

New Nonfiction by David James: A Dream of Death, or the Consolations of History



All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Trump is no Socrates (the understatement of my literary career).

But the two men do, in fact, share a common attribute. Namely, mortality.

As surely as water is wet, all humans are bound to die.

Despite every dictator (and aspiring dictator) assuming that they alone can stop the arrow of time and prevent their own mortality, dictators always inexorably die in the end (“One forgets that one is a dead man talking to dead men”). And the beloved people (who always universally revile the dictator by the end) continue living their own lives, enjoying a gradually increasing sense of freedom.

I had a dream that Trump had died. I am not one to usually recount or even remember my dreams, but the particular intensity of this one stayed in my mind upon waking.

I was talking with two good friends, both staying at my place in Italy, about literature and philosophy and the other

irrelevant things I am wont to discuss. Suddenly, one of the two received some sort of notification on his device, and said, "Gentlemen, I have some news. Trump is dead."

Great joy was my immediate feeling, and I began to organize celebrations at our ersatz symposium. As I scrounged up some sparkling wine and glasses, I noticed that my friends were more circumspect and did not share my enthusiasm. "One should not celebrate death," was the general sentiment of both.

Meanwhile, I expatiated at length on the difference between our reactions to this, or any other death. The death of a loved one or a well-respected person gives a sense of sadness and mourning and memories, and is one of the things that makes us human. The death of an enemy, however, brings no sadness, but generally leads to a sense of triumph and elation. It is as old as the human story itself, and is ingrained into both our DNA and our cultural evolution—to defeat one's attackers, or foes, and triumph over evil. Evil not being an objective entity, but the subjective and entirely personal rationalization of the human tendency towards oppression and cruelty. As a liberal, I believe that cruelty is the worst thing humans do, and that a healthy equilibrium between human solidarity and individual freedom is the ultimate goal of an open society.

Trump, on the other hand, represents cruelty at its most atavistic, almost Greek mythology-like in its perversity and capriciousness. Speaking just of his presidential forebears, he combines the incompetence of Andrew Johnson, the corruption of Richard Nixon, and the stupidity of G.W. Bush into one dastardly package where the total stench yet exceeds the sum of these nefarious parts. Trump himself apparently admires Andrew Jackson, a racist demagogue and unrepentant Indian-killer (it must be said that even Jackson had some positive qualities, such as an abundance of personal courage and convictions, whereas the craven leader currently installed in the White House noticeably lacks even a single identifiable

virtue). Therefore, to the point at hand, is it justifiable to celebrate death? There is no one, not Socrates, not Trump, and not the rich men still searching for the mythical fountain of youth, who escapes death. We are all in the same boat, trapped with each other for the duration of the voyage with no exit, and that fact alone should encourage us to be kinder and more understanding. Those who use their limited time to wantonly spread cruelty and violence amongst the fellow passengers of life need not be mourned; indeed, it is more than justifiable to celebrate their absence which represents more freedom and happiness for everyone else.

Trump is a villainous character for whom paragons run aplenty from the annals of history and even fiction, but from which Trump always comes out sorely lacking in comparison even against this sordid club of malefactors. Some various counterparts that come immediately to mind are:

–King Henry VIII (the consuming of wives and women, the explosive and capricious rage, and the unbridled gluttony that rivals Saturn devouring his children; only mitigated by Henry's sharp intellect and all-around talent common to all the Tudors, which put the troglodytic Trump to shame);

–Mr. Smith from the Matrix movies (one of the best villains in film felt the uncontrollable need to literally reproduce himself onto every other living being until the entire world was just a billion-strong assemblage of Smith clones. One needs little imagination to see that Trump's most consistent trait throughout his life is his need to put his name and face on literally everything, and to dominate others to the point of near-annihilation. Even here Smith, a machine program, reveals himself to be infinitely more compelling than the dour and dumpy Trump could ever hope to be);

–The Grinch, of Dr. Seuss fame (from the song: "Your soul is an appalling dump heap overflowing with the most disgraceful assortment of deplorable rubbish imaginable mangled up in

tangled up knots!" Of course, the whole point of the children's book is the Grinch's latter-day Scrooge-like conversion towards kindness and generosity, the likelihood of such a conversion for Trump would sooner happen when the Sahara becomes a green paradise);

–King John, whose gross misrule caused the barons to unite in forcing him to sign the Magna Carta. David Hume, in his four-volume *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* had this to say about the medieval tyrant, which should speak for itself:

“The character of this prince is nothing but a complication of vices, equally mean and odious, ruinous to himself, and destructive to his people: cowardice, inactivity, folly, liberty, licentiousness, ingratitude, treachery, tyranny, and cruelty—all these qualities appear too evidently in the several incidents of his life to give us room to suspect that the disagreeable picture has been anywise overcharged by the prejudices of the ancient historians.”

It is hard to imagine more severe judgment of a king or any political leader by an historian, even more pronounced in this case considering the famously moderate and conservative temperament of that quintessential Scottish philosopher.

One of history's lessons from the ill-starred reign of King John and the Great Charter is that sometimes, indeed often, it takes a truly terrible leader to unify the opposition and allow for eventual reforms. An appropriate and succinct quote here would be from Thomas Babington Macaulay's *History of England from the Accession of James II* regarding the overthrow of the equally terrible King James II during the Glorious Revolution:

“Oppression speedily did what philosophy and eloquence would have failed to do.”

Macaulay's great work was written almost a century after

Hume's and continues where the latter concluded. Macaulay was one of the most influential writers and politicians of 19th century England, and the most famous proponent of the "Whig theory of history" (that history marches on towards progress and improvement—a comforting theory of whose veracity we must nevertheless remain skeptical). For him, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which the Protestant Dutch prince William of Orange bloodlessly took the English throne from James II, was a symbolic apotheosis of the movement towards freedom and reform.

Of terrible English monarchs alone there are additional parallels to Trump than the aforementioned tyrants. Imagine an elected president somehow being able to rule for a full 60 years like the incompetent and insane King George III (though the 18th-century Parliament had already assumed much of the royal prerogative for itself, whereas the current US Congress is blithely surrendering its own powers without a fight). We need not believe all the Elizabethan propaganda about "Bloody" Mary Tudor to know that stoking religious hatred and intolerance, or sanctioning torture and fiery executions of dissenters is not the model a good leader follows (even if similar behavior, both shameful and shameless, continues today in the USA). Furthermore, King Edward VIII, who reigned for the single year of 1936, was an actual Nazi sympathizer who was warmly received at Hitler's personal mountain retreat. Continuing further back in time to the litany of Roman emperors, we easily find more depraved examples than we have time to discuss here. Likewise with that vipers nest of 20th-century dictators. At this point we must also ask ourselves why such monarchical and dictatorial precedents are much more germane and enlightening to the case of Trump than his constitutionally elected forebears. One of the many things we learn from history is the iron-clad tendency towards corruption that power brings, while even the worst US presidents had hitherto been highly circumscribed in the total executive power they could wield single-handedly.

Philosophy helps us understand our own existence and death, and live our lives accordingly. History helps us understand the entire human story, at its best and worst, and take consolation in the fact that we can be both spectators and participants in this never-ending drama. But why publicly express and expose these thoughts of mine? Why share with readers, some of whom know me personally but the majority of whom will be complete strangers? What is Trump to me, a lowly teacher who has not lived in the USA for well-nigh half my life? Why not mind my own business and not criticize politicians who were duly elected by the citizens, or billionaires who are clearly more important than everyone else because they have enough money to buy their own government? Why not just shut up and show some respect for the Dear Leader who merits constant adulation, respect, and obedience? Why not just focus on my own life and my own problems? Because I choose to do so, and I have the freedom and the right and the good conscience to not ignore injustice, cruelty, and obscene displays of power and violence that have plagued our primate species from time immemorial, and which will continue to threaten all of our lives until we either evolve our morality or wipe each other out. History never ends, nor does politics, and it continues to be the task of every generation to keep up the fight against the worst of us, until the best of us find room to survive and thrive.

Trump himself is a nobody—not historically but in terms of his actual temporal existence. His destiny is to die universally reviled and forsaken. He will have failed to leave a positive or loving legacy of any kind from his time on this earth, or to use his privilege and power to promote kindness and happiness amongst mankind instead of hatred and cruelty. He will have neglected to join in the common fellowship of mankind that celebrates diversity and creativity, the pleasures of music, or art, the written word or abstract thought, the teamwork needed to build something beautiful and lasting, or to discover the mysteries of the physical world,

the wonders of nature and the living creatures we share our planet with, or the consolations of history that could have taught him so much. This is not about him—this is about us. One thing I, the writer, and you, the reader, have in common is that we are both among the lucky few to be alive at this moment, with a road ahead of us whose destination we alone can decide, destined or doomed to be free, and hopefully with that freedom choosing the rewarding path of friendship, kindness, and love. What I want to know is, are you kind? The lessons of history show that these are the most valuable things to the living, and leave the most lasting legacy when we are gone.