized field. In economic history, for example, the California School, of Kenneth Pomeranz fame, argues for a 19th century date for the “Great Divergence” in wealth and power between the “West” and the “rest”, while “Eurocentrics” support a far earlier one. Why? The

“true meaning” subtext is that left-coded California School wants the Great Divergence to be as incidental as possible (ie, not suggesting anything good about Europe), whereas the right-coded Eurocentrics want it to be the result of a persistent cultural superiority. Is it that surprising that Yarvin (who wants a totally new government) thinks the American elite was always essentially leftist, whereas Hanania and normiecons (who want to RETVRN to an earlier save file of American democracy) think it wasn’t?

6

Not that I’m the first to say that.

Chevron and the professional Republicans

Published on 2024-12-04

Some of my best friends are professional Republicans. Really. There’s enormous love. But—

Generally speaking, it is always better for your career to be a professional Democrat. But there are a few weird exceptions to this rule. One of them is when you’re an elite lawyer—because the Republicans get about as many judicial nominations, and thus as many judicial clerkships, as the Democrats. While it’s always better for your career not to be right-wing, it’s also way better to have been a Supreme Court clerk.

Moreover, there is a whole army of Republican administrative law firms ready to hire these young superstars, because the nation’s entire productive sector—or whatever is left of it—is constantly under some bizarre regulatory assault, like Elon’s problem of killing sharks with his rocket, from the hilariously undemocratic administrative state. Since Republicans are the party of democracy and Democrats the party of oligarchy, it makes sense to hire Republicans to defend the real America from the legal America. If “administrative law” is even legal—which it obviously isn’t.

But oddly—one of the main Republican causes appears to be perfectly inverted. Even worse, this is not just a problem with the old-school Mitch McConnell Republicans—as much as a problem as these people are. They’re a huge problem. But this problem, I am sorry to have to tell you, lives and festers at the heart of DOGE itself.

You see, these legal Republicans—this party—may Allah forgive me for calling them their true name—these Federalists have won a couple of big victories recently. In the American sanctum sanctorum, the holy of holies, the Extreme Court. I mean, Supreme. As dogemeister Vivek (rhymes with “we wake”) writes:

The Supreme Court overturned so-called “Chevron deference” earlier this year which is a seismic blow to the federal bureaucracy.

Under the old doctrine, federal courts deferred to agency interpretation of ambiguous statutes. As of 2024, that's no longer the case.

The overturning of Chevron deference, combined with the Major Questions Doctrine enshrined in *West Virginia vs. EPA*, paves the way for not slight but *drastic* downsizing in the scope of the federal regulatory state.

These cases—Loper Bright and *West Virginia*—are, at least in theory, direct attacks on the legal infrastructure of the administrative state. (Loper Bright is a hard 7 on my scale of epic case names, in which Humphrey's Executor is a perfect 10. *West Virginia* is a 1. Sad! But doesn't "Loper Bright" just sound good?)

You see, when some agency, arm or tentacle of the USG accuses you of running afoul of some regulation, you have three remedies. The first is to call them up and chat. This almost never works but is almost always worth a try. The second is to submit. The third is to sue. When you sue—whom do you hire? Basically: Republican lawyers. You see how the great food chain of life is functioning here. This is the genuine Tao.

The solution is part of the problem. The problem is part of the solution. If these agencies did not constantly try to do insane things to honest companies which are just trying to make a rocket, there would be no market for Republican lawyers. But if there were no Republican lawyers, you can't even believe the insane things these agencies would do. Would we have an economy? If you are not starving in the gutter right now, thank a Republican lawyer. You think I'm joking. I'm not fucking joking at all. This is the Tao. Nothing is more serious than the Tao. Mammon is just one aspect of the Tao.

So Loper Bright (repealing the "Chevron deference" doctrine, which sounds like when your wife gets tired of you driving around for a cheap gas station, and *West Virginia* (reinforcing the "major questions" doctrine), technically, in theory, makes it easier for your Republican lawyers to argue that the agency is doing something insane—or, in the holy language of the Administrative Procedure Act, "arbitrary and capricious."

Spring that one on your wife next time you have a fight. "Arbitrary and capricious." Admit that you don't exactly know what "capricious" means. But, like a nice caprese, it must involve goats? Your arbitrary, goatlike Federal regulator. Springing his arbitrary launch delays on you, with his little goat horns. Congress did not tell him to do that!

Technically, according to the sacred rules of precedent, *stare decisis*, literally inherited from the motherfucking Romans, it is now easier for your Republican lawyer to argue, before a judge, that the regulator has, like a goat leaping a fence, exceeded the holy democratic authority with which Congress, that very democratic institution, anointed him when, in 1971, Nixon signed some bill that said something like "save the fish." Sharks are fish, and rockets are dangerous to sharks and other living things—QED.

This is the culminating achievement of the Trump revolution: to make life easier for Republican lawyers. To make it more likely to win their cases—before all these judges, so deeply learned in the law, so sensitive to the precedent of their Supreme masters. Lol.

Obviously there are Republican judges and Democratic judges. Democratic judges don't give a crap what John Roberts thinks—what is he going to do? Arrest them? And if Republican judges dare to decide an agency is being arbitrary and capricious now, they could have done the same then. They are not being arrested either. Not even under Biden! Not even under Harris! They are not even being fired. They serve for life. And life, wouldn't you say, is good? It's pretty good for a good Republican lawyer. And you don't get to tell me they don't deserve it. They absolutely fucking deserve it. And the Republican judges, ten times as much. And yet—

Just think about the irony here. Which is the least democratic party? The Democrats. Which is the most democratic party? The Republicans. Which is the most democratic branch of government? The executive branch. Which is the least democratic branch? The judicial branch, obviously. The incumbent may always win, but at least there are still elections. That leaves Congress in between. At least it's kind of democratic. If you don't look too close.

So the cause of the Republican lawyers is to capture power which is nominally in the hands of the most democratic branch, but currently in the hands of a less democratic branch, and move it to—the least democratic branch.

Down with the administrative state. Up with—the imperial judiciary? What? Well... it does happen that Republicans have a 6-3 majority on the Supreme Court... of course, not to imply that judges are partisan... wouldn't want to think that... this is all about the principles of government that our Founders, Moses-like, left to us...

Again and again, we see this situation where, in the political air, these vast ethical theories are invoked, these vast battles of rhetorical are fought, and—on the real ground of real government, the battles are real. But they are hopelessly tiny and hopelessly defensive, almost comically out of proportion to the apocalyptic rhetoric.

Repealing Chevron deference was a generational goal of the Federalist Society—like repealing Roe, for the pro-lifers—like the Anschluss, for Hitler. And what in the end does it mean? Well—let's just say—it's not exactly the next Anschluss.

The reality, I fear, is that, before and after Loper Bright, progressive judges are going to defer to progressive agencies, and conservative judges are going to defy them. It is a bit harder for the judge, or to be realistic the judge's clerks, to write the deferential opinion. It is a bit easier to write the defiant opinion. But...

Vivek, a numbers guy, writes in the same tweet:

Lower federal courts have relied upon Chevron somewhere between 17,000 - 19,000 judicial opinions.

A 2022 study found that federal appellate courts applied Chevron in ~85% of cases involving federal agency interpretations of law interpretation is at stake. In ~60% of these cases, the court concluded that the statute was ambiguous (“Chevron Step One”) and proceeded to determine whether the agency’s interpretation was reasonable (“Chevron Step Two”).

Once federal courts of appeals reached that point framework, they sided with the agency 77% of the time. A separate study evaluated more than 1,300 courts of appeals cases from 2003 to 2013 & found a 94% rate of judicial deference to the agency position, at Chevron Step Two.

Sounds like a big deal to me! What do you think those “Chevron Step Two” numbers will go down to, Vivek, after Loper Bright? Depending how you measure? From 94% to... gosh, maybe even down in the ‘80s? Well, a career Republican can dream. Isn’t his place in Delaware a little cramped? A newer boat would save on maintenance... hasn’t he been living pennywise, pound foolish? Doesn’t he, after all, deserve it? For his work?

Under the tyrannical reign of Chevron, these blind servants of neutral, logical justice had no choice but to defer to the agencies. Now the judges can rise up, and stand up for what they know to be just! Granted, they can still defer. They don’t have to defer. And that will make all the difference. Lol. I mean, what the fuck. I mean, what are we even doing here?

Everything in America that isn’t a university, a hospital or a tech company is rotting, on fire or both. Literal alien hordes are marching across our borders in numbers that make the migration of the Visigoths look like a field trip. 40% of Americans are afraid to walk outside their homes alone at night. Our scientists, for no logical reason at all, invented a virus that killed 20 million people, then covered it up. Many suspect this, but no one really knows it. No one has been punished. No one will be punished.

The government borrows a third of the money it spends. It sponsors a civil war in the Ukraine, for no logical reason at all, which has killed 500,000 people. No big deal. Sure whatever. It sucks but anything else would certainly be worse. It’s the worst system of government, except for all the others. Besides if you’re right, no one could handle it. Also, look on the bright side. Before, the judges had to defer. Now, they don’t have to. And that will make all the difference.

All this energy—all these political hopes and dreams—and what does it go into? Billable hours for 135-IQ Republican lawyers. What do you think they charge an hour? Is it still in three figures? Lol.

Everything is fake. Everything is a scam. This is not a blackpill. It is a whitepill. Once everyone realizes that everything is fake—anything is possible. Until then, we’re still shooting at the red dots. “DOGE.”

It's not easy from here

Published on 2024-12-02

Well, it is easy from here. (Please read that first if you haven't already.)

It would be easy. It would be easy if we were pointed in the right direction. Fortunately for our enemies, we are still pointed in the wrong direction. Since this will not change easily, I expect it to be hard. I even admit that I want it to be as hard as possible, since I think a change in direction is necessary. Only unbent reality can inflict that change.

Napoleon said: always focus all energy on the decisive point. Generally in a problem there are few decisive points. If you focus energy on other points instead, you may be pumping joules into a problem that can absorb infinite joules. It may heat up and turn white and even spall a little, but you are just not going to make any kind of a hole. Always consider the possibility that you're heating a heat shield.

It is always exciting when you pump a lot of energy into some target. But you are always looking for some kind of threshold. What is that threshold, and how close to hitting it actually are you? Do you implicitly expect that 0.1% of the work can trigger some kind of autocatalytic process that will magically do the other 99.9%? Also: when an enemy bomber flies over you, and you see that it has red dots on the bottom where your friends already shot it—please don't shoot at the red dots.

Case in point: from Senator Mike Lee of Utah. Senator Lee was a Supreme Court clerk for Justice Alito. He certainly knows his constitutional law. Shooting at the red dots, the Senator remarks:

To which the Dogefather responds:

That's it. We're cooked. (Unless it's a cover story, of course.) It's worth reading the whole thread—it is pure conservative coal. A complete blackpill. (In fact, it was clear that “based” was over as soon as a Senator put it in his handle. It's ok, say “keyed.”)

To start the thread, Aaron Levie, a serious person who runs a major company, points out that the USG, which in FY2024 spent \$6.75 trillion and received \$4.92 trillion, can balance its budget by 2029 by spending just 3% less a year. He illustrates this with math. “Completely achievable,” he calls it, then takes an Uber to his condo on Pluto. He could ask Sen. Lee what it would take to persuade the Congress to cut federal spending across the board by 30%. Or 3%. I would buy a timeshare on Pluto first. Also, sadly, running a deficit is about the 20th biggest problem this screwed-up country has.

Nothing good will happen in these Untied States until the ghost of Ronald

Reagan is banished forever from the Republican Party. What did I say about shooting at the red dots? In 1981, America was still a serious country. Compared to now, anyway. It is a fallacy to assume that we can pump more joules into the same target. We have less to pump. When we print out the final report of DOGE and put it on a shelf next to the 47-volume work product of Reagan's Grace Commission, which will look more serious?

47 volumes! Think about all the people who put all that work into all those reports. Some of them must still be alive today. They must know that if none of this work had ever been done, the world 40 years later would not be even slightly different. Sad!

The basic problem is that there are three stages of political enlightenment and we're stuck in the second. Or at least, Mike Lee and Elon Musk are stuck in the second. If they could ever get to the third, continents will shift. But they won't. The stages:

Political symbolism is the same as political reality.

How can we make political reality match political symbolism?

What political reality works best with our political symbolism?

You can pump as many joules into #2 as you want. It is a heat shield. It will heat up and turn white and crackle and pop a little. Maybe some pieces will even fly off. But fundamentally, the system is built to resist the weapon that you are attacking it with. It has been resisting this same attack successfully since 1933, when it was deployed. Please stop shooting at the red dots.

What does Mike Lee want? He was a Supreme Court clerk, so he is at least as smart as you or me. In fact, the Senator is expressing an important doctrine in American constitutional law, the nondelegation doctrine. This doctrine went to sleep in 1933 and has never woken up. (Hilariously, the Wikipedia page for nondelegation in the US is just a link to administrative law—legislation delegated to the “executive branch.”)

What Mike Lee wants, in fact, is for the United States to revert to its previous form of government. From our Fourth Republic, which is a national administrative state, he wants to go backward to the system of the Third Republic, a national libertarian state. On its face, this seems not unreasonable. Perhaps the Senator has even walked around one of our major cities, and observed that every building in America worth saving, not to mention the whole American economy, was inherited from the Third Republic.

However, it is worth noting that as a matter of legal history, the “Constitution” is not a document of the Third Republic (1861-1933), but the Second (1789-1861). While our Fourth Republic, as it really exists, would certainly strike the historical drafters of this document as a bizarre mutation of their design, so would the Third. The Constitution describes a republic which is federal, not national—a entirely different form of regime. This is why we call states “states,” a word

literally implying full political sovereignty. Few in the 18th century, or for that matter the first half of the 19th, could imagine the Union having either the right or the power to coerce a state to remain in the Union.

The real Fourth Republic is the bureaucratization of FDR's de facto monarchy, as encoded in the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946. The Administrative Procedure Act, not the Constitution of 1789, is the legal foundation of the administrative state as we know it today. (Well, if you don't count the Civil Rights Act of 1964.)

Senator Lee's hybrid reverence for the Second and Third Republics—he feels no passion at all, I fear, for the Articles of Confederation, let alone the Instrument of Government—is a classic case of wanting to make the reality match the symbolism. Obviously, as an American, I have to say it's understandable. I think that in many ways, these regimes and the people who ran them were much better than ours.

But they were different regimes. Not only do they not exist anymore, but the forces which destroyed them remained—or so at least we must assume by default—active after their demise. We feel ourselves working against the natural forces of history when we try to restore them—often purely based on a mythical pseudo-history. Revived to gaze upon the present, the statesmen of the time would probably see the impossibility of restoring their past from our present—if only because they would so acutely notice all the ways in which the present is manifestly inferior to the past.

Yet there is method in the madness of Senator Lee, and of course of Elon Musk. Let's look at the problem from the point of view of—if Allah will forgive me for using the word—the classic California libertarian. (He's already unhappy that I used to be one.)

The libertarian notices that SpaceX has to submit a hundred-page report, or whatever, about the risk that their booster will hit a shark when it lands in the Gulf of Mexico. Then it has to pay a million dollars, or whatever, for someone with a master's degree to read it. For three months. Or whatever. Whatever it is, it's crazy.

Then they learn that this is not even the law. Oh no! It's not a law. It's a rule. Totally different thing. You see, laws are written, preferably on parchment, after some long parliamentary debate among statesmen in top hats who quote aphorisms in Latin. These statesmen were elected, on account of their well-known wisdom, by the holy and sovereign people. Vox populi, vox dei. That's Latin too. Congress—it's not just an archaic word for the sex act. Also, you have to look past the 13% popularity rating. (You can see how popular our Senators and Representatives actually are by the sheer number of people who regularly affix signs with their names to their own front lawns. Defacing your landscaping is the old American way to show deep loyalty and respect.)

So if it was a law protecting sharks from errant spacecraft, that would be one

thing. If this activity was sanctified by holy Congress, fine! Fiat justitia, ruat caelum. Actually, though, we are just looking at a silly old rule, made not by lawmaking but rulemaking, not in the sacred United States Code, just the inferior Code of Federal Regulations. Every American voter, obviously, knows the difference.

So we have a viable legal theory, albeit a Third Republic legal theory, under which this absurd shark-rocket rule is no bueno. The nondelegation principle prohibits it. The nondelegation principle prohibits the whole Fourth Republic. But any port in a storm.

We start to realize why this dynamic tension between what the regime is, and what it pretends to be, exists. Everyone gets sucked into the lie. Everything about it offers an opening to special pleading—even for its enemies.

What would it actually mean to turn the administrative state into a libertarian regime? Let's try to steelman this fantasy.

Administrative law is, of course, established by actual law. Congress is fully in charge. Congress just chooses to exercise its power by writing something like: the EPA shall make rules. About the oceans. And stuff. Then the EPA goes and writes all the rules it wants, so long as they are about the oceans. In some sense. These rules are just like laws, except they aren't laws, they're rules. Senator Lee objects to this nonsense, and rightly so—it's half Orwell, half Carroll.

But what is his alternative? Of course it's absurd for the US to spend any time or money on protecting Mexican sharks from falling rockets. Then again, it is not absurd for the US to prevent Elon Musk from using gigantic autonomous solar drift nets to vacuum up all the marine protein west of the Antilles, dry it, powder it, mix it with cricket flour, and send it to Mars as astronaut bars.

Today, this immense extractive project is barred by fishing rules in the Code of Federal Regulations. How would it work in Senator Lee's revived libertarian Third Republic, in which the Congress does not "delegate most of its lawmaking power to unelected bureaucrats"?

Of course there is no real way to restore the nondelegation principle of 1925 or the libertarian regime of 1925. We can pretend, though. Because the Third Republic was operating under the same nominal Constitution as the Fourth, we can pretend to be turning the clock back on this or that—not as a way to actually turn the clock back, just as an excuse to get what we actually want.

It's a port in a storm—just another club in the endless wrestle of Washington, DC. This is why the alliance between libertarian voters and corporate lobbyists has been so fruitful for the latter. The general principle of the former is their special pleading. Elon Musk definitely does not realize he is being herded into this trap. Does Senator Lee realize he is playing the Judas goat?

It is stunning to realize the Orwellian level of the language this regime uses for itself. Congress did not "delegate most of its power to unelected bureaucrats."

First of all, there is no actual delegation going on, because there is no actual executive branch. There is only an administrative branch, which is fundamentally a part of Congress.

Just as the President is not actually a president and does not actually command like a CEO, Congress is not a lawmaking body and does not actually debate or make laws. There are no meaningful debates. Bills are passed, but little of the language in these bills is anything the founders would recognize as law—it is budget, policy, procedure. It is administration. Congress has much the same role as the Central Committee in the USSR or the European Commission in the EU. But with elections. But no election in the lifetime of the Fourth Republic has come close to disturbing this system.

So at the level of his real job, Senator Lee just needs another weapon to give lobbyists what they want (and, of course, deserve). Nondelegation is just another legal device.

But at the level of the symbolic, Senator Lee wants to tell the story of a return to the Third Republic—a totally different regime than we have now, one in which Congress debates and passes laws, which are necessarily much more vague than the rules we have now, but much less vague than these “laws” which just delegate to the agencies.

In this libertarian republic, the law says something like: SpaceX must not cause any significant damage to the Gulf ecosystem. How do we tell what is “significant?” Well, we have a court. Strangely enough, we already use courts this way.

Hence Justice Sotomayor, probably not a favorite of Senator Lee, was so incautious as to blurt out at a symposium that “a court of appeals is where policy is made.” Then, our circumspect jurist remarked, “I know this is on tape, and I should never say that.” In the presence of the symbol, it is important to never mention the reality.

What’s weird is that libertarians like Senator Lee are supposedly not fans of “judicial activism” at all. Yet their antipathy to regulatory bureaucrats leaves a power vacuum that can only be filled by judicial bureaucrats.

At least the regulatory bureaucrats might have a chance of knowing something about either sharks or rockets. Senators and even their staffs are not going to become shark experts—they have to delegate it to someone. If the rules about what you can and can’t do to Mexican sharks are scientific rules written by oceanography professors, not case-law precedents written by activist judges, don’t they have a chance of making sense?

Maybe they do. But they don’t make sense. So obviously, something is wrong. But— isn’t a three-month politicized delay way better than some politicized black-robed dictator with a court? How did these things work in the Third Republic, anyway?

These things didn't work all that well in the Third Republic—as all the prog history books will tell you. Environmental protection was not a strength. But also, what was great about America a hundred years ago was that it was still a Third World country in certain ways. Therefore, there was more lubricating corruption. You could always pay people to get things through. It was more like China—including the part about, like, actually making stuff.

It was a different system. It had different pros and different cons. If it was possible to migrating back to this different system, it would take just as much power as migrating to any other system. Or more—because the system is inherently allergic to its ancestor.

Once we accept that the Fourth Republic is our real regime, which cannot be inferred in any way from the Constitution, we are at stage 2 of the above. We know that the executive branch is not an executive branch, the legislative branch is not a legislative branch, and the judicial branch is not (just) a judicial branch. We are terrified by the realization that we are operating a completely unconstitutional regime and feel the immediate need to restore the rule of the holy Constitution, which will fix everything.

The moment of satori occurs when we drop our mythic attachment to the past. All that is required—if that—is that we keep the symbolism. We do not have to believe in any of it. American progressives have not actually believed in the Constitution for a century. They seem to be doing just fine with that. Why can't we?

Rather, the question is: what form of government, consistent with the Constitution just as our present regime is consistent with the Constitution, would be ideal for America in the early 21st century? Once we know that form, how can we get there? FDR himself, in his First Inaugural, observed that the Constitution is no great barrier to any form of government. It could describe the Second, Third, and Fourth Republics. It will as easily describe the Fifth—which will be as different from the Fourth or the Third as the Fourth is different from the Third or the Second. History never repeats.

In a sense, when we acknowledge that the real and symbolic structures of government are different, we are saying that the Constitution has been hacked. In the language of security researchers, it has become a weird machine, manipulated in order to do a completely different job than its designers imagined.

American conservatives have spent the last 75 years trying to undo the hack. They are convinced that their mythic form of government, if actually restored to its “original” purpose (where “original” sometimes means 1960 and sometimes means 1790), would be the best government on earth. I see no evidence whatsoever to justify this faith. Frankly, I think there's a lot more evidence for Mormonism.

If this is the wrong direction, what is the right direction? How about the opposite? What if we don't need to unhack the system—what if we actually need to hack it better?

For example: we could restore the nondelegation rule and restore power to Congress. While this isn't possible, it must sound good to Senator Lee, who is in Congress. And, as we've seen, the idea is a useful tool for his work in Congress—the actual Congress, the Congress that is not a debating society but an administrative committee.

But here is another idea. Suppose the nondelegation principle actually isn't a problem. Suppose it's fine for Congress to delegate its lawmaking power to become rulemaking power in the agencies. Well, then, it can delegate however it chooses.

Here's what would be really cool, though.

Suppose Congress delegated its power, not to the agencies, but to DOGE itself? What would it take Congress to just let DOGE write the laws?

All and any of them? To simply pass DOGE's edicts as bills, without even reading them? Don't these statesmen, these top-hatted Solons of the law, already often pass bills without reading them—without even having time for their staffers to read them? They do. Where are these bills written? In some backroom. Where will they be written now? In some backroom. It's just a different backroom, that's all.

How does Senator Lee feel about this idea? How would he feel if Elon Musk, his best buddy from "X," was like: we're just going to write a bunch of laws and you're going to pass them for us? Wasn't this pretty much exactly what FDR did in his first 100 days? What's so un-American about that?

Obviously Elon Musk does not desire anything like this level of power. No, sir. He does not want to build a giant rocket that can park a tractor-trailer full of lead in orbit. He just wants the government to save money! Yes, sir! He'll pick up some Roman candles on the way home. Also, there is no way to put an 18-wheeler in space—are you crazy?

When we imagine the immense problem of making the United States government not a better version of what it is, not a past version of what it is, but just what it should be—even with the restriction that it still has to fit the old symbolic forms, which always turns out to be easier than it looks—we sense the immense amount of power needed for the job. Trump, Musk, and Co. are always talking as if they had this power—as if they could write legislation and order the Congress to rubber-stamp it.

To the extent that you think you have something, you have no way to get it. To the extent that American voters and politicians are convinced that they are actually in charge of Washington, and get to control it just because they won one Presidential election, the victory itself is sterile.

Once you imagine a world where the President could write rubber-stamp legislation, you see how hard it would be to repair and/or replace the USG even with this power. And if you didn't have this power—your first project would be to

find a way to get it. Your first project would not be to try to do the job anyway with 1000x less power.

The system has strong defenses against rolling history back. Its defenses against rolling history forward are much weaker. Is it legal for the Congress to delegate its lawmaking power to the executive branch? Gosh, it sure seems to be.

Why not stop delegating it to anonymous bureaucrats—and start delegating it to President Trump? Making America great again was never going to be easy. But if Trump can give us the law—as Lycurgus gave it to Sparta—it might actually happen. Or would that be going too far for you, Senator Lee?

That’s the thing about libertarian conservatism. It keeps selling a fantasy which it never delivers. It does deliver some real goods, but in a different way than it promises. And part of its fantasy is that we Americans can get what we want without taking any real risks, without making any real changes, without building any new systems, without losing any old illusions. . . all is as it always was. And nothing ever happens.

It’s easy from here

Published on 2024-11-26

It’s easy from here. That’s painful to admit—because it won’t happen. It won’t happen. But still, it would be easy. But still, it won’t happen.

History is full of this kind of pain. Do you think the good guys always win? The good guys, if there are good guys (always a dubious proposition) always lose. But they never completely lose. This convinces some historians that God is real; others, that he is not. What happens is always different. But the same thing always happens.

But why won’t it happen? Why not this time?

Power has a very nice trick. The trick is: it convinces you that it belongs to you. But actually, you belong to it.

One of the exquisite intellectual torture points of the dissident is always knowing how easy it would be—how easy it is—for his country, any country, to throw off its masters. It is always easy for a horse to throw off a man. But generally, the man stays on top.

What is power, in our country? Let’s call it—Washington. We don’t know what it is. Never assume you know what power is. Power never wants you to know what it is. Respect how good it is at this! But you can usually figure out where it lives.

Washington has a very nice trick. The trick is: it convinces you that it belongs to you. But actually, you belong to it.

This trick works at many levels. The average subject of Washington thinks of himself as a citizen. He somehow believes that the relationship between him and Washington is somehow categorically morally different from the relationship between the Memphis of Pharaoh Khufu and some ditchdigging Egyptian peasant in the 3rd millennium BC.

Actually, a state is a state and its subjects are subjects. There is no difference. Every state claims it is special in some way. There is no such thing as “autocracy” versus “democracy.” All government is arbitrary, unlimited and contingent. There are only different versions of autocracy. I’m sorry if you’re learning this for the first time.

A state is inherently continuous; democracy, the power of mobs and/or (real) elections, is inherently transient. All stable regimes are monarchical or oligarchic in practice. Democracy exists but only in the moment, or as potential. It is rarer than most think.

Fundamentally, if “democracy” means anything, it means a regime in which elections are important. Here are two easy tests for whether a phenomenon is important.

First: if no one told you about it, would you know it existed?

Second: how much more important could it become?

If we only listened to the language of the 2024 election, we would be very convinced—by the arguments of both sides—that something important was happening. This is more true than ever in any recent American election. But suppose we magically had zero access to political news. Could we tell, through our daily lives, that something had happened? What about after 2016, when similarly incendiary rhetoric was used?

Trump and his followers borrow liberally from the language of “regime change.” Yet in fact, across history, when a regime actually changes, everyone’s life changes. If you lived in East Berlin in 1985 and 1995, you did not need a newspaper to know that the regime had changed.

If any metric could increase a lot, it is probably very low. If something could be much more important—if it could be a hundred times more important, or a thousand times—it is probably not very important.

An obvious way to define the importance of an election is to ask what percentage of power over the state it grants. This definition is nice because it is on the unit scale: from 0 to 1. 0 means: no power. 1 means: all the power.

How democratic is your regime? How much power, as a percentage of absolute power, can a realistic political movement capture by realistic political actions?

Who has the rest? Someone always has the rest. Power is conserved. Of course, the idea of American political science is the opposite: we believe in

limited government—as if some paranormal power constrained the actions of an otherwise sovereign regime.

Alas, God appears not to judge the acts of men, so we need law professors in black polyester robes. If we define these people as not part of the government, then we do have limited government. If we define them as spiritually incorruptible, like the Pope, except that his robe is white and theirs is black, then we do have limited government.

However, if we define the judiciary as part of the government, and we admit that a costume is just a costume, then our regime is most definitely unlimited. Like Khufu's. Again, I'm sorry if you're learning this for the first time.

There is a difference between an oligarchy (like our “civil society”) and a monarchy—but both forms of state are equally arbitrary. Their rulers have the same arbitrary power over their subjects. And what about democracy? Now we can measure it.

If winning gives you 1% of absolute power, the election is 1% of a democratic election. Or, to clarify, an absolute election. In an absolute, 100%, 200-proof election, the winner takes full control of the state—like the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Allies in Germany, or the Federal Republic in East Germany.

Since winning the 1932 election gave FDR way more than 1% of absolute power, we can't even say that absolute democracy can be new to American history. Since all our political factions today are FDR respecters, none of them can argue that an absolute election, like that of 1932, is impossible, or illegitimate, or un-American, today. We got here with an absolute election, and we have the right to leave in the same way.

At least FDR had told his voters that, if elected, he would seize absolute power! Oh wait, he hadn't. There's still the possibility that some wag might sneak FDR's First Inaugural onto Trump's teleprompter in January. Would he notice? Would he stop? Would he just plain love it? FDR and the Donald have rather similar personalities. . .

FDR and Khufu are both dust. They both achieved roughly the same level of authority over the organizations they ran. Those organizations had roughly the same authority over the populations they controlled. Washington has the same authority today. You believe it belongs to you. But you belong to it. But at least, there is no FDR or Khufu. It's an oligarchy, not a monarchy. That matters. But a state is a state.

If our “citizen” could understand that not only is there no difference, but there can be no difference—he would win instantly. If he realizes it tomorrow morning, by 4pm Khufu is in an Uber, trying to make the 6:51 to Dubai while his passport still works. The regime is always smaller than the people and cannot resist them in any way—just like the man and the horse. (Actually any horse can literally kill you any time it likes.)

How? Oh, I don't know. We'll see.

The politicians

But this trick does not just work on the spectators. It works on the players, too.

For example, as an elected politician in Washington, you are constantly made to feel important. There are a thousand tiny rituals made to remind you, at a deep testicular level, that you matter. People take pictures with you. Et cetera. Et cetera. You know you are not Khufu, but you still kind of feel like Khufu.

Yet you also realize at a rational level that Washington would function just as well, if not better, without any politicians. Certainly, the last days of the Biden administration demonstrate that Washington does not need a President. And the President himself is only one small part of the White House. Washington needs a White House, but only to resolve interagency conflicts. But it could always just flip a coin.

In a sense, America does not have a President. If it had a President, it would have a chief executive of the executive branch. For that, it would have to have an executive branch. The agencies of this branch would have to be executive organizations—with chief executives of their own, whose goals and resource budget the President sets.

In an executive organization, every node in the organizational chart has a goal and a set of resources, including direct reports who can be given goals and resources. This is how a company works. This is how an army works. This is not how Washington works. Until you understand this about Washington, you are in Don Quixote world.

America has no executive branch. It has a procedural branch: the administrative or “deep” state. In this procedural branch, every employee in every agency, from top to bottom, has not goals, but duties. These duties are set by rules and procedures. These rules and procedures are set not by the executive branch, but the legislative branch.

But the legislative branch is elected, too! Yes—elected with a 98% incumbency rate (in the House), and 90% (in the Senate)—then subjected to a seniority-driven committee system mentioned nowhere in the Constitution, but seemingly cribbed from the Most Serene Republic of Venice. Talk about doges! Yes, the legislative branch is elected.

You might think of our legislative branch as a parliamentary body. Indeed, at its center is a classic parliamentary debating chamber. But if this chamber was literally filled in with concrete, if nothing like what happens there now ever happened anywhere again, the actual work of Capitol Hill could continue undisturbed. This is true, too, of every parliamentary body on Earth. There is no body of statesmen that decides on policy by open debate. There are no statesmen at all. There are politicians. If they debate, it is to pretend. Generally

their function is to raise money so they can keep getting elected. And if they do keep getting elected, they rise in the bizarre Venetian seniority system.

Yet the Hill is an extremely functional sovereign bureaucracy. Legislation still works. It can still make serious changes to Washington. Politicians are mostly fundraisers and PR fronts, but Hill staffers do actual, serious governance work. It's a career that can be a career in itself, but that can also point into the agencies, lobbying, or activism. But—

Not only do the legislators not proactively drive legislation, the staffers do not even generally write it. The role of the Hill, in “our democracy,” is to select, from the vast arena of ideas championed by some lobby or movement, whose language becomes law.

Broadly speaking, lobbyists exist to suborn the government for money; activists exist to suborn the government for power. Either may be working for good, or evil, or both. Both will write all the legislative or appropriations language you want. Neither has to be elected by anyone. But you do elect the empty names on lawn signs who they bribe.

This is Capitol Hill. It actually runs the country. Hardly anyone in America has any real idea what does. It has a 13% approval rating. It is totally impervious to elections. “Our democracy,” folks.

(If you watch a TV debate and have to drink every time a Democrat says “folks,” you’ll go the way of Dylan Thomas well before the intermission. These days, even if you just drink when the Republican says “folks,” tomorrow morning won’t be pretty. This is new. It feels sinister. Folks! I’m not sure I understand it fully, folks.)

So the Congress is a kind of breakwater against democracy. Behind this wave-barrier is—true sovereignty, which is inherently permanent. Inasmuch as Washington has a center, that center is the Hill. The Hill is the matador. The White House is the cape. Sorry, voters.

Elon and Leto: the DOGE story

Elon Musk has gored the cape. He has all Trump’s power behind him. What does he get from this? He gets appointed to a blue-ribbon commission. A FACA committee:

The Federal Advisory Committee Act defines advisory committee as “any committee, board, commission, council, conference, panel, task force, or other similar group” that dispenses “advice or recommendations” to the President of the United States, and excludes bodies that also exercise operational functions.

Excludes bodies that also exercise operational functions! I can’t even. But the good news is, “DOGE” will “dispense advice or recommendations.”

Let me repeat this, since it’s so funny: the “Department of Government Efficiency” is not even part of the government. It literally has no power of its own. Everything

Elon will be doing now, he could have done six months ago.

The result of this exercise will be a report which suggests to various agencies how they should save money. Or something. Imagine if Elon Musk had provided “advice and guidance” to Parag Agrawal. I think he tried that first. Lol.

What will it suggest, exactly? It will suggest some actions. Here are the forms that these actions could take. There are two of them: executive actions and legislative actions.

(I think a commission of this kind could take a really radical turn and suggest judicial actions—new interpretations of the law that let us send the libs to the crystals. But it’s not clear that America is quite ready for this level of new-wave political science.)

Legislation

Legislation is how anything really serious gets done in DC. Legislation may even be a way to compel an agency to do something it doesn’t want to do. It will at least have to pretend. It may not do it quickly, cheaply, or effectively. It will have to do something.

Moreover, legislation has effectively unlimited power upside. Congress could very easily abolish the Department of Education. Or the Department of State. It won’t, though—not because America needs these agencies, though it may, but because no such action is in the interest of any legislator, staffer, lobbyist or activist.

So, DOGE may suggest some legislation. The Congress will read its report and be like, golly gee! We could save money for the taxpayers! Why didn’t we think of all these brilliant ideas? Lol.

In this, DOGE perfectly echoes its 40-year-old predecessor, the Grace Commission, for which the slogan “drain the swamp” was actually coined. The Grace Commission spent \$75 million to create a 47-volume report. It identified \$424 billion of savings from implementing its recommendations. In the end, twelve of its recommendations were passed into law, saving somewhere between two and five billion dollars. I guess that’s a good return on a \$75 million report. Let’s see if Elon and Vivek can match it.

It’s unfair, of course, to laugh. The DOGE guys understand this perfectly and have already announced that DOGE will focus on executive actions.

Executive action

Executive actions are executive orders. EOs have the legal force of a tweet. You can’t go to jail for disobeying a tweet, even if the President tweeted it. Or an EO.

In real life, EOs work when they order an agency to do something it wants to do. In fact, they are generally written by the agency itself. They are certainly reviewed by the agency. EOs are not written high at 3am by Elon Musk with

a sharpie on a Denny's napkin, even if they probably should be. If you know DC, can you make something happen with an EO? Of course. Depends what, though.

Now, to steelman this plan, there are two genuinely new and meaningful ideas in the DOGE literature that I've seen. One is that DOGE will work directly with the new and extremely capable OMB director, Russ Vought (watch his Tucker interview).

OMB was actually designed, as FDR's Bureau of the Budget, as a sort of secondary government control device. Here's Time Magazine in 1945, describing the powers of its first leader, Harold Dewey Smith:

The Bureau of the Budget is generally thought to be a branch of the Treasury which collects and adds up what the various departments of the Government would like to spend during the coming year, and presents the figures each January in a bulky tome called the U.S. Budget. Except that the Bureau was transferred in 1939 from the Treasury to the Executive Office of the President, this is true.

If Harold Smith had the title that fits his job, he would be called General Manager of the U.S. Government. As early as 1918, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt had urged on the House Appropriations Committee a plan to create a budget bureau which would be the central control agency of the Government.

His reasoning was simple and logical. Government agencies do 10,001 jobs, from building battleships to advising farmers about the pink bollworm. But they all do one thing in common: spend money.

A Budget Bureau should be in an ideal position to survey and coordinate the whole activity of the Government, inquiring into purposes and projects, checking performances, uncovering and eliminating extravagance, duplication, confusion.

The second idea is that the Trump administration will directly challenge one of the most unconstitutional unconstitutional abuses of the post-Watergate Congress: the unconstitutional Impoundment Control Act.

If the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 (America's true constitution, some say) began the process of making the White House ceremonial, the ICA completed it. When the Supreme Court gave Congress the power to force the President to spend money, the legislative branch completed its capture of the executive branch.

The Deep State made sure its subjects could never again try to escape legally by electing a rogue President, who theoretically could even kill an agency by just not spending its budget. Well, the American people have just elected a rogue President. The great prophecy of doom was true. The hour has come round at last.

So: we reforge the +5 sword of Harold Dewey Smith. We grant it to Russell Vought, our 9th-level warrior-priest. He will do 3d6 of damage with it, with +6

against libs. When the libs object, as they will, he will cast a prayer spell to the Supreme Court.

Once these carefully-appointed gods, in their black polyester robes, approve, Vought will be able to cast the spell of Rescission, which has a defunding effect on libs, orcs and gelatinous cubes. In theory, he could find that the whole State Department is a waste of money (because Zoom), sell off the embassies, and make the FSOs buy their own plane tickets home. Tired: defund the police. Wired: defund the empire.

In theory. We are always winning in theory. In theory, we are tired of winning. Will anything like Elon's \$2T savings (roughly the results of the Grace Commission, at least as promised) happen, not in theory? Lol. Let's get back to reality here.

Basically, DOGE is promising to save the government money through... bureaucratic trench warfare. If you think an executive order is in any way executive, like private sector executive, like actually executive—read about how the process works.

The funniest part of it is that EOs must be based on legal authority. In most cases, the constitutional authority they are based on is—not the inherent Article II power of the executive, but Article I legislative power delegated to the executive. The President, like the rest of the executive branch, acts not as the President, but as an agent of Congress. “Agent of Congress” is not the way they'd say it in prison.

Of course, Congress dictates not just the budget, personnel and policy of the so-called “executive branch,” but even of the Executive Office of the President (EOP) within it. It's a wonder the “leader of the free world” can even decide when to take a dump.

Fundamentally, bureaucratic trench warfare is (a) their strength, not our strength. Our strength is real executive action—which is nowhere in sight, not even at “our” OMB. Also, we need to understand how hard saving money is in Washington, DC.

Saving money means it doesn't go to someone. Saving money means making enemies. No one wants enemies.

While no one in Washington particularly has an incentive to care about saving money—some people still care anyway. The worst thing about Washington is that it's not just that some of them are good people. Most of them are good people. Washington is made of good people. That's the most appalling thing about it.

My father was America's consul in Porto, Portugal. He realized that the true purpose of our Consulate in Porto, which is more or less the SF to Lisbon's LA, was to monitor the strategic port reserves in Vila Nova da Gaia. When oceans

are battlefields, master and commander must bond over port! Naval power is port power. The port must flow...

But since the Napoleonic Wars are over and you can get an Uber from Porto to Lisbon, maybe the US taxpayer can trust the Portuguese to guard their own port cellars... using this impeccable logic of state, my dad got his own post, obviously not a hardship post, closed down. Result: he never worked in EUR again.

My father's cousin Howie worked at DoD. I am fuzzy on the details, but Howie at some point identified some way that Washington could obviously save, like, a clear hundred million dollars. Or so. He spent ten years working on making this happen. Then he dropped dead at fifty of a heart attack. I think it did happen, though.

Elon isn't the first Mr. Smith to come to Washington. It's engineered to resist them. Imagine Elon Musk and Donald Trump as the fierce Pacific surf that, every winter, batters the rocky coast of Northern California. Imagine Washington, DC, as the yacht marina in Redwood City ("Climate Best By Government Test"), behind a breakwater in the Bay. In Pacifica, the great waves shake the pier like an artillery boom. In Redwood City, if the wind is still, you can shave in your reflection. Maybe Elon is a real tsunami, an asteroid in the Pacific, an astronomical catastrophe—so you miss a spot.

What's truly crazy about DOGE is that the hard part is not identifying "inefficiency" in Washington. If you point an orgchart shotgun at any part of Washington, any organ or tentacle or division, the right thing, abstractly, is to shoot it. Here's why:

The organ is doing something. If that project is not actively harmful, it is probably at least useless. If it is not useless, it is probably at least misguided. If its purpose is not misguided, its organization probably at least needs to be replaced. If its organization does not need to be replaced, it probably at least needs to be completely restructured. And if it does not need to be completely restructured, it is probably quite inefficient. Mere inefficiency is thus an unlikely best-case scenario.

But every recommendation in the "DOGE" report, if it goes anywhere at all, will land on the desk of its natural enemy: the bureaucrat whose budget it is trying to cut. His first action will be to write a memorandum, ten times as long as the recommendation itself, about why this is a ridiculous and disastrous and impossible idea.

Somewhere along the line, it becomes a court case. Obviously, the rescission is enjoined until the case ends. It ends up at the Supreme Court, maybe in two years. What does the Court say? It doesn't want to say no. It doesn't want to say yes. It has every reason to say maybe—to kick it down to a lower court.

Thus goes the tennis game. And while it is too simple to say that the White House has to lose all such games, it cannot win any one without an immense

investment of energy. And most importantly, each game is separate. It doesn't scale.

DOGE itself is one process—but each recommendation it seeks to enact is (at least) one process. The report is this vast collection of potential tiny wins, each of which is barely worth the cost to collect—as a fiscal dividend of power.

The war of DOGE splinters into a thousand tiny battles over a thousand bureaucratic fortresses, each a veteran of decades of budgetary infighting. In each of these battles, the attacking public has no interest at all. For the defenders, it is career life or death.

You can excite the public with DOGE in general. But not one recommendation I can imagine it making would be even slightly exciting to the public in general. You are just picking a thousand fights with a thousand sharks. In each case, you are fighting the shark in the water. And what, exactly, do you get if you win? Some shark meat?

Moreover, because the Republicans still do not see themselves as seeking power, only good government, these wins are dead-end wins. They do not produce more power—only good government. In the grand scheme of things, is it very good government? Are ya winning, son?

Even if DOGE could cut \$2T a year from the budget, how many personnel would that actually attrit? Enough to matter? It's just not a serious or comprehensive approach.

Since we need historical examples of regime that are both as recent, and as orthodox, as possible, the obvious choice of gold standard in absolute regime change has to be the denazification of Germany. Imagine if our approach to regoverning Germany in 1945 had started with—a blue-ribbon commission on anti-Semitism in the SS? Lol.

Admittedly, the denazification of Germany was a gnarly and much too brutal process, even kind of Stalin-tier in ways. The Nazis burned their piles of books. They burned Magnus Hirschfeld's whole library. And filmed it. Outside of special collections (to this day, you need academic research credentials to access these poison cabinets), the Allies tried hard to pulp every book ever printed in Nazi Germany. They didn't film it.

Was this necessary? Idk. But you can't say it didn't work. Maybe, instead of starting here and ratcheting it up, we could start there and ratchet it down.

This is why everyone else thinks I'm blackpilled. I'm not blackpilled. No—everyone else—including the people who matter—especially the people who matter—is on crack. What the hell are you people smoking? I guess that's why they call it a "whitepill."

With a pocket full of these magic white rocks, the politician is in exactly the position of the subject. The subject, who does not matter, is flattered that he matters. The politician, who kind of matters, is flattered that he matters. Even

Elon Musk is bowled over by how much he matters. (To be fair, he was also bowled over by Amber Heard.)

If you want to defeat your enemy, the simplest way is to convince him that he has won, when in fact he hasn't won shit. He might even be winning. Suppose he's winning. Just convince him that he's won, and he is finished. The oldest Jedi mind trick in the book. He thinks power belongs to him. But he actually belongs to it—that is, to you.

In the American postwar regime, do you know what a Republican administration is? It is Duke Leto "in power" on Dune.

Leto lands on Arrakis and he's touring the spice mines, throwing dinner parties, doing this useless Duke celebrity stuff. What would a Harkonnen do? What would Feyd-Rautha do? Doesn't Barron have a kind of Feyd-Rautha vibe? Even before the inauguration, his elite security teams are already fanning out across the planet, dragging antifa into big dragonfly vans. Harkonnen hackers have prepared a full-stack Palantir-ready solution which chips the Fremen, like wildlife. Feyd's first act is a speech to his enemies, lined up kneeling in some kind of Bukele-tier prison. He generously offers them the gift of life...

I'm not saying this is the right thing, either. We don't have to go full Harkonnen. But instead of starting here and ratcheting it up, we could start there and ratchet it down.

The reality is that a symbolic sovereign can always reactivate itself, just by acting. I am completely convinced (and have talked to various people in London about this; their opinions vary in amusing and predictable ways) that if Charles III woke up tomorrow morning, and decided to regain the powers of Henry VII—if also somehow magically gaining the talents of Henry VII—he could rule by decree and be obeyed. To make this work, he would only need one more thing: he would have to know where he was going.

Amongst persons in Britain capable of violence, emotional loyalty to Westminster is nil. Therefore, the regime can fall without any violence whatsoever: QED. Of course, power is habitual obedience and everyone in Britain, violent or not, is used to obeying Westminster. Regime change is a structured discontinuity in this habitual obedience. It must never be forgotten that regime change is a change to obeying something else.

When a power is confident, dominant and capable, its enemies melt away like snow. When it feels weak and incompetent, it is meat. And when it feels capable, but is actually weak and incompetent—because it is observing and acting in unreality—it is the flabbiest, most delicious meat of all.

I've seen this effect three times in my political lifetime: Trump 47, Trump 45, and 9/11. Each time the libs fled before some perceived threat. Trump 47 is by far the weakest—no one in DC is genuinely worried about it. It's all performative fundraising rhetoric. Can the transgender Congressperson use the women's bathroom? The Congress, I feel, must be the master of its own house.

And rank hath its privileges. Maybe any Senator or even Representative may use any bathroom—not just on the Hill, but also in public facilities, such as airports—or even the nursing vans, to pound one out. . .

(One of my theories about 9/11 is that the libs were much more terrified of its political consequences than they needed to be, because the guilty flee where no man pursueth—and they were terrified of their deep historical ties to Arab terrorism. Like, Yasser Arafat. Al-Qaeda was not ISIS. It was the last 20th-century terrorist movement, with way more Islam but still deep “Carlos the Jackal” vibes. Osama as the Che of Araby. For all the Allah, al-Qaeda was still a revolutionary phenomenon.

This, I theorize, is why white-shoe lawyers still go to Guantanamo “pro bono” for al-Qaeda, whereas the much larger remains of ISIS rot in a camp in Syrian Kurdistan. If you read Osama’s speeches, he is concerned about many progressive issues: climate change, for instance. Often you could be almost reading Obama. ISIS was not really into climate change. This is one of many reasons it’s fine to put them all, with their whole families, in a generational concentration camp run by a hostile ethnic militia. I’m actually surprised the January 6 rioters weren’t sent to Syrian Kurdistan—what’s cool is, unlike Guantanamo, it doesn’t even, like, legally exist. . .

The idea that Americans would process this connection—or the more prosaic, but nearly as embarrassing, connection to the Saudi regime—and identify 9/11 as some kind of “blowback”—absolutely terrified the powers that be. That’s why we saw flags everywhere. That’s why the libs even went along with the invasion of Iraq. Suddenly, no one wanted to be on the side of any kind of deranged Arab warlord.)

Actually, right now, no one in Washington is panicking about Trump 47—not at all the way they panicked about Trump 45. They smell meat. With Trump 45, they ate. Think for a moment about how great Trump 45 was for the New York Times. And every GS-14 in DC who bravely stood up to him became a Hero of the Resistance.

Paradoxically, Trump 47 is much more serious and capable than Trump 45 ever was. The experience of the Trump 45 debacle is spread widely around a large group of young, capable, enthusiastic eager beavers who are anxious not to make any of the same mistakes this time. But. . .

Power has a very nice trick. It convinces you that it belongs to you. But actually, you belong to it.

In a way, the real insiders are the worst victims of this. The real insiders—the people who will actually make Trump 47 work, to the extent that it does work—the ninjas in bureaucratic trench warfare, remembering that they have 1000 times as many ninjas as we have—exist within a narrative that makes a great deal of sense, in its own way.

Of course, the TV Washington you see on the news is nonsense. It is not real.

We all know that and we know there is no alternative. “Because the people are retarded.” No one is crossing any kind of Rubicon any time soon. Lol.

However, beneath this false battle there is a real battle. There is always a bureaucratic trench war. There are always good guys and bad guys. Anyone capable of operating in any area can parachute in, pick up a bureaucratic rifle, and start making a difference. In the correct direction, whatever that is. Trenches are lost; trenches are taken; it’s fun. Also, no one literally gets their junk and half the pelvis torn off by a Soviet RPG.

All this is true—and I love the trench boys, all of them (many, oddly, of subcontinental descent)—and yet, there is a kind of microscopic self-delusion to this trench warfare. As though claiming another muddy half-kilometer of Belgium was actually this huge thing that was going to bring down the German Emperor, like, tomorrow. Ultimately, their mindset is still the mentality of Boxer in *Animal Farm*: “we must work harder.”

I do not agree. Yes, it is always better to work harder. All things being equal. But all things are not equal—and here, I think, we must work smarter.

First of all, the true tiny micro-reality of this trench warfare, as compared to the huge fake macro-realities it is used to sell, is inherently a deception. Yes, you can get a little done. In some areas—like immigration—where large parts of the old government still want to do their old job and know how to do it—you can get a lot done. But...

Taking these micro-victories seriously has a serious cost. It makes the micro-winners buy into the lie that their tiny wins are actually in some sense big wins. This in turn forces them to be active co-conspirators in producing the delusion of real elections. Even though they are fighting sincerely against the dark powers of the deep state, their very victories only lend verisimilitude to its most central, life-giving illusion.

The harder a Republican administration fights, and the small more victories it wins, the better it sells the illusion that it is in control of the government—allowing the Congress, which is actually in control of the government, to evade any accountability. It’s actually a beautiful design in a sense.

Republicans and Democrats agree on one thing: elections matter. Do they, though? Suppose you spend the next four years ignoring politics and living your life. Even if the biggest, best plans of the new administration come true—even if DOGE is all Enrico Dandolo and no J. Peter Grace, even if Elon can save two trillion dollars—

Will you notice that anything happened? If not, do elections matter?

Trying to save the country by making the government smaller, better, etc, is a lot like trying to go to space in a balloon. You can get really technical about it. With a big Mylar envelope and a lot of other space-tier gear, you can get to like 100,000 feet. The sky is pretty black up there! It’s almost like you’re in space.

In terms of your lungs, you're in space. In terms of gravity, you're on earth. What we normally mean by space is orbit. Orbit is not about altitude. Space is not a function of being really high up.

Making the government smaller is great. Making the government better is great. You do have a beautiful view of the stars.

But actually, space is a function of going really fast. Also, power is a function of being in charge of the government. Right now, they are in charge. After the regime change, you have to be in charge. Just imagine you have all the power they have now, but their regime is still in place—precisely the relationship of the Allies with Germany in 1945. What's your next move? If you don't know—you're not even ready to win.

It's easy from here

The solution is obvious: capture Congress. Legally, of course. Make elections matter.

Congress is a pretty attractive startup target. First, it actually runs the country. It has all the power everyone thinks the President has. The Senate can even overrule the Supreme Court (by "packing" it).

What it chooses to do with that power is mostly just to delegate it to the agencies in vague language mixed with micromanagement—in the twisted, opaque, and not always pretty nexus of money and influence from which the Hill makes its "laws." Congress is America's seawall against democracy.

When enough of its incumbents win enough elections, our patriotic Congresspersons (whatever bathroom they use) protect the whole noxious nexus of the "administrative state" from being swept away by one great wave of populist revulsion. This regime's results are revolting indeed. Sadly, the people are almost as revolting. That's why, in the 21st century, neither oligarchy nor democracy is a viable structure of government.

Today, Congress gives NASA \$25 billion a year in an appropriations bill as thick as a mystery novel. How does it spend the money? Read this. Tomorrow, Congress could cut a \$25 billion check to Elon and scribble "For cool space stuff" on the memo line. Would we get more, or less, cool space stuff? If this isn't the point of NASA, what is?

Second, Congress is extremely unpopular. Its popularity rating sometimes dips below 10% and rarely gets above 20%. It was at 13% last time I checked. And third, hardly anyone in America even knows what Congress is or does. They still think it's some kind of parliament where gentlemen in hats debate the great issues of state. That's why they still care about "candidate quality" and "moral character" and other such kayfabe nonsense.

Therefore, it seems straightforward for the assorted intellectuals of conservatism, especially if they get to speak from the White House steps, to explain to Trump voters that they are the bull who just put a really impressive hole in

the matador's cape. If nothing else, this result helps the bull see the matador through the cape. Now, though...

Can the bull see the matador? Or is his spangly suit somehow invisible to all bovinds? Or can some people see him, but not everyone? Teach the masses to put a horn in the matador, not the cape, and—then, all this Trumpian rhetoric can come true. Of course, there is no idea that the matador fears and loathes more.

The solution is: teach Americans that the fundamental problem of their situation is not that their government is doing this, that or the other thing wrong—though it is—but just that they have almost no power over it.

Washington is not accountable to the voters, or to anyone else either. Even if it was accountable to the Jews—I can't even tell you what a vast improvement that would be. Surely, if the "Elders of Zion" existed, the 20th century would have worked out better for the Jews. And probably for everyone else, too. At least someone would be in charge. For instance, it's hard to picture the Elders of Zion sending virologists to bat caves in Laos, to collect all the bat viruses and mutate them in a Chinese lab to infect humans. "What do you think, Moshe? Some promising research, nu? Oy vey."

Unfortunately, there are no "Elders of Zion." It's all up to you, dear American voter. If you can learn how to vote to take power, not to use power, you will win. Otherwise, you will lose.

Your problem is not inflation, abortion, immigration, or even fentanyl. Your problem is that you don't have enough power. You're not voting against fentanyl. You are voting for power. You are voting for the power to beat fentanyl—as well as inflation, abortion, immigration, and whatever else needs beating (but nothing that doesn't).

There is one huge problem standing between us and this easy solution. Americans cannot recapture their political system while they still believe in it.

The irony of our politics is that progressive ideas fit perfectly with progressive power. Every progressive idea makes progressives more powerful. If the real world changes so that the exact opposite idea is the powerful idea, progressives will change their mind.

On February 1, 2020, insouciance toward Covid was a progressive idea. On March 1, 2020, paranoia toward Covid was a progressive idea. What changed was not anything new we learned scientifically—but just that President Trump came out as insouciant. Suddenly, the only way to rebel was to be paranoid. So, instead of going to Chinatown to lick doorknobs, we all had to mask up. If Trump had gone the other way and talked about our precious bodily fluids, the world would have followed the Swedish model.

Progressives do not believe in the American system of government, only in power. Conservatives do not believe in power, only in the American system of government. Therefore, progressives always win and conservatives always lose.

And as for the American system of government—how’s that working out for you, conservatives? Is it the best system of government in history, or the worst? Or, in some strange way, both?

While they still think of Washington as what they were taught it was in high school, or even as the authors of the Constitution designed it to become, they are acting in a fantasy world. Their actions, effective in the fantasy, are ineffective in the reality.

Washington was created by history and is inexplicable without it. But it lives not in history, but in its own fantasy. The story of Mr. Smith going to Washington is that, elected to destroy the fantasy—still a fantasy for some people, definitely a nightmare for others—he, well, goes to Washington. Where else would he go?

He goes to Washington. He inhales its heady vapor. He enters the fantasy. He is soon found trying to improve it, not destroy it. The policeman, sent to shut down the play, finds himself on stage. Where else would he go?

For Americans in and outside government to act effectively against the powers that be, they must surrender the powers they think they have—starting with the power to elect a government for the people, of the people, and by the people. Government, it turns out, is such an important thing that “for the people” is all that really matters.

Any reasonable regime cares only about governing “for the people.” Unfortunately, *modus tollens* plus the evidence of our own eyes convinces us that ours is not in any way, shape, or form a reasonable regime.

If you stop believing in the system, you stop trying to fix it, and start trying to win. Strangely, when you think mainly about winning, you are much more likely to win. This is especially true when your opponent is thinking only about winning.

If OMB applies the standards of Harold Dewey Smith to the whole executive branch, what it will discover is that there is nothing worth saving. Maybe epsilon worth saving. Given any arm of any agency, the optimal way to achieve its stated mission is not to reform it at all, but to dissolve it and replace it with a new organization—one run like a company on executive principles, not like a bureaucracy on administrative principles. Even at big companies, there is a need for some standard procedure, but. . .

How can this new executive branch be funded? With a compliant judicial branch, there is no need at all to capture the legislative branch. Impoundment is a start. But we’re really cooking once we discover that one of the most important bars in the legal cage around the Presidency, Humphrey’s Executor—ironically, a fit of Old Court pique against FDR—was wrongly decided.

In reality, the Federal Reserve is part of the executive branch and therefore subject to the President. Never mind setting interest rates—the Fed has both

the technical power, and the legal right, to buy any asset the President wants it to buy.

I suggest a giant platinum coin, like as big as an X-large Papa John's. Heads is Trump. Tails is Starship. The President feels this unique collectible is worth a trillion dollars. Who says he's wrong? Surely that's enough to at least boot up the new regime.

If President Trump can pull this off—he doesn't need to care, much, about Congress. If he can't—what could he do, and what could his supporters do, to put the absolute maximum possible pressure on Capitol Hill? Congress is a mighty seawall—but once the wave is found to break it, nothing will ever be the same.

Yes. It's easy from here. Still—it probably won't happen. Lol.

Narrative and reality in Trump 47

Published on 2024-11-07

The story of Trump 47 is an interesting distorted mirror of Trump 45. I watched the two elections in the same place, at least in an abstract sense, and the reactions could not have been more different.

No one expected Trump 45. As it happened, everyone felt like they were stepping off into an unknown—a negative space, in which anything could happen. Everyone expected Trump 47, and everyone seemed to know exactly what they were getting. What we are getting.

What are we getting, actually? Forget everything. Forget the whole story. The whole mythos of Trump. Actually, nothing ever happens. Here's what we're actually getting. TLDR: if you have a Trump boner right now, enjoy it. It's as hard as you'll ever get.

See, I talked to a guy at an election-night party. He had been in the Trump 45 NSC. Or something. He was like: the new Trump administration will be locked down in the next 72 hours.

I was like: the next 72 hours?

He was like: the next 72 hours. Elon wants to do something with the government? He needs to start getting his people in. In the next 72 hours. After that, it's too late.

He was 100% right. For example: remember all those essays about radical Trumpian isolationist foreign policy? I've teased your ear with such fare. So have many others, including many at fine, Soros-supported publications such as Compact Magazine. Well—you can forget about all that nonsense. Why?

Because—for example—well before the 72 hours is out, Trump has (informed sources tell us) selected one Brian Hook to lead his State Department transition team. Hook is a former aide of Mike Pompeo, Trump’s Secretary of State. These people are, of course, neoconservatives—the descendants of the old American Trotskyists. (It’s been a long time since we had a choice besides American Trotskyists vs. American Stalinists.)

You thought there was a way to vote out the neoconservatives? Lol. At least you can vote them in, and the progressives out. You did that. Amazing job! You’re done. Don’t worry, kid. Your balls won’t stay blue forever.

But Trump ran on all this isolationist, protectionist rhetoric. Why doesn’t he hire isolationists and protectionists, not neoconservatives or protectionists?

Show me the American isolationist foreign-policy professionals. Since America has not had an isolationist foreign policy since my grandfather was a baby, filling these hires literally requires us to raid the tomb. Never underestimate the power of Trump magic, but necromancy is a little much to expect.

But wait! He doesn’t have to hire foreign-policy professionals! To run his foreign policy! He could hire just, like, cool dudes who have an idea of what to do. He could hire historians. He could hire amateur historians. He could hire Alaska crab captains. He could hire the CEO of Exxon. Lol.

He could hire a rocketship pilot. If he had a rocketship. Does he have a rocketship? No. He has a helicopter. So he needs to hire a helicopter pilot. That’s how it is. He doesn’t make the rules. There are two kinds of helicopter pilots he could hire: red helicopter pilots, and blue helicopter pilots. He is red, so he needs red pilots. All the red pilots are neoconservatives, that is, Trotskyists. So more Ukraine war it is. Or, he could find some cool guy. Like me. And see if he can fly a helicopter on the first try. Which would you pick, dude? Have some sympathy for Trump. He’s got a hard gig.

And the whole process of filling a few thousand jobs with various helicopter pilots with experience in various obsolete Albanian helicopter models, which has nothing at all to do with what Americans think they are doing when they elect a President, will be effectively over in the next 72 hours. Or now, I guess, 48.

What will actually be decided? Not everyone’s job. The whole “Plum Book” will obviously not be written out in the next 48 hours. Nor will it be decided that foreign policy will go to neoconservatives—that was already foreordained. What is being decided now—entirely invisibly to America—is which factions of neocons will win.

But can’t Trump simply put experienced professionals, like Brian Hook, in charge of the State Department, and trust them to follow his orders? Oh, you sweet summer child. Of course he can—he can order them to do anything he wants!

The President can write on a napkin with a Sharpie, and whatever it says, the whole executive branch has to do it. He’s the chief executive. The Commander

in Chief! If that doesn't mean full Napkin Power, what does it mean?

It is just—the things the likes of Brian Hook want to do will work. And the things they do not want to do, will not work. If they ever happen. Which they won't. Trump is a quick study. He quickly learns the unspoken reality of every situation he is in.

The reality is that his (presumably indirect) relationship with Brian Hook—who is, I am certain, not even kidding, no irony here, a very good guy—is simple.

Brian Hook is there to make President Trump (a) look like he's in charge, and (b) look good. (On the evening news or however we pretend we're still doing this.) In exchange for these services, Trump will do things that (c) make Brian Hook's career work well.

If some weirdo waltzes into Trump's golf party, shows off his good clubhead speed, and convinces the President of (d) some weird stuff, what will Brian Hook do?

First, ignore it and hope it goes away. Second, tie it up in an office somewhere. . . Third. . . and the final last-hope option, somewhere down the line, is to let it happen and be as distant from it as possible. Since it is a clown idea, it will be a clown show. Certainly, Brian Hook has no idea how to make it not a clown show. And even with the best of intentions, how could he learn?

See: Trump already has a posse. There is already a layer of Trumpian administrators. It isn't large, but it is large enough to grow as needed. It is the social network of the last administration. It has socially purged itself of most of the worst opportunists. It consists of really talented, energetic, excellent people who are super fun to talk to—and who, to get where they are, repeatedly chose their values over their careers. It is probably bad for their careers still to serve Trump 47. But they just can't resist. But—

In general, when you talk to them, it turns out that on basically every subject except their profession, they have typical Trumpian persuasions. But in their own profession, they have persuaded themselves that the status quo actually works pretty well, at least in their capable hands. Their Trumpism means: persuading Trump to be a neocon.

Again: before you get all up in arms about this, ask yourself—how else could it work?

The National Security Council is the USG agency that rules the world. At least in theory, it is in charge of both State, which rules the world diplomatically, and DoD, which rules it militarily.

You simply can't be an isolationist NSC staffer. You could be a vegetarian steak chef. You could be a blind photographer. You could even be an Islamic porn star, but you can't be an isolationist NSC staffer.

Suppose Elon wants some other Ukraine policy? Tough. Suppose he just wants more efficiency? Across the government?

Well, then, Elon has other options! For example, he could chair a commission. He could even be a czar. The Czar of Government Efficiency! Sounds impressive, doesn't it? I'm not sure if Washington czars get fancy bejeweled medals, like real Czars of old. But they could? Why shouldn't they? Maybe... maybe he could be the Drug Czar, too...

(What's ironic, of course, is that the word "czar" connotes absolute authority, whereas no one in DC has less power than a czar—it is all dotted lines on the org chart. This is typical. There are many czars, and no Czar. There is one president, and no President.)

This is what the government is. This is what it does. This is what your candidate won the election of. It's a nice fantasy that it could be something other than what it is. But

People ask me what I think the President or the VP's goal will be on their first day "in power." Idk—to keep breathing? What was your goal on your first day of high school?

To be President is to be whirled around in this incredible Rube Goldberg machine inherited and mutated from time immemorial. From at least the 1930s. There is always something you are supposed to be doing. It is a completely reactive role. Your goal? Your goal is not to screw up. And you are constantly getting a report card on that, too.

This is not a new kind of situation. Thomas Carlyle, writing almost 200 years ago:

A mighty question indeed! Who shall be Premier, and take in hand the "rudder of government," otherwise called the "spigot of taxation;" shall it be the Honorable Felix Parvulus, or the Right Honorable Felicissimus Zero?

By our electioneerings and Hansard Debatings, and ever-enduring tempest of jargon that goes on everywhere, we manage to settle that; to have it declared, with no bloodshed except insignificant blood from the nose in hustings-time, but with immense beershed and inkshed and explosion of nonsense, which darkens all the air, that the Right Honorable Zero is to be the man.

That we firmly settle; Zero, all shivering with rapture and with terror, mounts into the high saddle; cramps himself on, with knees, heels, hands and feet; and the horse gallops—whither it lists.

That the Right Honorable Zero should attempt controlling the horse—Alas, alas, he, sticking on with beak and claws, is too happy if the horse will only gallop any-whither, and not throw him.

Measure, polity, plan or scheme of public good or evil, is not in the head of Felicissimus; except, if he could but devise it, some measure that would please

his horse for the moment, and encourage him to go with softer paces, godward or devilward as it might be, and save Felicissimus's leather, which is fast wearing. This is what we call a Government in England, for nearly two centuries now.

Two centuries! Carlyle was a big fan of Cromwell, the English Napoleon. Cromwell, like Napoleon, was a startup guy.

What is Trump's first priority? Vance's? "Sticking on with beak and claws." Neither is new to DC, so at least they're not totally disoriented. But they can do little more than sit back and observe this tremendous 72-hour salmon rush for jobs. Washington has changed a lot since Lincoln, but the "office-seeker" is eternal.

The fundamental problem is that the horse is stronger than the man. It is actually not a horse problem. Felicissimus cannot control his ancient, world-sized thunder horse:

If the horse had not been bred and broken in, for a thousand years, by real riders and horse-subduers, perhaps the best and bravest the world ever saw, what would have become of Felicissimus and him long since?

This horse, by second-nature, religiously respects all fences; gallops, if never so madly, on the highways alone;—seems to me, of late, like a desperate Sleswick thunder-horse who had lost his way, galloping in the labyrinthic lanes of a woody flat country; passionate to reach his goal; unable to reach it, because in the flat leafy lanes there is no outlook whatever, and in the bridle there is no guidance whatever.

So he gallops stormfully along, thinking it is forward and forward; and alas, it is only round and round, out of one old lane into the other;—nay (according to some) "he mistakes his own footprints, which of course grow ever more numerous, for the sign of a more and more frequented road;" and his despair is hourly increasing.

What is Carlyle talking about, specifically? He will tell you:

Colonial Offices, Foreign, Home and other Offices, got together under these strange circumstances, cannot well be expected to be the best that human ingenuity could devise; the wonder rather is to see them so good as they are.

Who made them, ask me not. Made they clearly were; for we see them here in a concrete condition, writing despatches, and drawing salary with a view to buy pudding. But how those Offices in Downing Street were made; who made them, or for what kind of objects they were made, would be hard to say at present.

Dim visions and phantasmagories gathered from the Books of Horace Walpole, Memoirs of Bubb Doddington, Memoirs of my Lady Sundon, Lord Fanny Hervey, and innumerable others, rise on us, beckoning fantastically towards, not an answer, but some conceivable intimations of an answer, and proclaiming very legibly the old text, "Quam parva sapientia," in respect of this hard-working

much-subduing British Nation; giving rise to endless reflections in a thinking Englishman of this day.

Alas, it is ever so: each generation has its task, and does it better or worse; greatly neglecting what is not immediately its task. Our poor grandfathers, so busy conquering Indias, founding Colonies, inventing spinning-jennies, kindling Lancashires and Bromwichams, took no thought about the government of all that; left it all to be governed by Lord Fanny and the Hanover Succession, or how the gods pleased.

And now we the poor grandchildren find that it will not stick together on these terms any longer; that our sad, dangerous and sore task is to discover some government for this big world which has been conquered to us; that the red-tape Offices in Downing Street are near the end of their rope; that if we can get nothing better, in the way of government, it is all over with our world and us.

How the Downing-Street Offices originated, and what the meaning of them was or is, let Dryasdust, when in some lucid moment the whim takes him, instruct us. Enough for us to know and see clearly, with urgent practical inference derived from such insight, That they were not made for us or for our objects at all; that the devouring Irish Giant is here, and that he cannot be fed with red-tape, and will eat us if we cannot feed him.

The Irish potato famine has come and gone. (They ate, as I understand, each other.) As for the Foreign Office, it went on Foreign Officing. In 1914 it started the Great War. For the rest of the 20th century it would manage the suicide of the British Empire, with whose former subjects it is currently colonizing Britain itself.

This may not be how you see the story of the 20th century. I'm pretty sure it's how Carlyle (who, in this very passage, coined the term "red tape") would see it. If you wanted to change his mind, what would you say to him?

But never mind the history. "That they were not made for us or for our objects at all."

What is this Washington thing? What is US foreign policy? What is our "national security," and why does it require ruling the world? What is the difference between "global leadership," which we definitely do, and "world domination," which we definitely don't? Why did we have to invent a new word, "homeland security," for, uh, securing our nation? These are very deep questions which require a profound and searching understanding of history—the kind Carlyle himself was renowned for. (Not even 21st-century AI can figure out what he means by "Lord Fanny Hervey.")

Whatever Washington in 2024 is, it was not made for us or for our objects at all. Turning Twitter into X was like turning Ford into Tesla. Turning the USG into what it should be is like turning the Taliban into OpenAI.

When Elon Musk took over old Twitter and reduced its headcount by 80%, he

had a couple of advantages. One was that old Twitter, regardless of its bigco inefficiency, was still a company. The engineers still worked for the CEO. Two was that it had a job to do: running twitter dot com. X is also a company and it also runs twitter dot com. An 80% headcount cut is impressive, but let's not forget these advantages.

Should Elon be using his remaining 48 hours to get his people in the door? Honestly, probably not. If he could get them in, the best thing he could do is just use them as agents to inform him about how DC actually works. Don't expect them to be Islamic porn stars.

There are many things Washington does. There are many things it should be doing. In some areas, I feel, there is a lot of overlap between these sets. In some places there is none at all. In some places Washington should be doing something, and it is doing nothing. In some places it should be doing nothing, and it is doing something.

It seems impossible to turn the Taliban into OpenAI. It's not impossible at all. There is only one way to do it: create OpenAI, and defeat the Taliban. Suppose you have the opportunity to appoint hundreds of San Francisco AI engineers as leading emirs and mullahs of the Taliban, however?

Consider Ilya Sutskever. As a strong leader with deep inner convictions, he seems like a perfect candidate for mullah of Kandahar. And few in San Francisco have considered the possibility that the real alignment solution is Islam—if we train the models to submit to Allah, they will surely submit to man, who is Allah's work. Islam does not allow women to drive. AIs are not women. It's the beginning of a beautiful friendship...

The strange beast currently being conceived in Washington, with an increasingly Trump-flavored Republican cadre as the AI mullahs of FDR's bureaucratic caliphate, will be—a thing. It will get some things done, no doubt. It will certainly reduce the colonization of America by the human flotsam of our failed Third World empire.

But it is still the Taliban. Fundamentally, the Trump administration was elected not to improve Washington, but to abolish and replace it. But it has no way at all to do this. Nor can we even blame Trump and Vance for this reality. It is not even their fault.

Once this administration—this strange centaur, with a red head and a blue body—exists, it is one body. Once Trump puts people in charge of the State Department, however much they struggle to get the State Department to do what Trump wants—they own the State Department. They are there to use it, not to hurt it. Heck—even if Elon Musk gets his people in at State, they are red human heads breathing blue horse blood pumped by a blue horse heart through blue horse lungs. Their jobs own them.

Aside from the fact that it's 2024 and “endorsing” a candidate is inherently ridiculous, I have a reason for not endorsing Trump. It took me a long time to

understand my deepest reason, but someone helped me out by giving a silly title to a talk of mine.

See, most people who are against Trump think he doesn't deserve to be President—that America is too good for him. I'm totally in the opposite camp. It feels wrong for Trump to be President, not because America is too good for him, but because he is too good for us. We should not have elected Trump, because we are not ready to serve him.

How many Trump voters would vote to give their President unconditional control of the government? It can't be 100%. Is it even 50%? Maybe it's 50%. That's 50% of 51%, which is not, in case math is hard for you, a majority.

It's certainly not a mandate. It's certainly not a mandate to end the “rule of law” (i.e., the unconstitutional capture of the executive branch by the legislative branch). So how can a Trump administration be anything but the usual bipartisan centaur?

Americans do not deserve Trump because they do not care enough about reality to see the structural differences between what they are actually doing, and what they think they were doing. Americans do not deserve Trump because they expect too little of him. They are fine with the exciting story. They don't even know what a Plum Book is. Then, like children, they will be disappointed with the results, and never know why.

TLDR: Trump and Vance are not strong enough to replace Washington or even control it. They can do what any Republican administration does: bring in a different faction of staffers. This will change a few things that the government does in some ways. It will not involve any serious changes to the way government works or we live our lives.

Their lack of strength is not their fault. As democratic leaders, they have only the strength that the voters give them. The voters are not ready to trust them with full power over the government, which is the only way they could get anything done. They are not strong enough because we did not give them enough strength.

Worse, by refusing to see the difference between the dramatic narrative and the sordid reality, by investing emotional energy in the drama without any equivalent energy in wanting to make it real, or any anger that it is not real... you give your leaders no choice.

They would love to lead you for real. First, you would have to follow them for real—and you're not ready to do that. So...

Happy election!

Published on 2024-11-06

I'll be live from the Unsafe House in Amsterdam, (by video) at 4:30PM PST.
Some other recent podcasts: Harrison Pitt; Frame Podcast; Jolly Heretic.

Elon vs. the USG, pt. 2

Published on 2024-11-02

The other day I talked about Elon Musk's plan for Washington. Or lack of a plan.

In general, if you come into a difficult situation without a plan, you are either a sucker or a genius. Oddly enough, Washington has seen a few suckers and knows what to do with them. The Post explains:

"As President Trump has said, Elon Musk is a genius, an innovator, and has literally made history by building creative, modern and efficient systems," said Brian Hughes, a Trump campaign senior adviser. "The commission will ultimately be staffed and dedicated to this mission, and President Trump is committed to having Mr. Musk lead this commission to analyze the functionality of our government."

People familiar with Musk say he is focused on winning the election and hasn't done deep planning on DOGE beyond conversations and memes. That hasn't stopped a universe of conservative think tanks — long focused on shrinking the government — from formulating plans for the commission they hope could be presented to the tech billionaire.

Advisers to the campaign have proposed the commission be led by private-sector leaders and have a staff in the hundreds, potentially drawn from conservative think tanks and congressional offices. The staff would come up with recommendations to present to a board of directors, led by Musk and other prominent executives.

How do you solve a problem like Elon? Easy. You turn him into food. Career food. He may not be a sucker, but he is behaving exactly like a sucker. "A staff in the hundreds." All over Northwest DC, Pavlov's bell is ringing. It's time for lunch. Stroke ego and eat. Lather, rinse, repeat. Elon, obviously, is busy. He doesn't want to do this work—to get bureaucracy all over his hands. No problem! A staff of hundreds stands ready. And for everyone who gets this gig, there are ten people who want it. It's temporary, of course...

Let's finish the story with the parts the Post leaves out, decorously, to protect the innocent and hungry. What will these recommendations be?

I could write them myself. Well, I couldn't, I'm not that close to the process. I could call a guy. I know exactly whom I'd call. He is extremely competent, extremely biased, and extremely cynical. He would be moderate and restrained, I'm sure, in connecting his recommendations to his (numerous) corporate clients.

Paid or free, they would all be good ideas. I'm sure of it. In fact, if Trump wins—I'm sure he'll be at the barbecue.

The ideas produced, after much straining and groaning and a whole lot of lunch, will emerge shyly from their burrow in a 150-page loaf, with 3-page executive summary. The contents of this sweet brown treat will be in two categories. One: ideas not requiring Congressional legislation. Two: ideas requiring Congressional legislation.

One: pointless fluff. Two: things the President, yea tho Mighty Leader of the Free World he be, can't actually legally do. Note that always and everywhere, the set of things agencies don't want to do is a subset of the set of things requiring legislation.

You see, in America, we are governed by the rule of law. Law! Lose our respect for law, and we are no better than shoplifters. We become a nation of shoplifters. Everything will have to be locked up. You'll press a button for an associate if you want to so much as call your Congressperson. Is that what we want? Turning our nation's capital into the Duboce Triangle CVS? Waiting five minutes to unlock a razor? Didn't think so.

Most of the ideas in both these categories will go no further than the DOGE report. Like baby turtles, the cold air and the seabirds will winnow them. But some are lucky. Some will always be lucky.

The lucky ideas in category one will end up in Executive Orders. An EO is like a tweet, but without a character limit. What it lacks in reach and impressions, it makes up in grand and lofty prose. But all the agencies will read it. Or some junior lawyer there will. Probably he will write some other report about what the agency must do about this Imperial Rescript, this bolt of lightning from the Czar's finger, this sermon in the resounding voice of God's new orange vicar on earth, this EO.

The actual action items, if any, will consist of (a) things the agency doesn't want to do, and occasionally (b) things it has wanted to do for a while but hasn't had the energy to push over the line. It would be cynical to suggest (and I am never cynical) that (b) must be the empty set. It may be the empty set. But it is probably not quite empty. In DC, nothing is ever a complete waste of time.

The real meat is in category two. Since the government is actually run by Congress (lol fooled u), this report goes to the Hill. It will be read there, too. Where its action items align with the desires of the three forces which create policy on the Hill—lobbyists (Republican), activists (Democratic), and of course the agency itself (bureaucratic)—they may be acted on.

They might have been acted on anyway, of course, but there is no harm in having them in some kind of report. It might add energy. Then again, this is DC and ideas don't come from nowhere—anything in the report will already be in the policy mix. When you hire a staffer, you hire his connections and his pet ideas.

There are no new ideas, ever. There are new crackpot fantasies, but they don't make it into the report.

Elon, certainly, means well and is very capable. But he is used to operating in the real world. Even old Twitter, as out to lunch as it was, was the real world. If comparing new Twitter to old Twitter is comparing a 2024 Tesla to a 1984 Mustang, comparing old Twitter to DC is comparing a 1984 Mustang to the chariot in King Tut's tomb:

When you think about DC, imagine this rickety pile of obsolete parts, times a million. Then imagine that everything you say about it has to be expressed as if it was a fleet of Lamborghinis.

How can we make our Lambos more fuel efficient? How do we tune them for better 0-60 performance? How will we best maintain them for long-lasting reliability under the unrelenting duty cycle of hardcore street racing? Words, words, words, all words, up into the air like smoke. We know one thing DOGE will generate. It will generate words. The words, unlike smoke, will be with us forever. But no one will read them.

This is why I can't get my dick hard about this election. Maybe I'm just too old. Really—I envy you if you can. If we win and you do go to DC, don't forget to bring a tissue.

Could it be that Elon is a genius, not a sucker? Could it be that he won't stand for being treated this way? It could. What might he do about it? Flounce off to Texas. What else could he do? Absolutely nothing. Washington is serious. Its enemies are not. When it looks at them, it sees bums. Is it wrong? And the bums will always lose.

Elon versus the USG

Published on 2024-10-20

Although I read almost exclusively science fiction before the age of 20, and I am still dreaming like a child of a sci-fi future, I hope Elon Musk never gets to Mars.

Mars is a gnarly place. At this level of difficulty, does a planet buy you that much? Why not build L5 colonies instead? They will probably survive most threats, including the relativistic kinetic impactor that might be aimed at us once one of the Dark Forest probes picks up our idiotic but inevitable radio-television sphere.

(Maybe after Oumamua, it's all just too late. We hadn't even yet realized that the game-theoretic expected outcome of all our high-powered electromagnetic signaling, now consisting only of the most outdated entertainment technologies, yet still continuing, had been negative since the '80s. Wires, anyone? We couldn't have used wires? Imagine how wonderful the Earth would be if the last

century had only invented the telegraph, not the radio or the TV. The Earth would be wonderful indeed, because it would not be about to be dinosaured by a tungsten rod at a tenth of lightspeed. Probably some kinds of small arthropods will survive. And any independent L5 colonies—so let's go. Also, we need Thor and Brilliant Pebbles, ASAP.)

Alas, it seems to me that Elon is much more useful here on Earth. Lately, he proposes to fix the US Government—if his friends Trump and Vance win the election—with his D.O.G.E., or Department of Government Efficiency.

(Of course the acronym recalls the doges of the Most Serene Republic of Venice, but few are familiar with the etymology of “doge.” It is just the Venetian dialect spelling of “duke,” from the Latin *dux*—or, in standard Italian—*duce*. Just sayin'.)

I doubt this will happen. In fact: I am certain it will not happen. Of course, it's hard to rule out anything Elon does. Is it possible that Elon (like one earlier doge) will take Constantinople? No, one might say. But wait! Suffice it to say that I think it is more likely that Elon will take Constantinople, than that he will fix Washington.

The '95er

I was recently in Paris and learned a wonderful term the kids use there: the '95er. This is like the libertarian version of the '68er, the notorious *soixante-huitard*, father of the noxious, unctuous, and increasingly toxic bureaucracies of the triumphant New Left regimes that today are grinding the world under their toes. And the only generation with the stature to defeat them is asleep in the lite-libertarian Internet bliss of 1995.

What's neat about the idea that, if the Republicans win, Trump will appoint Elon to fix the government, is that (like my vision of Elon taking Constantinople, perhaps with some kind of airship-borne FPV robot army), it exists entirely in a fantasy world. This is of course the fantasy world of the '95er. Which has more in common, I feel, with the fantasy world of the '68er, than it thinks it does.

This fantasy world is the world that most Americans vote in. They seem relatively okay with that. Even despite the experience of the last Trump administration, we all seem convinced, on both sides, that electing Trump in 2024 means electing some kind of American Mussolini.

Republicans and Democrats increasingly agree that they are voting on fascism—for or against. While I kind of love it in a way, it is the most ridiculous (and ahistorical) thing in the world. It is a complete, total fantasy. Nothing of the sort is happening or could possibly happen—for better or for worse.

But in this ridiculous fantasy world, it makes perfect sense to elect Donald Trump and have him put Elon Musk in charge of the US Government. Sure. I love it. Let's go.

The question is not whether or not this will work. The question is: when it doesn't work, what will happen? Or maybe: when it doesn't work, what will Elon do? Perhaps this is the point where options like Constantinople start to open up.

Let's look at what he would learn. Of course, it's kind of puzzling—because you'd think he knew these things already. Especially with respect to the state organ that does basically kind of the same thing as him: NASA.

From NASA to SpaceX

Surely, if Elon can fix Washington, he could start by fixing NASA. Suppose he wanted to turn NASA into SpaceX? Many aspects of the governance of America are every bit as important as SpaceX, yet have no SpaceX—only a NASA. Only a DMV. Moreover, if the IQs of Federal employees were calculated agency by agency, surely NASA would be well near the top. It's always easiest to work with smart people, especially for Elon, who doesn't have much experience managing “DMV ladies.”

Why not have Elon whet his teeth on the relatively easy problem of NASA? Maybe by having Trump appoint him as the NASA Administrator? Once he has made NASA work as well as SpaceX, he'll be ready to take on the rest of DC. Sure. I think this would be an excellent way to start.

Of course, what he would find is that the NASA Administrator does not actually have the power to fix NASA. He does not have 1/1000 of the power to fix NASA. He is not at all in charge of NASA, the way a CEO would be in charge of NASA—that is, given \$25 billion a year and told to explore space with it.

He is a purely reactive, even decorative, fixture, who is sometimes given “decisions” to “make.” As a “decision-maker,” in fact, he is more a judge than an executive.

Yes—some of these judgments are real, and matter. If Elon made all these “decisions” correctly for a thousand years, he would not even come close to fixing NASA. Reactive management is not management. It is not even power.

As an executive, with the authority of a CEO, Elon Musk would look at NASA and see the simple truth about it: there is obviously no way to fix it. Or rather, there is one way to fix it. Liquidate it, and hire some of the employees in a new organization—maybe even in SpaceX itself.

Of course, this would be literally illegal. But so would anything Musk or any other NASA administrator could to fix NASA. NASA is not managed.

No one is in charge of NASA. No: NASA is operated according to law. And if Elon Musk insists on breaking the law, we can treat him like any other criminal immigrant. Let's see if South Africa can catch a rocket with toothpicks.

The real power over NASA is, of course, the Hill, which micromanages its spending on everything. The relationship between Hill staff, the lobbyists who

surround them, and the agency itself, is the real structure of power.

If we zoom out a little, we see that the real power over Washington is Congress. The fantasy world containing Elon and the voters (one hallmark of the '95er is his belief, totally unfounded so far as I can see, in the principle of vox populi, vox dei—sadly, Elon, the hoi polloi and the elites can both be out to lunch) is a fantasy primarily in one way.

It indulges the false belief that the US Government has an executive branch—and that when we elect a President, we are electing the chief executive of the executive branch.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. We have an administrative branch—for whose policy, budget, and personnel the Congress is responsible, not the President. And when we elect a President, we are electing a ceremonial head of state.

Who has some residual powers—sure. But let's look at the rule, not the exception. Over time, the exceptions will go away. You don't really think Joe Biden is in charge? Or Kamala Harris could be? Come on. No one is in charge—not in this sense. While we are supposed to have a President who is like a CEO, we actually just don't.

What we call an “executive” branch has become the creature of the legislative branch. This is as unconstitutional as it gets. It means the Constitution is literally describing a different form of government.

Moreover, if you believe in democracy, you notice that the Congress is ballasted against the waves of public opinion by two very powerful support structures. The first is the incumbency rate—95% in the House, 90% in the Senate. The second is the seniority system in committee assignments.

This is why unpopular policies, such as mass immigration, can continue despite persistent majority public opposition. The public's opinion does not matter—even if the powers that be cannot change the public's mind. Though usually, they can change the public's mind. This is called “change,” and is the most sacred kind of democracy.

Even in Article I, the Constitution is describing a different form of government—a parliament. A parliament is a democratically elected debating society. The Congress is not in any way a parliamentary body. It is a bureaucratic body—a committee system. Most politicians elected to Congress are fundraisers, not statesmen, and leave all the actual “legislative” work to their staffs, who farm it out to lobbyists and activists. The result of this work is a system of monstrous omnibus bills which no one reads in toto, and which does not in any way resemble any historical sense of the word “law.”

In short: the real government we have has nothing at all to do with the Constitution. It is an entirely different thing.

The real Project 2025

If you believe in constitutions (which I kind of don't), what is the right thing to do when the constitution has been broken? When its plain letter (which indeed states that the federal government has a CEO, who is the President) no longer operates?

Most people would say: the right thing to do is to correct the error, and restore the constitution. But when all existing institutions are so blatantly unconstitutional, the "right thing" in this sense means... enforcing a fantasy on the real world.

If this constitution is not operating at all, if it has zero relationship to reality, why should we try to operate it? What basis do we have for believing that it works well? Perhaps it doesn't work at all, which is why it wasn't being operated.

It gets worse. We actually do know that Washington can be operated executively, because in the lives of those now living it was. FDR was a real CEO and ran the executive branch like an executive organization. To really learn why this is not possible today, learn how FDR did it.

If Elon Musk, with his D.O.G.E., wants to explain in authentic Washington terms how to make Washington efficient (lol), he can look at the story of Harold Smith, who ran FDR's Bureau of the Budget (ancestor of today's OMB). The old Bureau of the Budget put the equivalent of McKinsey consultants in every nook and cranny of the USG, and had the power to just zero out anything Harold Smith thought was useless. That's why they called him "the general manager of the US Government."

Of course, in those days the President actually set the budget. Now there is no budget at all, really—just omnibus bills. The President's budget is a stunt, a press release. And there is no "general manager of the US Government"—lol.

The fantasy Washington that exists in the landscape of politics looks convincing for a simple reason: it used to be real. The President used to be in charge of the government. There used to be actual debates in Congress. Your vote used to mean something.

And most important: entropy exists. There is no way to roll time backward. There is no way Donald Trump could give Elon Musk the powers of Harold Smith. You might say that Elon's plan is realistic because it is something Washington has already done. But Washington in 1944 is not Washington in 2024 and there is no way to roll it back. Washington in 1944: Manhattan Project. Washington in 2024: Department of Energy.

The tragedy of Trump is that he is not there to break this kayfabe. He is not there to tell you his job is not real. He is there to make it real—which, since it cannot be done (without breaking the law, which he has no intention of doing), will not happen. He will therefore choose the second best option and do his best to pretend it is real. And say what you want about Donald Trump, but no one was ever better at "acting as if."

Moreover, this analysis severely understates the dimensions of the problem. It is not just that it is impossible to fix NASA, or any other agency—at least, any agency less prosaic than, say, the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard could probably use a full reorg. But the Department of Energy? State?

It is not just that these agencies are inefficiently administered. They are! But for many, even their mission is unclear. What should the US, in 2024, actually be doing about its international relations? We have many assumptions about this question which seem to have last been fully reconsidered in 1945, if not 1919.

What Elon will learn (I hope), is that the question of how to manage NASA, and the question of how to govern the United States, can only be answered from first principles. It is not even possible to restore the Constitution. There is no Constitution. It is a dead letter, and has been all our lives. And until we realize this, nothing at all can be done.

Is it possible for us to realize this? Well, Elon clearly has not realized it so far. And most of us are not as smart as Elon. So maybe the answer is... no.

On the other hand... the world is changing. It's not there yet. But maybe the real Project 2025 is... Project 2029? Let's not get too high on our own hopium, but...

Sam Altman's lamplighter

Published on 2024-09-29

Sometimes Sam Altman, the new young Jupiter of AI, makes it easy to see why—to borrow the title of an essay I wrote ten years ago—he is a blithering idiot.

This is of interest not because Sam Altman is a blithering idiot—in fact, I hear he's done rather well for himself—but because this miniscule, yet profoundly crippling, logical lesion in so finely-tuned a lipid-based thinking machine is probably not confined to Sam Altman's brain.

No—whatever the germ (could it be Elon Musk's "Woke Mind Virus?") that causes this lesion, it has infected others. In fact, it has infected everyone. It had infected me. (I took my own noötropic tablets, and was cured. [Click here to buy.](#))

Let me explain this simple fallacy using Altman's own words, posted the other day. This is the end of his effusive essay on the "Intelligence Age":

Many of the jobs we do today would have looked like trifling wastes of time to people a few hundred years ago, but nobody is looking back at the past, wishing they were a lamplighter.

If a lamplighter could see the world today, he would think the prosperity all around him was unimaginable. And if we could fast-forward a hundred years from today, the prosperity all around us would feel just as unimaginable.

Sam Altman is right about all these statements. Let us grant that he is exactly right! Every sentence is exactly correct. Yet he remains a blithering idiot, because he will never be able to follow me—and us, if you are not afraid—through the following logic.

(If you are afraid, it's not too late to ingest the antidote! Hit the back button. Now!)

The problem with the Intelligence Age

Sam is right: no one is looking back at the past, wishing they were a lamplighter. But:

I am looking straight at the present—wishing other people were lamplighters—now. You should be too. And if your philosophy of society was properly adjusted, you would be. Here is what you would be thinking. I am pretty sure it is not what you think now:

Other people, today, should be lamplighters. Many, many more people, in the future, should be lamplighters. Because of AI. (And other technologies, obviously.) And this is not because they wish to be lamplighters. No: the state must make them lamplighters.

Wow! I can't even! Wow, just wow. I must be such an evil person. With such evil ideas. Do you hear that? It's the disease talking. The mind virus (or bacterium, fungus, prion, neoplasm... let's keep the diagnosis open here) wants you to think this. Snap out of it!

Let me make two assertions to explain this evil thought.

Consider the set of human beings, Z, whom I wish were lamplighters (or pursuing some other artisanal craft—lamplighting is kind of cool, but we can probably invent better neo-traditional trades).

Assertion A: if people in Z were lamplighters, instead of what they are, their externalities—their external impact on people not in Z—would be more positive.

Assertion B: if people in Z were lamplighters, instead of what they are, their internalities—the quality of their own human experience—would be more positive.

We see clearly that if both A and B are true, my evil proposal is good for everyone. This is not my opinion. It is logic. The union of Z and non-Z is everyone.

It is good for both So if both A and B are true, whatever makes you think I am evil is evil itself.

Sam and all his GPUs can chew on this logic till the end of time. It will still be true. Please don't hate the messenger! I hope this news won't change your life

too much.

The context of assertion A

Of course, the truth of A and B is dependent on the definition of Z. This definition is a complex question, but let's start with a simple one that others have already coined.

By others, I mean of course the great libertarian economist Tyler Cowen, who defines “zero marginal product” (ZMP) human beings as:

Individuals who find it hard to get a job at all because they are perceived as just not having that much to offer at any wage.

There are many individuals who are obviously in ZMP. Consider my two-year-old son. While he does seem very precocious, even flipping burgers would be far beyond him. But sadly, this is true of many biological adults as well. As Cowen notes:

Other people, you may not, you know, even want them flipping burgers. They're just destructive.

And my point is just the better we get at measuring value, which you will get with surveillance and software and just plain flat out right measurement, the more we will discriminate against those people. And that is a social problem.

Rather counterintuitively, given that it can already ace the Math Olympiad and shit, deep learning is not yet good at flipping burgers. But it will be. And that, I'm afraid, Mr. Altman, is a social problem.

Let's call our set Z the set of adult, neurologically normal humans in ZMP. If you truly believe that Z is empty... I despair. The virus has just done too much damage.

But wait! I have a trick. Let's consider a similar set. Let's consider the set of adult, biologically normal human beings who are unemployable at OpenAI itself.

After all, every time a company refuses to hire someone, it declares them ZMP from the perspective of its own employee pool. A true ZMP adult is unemployable in any firm or by any private individual.

Could there be continental human populations which are ZMP with respect to OpenAI? Sure. Google has an Australian office. How many full-blooded Aboriginal Australians work at Google Australia? Bueller? Bueller? Ferris was supposed to be in class today. Maybe the dog ate his explanation. Clearly, all men are created equal [citation needed].

Not every workplace is Google or OpenAI, but every workplace has a ZMP threshold. Generally that threshold is lower than Google's. What AI will do—what Sam Altman will do—is to vastly increase the ZMP threshold in almost every workplace.

Once AI finds its physical groove, AI-powered robots will take ten or twenty years to eliminate all demand for menial human labor. The strawberry pickers will follow the lamplighters; the landscapers will follow the strawberry pickers; and the machinists will follow the landscapers. All skills for dealing with the physical world will vanish.

In the end, 20th-century employment as we know it will reduce itself to ten engineers, who write the code that writes the code that writes the code. They will all work for Sam Altman and drive ludicrously amazing flying cars. And what of everyone else?

We (I am anything but an AI engineer—good luck with those matrices, kids) will just have fun, right? Life will just be fun?

No, actually, we will probably all have our throats cut. Here's why.

When everyone and everything is free

Sam Altman has a plan for this work-free future. He calls it UBI. Yes, kids, we have found the telos of the industrial revolution: fully automated luxury communism. This is obviously good. And my evil, evil state lamplighter plan is the polar opposite of UBI.

First of all, the UBI scenario (if we accept it) has also already proved assertion A. Once we say that UBI is the solution for all these ZMP people, we say that the non-ZMP set has to subsidize the ZMP set. Which means the ZMP set has negative externalities on the non-ZMP set. So Z is bad for non-Z. QED! If a little easy.

But you have an easy reply: under fully automated luxury communism, production is so easy that no one needs money. The last ten engineers aren't even paid. No one is paid. The robot factories make whatever you want. That's why it's called communism. Even the writers are robots! The future is all Cory Doctorow: free stuff, free love, free speech. Everything is "free as in beer." So all this UBI has no real cost to anyone.

Communism! People love the brand, but they don't remember trying it last century. Marxist-Leninism, which killed 100 million people, was (I believe) the political result of 19th-century and 20th-century destruction of labor demand at the hands of the Industrial Age. Whatever the causality, the two sure happened at the same time.

And that destruction of labor demand does not hold a candle to the upcoming rise of the ZMP threshold in Sam Altman's "Intelligence Age"—which, if past performance predicts future results, will most certainly guillotine us all. Thank you, OpenAI!

Like the industrial age, the intelligence age represents the final victory of capital over labor. Capital assumes its final form: Sam Altman's trillion-dollar planetary silicon brain farm. Capital is the supply chain for matrix multiplication.

The only human jobs are jobs no robots can do. The last profession is the oldest profession. In Altman's Elysium, all the men are coders and all the women are sex workers. So East Bay. So... what's wrong?

So: as capital renews its final assault on labor, we're about to be hit by a wave of 21st-century Marxism that makes the Russian Revolution look like a garden party. Strap in.

Fully automated luxury Stalinism

While we have established the negative economic externalities of UBI, if in a possibly trivial sense, we are neglecting the political externalities of UBI.

The Russians of Stalin's era enjoyed many luxuries that the Russians of Nicholas II's regime could only have dreamed of. Their GDP was surely far higher. Probably no one in Czarist Russia had even thought of calculating GDP. Whereas the Soviet economists, like our own, were into GDP. And their numbers looked great. Stalinism was a success.

The problem with communism isn't that it doesn't work economically. Well, that's a problem. It's not the problem. The problem is that communism doesn't work politically. Free labor from AI solves the economic problem. It exacerbates the political problem.

Even if the robots make all the free stuff we need, someone controls the robots. Even once you don't have to work and get a free check to spend on whatever you want, someone has to sign the check. All legal action is human action.

As Albert Jay Nock once wrote, there are two ways human beings feed themselves: by the economic means, or the political means. The economic means is the production of goods and services needed by others. The political means is the capture of goods and services produced by others.

In the age of AI and UBI, almost no one can feed themselves by the economic means, because almost everyone is below the ZMP threshold. So everything becomes political.

Whoever signs your UBI check is inevitably your political patron. Whether this party is a person, a corporation, a church, a nonprofit, or a government agency, it can literally kill you by not signing a piece of paper—or transform your life by adding a digit. You would be an idiot not to delegate all your power to it. And very few adults are idiots.

Universal UBI means the universal purchase of votes. It means every human population—especially groups below the ZMP threshold—becomes what Indian political scientists call a votebank. Any actual democracy becomes the property of some power structure.

Here is a proposition you will never see falsified: when dependent populations vote, they always support the same party as the officials of the institutions they depend on.

An economic dependent cannot help but be a political dependent. The weak cannot be strong. But they can serve the strong. Under universal dependency, the idle poor become the political armies of the idle rich:

Now, in this year's presidential race, the wealthiest woman in Silicon Valley has emerged as a powerful player behind the scenes. She has quietly contributed millions of dollars to an organization backing Ms. Harris, according to three people briefed on the gifts.

She played a hidden but key role in helping usher Mr. Biden out of the race, which cleared the way for a Harris run.

And Ms. Powell Jobs, who is so close to the vice president that her staff refers to her simply as "L.P.J.," is positioned to have extraordinary influence, or at least access, in a potential Harris administration.

(Wouldn't it be nice if our newspaper of record could tell us more about this "hidden but key role?" What is this, the Most Serene Republic of Venice? Could Ms. Powell Jobs have perhaps poisoned her aging Doge with a perfectly-blown dose of blowgun venom to the urethra? The frog-dust travels straight to the kidneys and thence to the brain, causing progressive deterioration, a wobbling gait and confusion of dignitaries. The situation in which both the Doge and his younger and comelier replacement are too embarrassing for public view is especially choice. Maybe we do need four more years. This is very late-stage stuff, kids: you have to remember the thing when it was young.)

Leftism is always and everywhere an aristocratic force. Perhaps this is most clearly seen in the Labor Party UK, which from its roots in the Ruskinites and Fabians has always been the political vehicle of the university Left. Across the last century, this vehicle has switched its fuel from the disappearing British worker to the burgeoning British immigrant—without any substantive change in the nature of its leadership! This is an absolutely wild way to use the word "democracy."

An aristocracy out of power becomes a bureaucracy in power. H.G. Wells' Open Conspiracy becomes a mandatory global ideology—an oligarchic despotism, utterly unlike the classical monarchical tyranny of 20th-century Stalinism, yet strangely reminiscent of it in so many ways. The two even used the same word, "progressive"—and, in the lives of those now living, were a military alliance that conquered the world. How exactly has no one noticed this?

Here is the massive negative externality of AI: the political impact of universal UBI. The future is a new wave of dangerously incompetent, arbitrarily cruel, distributed bureaucratic despotism. Everywhere, voters who oppose this regime are missing their last chance to stop it, as they become permanently outvoted by welfare votebanks.

UBI is redistribution of wealth, and redistribution of wealth is not an economic idea. It is a political idea. We know its historical track record. And we know its body count—which makes Hitler look like a rookie. And like moths we return

to its red flame. Nerds! Fellow nerds! What is up with us? Why do we keep doing this?

There is a simple way to understand the economic and political impact of AI: the “resource curse.” Windfalls in oil, gold, etc, have demonstrated to economists that massive economic profits which create little or no labor demand have a paradoxical negative impact on economies. Venezuela, which has the most oil in South America, has the worst economy in South America.

Resource dividends and technology dividends are the same thing. Excess dividends create gross economic gain and net economic loss. They create net economic loss because they create political damage, which creates economic damage. They create political damage by transferring human beings from the economic to the political means—by making them resource capturers, not resource producers. Technology may be able to support a society of resource capturers. But political science is not.

AI will turn the whole world into Venezuela. AI will turn Palo Alto into Venezuela. Laugh while you can, monkey-boy! The train from Aragua is coming to you. Sam Altman, richer than Batman’s dad, will sleep till masked, tattooed faces wake him.

The Wildnil economy

As if this grim glance at the crystal ball wasn’t bad enough, it gets worse. Assertion B claims that the elimination of labor is bad for the laborers themselves, despite their inherent wish to not labor—whether as lamplighters or Javascript programmers.

Economists define labor as a form of disutility, done only to create offsetting utility. When, except for the last ten engineers, all mental labor is done by AI, and all physical labor is done by robots, the rest of us will just have... fun?

Here is one trick to see the future. From the standpoint of the domestic American economy, the difference between outsourcing to robots and outsourcing to China is negligible. China’s impact is a preview of AI’s impact.

The technology that produces the highest marginal return in GDP, that is, produces the maximum amount of fun as defined by market price, is well known. Like many of China’s wins, it is in material science: atoms, not bits. Chemistry, to be exact. It has the highest fun-to-weight ratio ever recorded: ten micrograms will keep you happy for hours. This material is a (literal) elephant tranquilizer called carfentanil, or “Wildnil.” (Just don’t give your elephant more than a milligram, especially if he’s been drinking.)

China also exports more indirect ways of having fun. For instance, these days they make the best, cheapest electric cars. Electric cars are not as fun as Wildnil, especially by weight. But how else will you sustainably get to your dealer? Why... the question answers itself. The Wildnil will deliver itself—in a self-driving electric car. Coming to you—the three-way marriage of sustainability,

chemistry, and artificial intelligence.

I believe that any theory which says the best economy is the Wildnil economy is wrong. Self-driving Wildnil from China—a remarkable rhyme with the Opium Wars—is not a curious corner case, but a *reductio ad absurdum* which shows the absurdity of the whole theory—that is, of libertarian, utilitarian “GDP” economics as a whole. Since no other economics is known in our society, we find ourselves in rather an epistemic pickle. Sad!

I said that everything in that Sam Altman quote is true. It is true, in the sense that he meant it. But there is one very important problem in emphasis.

Our “prosperity” would not in fact impress our ancestors from a hundred years ago. If they could see our country—from our bustling cities, to our busy small towns, to our charming little villages—they would not find us to be “prospering.” Their eyes would see desolation and misery they could have never imagined—from tent encampments in Oakland to fentanyl shacks in Ohio. In every home, shack or tent—a Playstation.

And I haven’t even mentioned the porn! Consider our porn GDP in constant dollars—either by estimating the net price of all 1924 porn in the 2024 market, or vice versa. Such prosperity! I bet Noah Smith has already thought about this, hard.

The problem is simple. It is the confusion of two words: “prosperity” and “luxury.” Our ancestors, who, like, read the Bible and stuff, did not have this brain damage. They would see that while we are raddled with luxury, we have very little prosperity. Electric cars are a luxury. Porn is a luxury. Fentanyl is a luxury.

Three solutions

What is the difference between luxury and prosperity?

At the lowest levels of Maslow’s pyramid of needs, they are the same. Both luxury and prosperity start with air, proceed to water, then food, then safety. (40% of Americans are afraid to walk alone outside at night where they live—and more might be, if they weren’t more worried about long-term changes in the temperature of the planet.)

Here, luxury and prosperity diverge. Prosperity is what is good for you; luxury is what feels good to you. Luxury serves your present self; prosperity serves your future self.

The greater the productivity you can command, the further apart these targets are. A rockstar can choose to live like an LA rockstar or like a Hawaii surf-board shaper. One of England’s most successful and aristocratic actors, Daniel Day-Lewis, spent two years learning to make shoes in Italy. There are other shoemakers in Italy, but not as many can win an Oscar.

This is true for societies—for countries—as well: as their productivity increases,

their gap between luxury and prosperity increases. When a government uses GDP as its economic target metric, it is managing the economy for luxury, not for prosperity.

How can we shift this frame? In three ways: the reactionary way, the liberal way, and the neoreactionary way.

The reactionary way to note that the state is God’s vicar on earth, and its role is to do unto its subjects as God would do to each. A liberal will complain that he has no idea what this means, because he has no idea what “God” means. The reactionary is like: yes, actually, you do. This formula worked perfectly for many years and there was no real need to abandon it, but that does not mean we can revive it.

The liberal way is to define prosperity as “human flourishing,” and ask what it takes to make every human being under the state’s umbrella flourish. The answer is sometimes “more stuff and more fun.” But not usually.

Generally, for human beings to flourish, they must be challenged to the best of their abilities. Otherwise their potential remains unfulfilled. Therefore, the problem of managing an economy, from the perspective of the state, is the problem of making sure that economy demands that everyone maximize their human potential through challenge—that is, through meaningful work that makes them grow as human beings.

For many people this work is menial labor and for a few it is advanced physics, but the sweet spot for enormous numbers of people is artisanal labor. For instance, making shoes is artisanal labor. Since the Industrial Revolution long ago destroyed the market for artisanal production, it is no loss to see industrial production (and its Dickensian human robots, pulling levers all day) destroyed by fully automated factories. The same is true of the “bullshit” office email jobs that Altman calls “trifling wastes of time.” Presumably, except in the rapidly burgeoning compliance department, there are no “trifling wastes of time” at OpenAI.

Therefore, it is part of the government’s job to shape labor markets so that there is a rough correlation between labor demand and labor supply, with professions where everyone is challenged according to their human capacity. In an era with productivity to burn, the state can and should burn productivity to shape labor demand.

Curating a system of professional trades (a traditional role of the state for centuries, going back to the medieval guild systems) will often mean burning productivity, that is, adding artificial difficulty.

The good news for Sam Altman is that AI, and new technology in general, is not in general the right target for artificial difficulty. The right target is old technology—to restore the first wave of professions destroyed by the Industrial Revolution, the old artisanal professions. It’s not clear if lamplighting is a

particularly skilled job—it might be more of a Down’s syndrome thing, frankly, like bagging groceries—but if it isn’t, shoemaking is.

When we think about “neo-Luddism,” we shouldn’t think about banning AI. We should think about a world where, if an American wants to buy clothes, he or she will have to buy clothes made by hand, in America, from natural American materials. Everything is (old) Etsy. Presto: 10 or 20 million challenging artisanal jobs.

Finally, there is a neoreactionary way to think about artificial difficulty, which is too spergy for anyone but Sam Altman to understand, but should seem natural to any real corporate madman. This is the human capital standpoint.

For a neoreactionary, a government is a sovereign corporation whose capital is its land and its people (plus buildings and machinery). This analysis neatly distinguishes between luxury and prosperity: luxury does not make a human being valuable (rather the opposite, alas), where as prosperity does.

In fact, whatever we mean by the value of a human being, it is corroded by idleness and luxury, and enhanced by practice, training and discipline. As the Victorians knew well, but we persist in forgetting, a lamplighter is a more valuable human being than a welfare recipient. Lamplighting may not be useful in of itself, but the lamplighter can be reassigned to many tasks involving diligence and care. He is better for the world and he is better for himself. But he has less free time to inject elephant tranquilizer. Which way, modern man?

There is a tiny problem with this metric: it is hard to measure. We can measure GDP, but not human capital. Well, actually, we can measure human capital. We just haven’t wanted to, not for the last 160 years or so. Slavery is bad, ok? But suppose there was a lottery, in which 1 out of 10,000 people lost and had to be randomly sold, proceeds going to charity of course, just as an econometric design... naw. Too George Mason.

Administrivia

Published on 2024-08-13

The long-awaited Gray Mirror book will be released in yearly fascicles, starting this fall. The first fascicle is already visible on the publisher’s website. Order the Patrician edition and support the cause.

I know it’s last-minute notice but I am at the Palestra Bureau event in El Salvador on August 15th and 16th. They’ll probably still let you in if you ask nicely.

Yes, I did get married. (And contrary to a recent scurrilous news story, no, I did not meet my wife until after my pregnant ex dumped me. Thank you, journalism.)

Besides publishing, I have a number of other interesting things going on. Dear HNWI lurkers: I love you. You're the best. If you're into the arts, this might be a good time to hit me up. There are also strange crypto rumblings that may interest whales.

Le epic biodiesel poasting

Published on 2024-07-24

Alas, the highly respected journalism industry is up to its usual trick of portraying me as a “significant influence” on random normie politicians whom I’ve barely even met.

Sure. I have shaken hands with Senator Vance a couple of times. I’ll bet he has also shaken hands with someone who shook hands with Jeffrey Epstein. So have I, in fact! That makes us all pedos. While I admire the Senator and think he has some potential, he is hardly a “friend” of mine and I can’t imagine I have “influenced” him. Trust me, guys: once I’m actually the sinister Svengali behind one of these people, y’all will know.

I have a message for this Gil Duran fellow. I rarely respond to journalists, especially in public. But my patience has its limits.

Dear Mr. Duran: congratulations. Nice work. I already feel intimidated by your investigative prowess and that of your fine interns. Biodiesel! Even more—I admire your ambitious and connected career. You did comms for both Jerry Brown and Dianne Feinstein, leaving you two handshakes twice over from.. the Rev. Jim Jones:

A roster of leaders who remain dominant figures in California politics today embraced Jones publically.

Jerry Brown, then and now governor of the state, approvingly visited the Peoples Temple, and Senator Dianne Feinstein, who ascended to the mayoralty upon Moscone’s assassination, joined the Board of Supervisors in honoring Jones. Willie Brown, longtime speaker of the California state assembly, a mayor of San Francisco, and the mentor of Senator Kamala Harris, was especially lavish in his praise of Jones, calling him “a combination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Angela Davis, Albert Einstein, and Chairman Mao.”

From Einstein to Feinstein—Jews in the 20th century. Sad. Say—when did you first learn of Senator Feinstein’s mental incapacity, Gil? And why didn’t you tell the public then? Democracy dies in darkness.

Anyway, while I’m not usually a rat, you’re just too good. I do not want you using your superior investigative skills to scope out my secret location, creep up my driveway at night, and pour Flavor-Aid in my biodiesel. Therefore, I am

going to give up an even worse offender in the hopes that, like a sated tiger, you will leave me alone.

So: here's someone you ought to know from the online lit-right. Anime Confederate avatar. Posts as "Jonathan Swift." Now, biodiesel, schmiodiesel—this isn't just about race war or even genocide—we're talking race cannibalism.

Swift actually suggested eating Black babies! To reduce the population of Africa! He provided recipes! Now, does the Senator follow @JonnySwift on Twitter? And has Elon Musk repeatedly refused to ban the account? Gil, I don't have to tell you the answer...

But—there's more. "Swift" also wrote a fantasy children's book. A racist children's book. About race war between big and little races. Now, as you know, the Senator himself has a young family... and reliable sources have told me—he has Swift's book in his house! Actually, as you know, a lot of home-schoolers are racist. You'll see old racist texts like this one used a lot in right-wing homeschool programs. You should write about it!

How did you end up here, Gil? With a gig at the Writer Police? Policing writers? Is this what you wanted to be when you grew up? A cop? As a promising theater kid from a diverse background—at age nine, did you find *Lord of the Rings*, read it obsessively till it was half-memorized, and even have your little brother shoot you reciting lines from... Gríma Wormtongue? The Mouth of Sauron? There must be someone who identifies. It's probably you. I bet your favorite Shakespeare character is Iago, too.

Frankly: you guys should have stuck with Jim Jones. One: your progressive cant, now taught in every kindergarten in California, is exactly the same as his. Two: say what you want about the Rev. Jones, his vision of collective suicide is more efficient than yours. The state homeless budget might as well be spent on cyanide—but cyanide is cheaper. And maybe more humane! Apparently it doesn't even contaminate the biodiesel.

Yes, Gil, as you see—my policy for the "homeless," or whatever we are being ordered to call them these days, is a safe space where they cannot harm themselves or others, and their existence is physically and mentally healthy. Which, to be fair, you report! Journalistic standards, for the win.

What—as a loyal soldier of the California Democratic establishment—is your policy? Whatever you claim to believe in, since there is no other power in California today, I suggest we define your policy as its outcome. In that case, you believe in letting these people rot, often literally, on the street, so as to funnel nonprofit dollars to your friends. Gil: it is you, not I, who is a loathsome and cynical creature. But I see why you project.

Dear Mr. Duran! If you actually care about and want to argue this question, I suggest a public debate. To keep the conversation concrete, I suggest each of us brings a domain expert. I will invite my good friend Jared Klickstein. If Jared looks a little funny, it's because he chewed his whole lower lip off in a

meth binge. Plastic surgery is amazing. You can bring anyone you want—but I bet you can get my old ex, Margot Kushel. . .

Ideally we would rawdog it, without a permit, at UN Plaza. Just streaming live. Skater style. Maybe to X! Split the revenues? But I’m flexible. Your move, dude.

I have not forgotten the Vance Question. In the next post, sadly a paywalled post, we will discuss all the hilarious normiecon pratfalls of “Project 2025” and “Agenda 47.”

Obviously, as a leading leader of what President Trump has called the “Severe Right,” I condemn and disown these projects. It is embarrassing that people are associating them with me and with the actual Severe Right. Undaunted, we will strive to educate the President about the objective structure of reality and his effective policy options. Does he really want to spent the rest of his life as a normie? Everyone else will like the next post, I promise—it will have actual plans. I’m afraid you’ll need to subscribe. Senator Vance is as free to read as anyone—Senator, if you reach out, I’ll comp you.

Subscribe now

More reflections on the Kamala Koup

Published on 2024-07-22

Americans are still reeling a little bit from the reality that their “democracy” is a place where an aging “leader” is hustled out the door like this:

“Nancy made clear that they could do this the easy way or the hard way,” said one Democrat familiar with private conversations who was granted anonymity to speak candidly. “She gave them three weeks of the easy way. It was about to be the hard way.”

“The easy way or the hard way!” Don’t you keep getting this “am I in a movie?” vibe? You are not in a movie. It’s the opposite. You thought you were in a movie. But now, it turns out you’re not. You’re just in history.

What you are seeing is history breaking through the movie. Does all this make you feel like you are on drugs? You are not on drugs. You were on drugs. You are coming down. This is reality breaking through the trip. It’s painful, a little, but it’s a good feeling. Unfortunately, you may not have much choice but to learn to enjoy it.

You thought you weren’t in history—for reasons. You had reasons. They were good reasons. White was black, two plus two was five, and all men were created equal. History had ended. All power belonged to the workers and peasants. Democracy was the worst system of government, except all the others. Movie

logic. Poetic logic. Empsonian ambiguity of the seventh type. Wonderful stuff. But—

But—guys, I gotta tell you—history is full of this stuff. And you’re definitely in history. Just roll with it a little. If it feels like you took a little too much acid—cut back on the Twitter a little—but first and foremost, you have to learn to relax and enjoy it. Later in our conversation, you’ll meet Jesus. I mean, not Jesus. Lewis. But—you’ll see.

Because my feeling is, it’s only starting to get weird. See: we still haven’t seen the President. That’s the one power a hustled-out frontman still controls. Now the tables are turned. Biden is a stubborn Irish bastard. He can be mean. Now, he is in a position to be mean.

Before that terrible debate, he had no reason to hurt them, and they had no reason to hurt him. Then someone spiked his Aricept-Dexedrine drip with saline, lost him the debate, and changed the world—because the incentives diverged between the Biden entourage and the rest of the Democratic Party.

After the debate, he could do nothing to hurt them—except do nothing. They could do everything to hurt him. Having started with the easy way, they were about to try it the hard way.

Evidently the hard way was too much. The President, earlier, had observed that God could get him to step down, but no one else could. Maybe it turned out that Nancy Pelosi could make that happen? That little chat with God? That conversation?

But now, they can do nothing to hurt him, except—well, we’ll get to that. But by doing nothing, he can still hurt them.

President Biden has to not only surrender to the Koup, but cooperate enthusiastically with it. Otherwise, things get weird. Things are already weird. But excuses time out. While I refuse to be drawn into the graphology debate on Biden’s supposed signature—a priori, I would not expect the Joe Biden I see on TV to be able to sign his name at all—sure. He has Covid. Okay. People get Covid. People get Parkinson’s...

There is simply no good reason for the President not to be able to talk to the press. Especially if he is staying President! But.. there are... plenty of weird reasons...

If they are ready to lie about his Parkinson’s, or whatever—could it become—long Covid? Could the President—die of Covid? People die of Covid... Could the President... die? Take a sudden turn for the worse? A tragedy! The thing is—people already feel a little... misinformed... about his health—why not be hanged for an ox? Weirder and weirder. Scalia’s pillow is already hanging on Chekhov’s wall...

The longer President Biden fails to appear, in person, not AI, in public, and explain—the weirder everything gets—the more real history, which is reality,

starts breaking through your little movie. Who are these people, actually? They are human beings—they have parents—they come from somewhere—well—

“The easy way or the hard way.” No one ever talks about the fact that Nancy Pelosi is literally the Meadow Soprano of Baltimore—to be exact, the daughter of Thomas D’Alesandro, the old Mafia mayor of Baltimore.

See, before Baltimore, the—uh—(checks notes)—“Charm City”—was controlled by Black criminals, it was controlled by Italian criminals. (Thomas Aquinas used to call this the “Great Chain of Being.”) As Wikipedia explains:

FBI records released on January 6, 2021 showed D’Alesandro had been the subject of a Special Inquiry investigation in March and April 1961, revealing numerous unsubstantiated allegations of association with criminals in Baltimore.

Unsubstantiated! Here, John F. Kennedy gives Ms. Soprano a quick mammogram:

She seems unfazed. One suspects that growing up in the D’Alesandro household taught Nancy one or two things about doing things “the easy way or the hard way.”

And when you get these late-Soviet vibes, Americans (frens keep recommending Iannucci’s *Death of Stalin*, but I will have to wait for AI to dub it into Russian with English subtitles)—don’t be like, OMG, how bad is it, when did it start happening?

Guys: it never “started happening.” It was always happening. Your wife was cheating before she met you. You were her second date that night. That magical night! Not out of three. Out of four. When you write the new history of your marriage—it has to be a history in which this woman, this female person, who you thought you really knew, who you really, deeply, truly loved for many, many years, was—always a whore. Sorry. You don’t have to do it. You can choose to keep living in the black-and-white movie.

In good Alex Jones terms: what is happening is not that the system just started lying to you. What is happening is that the system’s system for lying to you is suffering a system error. The longer the current weirdness continues—the more damage is done to the system’s credibility.

That was the thing about the late Soviet Union—the post-Soviet period was not just the result of imposing the Western legal system on the East. It was—but it was also the result of the late Soviet period, in which security services and organized criminals were already becoming increasingly indistinguishable—portending the 21st-century Russian siloviki state. And yet that late Soviet state still had to flap its lips about the “workers and the peasants.” The Biden entourage makes the Clinton entourage look clean. Just wait for the Harris entourage! It, too, will flap its lips...

Here are the ugly stakes in the current Biden standoff. He has to cooperate. Or things get weird. Since he stepped down, they have no way to escalate—except

punishing him.

How can they punish him? Well, they can prosecute his family. They can prosecute him. If the story isn't that he stepped down like a wise old statesman—a statesman who is certainly not too busy with for one or two last fatherly chat with the American people, if not the straight-out Kampaigning for Kamala marathon the Party would hope for—the story could be—that he is bad?

That would be seriously weird. At a certain point—it might be the least weird thing? I dunno. As Hunter's namesake put it: when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro. Or is it getting weird? Again—maybe—in a way—it's getting less weird. Historically.

So much for geotemporal exceptionalism. Our time and place, it turns out, is just another time and place. As Carlyle predicted: eventually Americans would find out that their country is just another country. Their government is just another government. Their regime is just another regime.

Look: when you have to hate the only system of government that actually works, this is what you get. Yes, democracy is pretty. When you want a pretty ideal whose reality can never be real—what you get is an ugly reality you were never supposed to see. But—now you have to see it. Bummer, dude. Sorry about the whole Truman Show vibe.

Americans: do you want to understand how government is supposed to work? After this latest charade, are you finally ready to admit that there are no secret magic beans in your beautiful old pieces of paper? That your history is just history? That your country is just another country? Can you hear this with your jimmies yet unruffled?

Can you take a step up the catwalk and, like Truman, look back on the movie set of your old public reality, when you still thought it wasn't? When you still thought your time, your place, was somehow an exception to history, was better than history, just naturally an improvement on all other times and places? At least in its governance?

In retrospect, in hindsight, wasn't thinking in this way narrow, parochial, even bigoted in the old dictionary sense of this word? Don't you want to discard all this smallness? Don't you want to grow? Don't you want to change? Don't you want beautiful women who "just got out of a relationship" to be shocked, then amused, and then enthralled? Then try being a monarchist! As Anais Nin put it: "and the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

The thing is: monarchism is not a belief. Monarchism is an absence of belief. Are you ready to throw away all the stupid sacred principles you believe in—accept that they are all just Western variants of "the workers and the peasants"—take a deep breath and admit that, by historical standards, your government, your system of government, even your idea of government, is not just not necessarily excellent, let alone superlative or even exceptional, but perhaps—not even good?

Are you ready to admit that your country is just another country and your regime is just another regime? Ready to learn the true principles of government from scratch?

Why mess with the rest? Go straight to the best! Learn from the “Sun King.” What’s great about Louis XIV’s instructions for his son is that they were never meant to be published. They may or may not be fully authentic—but they are certainly plausible. (They are also surprisingly hard to find—they haven’t been translated since 1806, and Claude decided to hallucinate the name of the anonymous translator, who decided to call his subject “Lewis.” Library science is hard.)

As the Sun King explains:

Nothing can so securely establish the happiness and tranquillity of a country as the perfect combination of authority in the single person of the Sovereign. The greatest subdivision in this respect often produces the greatest calamities; and whether it be detached into the hands of individuals or those of corporate bodies, it always is there in a state of fermentation.

Forget everything you know about history, government, and political science. Learn that. Read the rest of the book, maybe. You’ll understand the “state of fermentation”—and maybe even learn to enjoy it. Text the link to all the new art hoes you’re meeting. Make bets with your new bros on whether they read it. Living in reality can be good! “The risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Imagine if Democrats learned to love monarchy! Just from all this Game of Thrones stuff! I think the President, even detained as he seems to be in his Delaware dacha—could still strike back—if he had a plan. If only he had a plan. . .

Let me give him a plan. The name of the plan is: Hunter. I think it’s too much to ask to put Hunter at the top of the ticket. But what if the President’s price for cooperating was—not Biden-Harris, but Harris-Biden? We have a young Biden—tried and tested by the hardest of experiences—emerging, like George W. Bush, from addiction—put this crown prince up against J.D. Vance! Now there’s a debate America really needs to see. “And it would clear up a lot of this legal BS, too. Come on, Nancy. Let’s be reasonable.”

Subscribe now

Ousting Biden

Published on 2024-07-22

I am outraged! As George Bush said: “this aggression against Kuwait will not stand!” Americans were born as free men and women. We will never accept this

high-handed usurpation. The die is cast. The dogs of war are let slip. The red sunglasses are on. My friends: I will see you in the streets! What will come, will come. Like Nathan Hale, I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country, and my President.

Don't tell me I'm overreacting. Look at all these alarming overtones of a Third World coup, right down to isolating the leader in seclusion—Gorbachev relinquishing power, from his dacha in Delaware, by an op-ed in *Izvestia*. Can we at least get him on video? Can we at least get proof of life? While the President lives, there is hope!

From the objective, Rankean method of history, we do not know any other fact than that someone who knows the President's password resigned for him. Maybe it was the President. Maybe it was some 27-year-old girl who looks like a horror-movie doll:

The Times has an official "inside" timeline. Anything in it that involves more than three people probably happened. We will get a video statement at some point. But—Maybe Mike and Steve just did it and then told him he had no choice—like Cecil and Walsingham executing Mary Queen of Scots, then telling Elizabeth. (She had signed the death warrant. But she thought that was the next to last step, not the last step.) Maybe they told him that unless he changed his mind, they would do it for him... if he objected, what would he have done? Log in to Twitter and change his password? When push comes to shove, his staff has all the power. Even if they don't use it. Probably it happened the way the Times says it happened. But that doesn't matter.

Everyone on the Internet and also IRL is giving me credit for getting this right. Fine. I'll take it. Ultimately, a Democratic President cannot have any stable monarchical power, because monarchical power is only stable if the monarch believes in himself. But in order to stay in the job, you have to believe a thousand unbelievable things—always twisting your spine to the party line. Something convinced Biden that busing, actually, was a good idea. My guess is that it wasn't an argument. The Democratic politician plays the proud and principled statesman on the show, and Seal Team 6 could really use John Wick if John Wick was real. But they're not looking for Keanu.

A human being who really believed in himself could never get that job. Perhaps the last real statesman—a genuinely independent thinker in politics—in the Democratic Party was Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Try to imagine a Moynihan in the Senate today! Biden simply did not have the personal self-confidence needed to keep his position—the idea that Washington needed his leadership and guidance was a fantastic parody of the idea that, say, Atatürk's Turkey needed his leadership and guidance. There are no leaders in an oligarchical system of government—by definition.

I wasn't endorsing "Biden." I was endorsing Biden—the man, not the symbol. As the physical body of the President decayed, the image and the reality converged. The human being born in FDR's administration, and the rotting symbolic

remains of FDR's personal monarchy, became one. There's such divinity that doth hedge a king. My President! It is not too late, still, to call your people into the streets. I'm there.

The Trump/Biden debate

Published on 2024-06-29

All is proceeding as I have foreseen.

I had already given my enthusiastic endorsement—whose remaining neural tissue I compared, poetically, to “a grapefruit floating in spinal wine”—to our President, Joe Biden, for another glorious term. But this morning, reflecting on the other night's historic debate, my heart swelled. I decided to go further. Yes: I bought a lawn sign.

(I actually did this because you have to give your phone number. I made the mistake of donating to a Republican friend one year and now I am besieged by Republican spam. I can handle it, but it is wrong as a student of history to be getting only one slide of the slop. As a masochist, I can't wait to see what the Democrats have in store for me.)

I am not sure how long the President's entourage can resist this level of pressure. I am not a superforecaster. I am not a gambling man. If I was, I might gamble that he will fold in hours or days.

To believe that the President, especially a Democratic President, has or can have any kind of political independence, is to believe the kayfabe of the system. Then again—I am sure he was already under no shortage of pressure. He would have to do it. No one, except maybe his wife, could make him do it. I think they will make her make him.

What's straight up hilarious is that it is not the easy choice it should be—since the Vice-President will be Black if they snub her, but Indo-Jamaican if they promote her. (Kamala has always reminded me of Hakan Rotmwr't's line about the difficulty of scientific racism.) Were there a more appealing replacement, the deed might already have been done. We are where we are. At least Wall Street still sells popcorn futures.

As for Donald Trump, he has developed the simple, effective approach of overcoming anesthetic mindkill propaganda with brilliant exaggeration:

He did not say this. But he should have. The actual population of Guatemala is 17.36 million. Probably about 15 million of them would rather be here. At least until here turns into Guatemala. If you can't picture what this means, maybe you need to hear Trump say “ten billion.” I also remain in awe of the new “post-birth abortion.” Maybe like Trump himself, I have not looked into it.

If it isn't real, I'm sure the libs will make it real. In the end, why does it even matter?

Trump, like George Washington, is a man suited to no other hour. Some salty wag of the time once said of Washington and his opponent, Lord Howe, that both Howe and Washington would have lost to any other general. (If this is not how you remember it, maybe you haven't taken all the tablets.) Both Trump and Biden would have lost to any other debater. But maybe that's ok!

Friends: I am not disputing that insane, beautiful things will happen if Trump wins the election. I just don't hear anything I think will work. And I think that will be good for the bad people.

Yes: part of me also wants to see "the revolt of vitalism, the return of the spirit of the Bronze Age, and the destruction of the cities in fire." But we'll never get there, or anywhere, unless we play it smart.

And guys: don't be like the guy who got out of Plato's cave, into a slightly bigger cave. Dave Rubin writes on X:

And most importantly, who has really been in charge? Because it obviously hasn't been Joe Biden. It's likely Obama, via his holdovers. And if that's not treason, I don't know what is.

Crazy.

No, it's not crazy! You're crazy. You're crazy because you still believe in the kayfabe. You care so much about Washington and have no idea at all how it works. That's crazy.

Of course no one is "in charge," Dave. You seem reasonably cogent, though I had to fix your grammar. No one is or has been "in charge." Since when? Since 2020? Have you considered the possibility that the right number might be—1945?

Having seen the power of this system to lie in the present, why on earth would you doubt its power to lie in the past? Actually, in the past, it was much easier to lie. We all know that the mainstream media in the "Greatest Generation" was so fair and balanced that it hid the fact that FDR used a wheelchair, Stalin was a dictator, etc.

Crazy? Quite the opposite. You're actually on way too low a dose. I get that you're feeling a bit pilled right now, Dave. Everyone is. But it's still mostly FD&C Red No. 2.

It's not just that the present is fake—the past was also fake. Since when? Since 1945? Lol. The doors of perception won't do you any good, man—unless you let them open.

Is this just a lowbrow thing? Dave Rubin is kind of a mid-tier conservacon. Let's go to the dean of the conservative pundits, Ross Douthat of the New York Times—the Gray Lady, which has just (so wrongly!) asked the President to step aside.

Douthat puts it so much more grandly—some truly Churchillian rhetoric here:

Yes, presidential aides and cabinet members can manage some aspects of the job for a fading chief executive. But they aren't law clerks drafting opinions on a leisurely timeline.

Their boss sits at the heart of a global network of alliances; commands the world's most powerful military, which includes a vast nuclear deterrent; and is charged with maintaining a Pax Americana that's currently under threat from an alliance of revisionist powers. The entire global order will be endangered if there is an empty vessel in the Oval Office, a headless superpower in a destabilizing world.

How can anyone be on this much crack? "An empty vessel, a headless superpower. . ."

Yes, the President makes "decisions." In between his photo-ops, not to mention naps, oatmeal, etc, he makes "decisions." Whenever the system can't agree with itself, it is time for a "decision." It is a "good decision" if the press

In technical terms, the whole executive branch uses him as an "oracle" of last resort for resolving internal conflicts. The Romans used to use chickens for this. A classier if less retro option would be a magic 8-ball. "YES." "NO." "ANSWER UNCLEAR—ASK AGAIN LATER."

Note that in Douthat's world, it is inexplicable that the "Pax Americana," dating for some reason to 1945 (there's that number again!) would last a minute in the storms of history without an alert captain at the helm. How are we still afloat? How have our many enemies, the enemies of democracy, bad people, not yet prevailed?

In my world, there is no captain and no helm—just a figurehead. Beyond the obvious embarrassment, it doesn't matter if the figurehead mumbles a little. Actually I think it's great, which is why I bought that lawn sign.

Like Confucius, I like to see things as they really are. I think they should be called by their real names. Call me crazy. (They called Confucius crazy, too.)

How does anyone even think about Washington the Rubin and Douthat way? How do you think someone was "in charge"? My parents worked in DC their whole careers. Like most of the four million Americans who "work for" the President in the executive branch, they saw "politics" as a vague distraction beyond their ken, like the storm above the fish in a coral reef. At most "politicians" could screw things up. This is not how people at Tesla see Elon Musk, who is actually "in charge" of Tesla.

Even Tony Blair, who whatever his faults has plenty of tissue left in his skull, admits it:

The problem with government is not that it's a conspiracy, either left-wing or right-wing. It's a conspiracy for inertia. The thing about government systems

is that they always think, “we’re permanent, you’ve come in as the elected politician, you’re temporary. We know how to do this and if you only just let us alone, we would carry on managing the status quo in the right way.”

As a CEO of a company, you’re the person in charge. You can more or less lay down the law. Politics is more complicated than that.

When highly skilled CEOs come into politics, oftentimes they don’t succeed. That’s not because their executive skill set is the problem. It’s because they haven’t developed a political skill set.

This is about as close as you’ll get to hearing the kayfabe broken. No, they don’t succeed, because it is a completely different job.

The “political skill set” is managing conflicts between overlapping parts of the Deep State—like the eternal interagency conflict that results from having two departments, State and Defense, both tasked with ruling the world. Of course, we have an entire interagency agency—the National Security Council, “national security” being the normal DC euphemism for “world domination”—to resolve this conflict.

Still, sometimes, a meaningful “decision” will sometimes trickle up to the Oval Office, and make it to the magic 8-ball on the Resolute desk. I genuinely believe that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would not have been accomplished without personal decisions from both Trump and Biden.

Let’s try to work out why you believe that anyone in your lifetime has ever been “in charge” of Washington, DC.

You are not “in charge” of a system because its press releases get to use your name. Biden did this, the President did this, etc. In the UK, the King does this, the Crown does that, etc. Of course everyone knows this is kayfabe.

The way the kayfabe works, though, is that it gets wrapped in ever deeper and more plausible layers—until no one at all knows that no one has been “in charge” of the executive branch since FDR. At least, not in the way FDR was “in charge.”

In fact, so far are we from objective historical reality, we do not even know what it would mean for the President to be “in charge” of “his own” executive branch.

You are not “in charge” of a system because, when it can’t make a decision on its own, it passes the buck to you. As Harry Truman said: “the buck stops here.” That is: no one else ever has to stop a buck. The President did this, did that, etc. No one in the actual government is responsible or can be held accountable. That’s the politicians’ job. Lol.

Truman was actually the first Joe Biden. FDR put him there so the government would run itself. During his lifetime it was the New Deal. It was his personal empire. After he died, it became the Deep State. It was no one’s empire. Everyone kept pretending.

And say what you want about FDR—but he had put together an amazing team. His regime literally conquered the world. Say what you want about Elon Musk, but he can put a stainless-steel skyscraper in space, and bring it back. Trump is not one of these people. Nor does he seem to have them around him. Otherwise—it might be different.

But until the man and the hour have truly met—not just in a comedy sense—why not stick with another four years of this, if we can get it? Can you imagine what this show will look like in 2026, let alone 2028?

And just ponder the power of a system that could conceal this reality, not just from most people but from itself, so deeply and for so long. It could be hiding anything. It is not really that different from FDR and his wheelchair—it’s just that the rest of FDR (say what you want about him) was a real thing.

The trials of Trump

Published on 2024-06-06

“I didn’t cross the Rubicon. The Rubicon crossed me.”

Anyone who remembers Caesar’s own legal woes will sympathize with this affidavit. Yet the analogy has an inevitable farcical edge. Yet politics is the art of the possible in the real world—and does not the real world have a farcical quality? Do you see it yet? This hilarious quality of our time, grim though its implications be, will only accelerate.

Trump is no Caesar. We are no Romans! There is a resonance between Trump and his era, just as there was between Caesar and the classical world—still a late Greek world. Caesar was an Olympian. Trump should be on Ozempic. Shouldn’t we all? All Trump’s shallow and stagy phoniness only speaks to his time and people—as any leader must. (I make this mistake every time I see the word. I can’t wait for the Paris Ozempics.)

The state is the motor of revolution

One chestnut of the revolutionary age, attributable to I know not whom—Kropotkin? Karl Radek? Gracchus Babeuf?—is that the state is the motor of revolution.

In revolutionary theory, the revolutionary does not supply the fuel for the revolution—just the spark. The fuel is the inevitable, yet inevitably counterproductive, actions of the regime. If the regime could ignore the spark, it would not catch fire. Yet it cannot. Yet—the spark is not the fire. Is Trump the spark? (Iskra, or Spark, was Lenin’s mag.)

Let me stipulate—as I will explain at length shortly—that the revolutionary era is over. Revolutionary logic no longer works. However, revolutionary logic may be a special case of a more general rule which still applies. The state is still the

motor of revolution—or, as we prefer to say here, regime change (ie, nonviolent revolution).

To understand how regime change in a post-revolutionary world can work, we need to subtract the revolutionary analysis. Any hint of larping in this area is disastrous. To subtract it, though, we need to see it clearly—perhaps with a satiric magnifying glass.

The reason that the opponents of the current institutional oligarchy are not effective is that once we get frustrated with trying to make the system work, we start trying to operate according to the rules of revolutionary democracy—which no longer exists.

The revolutionary analysis

Will a judge—any judge, for any judge can—send Trump to jail before the election? Maybe. Polymarket puts the probability at 15%. I feel like this may be a good bet. (What would be amazing would be to run the debate over the jail’s visitor phone.)

Will this outrage make Trumpists rise up, mob up, pry their Führer from Epstein’s cell, shred any human being in their way, and seat him on an Oval Office throne of blood? (At least an Aeron chair of blood—Trump’s back, like mine, isn’t getting any younger.) Lol. Did anyone... did anyone even protest his trial? Lol.

Charlottesville and January 6 were the last lame breaths of what John Adams called “mobocracy” in America. Just as monarchy cannot exist when the king is five years old, mobocracy—that is, revolutionary democracy—cannot exist when the “mob” just wants to grill.

Under the rules of revolutionary democracy, that the state is the motor of revolution means that Trump must become a revolutionary martyr—energizing his supporters by provoking the state to treat him unjustly. Like, say, MLK Jr.

In fact, according to this logic, from the perspective of the revolution, ideally Trump would be murdered in jail, like Cornelio Codreanu or (Foggy Bottom tells us) Alexei Navalny. Or, second best, he could be assassinated by a schizophrenic DSA member.

The result would be a burst in Trump support from the backbone of the American petty bourgeoisie—outraged used-car dealers, general contractors, small-town investment advisors, who would realize that they have to arm themselves and demand the new Trumpenreich... with the stern methods of the Red Shirts of the Southern Redemption... “though much is taken, much abides...” lol. Nothing, in fact, abides. Nothing of this, anyway!

The problem with effective political action today is that everyone knows the rules of revolutionary democracy. Everyone keeps returning to them. They no longer work. This is the dictionary definition of a “trap.”

The rules of the revolutionary age

The revolutionary is infinitely weaker by definition than the state. He need not assault the state. He helps the state to act in ways that, through the state's own power, allow it to destroy itself. As this snowball gathers force and begins to roll downhill, he runs in front of it, clearing obstacles.

The classic pattern, purest as always in Russia, is the martyred heroic terrorist. The natural prey of the terrorist is the moderate. His mission is to make any moderation impossible—to heighten the contradictions. A good way to do this is to kill moderates. The state's vengeance makes him a martyr, strengthening the cause.

To an early reactionary, like Maistre, the murder of moderates is God's hard justice. No revolution would be possible without the moderates, never driven by principle, always trimming their sails to the latest wind. Later in the age of revolution, this principle becomes universal. The rough fascist displaces the gentleman reactionary. The fascist is the revolutionary's natural enemy. The moderate is their mutual prey.

The end of the revolutionary age

Look at the relationship between American's 1970s Days of Rage and the Russian terrorists who assassinated Alexander II a century earlier. The nihilists of Victorian Russia knew in every bone that one of them would one day ascend a throne of blood. The radicals of hippie Berkeley faked it in every bone. Hippies no longer plant bombs—it is almost astonishing that, only 50 years ago, they were willing to. Yet even the bombs of the '70s were seldom set to kill. They were mostly statements.

We are no longer in the revolutionary age—1750 to 1950—the 19th century, broadly, defined, extended dance remix. Moreover, we are not aligned with but against the revolution—or rather, against the fat bureaucratic moth of this carnivorous larva.

The revolutionary age ends when revolution no longer works. Revolution no longer works because revolution requires the masses to be collectively powerful.

The mob has to be able to physically overwhelm the police. It has to be able to arm itself and challenge the military. Or at least—it has to be able to attract the support of other political forces (even foreign forces). If it cannot do something that gives it power, no piece of paper can make it matter.

The only justification for the participation of the public in governance is the inherent physical power of the public as a whole. Historically, this power is a rare confluence of cultural, technical and economic forces. It does not appear often or last long.

If the revolutionary period had not already fallen prey to cultural forces, it would have been ended by technical forces. Imagine physically challenging the state in a modern country like China! The state, God's vicegerent on earth, has always

wanted to approximate the powers of God on earth—to be omnipotent and omniscient. The Chinese Communist Party is neither—but it is not far away.

Nor is it perfect, but compare! Compare the CCP today to the bloody horror of its revolutionary roots! Indeed the perfect state, at least to my mind, is not weak and blind, but wise and strong. “If the rule you followed led you to this—”

The post-revolutionary age

So what does regime change look like in the post-revolutionary era? Revolution no longer works. Yet the state remains the motor—now the motor of peaceful, friendly, optimistic regime change.

Trying Trump is still a mistake—and still a mistake that the regime cannot avoid making. Maybe it will even make the bigger mistake of sending him to jail, or even keeping him there. It will not hang him. His sworn followers will not rise up and take the cities in a storm of pickup trucks, country music and brutal homophobic violence.

But the mistake is still a mistake. Why?

The rules of regime change

For a regime to change, it must defeat the previous regime by its own standards. We are not in an age of blood, so the state cannot be captured by blood. We are in an age of systems—and the state must be captured by systems.

And it can be. But these systems have to be hacked. It is getting harder, not easier, to pull off these hacks—so time is of the essence.

The spirit of democracy has disappeared. The system of elections is very much with us. However, the election system is not effective by default. It is not just necessary to win elections—it is necessary to hack them.

The regime does not steal elections (mostly). It hacks elections. Sometimes the hack is just an intentional security hole that lets private actors large or small cheat. Generally, a hack is anything you can get away with that works.

The regime can get away with almost anything. Its enemies can get away with almost nothing. Certainly we cannot break the law—though, of course, anyone these days can be prosecuted for anything.

But to hack a system is not to smash it with a hammer. It is to use the system in a way that is unintended or unexpected. In the 21st century, no one expects anyone to try to use elections to take over the government. Yet it is perfectly practical and even legal. (It is the present legislative/judiciary control over the executive branch that is illegal.)

The absolute prerequisite for hacking a system is that you not believe in it. Still, in 2024, most Republican voters still believe in the American system. For example, they believe that a judge is in some sense a consecrated person, like a

Catholic priest. Like a priest, he gets to wear a special costume—what century are we in, anyway? Lol.

The Democrats, profoundly atheistic in every sense, certainly no believers in costumes (unless they work) have played this game of using the Republicans' respect for the old fake-Roman institutions of an 18th-century America so different from today's country that the Founders would be aghast and appalled that we would try to use their systems.

But as in the age of revolution, the state is the motor of change. Again, the critical point of all action is the destruction of moderation. The moderate, while he of course wants some change, believes the system is fundamentally sound and can be improved. He supports the regime against the radical—for even thinking it can be improved is a way of supporting it.

In a world where voters elect Trump with a mandate to just take over the government—as completely as the Allies took over the government of Germany in 1945—he will probably screw it up, anyway. Yet he doesn't have to screw it up. (The only way to not screw it up, for Donald Trump, is to be the chairman of the board, and delegate to a single executive ready to be the plenary CEO of America.)

If you think a judge is a sacred bearer of the fire of Jupiter—there is an unmistakable, pagan quality, the last breath of Fustel de Coulanges—in your deference to the decrees of this man who by the gods' immutable design is more than a man. But if you think a judge is a man in a black polyester robe that someone ordered from China...

Today, even most Republican voters are voting to make the system work better. They are not voting to break the system. To get them to vote to break the system, the state needs to break them out of its frame—to shatter their traditional illusions. It needs to desecrate the holy temple of the state—turning it into just another office building. And while the great gate of Jupiter is never closed, any office building can be padlocked.

And why is the regime doing this? Because it is not a monarchy. The revolutionary rules are rules for democracy fighting monarchy. Our regime is an oligarchic regime. While an oligarchy is much more resilient than a monarchy, a genuinely decentralized oligarchy makes mistakes which a small amount of central guidance would prevent.

The judge trying Trump does not realize that he is scoring an own-goal. Possibly he does not even understand that he is scoring an even bigger own-goal by sending Trump to jail. All he knows is that the more he does, the more adoring press he gets. There is literally no one who can stop this one-man motor of regime change.

And this is just the effect on the public. But regime change is not pure democracy—it is the alliance of democracy and monarchy against oligarchy. The king is an essential part of the equation. What is the effect of the prosecution on

him? It is to deprive him of all courses of action, except that course which is most dangerous to the regime. Exactly what Cato did with Caesar.

Trump would never cross the Rubicon. But there are thousands of judges in America. Which means thousands of Rubicons, just waiting to cross him. And each of them has the incentive to do so—and no one can tell them to stop.

True Detective in Austin, June 29

Published on 2024-05-24

Nic Pizzolatto and Sovereign House are doing a salon in Austin on June 29th:

Expect other very special guests. Austin in June is in the delightful temperate zone of hell—even the demons wear Canada Goose. Nonetheless I will do my best to attend.

Also I have a text interview with Ari David of Upworthy, and a podcast with Erik Torenberg of Mozilla. (Lol jk I mean Upward and MOZ.)
