

The New Criterion

The Media December 2016

Groovin' on the shock

by James Bowman

On the election and the triumph of rhetoric.

Once, many years ago, a friend told me of an experience he had had walking down the street after a violent thunderstorm. He noticed, almost simultaneously, that a power line had come down and lay with one end in a large puddle and that a hippie, coming down the street in the opposite direction, had not noticed it and was about to step in the puddle. He had had no time to shout a warning before the hippie was hurled into the air by the force of the electric charge and landed in a heap on the sidewalk. My friend and other bystanders rushed toward the poor fellow and cried, "Are you hurt? Are you all right?" The dazed hippie, perhaps not entirely a stranger to similar mind-altering experiences, looked up at the circle of concerned faces gathered around him and said: "I'm all right, man. I'm just groovin' on the shock."

That was the attitude I thought the media ought to have adopted on the morning after the Trump election victory last month—failing, of course, the attitude of genuine humility of which they are apparently incapable. Their dismay at so ghastly a prospect as Donald Trump in the White House was understandable, but it certainly wasn't as if that was all downside for them. There could surely be no doubt that Mr. Trump would continue to be for them the excellent copy he has been for the last eighteen months, and if the apocalyptic warnings of his unfitness for the presidency and the prospective dangers attending his tenure of that office which have become their stock-in-trade are not borne out by events, who will care? The disjunction between rhetoric and reality is what made both the Trump candidacy and their reaction to it possible in the first place.

A disjunction between rhetoric and reality.

As someone who has been reviewing movies for a quarter of a century during which pretty much everything coming out of our domestic film industry has aspired to the condition of the animated cartoon (as Walter Pater said the other arts did to the condition of music) I have been in

a better position than most to have seen this election coming. Why suppose that politics would be

immune to the virus of the cartoon culture that, over the last thirty or forty years, has come to pervade pretty much every other aspect of our public life? From the first appearances in the 1990s of “reality TV” shows, like rust spots on a piece of delicate machinery, we could have foretold the day, not long hence, when the smooth workings of our democracy were bound to seize up on us, as they did during the late campaign, and turn into a braying cacophony of rival football gangs, each trying to shout the other down.

Yet the media have been too enthusiastically joining in the shouting—how else to attract an audience in the era of reality-TV politics?—to have noticed what, as Donald Trump likes to say, “is going on.” Even after the Trump victory, they seemed to see it all as a bizarre aberration beginning and ending with Mr. Trump. “No one predicted a night like this,” wrote Jim Rutenberg of *The New York Times* next morning—he of the front-page, signed editorial advocating journalistic advocacy on behalf of Mrs. Clinton. What he meant, of course, was that no one he might have expected to meet socially had predicted it, no one from among the progressive Hillary admirers and Trump haters who are the only people he knows. It doesn’t occur to him that his casual relegation of half the country to unpersons might have had something to do with the Trump victory.

Annoy the media: Re-elect Bush” was the cry back in 1992, the only time I have ever put a bumper sticker on my car. Well, at last there is a case to be made that people did vote to annoy the media, who badly overplayed their hand by going into hysterics every time they were called upon to consider the prospect of a Trump victory. I doubt that he would have won if it had not been the Republicans’ “turn” at the presidency, as these things have gone since 1992, or if Mrs. Clinton had been a more attractive candidate, but he came near enough to losing as it was that it seems entirely possible a popular reaction against the media’s self-importance and self-righteousness could have made the difference. Not that the media themselves can be expected to grasp this possibility.

Elsewhere in the *Times* on the morning after the election, Mr. Rutenberg got together with the paper’s chief television critic James Poniewozik to ask, “Can the Media Recover From This Election?” Alas, it was but too obvious that they could. And we who would have preferred to humble the media, rather than merely annoy them, have to beware of engaging in their own brand of apocalypticism, which was no more persuasive as applied to themselves than it had been when applied to the republic under President Trump. Nowhere, however, in a piece apparently written before the result was known, did there appear to be any appetite for self-examination or re-consideration of the practices which were to bring them to such a pretty pass. Messrs. Rutenberg and Poniewozik only doubled down on the former’s advocacy advocacy, which the latter was pleased to describe as a noble endeavor “to describe reality as we honestly find it, regardless of appearances.” Reality, forsooth! That they apparently consider their claim to be arbiters of reality as beyond dispute is the best evidence yet that the media haven’t recovered from this election, at least not in the moral sense—and that they won’t.

Look, too, at that day’s paper’s trumpeting flight of headlines:

“Across the World, Shock and Uncertainty at Trump’s Victory”

“Donald Trump’s Victory Promises to Upend the International Order”

“Donald Trump Is ‘Dangerous’ for Global Stability, U.N. Rights Chief Says”

“Global Markets Are Shaky After Trump Victory” (though this later had to be changed to: “Global Markets, Initially Shaken, Edge Higher After Trump Victory”)

All these were echoed in *The Washington Post*’s even more absurdly overstated: “World gasps in collective disbelief following Trump’s election.” This had also been a common tactic during the campaign. Somewhere, we were told, a foreigner was either laughing at or horrified by the dim-witted yokels who were supporting Donald Trump. Weren’t they ashamed of themselves? Weren’t their more sophisticated fellow countrymen even more ashamed of them? But what kind of people did they suppose would be susceptible to such shaming tactics? Who but those already disposed to feel ashamed of their country? Wouldn’t anybody else be driven by them to vote for Mr. Trump even if they were not already planning to do so? And, by the way, those gasps of disbelief from selected foreign dignitaries were interspersed in the article that followed with much more temperate and even some favorable reactions.

The comedy in the media’s tut-tutting about a world they essentially created by selling the public on the notion that elections are really titanic struggles between good and evil has been the one redeeming feature of the last year for those of us nostalgic for a press content with the role of wry observer of bipartisan follies and not committed instead to passionate advocacy of one side over the other. Donald Trump may not be the gigantic intellect he believes himself to be, but he is smart enough to have seen further than the media or the Democrats into the role that he would be forced to play in this epic drama where Republicans are normally expected to play that of the gentlemanly loser. He relished playing it, too—and, with it, playing the media for suckers. The more they affected to throw up their hands in horror at his words and deeds, the more phony they and their fanatical anti-Trumpery appeared.

Did there not stir in them some faint sense of recognition?

True, the media as we have known them for two generations are dying, and their faculties are fading fast, but how could they not have seen anything of themselves in the mirror when they looked at Donald Trump and the Trump campaign? Did there not stir in them some faint

sense of recognition when they noted his Manichaeian worldview, his use of hyperbole—particularly when it came to the catastrophic consequences of not listening to him, his obsession with appearances, his equally obsessive interest in scandal and hidden information, his inability to admit fault or mistakes, and his insistence that the election was “rigged,” and that those

who disagreed with him about anything must be either “failed” or “crooked” or “lying”? How, above all, did they miss in his self-importance and absence of self-reflection the reflection of their own?

During the campaign, I often felt as Mike Pence presumably did when, during the vice-presidential debate, Tim Kaine unleashed a string of insults against Donald Trump, beginning with the assertion that the Trump campaign was “insult-driven.” Wonderingly, Mr. Pence replied: “Ours is an insult-driven campaign?”

And yet both Mr. Kaine and his many supporters and cheerleaders in the media appeared to take it for granted that he could not be held to the same standard to which he was trying to hold Mr. Trump. Similarly, Mr. Kaine’s claims that the Trump warning of a rigged election was “scorched earth” campaigning and mere “scare tactics” were hardly out of his mouth before he himself was accusing “some in the FBI” of “actively working to try to help the Trump campaign.” But why should the media have noticed any such contradiction when they themselves were simultaneously criticizing Mr. Trump for undermining democracy with his claims of election fraud and repeating (and repeating) their own and the Democrats’ long-standing claims of gop vote-rigging through “voter suppression” — which is their preferred term for the Voter ID laws mostly passed by Republican legislators and invalidated by Democratic judges? If, as they said, there was “no evidence” of voter fraud through failure to require a photo ID in order to vote, why were they so determined to make sure that there could be none?

This was one area in which the overheated rhetoric of the campaign might have been expected to have real-world consequences reaching beyond the election, but for the most part people on both sides appeared to treat the apocalypticism of the campaign as being for campaign purposes only, which is what you’d expect given the cartoon climate. Thus, as *The New York Daily News* reported on Hillary Clinton’s last day of campaigning:

Cleared of another FBI probe and clinging to a narrow lead in polls, Hillary Clinton hit the campaign trail for the final time Monday with a message of hope—and civility. “I think we do need more love and kindness,” Clinton told a rally crowd in Pittsburgh—her first of four events in an intense last day of campaigning. “We have got to rise above all this hate-filled rhetoric.” “Anger is not a plan,” she added, reiterating a promise to represent all Americans if elected—a message she repeated in her final campaign ad. “I want to be a president for all Americans, not just some,” she said.

So much for the “basket of deplorables” she had seen in the millions of Trump supporters a few weeks earlier. But, then, maybe she wasn’t thinking of her own anger and hate-filled rhetoric but somebody else’s. It’s possible. It was enough of a concession in her eyes to speak of such things in the abstract—and in the abstract to deplore them—once the campaign extravaganza was finally grinding to a halt.

I think that the extent to which our politics are now conducted entirely on the rhetorical level has been insufficiently appreciated up until now. I have written before about Barack Obama as our

first rhetorical president, a man elected not on the strength of anything he had done or even of anything he had promised to do, apart from a vague expectation of “hope and change,” but for the words with which he told us how he felt about things, and how he made us feel about ourselves for believing in them, and in him. In this respect, he was a classier version of Trump before there was Trump—a Trump for starry-eyed elites who, like Michelle Obama, could only be proud of their country once it made him president. Like Mr. Trump, too, he must have understood how low people’s expectations were of their federal government, and so that they wouldn’t anyway believe any but the vaguest of promises (Hope + Change = Make America Great Again). What people wanted in a leader whom they considered more or less a figurehead was reduced to personal authenticity, and that is the one thing that both the president and his successor have had to offer—and that immunized both to some extent from the now-ubiquitous charge of “lying.” It was also the one thing that Hillary Clinton and the media, the big losers of this election, didn’t have.

Of course, so long as the media are able to keep the country focused on questions of good versus evil, the rhetorical presidency can be expected to continue, but, somewhat belatedly, there have appeared some unwelcome signs of a turn to substance. “She doesn’t do anything about anything other than talk,” said Donald Trump of his opponent. “With her, it’s all talk and no action.” This kind of thing began to resonate. Hillary’s hammering on the theme of “forward, not back,” and preserving the gains of the Obama administration was especially likely to look like mere spin when the way forward was as obscure to people as were the putative gains of the Obama administration—or her own accomplishments as Secretary of State which, by her own account, seemed to consist of visiting lots and lots of countries and logging lots and lots of air miles. Wasn’t this all, as Mr. Trump said, just talk?

Ironically, Mr. Trump’s own more timid or reluctant supporters were likely to plead on his behalf that the offensive and politically incorrect language that the media harped on as the salient, if not the only, feature of his campaign was also just talk, if “locker-room” talk. And how much else besides, we may wonder? That, of course, remains to be seen. At all hazards, however, Mr. Trump seems to have understood (as the media have yet to do) that American political contests now take place almost exclusively on the rhetorical level, and that you have to shout to be heard in that environment. Bad manners on all sides, it seems, are *de rigueur*, even if they will only ever be noticed as such by the other side, which will confidently brand them, to the wonder of the world, as the sole true and unassailable *reality* that we and our fellow partisans still have to cling to.

James Bowman is a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of *Honor, A History* (Encounter).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 35 Number 4 , on page 77

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2016/12/groovin-on-the-shock>