

ELECTION 2016 DONALD TRUMP FEATURE OCTOBER 24, 2016, ISSUE

Donald Trump, Shamer in Chief

He's spectacularly trashed our political culture by weaponizing shame. But he's not the first—and he won't be the last.

By Adam Haslett

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Illustration by Philip Burke.

Like so many of us, I've spent the last 18 months enthralled by the dark carnival of our latest national election. From the start, I couldn't tear my eyes from the spectacle of the Republican primaries. Never have I experienced such oceanic quantities of schadenfreude as I did watching the front men for modern conservatism stand slack-jawed while the leading candidate for their party's nomination figuratively slapped George W. Bush across the face for starting the Iraq War and flushed 30 years of free-market trade policy down the toilet like schoolwork torn from the hands of teachers' pets. From my own white, middle-class safety, I thrilled at Donald Trump finally bringing the Republican Party's appeals to racial prejudice into the open, where they would be judged in all their ugliness. But at the end of each debate, I felt the nausea of the glutton and promised myself to consume less of the circus in the days ahead, only to return to the political blogs the next morning, hungry for fatuous commentary on who had "won," knowing in my gut that all I or any of us were doing was losing whatever frayed threads of decency still held American political life together. Through the conventions, the summer meltdowns, and now the fall debates, my mind has been captive to each flicker in the polls.

And I am hardly alone. Our presidential contests have become such prolonged episodes of mass distraction and political anxiety it's hard to even keep track of what we are experiencing. Still, we have to try. And that begins by understanding that one of the reasons they have become such totalizing events is that presidential elections are one of the only chances we have left to fulfill the basic human need to experience collective emotion. In an era of social atomization and online living, when we have so few points of civic attachment in the vast middle ground between domestic life and the imperial presidency, the candidates—as the phenomenon of Barack Obama made abundantly clear—have become repositories for feelings that have nowhere else to go. What have been, for most of our

history, political contests over leadership of the executive branch have transmogrified in recent decades into something we experience less as debates on the direction of the nation than as zero-sum battles over who will be allowed the pleasure and relief of feeling they are not alone in their own country. Beneath the smog of vitriol and disgust that has characterized this election, then, lies a great sorrow: that there is so little fellow feeling left among us these days that we are compelled to seek it in our national leader. Historically, this has never been a good sign.

No one has better manipulated this paucity of solidarity—and thus more powerfully distracted us from the concerns of real life—than Donald Trump. He’s accomplished this through endless acts of public verbal violence that have broken one unwritten rule of political discourse after the next, and have had the effect that all violence does: to shock those who experience it into a kind of stunned passivity. Eventually, as we have seen, the violence numbs people’s senses to the point that they no longer fully register the horror of what they are living through.

In an essay on *King Lear*, the philosopher Stanley Cavell describes Lear’s daughter Regan, who orders the eyes of her father’s loyal friend Gloucester gouged out, thusly: “She has no ideas of her own; her special vileness is always to increase the measure of pain others are prepared to inflict; her mind is itself a lynch mob.” A

year and a half into Trump's incitement of a campaign, this seems the most concise formulation of his character: He has no ideas of his own; his special vileness is always to increase the measure of rhetorical violence others are prepared to inflict; his mind is itself a political mob.

How can we resist this maelstrom of distraction and the intellectual passivity it induces? We have to start by letting go of the two beliefs, nearly universally accepted, that lie at the heart of it. The first is that Trump, in his serial demolition of political norms, is some radical anomaly, unprecedented in our stable two-party system—an argument that Hillary Clinton's campaign has, disappointingly, chosen to center itself on. While this is true in a host of trivial ways, the repetition of it ad nauseam hides the far deeper continuity between Trump and the development within the American right over the last two decades of precisely the strategy of political vandalism and brinkmanship that he has used to fuel his rise.

The second belief to let go of, and the more powerfully distorting one in the long run, is that the emotion driving our present politics is anger, when it would be more accurate and far more illuminating to say that it's *shame*—economic, ethnic, and personal shame. And here, importantly, there is no obvious partisan divide. At a time of gaping inequality and an ever-more-freelance labor market, economic insecurity—absolute or relative

—is a general condition for the vast majority of the population, regardless of what the official unemployment numbers tell us. For all the political rage on display in this election, the deeper, more private, and more pervasive feeling animating our current political misery is the shame that has always accompanied poverty, or not being able to provide all you want for your children, or enjoying less than you see others enjoying, or—in this second Gilded Age—simply not being rich. Add to this the humiliation that our society visits with such numbing regularity on women, racial and sexual minorities, and, increasingly, on white working-class people for their supposed pathologies, and you begin to see that shame has become the force that binds us together.

The real divide comes in how this shame is used. Trump has weaponized it. Indeed, his skill is precisely this: to create an entire national theater of shame in which he induces that very emotion in his followers, on the one hand, while on the other saving them from having to acknowledge its pain by publicly shaming others instead. This has been the central action of his campaign from the outset. He tells people that “we don’t win anymore,” that we are losers, losers who “don’t even have a country,” because it has been overrun and “raped” by immigrants and foreign powers. This summer, in Erie, Pennsylvania, he dropped the pretense of including himself among the losers and told his audience directly: “You people don’t win, that’s for sure.”

But yelling at people about their degraded state is just part of a larger performance in which he gives them the means to avoid the shame of their condition by enjoying, live or online, his shaming of others: opponents, journalists, protesters, disabled people, and, often most virulently, women. His recent misogynist tirade against a former Miss Universe is just one in a series of instances in which he has figuratively offered up the bodies of women for public denunciation. Despite all the attention to the rage supposedly being channeled by Trump's campaign, it isn't anger that has made this theater of his hypnotic. It's the more primal pain and pleasure of public humiliation.

In contrast, the Democratic Party that Clinton now leads is grounded in the opposite, ethical response to shame—at least for the historically disenfranchised identity groups at the heart of the Obama coalition—which is to acknowledge the existence of shame and the suffering it has caused, and then to seek its political repair. This is the social balm that the party proposes to cover the bruising of its neoliberal economic policy: We'll give you gays in the military, you give us the Trans-Pacific Partnership. That one of the unintended consequences of this gambit has been to open up space for Trump and others to exacerbate the shame experienced by a large segment of the white working class is the most volatile and misunderstood dynamic of this election.

To get at the roots of the right's political vandalism and the supercharged emotions of this election, we need to return to the modern avatar of antiestablishment resentment, Rupert Murdoch. Contrary to his image on the left as the Darth Vader of conservatism, Murdoch, like Trump, has long been a chameleon when it comes to political party. In the United Kingdom, his papers supported Labour before they supported Margaret Thatcher; they played a decisive role in electing Tony Blair prime minister, before switching again to the Conservatives under David Cameron. As biographies of Murdoch make clear, from his earliest days as an Australian at Oxford with socialist leanings, to his economically foolish determination to buy *The Wall Street Journal* late in life, his central urge has been far less to bring victory to any particular ideology than to thwart, discomfit, and if possible destroy whatever he perceives to be the establishment, be it English aristocrats, cultural snobs, labor unions, or East Coast liberal elites.

In a description of Murdoch's entry into the British media business in the 1960s, *The Economist* once credited him with having "invented the modern tabloid newspaper—a stew of sexual titillation, moral outrage and political aggression." Long before his most famous media property appeared on American cable, Murdoch imported this stew to the United States with his

purchase of the *New York Post* in the mid-'70s. One of the first things he did was to order up a gossip column, the famous "Page Six." The "heart—and spleen—of the paper," as *Vanity Fair* once described it, the column was meant to bring the high and mighty down to the realm its readers occupied by exposing their hidden seediness.

"Page Six" and the *New York Post* are what first made Trump famous. As a former "Page Six" editor aptly put it, the column "definitely played a role in helping push Donald Trump to the first round of his never-ending whatever." An otherwise unremarkable heir of a real-estate fortune, Trump became the subject of a record number of *Post* covers for his carefully cultivated and basically false image as a Manhattan playboy. His salacious behavior and conspicuous lifestyle sold newspapers, just as they sell cable and Web ads today.

In creating Fox News, Murdoch brought the format of the tabloid newspaper to coverage of Washington. And it has been this format—the "stew of sexual titillation, moral outrage and political aggression"—more than the channel's support for any particular candidate or policy, that has had the most lasting and corrosive effect on our politics. As the intrepid Gabriel Sherman details in his biography of Roger Ailes, erstwhile Fox News chief and current Trump adviser, the network's audience began to explode based on its coverage (and, in no small part, its invention) of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. With the help of Matt Drudge, the Murdoch Mini-Me of the early

Internet, a new, hyper-aggressive gossip-mongering became, for the first time, a major driver of Americans' understanding of their government, with other networks and websites entering similar territory in order to compete. It was during Ken Starr's investigation that the marriage between right-wing Republicans and tabloid media that defines our political landscape today was consummated.

What elected politicians like House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his henchmen brought to the wedding table to feed this new spectacle machine was a willingness to commit what amounted to vandalism of the Constitution in the pursuit of an ideological end. Before we allow Trump's violence to create such amnesia that people pine for the sober-minded Republicans of the 1990s, let us not forget that the impeachment of Bill Clinton was a grotesque abuse of the system of checks and balances, out of joint with any reasonable understanding of when that extraordinary power ought to be exercised. Just as Trump's antics do now, the impeachment circus engrossed the nation, stunning much of it into a new political normal in which a flimsy and hypocritical moral crisis justified such vandalism. Its real purpose, of course, was to debilitate a Democratic president and engender deep cynicism about the federal government—the ideological end of an antigovernment party.

The impeachment was such a success even in its failure, much as Trump has thus far proven to be, that it set the template for how the right could operate from a position of political and, increasingly, cultural weakness to nonetheless achieve its revanchist aims: by violating a political norm in spectacular fashion, thereby creating a media frenzy and, under cover of the ensuing distraction, advancing its otherwise endangered or unachievable goals. Just as physical violence monopolizes attention in real time, so theatrical and rhetorical violence monopolizes it in the political space.

Thus, during the Florida recount, the Bush campaign, in a plot conceived in part by Trump adviser Roger Stone, paid hundreds of Republican operatives to fake a violent protest outside a Miami-Dade election center. The so-called “Brooks Brothers riot” interrupted and discredited the electoral process itself; the resulting wall-to-wall cable-news coverage stupefied the country into believing that chaos reigned, and that the Supreme Court—despite violating its own legal norms—was justified in deciding the election. It remains, at least for a few more weeks, the most consequential victory of tabloid journalism over our political institutions, altering as it did the course of history and leading to the war in Iraq.

Employing the formula in 2004, right-wing groups, again with the help of Fox News, created a months-long news circus by trashing another supposedly sacrosanct

rule of our political life: that a decorated war hero—in this case, John Kerry—would not be attacked for his service. Again, the story drew such fervid attention not, in the main, because of its content, which was paltry, but because, consciously or not, we were stunned by the violation of what had been an implicit bargain about the treatment of veterans. It was this violence that did the enthralling; and with the successful “swift-boating” of Kerry, a weak president was reelected. If Trump’s rhetorical cluster bombs make these episodes seem quaint, it is not because they are different in kind, but in degree: The arc and format of their unfolding in the media are nearly identical.

By the time we reach the Obama administration and the right’s massive resistance to its very existence, the vandalism of unwritten institutional arrangements and the ginning-up of false crises—each with its own attendant cable-news conflagration—proliferate so quickly they’re hard to catalog: the Tea Party’s emergence; Joe “You lie!” Wilson; Mitch McConnell announcing that the Senate’s chief priority was to make Obama a one-term president; the threat to default on the national debt; the government shutdown; and, most recently, the refusal to hold hearings for a sitting president’s Supreme Court nominee.

Once we step back from all the drama and fake emergencies, what we see over the past 20 years, beginning with the Clinton impeachment, is a domestic

variation of what Naomi Klein described in *The Shock Doctrine*. But here, rather than inducing and taking advantage of disasters, wars, and other types of violence to advance laissez-faire capitalism, the right is fomenting and subsequently manipulating a misery that exists mainly in the realm of culture and fantasy. While free-market economics has come along for the ride, the main antigovernment end being advanced in this less concrete realm has far older and deeper roots in American history than Milton Friedman. It is an attack on the federal government and judiciary for its perceived sponsorship of the interests, and often simply the full citizenship, of African Americans, women, and other racial and sexual minorities—a sponsorship that, ever since Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, has become more and more identified with the Democratic Party.

It is no accident that this pattern of vandalism began in the 1990s, just as Republican dominance of the popular vote was ending (even if Trump were to eke out a victory over Clinton, in no scenario would he receive an absolute majority). People don't employ vandalism from a position of strength; they resort to it when their weakness in the existing system prevents them from achieving their goals through regular order. To the extent, then, that we continue to treat Trump's own shock doctrine as anomalous rather than as the latest fruit of the now long-standing marriage between tabloid journalism and the American right, we remain caught in

one of the most powerful distractions contained in most coverage of this election: the idea that any of this is going to end on November 8.

Whether Trump wins or loses, starts a cable network, or runs again for president, the purposeful degrading and delegitimizing of our political culture and institutions that he has accelerated will not only continue; as the electoral strength of the GOP further wanes, it will intensify. That's what Trump is—an intensification of an existing weakness. If Democrats, much less progressives, retain any aspiration to advance their goals through the existing system, we have to be clear-eyed about what is occurring—or we are as doomed to fail as a boxer at a knife fight.

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How did it come to this? The most common explanation given is that decades of technological advancement and automation, neoliberal trade and labor policy, and stagnating real wages have effectively disenfranchised huge numbers of Americans by cutting off access to a decent, stable life for themselves and their children. Vast inequality in wealth, combined with demographic change and residential segregation along racial and ideological lines, has fostered mutual suspicion and resentment among those who see their place in the old social hierarchy eroding. And thus we arrive at the dominant trope of the endless attempts to account for

Trump's rise: the seething, racially tinged anger of the white working class. For 18 months, barely a day has gone by that I haven't read an article that told some version of this story.

This story is not untrue. The economic and cultural conditions it describes are real. But as an explanation of Trump, it obscures as much as it reveals, because it buys into the image that Trump himself is peddling: that he is the true populist channeling the fury of dispossessed white America. And in this effort, for all their supposed antagonism, Trump and the news media have cooperated in portraying his theatrical rage and the most violent behavior of a minority of his supporters as the emotional crux of his campaign. This is how we've been led to equate the character of his live audiences with that of his electoral support. But if we allow ourselves to believe that some 40 percent of the national electorate consists of foaming-at-the-mouth white supremacists, we may as well copy the Texans, start our own secessionist movement, and call it a day. Yes, Trump is inciting racial hatred and mainstreaming white-supremacist politics more directly than any of his Republican predecessors dared to do. But for all the attention this does and must receive, it is not *all* that he is doing.

The widely cited *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by *National Review* contributor J.D. Vance, recently offered what is, in essence, a gentler

version of the infamous Moynihan Report—only this time written from the inside and about the social mores not of African Americans, but of the residents of what Vance calls “Greater Appalachia.” Its most telling passage doesn’t deny the existence of racial resentment in the world he grew up in; rather, it complicates it:

We know we’re not doing well. We see it every day: in the obituaries for teenage kids that conspicuously omit the cause of death (reading between the lines: overdose), in the deadbeats we watch our daughters waste their time with. Barack Obama strikes at the heart of our deepest insecurities. He is a good father while many of us aren’t. He wears suits to his job while we wear overalls, if we’re lucky enough to have a job at all. His wife tells us that we shouldn’t be feeding our children certain foods, and we hate her for it—not because we think she’s wrong but because we know she’s right.

What Vance is describing here is shame. A shame that is both personal and ethnic, that is grounded in economic conditions but experienced socially—both locally, within communities, and nationally, in the fun-house mirror of the mass media.

It is certainly true that the recently noticed travails of white people without college educations, such as increased heroin use and higher suicide rates, have received strikingly more sympathetic coverage than the ongoing suffering of African Americans living in

poverty. Nonetheless, to understand Trump's flourishing, we have to acknowledge that the degrading of the social fabric wrought by our brand of capitalism, and by the Great Recession in particular, isn't limited to communities of color. In the places Vance writes about—towns that have become the subjects of the kind of voyeuristic “profiles in despair” that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* once reserved for developing countries—what Trump has taken a sadistic advantage of is not so much raw anger, but rather its more basic predicate: the shame of being lesser-than. It's the feeling Vance describes arriving at that bastion of establishment privilege, Yale Law School, where his lower social class planted “a doubt in my mind about whether I belonged” and “the lies I told about my own past” weighed on him. In much the same way that a gay kid can only overcome the damage of self-loathing by acknowledging it, part of what allowed Vance to form intimate relationships after being raised by a drug-addicted mother in a series of poor white communities in Ohio is that he “stopped being ashamed. My parents' mistakes were not my fault, so I had no reason to hide them.”

There is something very important to listen to here if, in the long run, we're to have any hope of repairing the vandalism that the right wing has visited on the body politic, and that Trump is committing with such abandon. Shame is what we have in common. It is the messy, volatile, and most often intolerable feeling that

haunts unemployed young men in isolated rural communities and urban ghettos alike. It gnaws at millions of women who are belittled, harassed, and underpaid, and who live on their own in higher numbers than ever in our history while still being told that family is the key to fulfillment. It plagues African Americans humiliated by the police, or who have had loved ones killed by them, only to be told that the victims were to blame for their own deaths. Despite the advances in gay rights, it still consumes LGBTQ youth, who kill themselves at four times the rate of their straight brothers and sisters. It eats away at veterans consigned to poverty. And yes, it troubles the spirits of many white Americans living in what are glibly called the “fly-over states,” who perceive—not incorrectly—that most of the gild of the age is concentrated in cities on the coasts, whose wealthier residents consider them cultural primitives.

Indeed, it even lies in the hearts of those who, on the left, we consider our most virulent enemies. As Gabriel Sherman’s book chronicles, the leading men of Fox News—Roger Ailes and Bill O’Reilly—were formed in part by feelings of class humiliation that bred their resentment of what they consider the liberal establishment. As for Trump, he’s a son of the outer boroughs whom “Page Six” once reported had been “blackballed” from membership at the most exclusive country club in East Hampton because, after all, he simply wasn’t one of them.

This is the divide. This is the choice. Make shame—your own and others’—into a weapon, as these men have done, and you get the closest thing to fascism we’ve had in this country since the 1930s. Create the room for shame’s articulation, and therefore a recognition of our commonality, and you have at least a shot at the working basis for an ameliorative democracy.

But what makes the latter so hard to achieve at present isn’t just the acid partisanship most frequently blamed for our ills; it’s the feedback loop between the endlessly disruptive drive of commodity capitalism and the cultural climate we’ve allowed it to produce. Here the instrumental use of other people’s shame is in no way limited to the political right. Much reality television, *The Apprentice* most definitely included, is based on it. It wasn’t always the case that ordinary people’s humiliation was the stuff of our daily entertainment. But it is now. What’s more, the tabloid format that Murdoch honed in the UK in the 1960s, that stew of sex, outrage, and aggression, hasn’t just corroded our experience of national politics. It has, in a very real sense, swallowed us whole. Between pornography, celebrity gossip, crime and disaster clickbait, and political fury, the Internet itself has become the infinitely circulating tabloid we live our days inside. We don’t even require the Murdochs of the world anymore.

On social media, we turn our own lives into tabloids: gossiping, titillating, publishing our moral outrage and our political diatribes, updated by the minute. And nowhere has shame been more effectively weaponized than on these platforms, where online bullying immiserates lonely teenagers and people share links to revenge-porn videos to humiliate their departed lovers. It is not just Trump supporters who are caught up in a national theater of shame. In one way or another, to one degree or another, we are all in attendance now.

Is it any wonder, then, that fellow feeling is so hard to come by? And that we would seek it, in however mediated a form, from some of the only people left who can act as containers of our collective emotion—our presidential candidates. Hillary Clinton’s inability, for a variety of reasons, to become that vector of shared sentiment, as Obama so clearly did, is one of the defining facts of this election—as is Trump’s ability to achieve precisely that. The fact that he is the one to accomplish this in 2016 brings to mind a line of Mary Gaitskill’s, from her novel *Veronica*: “The more withered the reality, the more gigantic and tyrannical the dream.”

Donald Trump, a would-be tyrant, is a creature born of our already withered public life. He is neither an anomaly nor the end of his kind. We either find a way to acknowledge together what we suffer in common, or we live in his world. ●

10 COMMENTS

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