The Second Coming

Fintan O'Toole

Disinhibition will be the order of the day in Donald Trump's America.

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Brooklyn Museum

Winslow Homer: *Sharks (The Derelict)*, 1885

Karl Marx famously wrote that "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." Donald Trump's crushing victory over Kamala Harris makes him undoubtedly a world-historic personage whose impact will be felt around the world for a very long time. But his second coming is no farce. It is a brutal show of strength.

It has turned out that the drama that best encapsulates this momentous period is, after all, the shadow play of death and resurrection that unfolded in Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13. As Trump was grazed by a fragment of a bullet fired by Thomas Matthew Crooks, he dropped to the ground, then rose again, fist in the air, triumphant and defiantly alive. Distilled into this moment and lit by a glow of heroism was the whole story of what had happened since

Trump's apparent political death on January 6, 2021, and of what was to come in the 2024 election: that which does not kill him makes him stronger.

There has been, in recent times, something of a pattern here: the strongman gets elected, is thrown out of office, and then makes a triumphant return. This is what happened with one of Trump's political models, Hungary's Viktor Orbán. It happened with Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Robert Fico in Slovakia, and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. And what this pattern suggests is not just that the strongman comes back—he returns as a more radically authoritarian ruler. The second time he is infused with the swagger of impunity. The man they couldn't kill is also the man they cannot inhibit.

"Disinhibition" is a word that has recently migrated from the lexicon of psychology into that of American politics. It refers to a condition in which people become increasingly unable to regulate the expression of their impulses and urges, and this year it very obviously applied to Trump's increasingly surreal, vituperative, and lurid rhetoric. But it now must also apply to the institutions of American government: with allies on the Supreme Court and with control over the Senate and (most probably, at the time of writing) the House of Representatives, Trump will have no one to regulate his urges.

And perhaps it applies to American society too; this is a disinhibited electorate. It is no longer, on the whole, frightened of its own worst impulses. Up to now it has been possible to take some comfort in Trump's failure to win the popular vote in either 2016 or 2020, and in the fact that not once during his time in the Oval Office did a majority of Americans approve of the job he was doing. (This was true of no previous president in the era of polling.) It could be said with some justice that he did not really embody America.

But now he does. The comprehensive nature of his victory suggests that alongside the very large core of voters who are thrilled by his misogyny, xenophobia, bullying, and mendacity, there are many more who are at the very least not repelled by his ever more extreme indulgence in those sadistic pleasures. They know what he's like and don't much mind.

This is hard for Democrats (and just plain democrats) to get their heads around. Both inside and outside the US, liberals and progressives have had a default assumption that, even if their government sometimes does terrible things, Americans themselves are essentially decent and benign. The Harris campaign, with its messages of joy and hope and its (bleakly fruitless) pursuit of an imagined reservoir of Republicans too well-mannered to vote for Trump, rested on the same supposition.

In retrospect, one of the most telling moments of the election campaign came on September 14 in Superior, Wisconsin. Toward the end of a barnstorming speech, Harris's running mate, Tim Walz, told his audience: "I'll go to my grave not understanding why, but I know it's a fact that this is going to be a margin-of-error race." The second part of this sentence was entirely unsurprising, but in the first part Walz surely said more than he meant to. He expressed a sense of incomprehension that went far beyond his own bafflement. Hovering over his words was the dread that the American republic might go to *its* grave with its defenders still wondering why.

Part of what made the election so strange was that everyone was flying blind. The instruments that are supposed to peer through the darkness —the polls—merely thickened the great cloud of unknowing. They are, of course, often wrong, but they usually conjure at least a mirage of what awaits on the horizon. When all the results are within the margin of error they leave us stranded in that liminal space where there is, as W.B. Yeats put it at a different time of murky anxiety, "no clear fact to be discerned."

The actual vote came down not to the margin *of* error but to the margin *for* error. Half of Americans seem to think that their country has none, the other half that it has plenty. One tribe fears that, after almost a decade of Trump bombarding its laws, institutions, and civic life with verbal and physical assaults, another four years of him in the White House will kill them off for good. Harris appealed to those fears.

But the other tribe thinks the US can afford to gamble its future on a carnival barker, a wild improviser, a reckless disrupter. It has, paradoxically, a deep confidence in the America that Trump disparages with such dark relish, believing that a good shaking-up will not break the country but bring it back to its true self. Trump is a confidence man in both senses—he may be conning much of his own electorate, but they give him the benefit of their nonchalant belief that he is not destroying American norms, merely restoring an imagined American normalcy.

This is something else that made the campaign hard to comprehend. Trump drew a picture of an America on the brink of extinction—but many of his voters trust in an idea of an America that is so fundamentally resilient that it can afford to take breathtaking risks. Harris offered hope in the promise of America—but many of her voters see the country as too fragile to survive another disordered presidency.

Without taking this contradiction into account, it would be quite rational to struggle to understand Trump's astonishing political potency. He is surely the most *known* candidate ever to face an electorate anywhere. It is not just that he has been a national celebrity since *The Apprentice* first aired twenty years ago. Or that he has

dominated American politics for almost a decade, sucking in most of the attention that citizens give to public life. Or even that he has—unlike in 2016—actually been president for four years of malign incompetence, ruling over an administration whose inner workings have been amply revealed by his own closest advisers. (The description of him as "a person that has nothing but contempt for our democratic institutions, our Constitution, and the rule of law" comes not from one of his enemies but from his longest-serving chief of staff, John Kelly.)

Beyond all of that, there is the knowledge that Trump illegally paid hush money to a porn star, that he has boasted of grabbing women's genitals, that his businesses engaged in large-scale fraud, that he kept government secrets in boxes stored in a bathroom at Mar-a-Lago, that he tried to steal the last presidential election by any means necessary, up to and including a violent invasion of the Capitol. And even though, in the suit E. Jean Carroll brought against Trump, a New York jury convicted him of sexual abuse rather than rape—which in the state's legal definition means forcible vaginal penetration with a penis—"that does not mean," as the judge in the case later clarified, "that she failed to prove that Mr. Trump 'raped' her as many people commonly understand the word 'rape.'"

And in this campaign, he let everything (from Arnold Palmer's penis to the greatness of the fictional serial killer and cannibal Hannibal Lecter) hang out more than ever. Trump presented to the electorate not just his Ego but his Id. His public utterances were increasingly like a version of *Ulysses* written by someone on a bad acid trip. His stream of consciousness was more like a meander of unconsciousness. Random thoughts surfaced like the sharks with which he was so weirdly obsessed:

> A lot of shark attacks lately. Do you notice that?... I watched some guys justifying it today: "Well, they weren't really that angry. They bit off the young lady's leg because of the fact that they were not hungry, but they misunderstood who she was." These people are crazy.

This supersaturation of knowledge about Trump is what was discombobulating for the Democrats. In the old normality they still inhabit, it was natural to think, "If only people knew..." In the old politics, it was sensible to ask (with T.S. Eliot), "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" But voters did know, and they were, on the whole, willing to offer not just forgiveness but trust and approbation. In this new era the New Age creed that letting it all hang out is a sign of honesty and authenticity has become the great asset of the right. The more unfiltered Trump became, the more real and sincere he seemed to a majority of voters.

If on Trump's side of the great divide there was a crazy overload of knowledge, on Harris's there was a dearth. The fundamental problem was not just that Harris was relatively unknown to most voters—a problem compounded by Biden's disastrous reluctance to honor his pledge to be a bridge to a new generation and step aside after his first term. Also unknown were, to a remarkable extent, the actual achievements of the Biden administration, of which Harris was part.

Biden has been very good at doing what Trump claims to be capable of but isn't: getting big things done. The president had tangible successes in overseeing the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine, reducing unemployment to its lowest level in fifty years, extending access to health care, beginning the transition of American industry to a post-carbon economy, and tackling the dreadful state of much of the country's infrastructure.

Yet he was terrible at communicating those achievements to the general public. This was partly because of his wan and increasingly frail presence. But it was also because many Americans saw his presidency as a truck stop rather than a highway, a hiatus rather than a trajectory. Biden got elected by offering quiet and healing. Perhaps Americans got bored with quietness.

His administration's objectively significant accomplishments could not break through to swing voters, many of whom had chosen Biden because they wanted to get politics (which had become, in effect, Trump's tantrums and frenzies) out of their heads for a while. And in this Biden succeeded all too well. Biden allowed people not to have to think about Trump. His administration was understood as a form of convalescence, a respite from all the craziness and chaos of Trump's feverish presidency. But it's hard to make voters think of a nursing home as a source of energy.

The very existence of a competent federal government, going about the ordinary business of trying to make people's lives better, allowed for a creeping amnesia. It became possible to forget what it felt like to live under a Trump presidency, to wipe away all the reasons Trump left the Oval Office with an abysmal approval rating of 34 percent. The paroxysms of rage, the sulks of self-pity, the murderous ineptitude of his handling of the pandemic, the relentless lies and untethered violence of his attempted coup—all of this receded into the past with extraordinary rapidity.

Something odd has happened with American memory. With the "Again" in MAGA, Trump appeals to a notion of a better past to which he will allow the US to return. This certainly works: CNN's exit polls suggest that two thirds of those who believe that "America's best days are in the past" voted for Trump. But "the past" now seems to

include at least the first three quarters of the Trump presidency, before the arrival of Covid. A glow of nostalgia surrounds a period that ought to be too recent for wistful longing.

This strange twist in time helped to shape a contradiction Harris struggled—and ultimately failed—to resolve. Was she running as a guarantor of continuity or a force for change? Perhaps, if there could be said to be a moment that she lost the election, it was her answer on ABC's *The View* on October 8 to the question "Would you have done something differently than President Biden during the past four years?": "There is not a thing that comes to mind in terms of—and I've been a part of most of the decisions that have had impact, the work that we have done." She was trying, not unreasonably, to claim a share of the credit for Biden's considerable achievements. Her problem was that there was precious little credit to go around. Half of a small dish of public approval makes for pretty meager fare.

Harris embodied radical change in who she is—Black and female. But she struggled to represent change in what she would do. Her signature issues—access to abortion and the defense of democracy—necessarily involved her defending rights and institutions that had seemed stable before Trump and his movement revolted against them. However just these causes, they meant that she was standing up for what was (at least until very recently) the status quo. The bold vision for progressive change embodied in her persona was blurred.

While Harris was trying for uplift, Trump's method was overkill. In a TV ad that a group allied with his campaign aired nearly six thousand times in just six days in late October (at a cost of almost $20 million), a voice like something from a trailer for a horror movie intoned, over mug shots of dark-skinned men and pictures of female victims, that these women were "bludgeoned, raped, strangled, stabbed, shot, and murdered." It was as though each of them had been killed several times—and slaughtered by Harris herself. The primary message that Trump hammered home, over and over, was that Harris personally unleashed this frenzy of violence by opening the southern border to the hordes of madmen and murderers loosed from the hellish asylums and prisons of foreign countries.

The strength of this terroristic messaging was that it fused racism and misogyny to produce the sum of all fears. Its apparent weakness was that the misogyny seemed too generalized. It was intended to appeal not just to sexist men but to women frightened of the kind of violence that sexist men inflict. But Trump would not keep it on target. His statement in Wisconsin on October 30 that he was going to "protect" women "whether the women like it or not" was too blatant a tell. It encapsulated the sick paradox of the grabber of women posturing as their guard.

Trump's constant personal denigration of Harris's intellect, career, and sexuality was, on any ordinary view of political utility, the wrong kind of misogyny. It laced his potent cocktail of race- and gender-based phobias with raw rotgut chauvinism. It seemed reasonable to think that Trump was going too far and provoking a backlash from women. As Nikki Haley put it, "This bromance and masculinity stuff, it borders on edgy to the point that it's going to make women uncomfortable."

But not, it seems, uncomfortable enough. Trump's bet was that this parade of misogyny would attract disgruntled young men to vote for him more than it would animate otherwise undecided women to vote against him. His instincts turned out to be right. A majority of white suburban women seem to have voted for Trump. According to exit polls, the gender gap was perfectly balanced, with Harris ten points ahead among women and Trump ten points ahead among men.

The gender divide partly accounts too for Trump's increased popularity with men of color. This trend was already evident in 2020, but this time he seems to have made even deeper inroads. CNN's exit poll suggests that 21 percent of Black men and a clear majority (55 percent) of Latino men voted for Trump. In such a profoundly gendered election, being male mattered more for many voters than any assumptions about racial or ethnic solidarity.

On the other side of that divide, even while pro-choice referendums passed in seven states (though they were defeated in Florida, South Dakota, and Nebraska), it may well be that the prospect of passing these measures gave many women a degree of comfort that they could protect their reproductive rights at the state level. Or it may simply be that garish misogyny is now so normalized that many women had already priced it in.

In a disinhibited America, a lot of women may now be expecting nothing better from men. Perhaps, like Haley, they rolled their eyes at the spectacle of Trump's big Madison Square Garden rally being "overly masculine," and then voted for him anyway because men being boorish is just the way of the world. Whatever this means for the future of gender relations in America, it is not likely to be pleasant.

It's tempting, in some ways, to do the same for the election result as a whole—to normalize it by putting it down to prosaic explanations like the impact of inflation and the anti-incumbency mood that has swept through most of the democratic world. Those factors are of course very real. Inflation, in particular, acts as a cipher for a much wider range of perceptions, not only of immediate hardship but of unfairness and powerlessness. But we must not lose sight of the much larger consequence of Trump's victory: it decisively shifts the idea of who is a normal American.

It was not wrong to see this election as pivotal, and what America has pivoted toward is a knowing and deliberate transfer of power to a nexus of interest groups whose interests are inimical to pluralist democracy. One of them is of course Trump and his family. He will have free rein for personal vengeance against his enemies and for untrammeled self-enrichment.

Another is made up of fundamentalist Christians who will gain control of federal education and health care policies and of federal court appointments and use that control to further roll back the gains made over many decades for the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, and people who just believe that they should be able to live their lives as they see fit. A third is the oligarchs who will be allowed to do as they see fit, whether in a free-for-all of oil and gas drilling or in already dangerous areas like social media disinformation, AI, and cryptocurrencies.

Trump's second coming may not quite herald the end of the world, but it will hand the ship of state over to a motley crew of libertines and libertarians, control freaks and fanatics. It will stage its own spectacles of mass roundups and treason trials for the amusement of the many millions who are, it now seems abundantly clear, entertained by exhibitions of cruelty. It will be a nonstop show, its cacophonous soundtrack amplified by Elon Musk and the thriving denizens of the digital manosphere.

For those who are now defeated, there is the task of creating a story and a movement that can provide an alternative clear and coherent enough to break through the coming bedlam. Blaming Harris or retreating into the old orthodoxy that only white men can hope to win will not be useful. Neither will an insistence on chasing a supposed centrism that avoids the conflicts that have to be faced and the choices that have to be made.

Arguably, Harris had both too many messages—abortion rights, the protection of democracy, an industrial revival, support for Ukraine and NATO, prescription drug prices, housing, simultaneous loyalty to Israel and sympathy for Palestinian suffering, the creation of an "opportunity economy"—and too few. The Democrats played down two very big things: the climate crisis and the income inequality that is sure to rise as new technologies further enrich existing elites. The result was an offering that was broad but shallow, based as it was on a decision not to address issues that are shaping the lives of Americans now and will continue to shape them in the coming decades.

Harris's defeat showed that grace, good humor, intelligence, and energy—all of which she demonstrated amply—will not be enough. There has to be a capacity to tap into and redirect the discontent that Trump has been able to channel into hatred and fear. Trump has moved American politics away from parties and toward movements,

away from process and toward performance. Those who oppose him will have to be better at playing on this new stage. Harris showed that the Democrats can summon crowds, that they too have the potential to create and sustain the kind of permanent campaign that has allowed Trump to ride out every setback.

Such a campaign must start from the recognition that the people who can form it now constitute the official "enemy from within," a minority at risk of becoming, unless they can find an effective voice, the erroneous margin of the newly dominant America.

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This article was originally published online November 7, 2024 in slightly modified form.

An earlier version of this article improperly stated that Trump had been judged by a jury to be a rapist. The current version properly sets forth the verdict.

Fintan O'Toole

Fintan O'Toole is the Advising Editor at *The New York Review* and a columnist for *The Irish Times*. His book *Shakespeare Is Hard, But So Is Life* was reissued this year. (November 2024)