

The Robespierre Conundrum

by David Wisner

I am by inclination a historian, little given to moralizing. Two pieces of reporting in the American news outlet *Politico* prompted me recently to revisit a scenario that has preoccupied me for nearly a decade now. The stories took me back to a time a little over two centuries ago, to an episode in the French Revolution, during the hot, heady days of July 1794 when a faceless group of deputies in the National Assembly, browbeaten and cowering in fear for weeks, if not months, conspired to overthrow the revolutionary Committee of Public Safety, the dictatorial arm of the most radical members of the Jacobin Club, among whom, first and foremost, Maximilien Robespierre.

Those revolutionaries who had survived the Terror and the *coup* of 9 Thermidor, who had managed to lie low during the stormiest moments of revolutionary violence, who had fallen over one another to flatter and facilitate Robespierre to save their hides at the height of his power, were now falling over one another to denounce him, alleging one after the other that they had been deceived, blinded, dumbstruck. Finally the scales had finally fallen from their eyes, they cried. How else could they have supported, agreed with, done the bidding of the scoundrel, the despot whom they had hitherto dubbed the Incorruptible?

The spectacle as it unfolded in the ensuing days had already been repeated on more than one occasion during the course of the Revolution. As the historian R.R. Palmer first wrote in 1941, “An old process was repeated. Revolutionists had abandoned one sinking ship after another... [A]fter Thermidor, men who had worked with Robespierre and agreed with him vociferously declared, to protect themselves, that they had always been his enemies. That they had secretly opposed his hypocritical projects, or that, in their patriotic innocence, they had been his dupes.”

Since 2016 I have pondered whether the scales would fall from the eyes of the Republican rank and file, not to mention the party mandarins and grandees. What would it take for them finally to denounce the man no one in their right mind would call incorruptible, whose faults were there for all to see, whose unconscionable bidding they were now doing with unbridled enthusiasm? When would the cascade of excuses start gushing out? Yes, but we were all fooled, said the silent majority in 1794, safe henceforth in their places (at least until 18 Brumaire and the rise of Napoleon). Why, on January 7, 2021, or at any point thereafter, had the floodgates of recrimination and denunciation not opened wide, had public opinion not turned definitively against the American pretender, Donald Trump? What does Trump have on Robespierre?

Here now, less than a week before election day, in one corner it has been revealed by John Kelly, then-President Trump’s sometime Chief of Staff, that Trump had praised Hitler for something or

other. Why tell us now, one wonders, and not when it actually happened, or at any time subsequently? Why not drive the nail into the coffin after the failed insurrection of January 6? Will it suffice now for others who had witnessed such travesties to come forward, to turn the tide? They had been beguiled, too, hadn't they. It would have been so easy to say, easy for the rest of us to believe. Didn't Donald Trump trick a lot of us?

A trickle of former Trump advisors and party spokespersons have of late become more visible, more vocal, in their disapprobation. The journalist Mike Allen has speculated that it will only be a matter of time until Republicans turn their back on Trump, provided he loses again on November 5, and loses badly. According to one's best guess this is not likely to happen, however, in large part because not everyone has been fooled, or ready to claim as much. *Au contraire*. In another corner this very day stand no fewer than 236 current Republican candidates for a wide range of public offices throughout the United States who have fallen in headfirst with the Big Lie, asserting that the 2020 election was stolen, that Donald Trump had actually won but been prevented from remaining in office. Despite all the revelations, despite the deafening lack of tangible evidence, they do persist. How many more are willing to vote for these same denialist candidates? Will they ever suffer from buyer's remorse?

Since the beginning of this calendar year I have been watching the campaigns with one eye, weary, wary, hoping, wanting to be convinced that the Lockean spirit of American liberalism would prevail, that the guardrails set up as an integral part of the American social contract would be sufficient to constrain those few bad eggs who refused to accept the consensus of the many, of the clear majority, of those of us who more or less get along with one another in our state of nature, regardless of which mainstream political party we support.

I almost gave up before I got started, one day in the very beginning of January, upon reading the headline and drophead of a column by Karen Tumulty in the *Washington Post*. "If, knowing everything Americans now know about Trump," Tumulty wrote, "they reelect him — or even come close— it will be time to quit lying to ourselves." Is this who we really are?

I am reminded of something I told Greek journalists on national television the day after Donald Trump had been elected -- and Hillary Clinton conceded defeat -- in 2016. Maybe Americans are simply more conservative than you think they are. Not prophetically, not resignedly; it's just the way things are. Now, in 2024, a mere two years before the Semiquincentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it would appear that Americans are also more cunning and more intolerant and more susceptible than we both have been willing to admit, for whome "America" means something very different. Maybe there are more bad eggs among us than I had been prepared to realize.

It looks in fact like I am the one who has been misguided. Alas! Perhaps, as New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu had averred already in April, per more reporting in *Politico*, this is indeed who we are, at least that “me and 51% of America” who do not see Donald Trump’s many faults and misdeeds as disqualifying him from occupying the Presidency again.

The math troubles me deeply. You see, hard core Republican supporters of Donald Trump and his movement are not numerous enough to elect him, Electoral College of no Electoral College. They need help from another tribe in American politics, independents, those without formal party affiliation. Their identity fluctuates, and the overall percentage of registered voters who have no party affiliation also trends up and down from year to year. Call them American king-makers, if you like. I myself have voted for candidates of both parties; I have split my ticket. (It used to be a source of pride that students in the undergraduate politics courses I taught could not tell whether I leaned right or left on the political spectrum.) It will be citizens like me who belong to neither party who tip the scales and decide who the next President of the United States will be.

Now, it is understandable that the MAGA faithful who have endorsed candidate Trump, who have invested so much in his candidacy, should resist the temptation to sell him down the river when thus confronted with so many revelations of the damaging sort (the same candidate whom they so fervently support repeatedly feigns ignorance when he is not claiming to know everything). The Trump campaign is actually doubling down on the purity of the MAGA movement. They are still but a plurality of voting Americans. Those who have in principle resisted the clarion call to party loyalty, regardless of ideological orientation, have no such excuse.

Will it fall to me one day soon to deny knowing those independents who have seriously entertained the prospect of re-electing Donald Trump in 2024? While it is not a gesture that would come to me instinctively, do I really know these people? It is not a betrayal of one’s sense of independence to condemn Donald Trump and expect others to do so -- even to accept on face value the claim that one was once bedazzled into voting for him. It is the attitude I would expect of any person for whom decency is an actionable virtue. Have we left no sense of decency? If not, then who the hell are we?

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