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Inauguration Day and the Politics of a Partial Exorcism

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Abstract

"Our nation is possessed by various spirits, and the parties are far from united on which ones should go and which should stay."

Posting about the 2021 Presidential Inauguration from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Inauguration Day and the Politics of a Partial Exorcism

Donald Roth

There is no doubt that the inauguration of the Biden presidency on January 20, 2021, will mark a point of historic political transition in the United States. Since at least President Reagan's inaugural speech in 1981, Americans have been congratulating themselves on the "orderly transfer of authority," which Reagan called "nothing less than a miracle." This most recent transition has surely been less orderly, and, if we can move past some of the troubled spirits that have plagued our nation in recent years, it will have a whiff of the miraculous.

More likely, the political quote we'll hear bandied about in the coming weeks will not be Reagan, but a potentially apocryphal quote from Benjamin Franklin. When asked about the form of government contained in the new constitution, he is reported to have answered, "A republic, if you can keep it."

So how will we go about keeping it? Part of this will be moving on to the reality of a new elected officeholder in President Biden. Another important part will be coming to grips with what has happened in the last four years, the last few weeks, and what this means for the future.

Since the House of Representatives has impeached President Trump for a second time, the inauguration of the Biden administration will be at least partially defined by a historic moot impeachment trial. Since there is no office to strip from President Trump, and impeachment is not the only road to bar Trump from holding future office, the inaugural agenda for Congress will be a sort of political exorcism. However, this will be only a partial exorcism, as our nation is possessed by various spirits, and the parties are far from united on which ones should go and which should stay. In this article, then, I

invite you to adopt the metaphoric lens of “exorcism” and think about what spirits we most need to rid ourselves of.

A Looming Specter

Despite the desperate cries of “stop the steal” that echoed through the halls of Congress, the key political reality that has propped up the spirit of Trumpism is going away. That reality is that the cult of personality around Trump has always been about being in power and being a winner. Come Wednesday, neither of those will be true anymore. The overwhelming majority of Republicans and unanimity of Democrats recognize this, and even President Trump has acquiesced to this reality by relenting in some of the ardor of his refusal to accept the election results (and by actually stepping down).

The question is whether Trump retains some sort of power by winning the hearts, minds, and loyalty of enough of the Republican party to keep his cult going until he can make another bid for power. Some, like Senator Josh Hawley, seem to be banking on this by jockeying for the position of being crowned heir to the Trump legacy. Their desire to ride the coattails of their erstwhile leader is misplaced, as I’ve seen little in President Trump that points to a desire, at any point, to hand the reins over to a successor. Others, like Senator Ted Cruz, seem to want to retain the activation of a new, populist base, as Trump seems to have rallied people to his banner that were never so enthusiastic about the Republican party. I suspect that these voices are just fine with being rid of Trump, so long as they can convert his followers.

However, many, if not most, appear quite ready to banish Trumpism from the American political landscape. For establishment Republicans, like Senator Mitch McConnell, Trump seems to have outlived his political usefulness, and these voices are ready to more thoroughly put the legacy of Trump to bed in hopes of regaining control of party dynamics. Others, like Senator Ben Sasse, have long seen Trumpism as a cancer that undermined conservative principles, and they hope to cast a different vision for the Republican party than the iconoclastic, xenophobic populist rhetoric of the Trump years.

The political Left is unanimous in their desire to exorcise Trumpism, but they are divided on what that exactly means. A sharp point of division among Democrats is how to interpret Biden’s victory. Biden’s campaign married the most progressive major party platform in recent history with an appeal to a return to normalcy aimed at winning over moderates. However, while Biden won, his coattails were virtually non-existent. Democrats split on whether this was because Biden came off as too progressive or not progressive enough, but the words of President-elect Biden’s first address are telling. He

called this “a time to heal in America.” This expresses a more moderate appeal that the first steps of a national exorcism have begun.

A Partial Exorcism

Yet what spirits are we now casting out, and what does healing look like? Beyond the narrow historical fact that the Trump presidency is at an end and the Biden presidency is beginning, there is no clear answer.

It is clear that nativism was a key spirit of Trumpism, but it’s not clear that Americans are looking to lay the inward turn of “me first” to rest. While the definition of who exactly falls within the tribe varies across party lines, much of American social dialog remains about who and/or what gets to be nearer to the front of the line. The ideological extremes differ in whether they define the worthy along nationalist or intersectional lines, but the language is similar. This spirit is perhaps most clear where it is called forth by practical necessity, such as in the lines of prioritization for Covid vaccinations. Yet, aside from debates about the priorities of specific states, Americans are largely united in a sense that all Americans should be at the front of the global line, even if this means that elderly and vulnerable people in less wealthy nations will likely have to wait until as late as 2024 for vaccinations.

It is clear that hyperbolic rhetoric was a spirit of Trumpism, but it’s not clear that Americans are looking to lay polarized, apocalyptic narratives to rest. One of the most strident voices on the Left, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, characterized the Trump years as “a free fall into hell.” Republicans, who don’t share her vision of heaven, are proving reticent about painting the insurrectionist riot on January 6 in more stark terms because they realize that this would acknowledge a political vulnerability—one that Democrats are keen to capitalize upon. They recognize the rhetorical impact of distinctive terms that are open to amplification, creating a chasm between the travesty at the capitol and the attempted establishment of “autonomous zones” in several U.S. cities after a summer that turned many urban centers into burned-out war zones. There is a serious difference between the two that should not be papered over, but a spirit of hyperbole papers over similarities as well. Of course, the violent insurrectionist mob at the capital wasn’t spurred on primarily by an enthusiastic embrace of fascism; instead, many on the Right are driven by a fear that a Democrat regime represents an equal and opposite “free fall into hell,” and the mob represented those who were willing to sacrifice even democracy to the fire if it means avoiding a worse apocalypse. Given that our political rhetoric has long painted oppositional political figures as heirs of Hitler or Stalin, we have become so accustomed to hyperbole that genuinely trying times can only be described by ever more extreme hyperbole.

It is clear that a crass form of political cynicism was a spirit of Trumpism, but it's not clear that Americans are looking to lay the instrumentalization of values to rest. Trump, tear-gassing protestors to pose for a photo op with a Bible, represents perhaps the most blatant political cynicism of a cynical age, but it's not clear that we are in any way weary of *realpolitik*. Many Democrats who cheered on rioters hurling glass and explosives at police are suddenly aghast at the assault (and murder) of police officers while they continue to maintain that saying "Blue Lives Matter" is hate speech. Republicans who refused to approve Merrick Garland's nomination at the end of President Obama's second term suddenly discovered meaningful distinctions that they claimed warranted rushing through the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett, even when they had denied that they would take such action in exactly such a circumstance four years prior. In the face of such hypocrisy, it's natural for everyone to conclude that our politicians are not ruling so much in the interest of the values they espouse as for the power it gives them. In this climate, there is a rising, rather than receding, tide of those who conceive of the political as nothing more than what Nietzsche called "the will to power."

The Needed Exorcism

This brings up the true spirit that we need to exorcise from the common sphere. Friedrich Nietzsche was not entirely wrong to see a tendency in human societies to sacrifice much that was once professed in the pursuit of power. The error that he made was to valorize this process, rather than seeing it for the corrosive reenactment of the sin of the Garden that it really is. Nietzsche saw the origins of society in the individual, not a social group, and he bent the idealized vision of humanity back toward achieving total liberty for individuals, or, at least the *übermensch* who he thought could attain it. Although they differ in their views of what conditions are preferred for which individuals to flourish, many on both the Right and Left agree with this fundamentally individualistic, ultimately narcissistic assessment of the world.

While it is an unfortunate reality of our world that we easily discard professed values in the face of practical pressures, this is a failing, not a feature, of humanity. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes ably demonstrate this in their analysis of 1 Samuel in *The Beginning of Politics*. In this book, they argue that the Biblical author shows the "double reversal of ends and means" that often comes with human political power. Specifically, the acquisition of power for a good purpose ends up corrupting those who acquire it and then personalize their power in pursuit of their own ends. Along the way, genuine ends are converted and instrumentalized into means for maintaining power. Using this insight, we can see ways that our contemporary political establishment often seeks office on the basis of certain principles, then sacrifices those principles in the pursuit of maintaining influence. In that process, they may turn to cynically picking up values or narratives that serve the temporary purpose of maintaining power.

Even though there are many Christians who have proven willing to sacrifice the values of Christ for the maintenance of political power, this is not the core of what Christianity is. A Christian view of the world sees us as a people, called by God, not as individuals. Even though we are fallen in sin, we aspire to put on our new selves, to live consistently with our values, even when that is unacceptably costly by the standards of *realpolitik*. As a broader American society, we can also benefit from taking something from this Christian sensibility. Human beings are at their best when they aspire to values, not when they sacrifice those values in the pursuit of power. We are also at our best when we consider ourselves as a common people, not as tribes or individuals out to live our best lives now. If this political season is marked by a politics of partial exorcism, we would do well to work to exorcise this spirit of narcissism and a thirst for power before it leads us to our mutual destruction.