

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Heroic Centrism: How We Got To Now

“People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. ... Things are not black or white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters.”

– Dwight D. Eisenhower [1]

On the afternoon of January 6, Americans learned what happens when the gutters spill over: they pollute the halls of the Capitol, endanger the 400-year-old American experiment in self-government and threaten to end “*government of the people, by the people, for the people.*” [2]

In the process, the motley mob, of whom President Trump’s only known disapproval was that “the violent extremists appeared ‘low-class,’” [3] proved the prescient wisdom of both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Jefferson, in a letter to Charles Yancey, said, “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free ... it expects what never was and never will be.” [4] For as Madison said in Federalist #10, reacting to the populist rage of Shay’s Rebellion, a group “united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community” threaten the enterprise. [5]

In asking “How did we get *to now?*” one must first admit that we were warned – many times. Almost immediately after the 2016 presidential election, a spate of books, lectures, and podcasts warned “*it could happen here.*” One of the warnings came almost a century after as Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here* about a Hitler-wannabe seizing the American government found a second-life with a 21st century audience. Other classics reborn were George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*, along with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

More ominously, as we detailed in an August, 2020 *Book Notes*, “What Were

Machiavelli's True Motives?" which can be found [here](#). Patrick Boucheron warned if we are reading Machiavelli now, take heed for "he's been a trusted ally in evil times." Why? As I wrote in that *Book Notes*, "because he understood despotism and those who would be despots, which is why 'interest in Machiavelli always revives in the course of history when the storm clouds are gathering. ... If we're reading him today, it means we should be worried. He's back; wake up.'" [6]

Many did but others slumbered on, despite the growing flow of warnings from books like Madeleine Albright's *Fascism: A Warning* to Ziblatt and Levitsky's *How Democracies Die* to Stephen Brill's *Tailspin* to Michael Tomasky's *If We Can Keep It* to Darrell West's *Divided Politics Divided Nation*, among a plethora of others. Among those still "slumbering on" as they double-down on Trumpian duplicity are, as Trump himself called him, "Lying Ted Cruz," Alabama's new Senator and former coach – "I lost my whistle and clipboard" – Tommy Tuberville, and Western Pennsylvania's own U.S. Representative Mike Kelly. But many others, like Pennsylvania's two senators, Republican Pat Toomey and Democrat Bob Casey, like Erie's own former Governor Tom Ridge – and inaugural director of the Department of Homeland Security -- and former U.S. Representative Phil English are keenly alert to the danger of *now*.

What is the shape of this dangerous *now* and how did we get to it?

Sadly, the shape of *now* is also the shape of the near-term past and almost certainly the shape of the near-term future; whether it is the shape of the long-term future remains to be decided.

So, what is the shape of *now*? *Now*, as described in another *Book Notes* "*William Butler Yeats: 'The Second Coming'*", which can be found [here](#). It finds the center not holding, things threatening to fall apart and the best lacking all conviction while the worst, like the thugs marauding through the Capitol, "are full of passionate intensity."

As Americans hunker down in their tribal caves, either real caves in the Idaho outback and in urban enclaves or virtual caves in the darker depths of internet-fueled conspiracy fantasies, among the most vital of those things falling apart, unraveling, shredding is the cultural consensus about what constitutes the American story. Which, as I have explored in numerous Jefferson presentations and on WQLN/NPR1's *The American Tapestry Project*, is existentially vital, for it is in stories that a culture shares its common values.

The Jefferson presentations can be found [here](#). You will have to scroll down through the list because the presentations are organized chronologically, not thematically, with all other Jefferson presentations. *The American Tapestry Project* can be found [here](#).

More broadly, it is in its stories that a culture exists, if it exists at all, for it is in the stories people tell themselves about their shared experience that creates culture. And, maybe from the beginning, but certainly since the 1960s, Americans have disagreed about which stories define them as Americans, for what are the infamous culture wars if not arguments about whose story is the American story? It apparently has not occurred to or, more dangerously, has been denied by some that all of the stories woven together are the shared American story – The American Tapestry.

It's an old thread in the weave of the American tapestry, the interlacing stories of who is "in" and who is "out." Those already "in" have always resisted, either legally, when possible, or with extra-legal violence when necessary, the inclusion of new people in the definition of "We the people" in our founding documents. The excluded, including people of color, women, and generations of immigrants, have always sought inclusion by appealing to America's foundational values of liberty, freedom, equality, and opportunity. Those who would exclude them have often denied those very values.

So, now we sit in this second week of January 2021, as I write this and it's published, not only beset by a raging pandemic showing no signs of relenting but also anxiously watching the denouement of America's second failed peaceful transfer of power – the other being 1861 and the onset of the Civil War – and its first apparently presidentially inspired attempt at a *coup d'état*.

Or is it the opening act of what threatens to be ongoing civil unrest or worse?

I am sure some will be quick to point out that last week's siege and invasion of the Capitol is not technically a *coup d'état*, for the military was not involved. A *coup d'état*, as defined by the **Encyclopedia Britannica**, is "the sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group. The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, police, and other military elements." [7] Dangerously, we are now learning some police were likely complicit.

If Jan. 6's events were technically not a failed *coup d'état*, they do qualify as an insurrection. An insurrection is defined as "a violent uprising against an authority or government." [8] Insurrection "specifically refers to acts of violence against the state or its officers. This distinguishes the crime from sedition, which is the organized incitement to rebellion or civil disorder against the authority of the state." [9] The U.S. Code defines rebellion or insurrection as "Whoever incites, sets on foot, assists, or engages in any rebellion or insurrection against the authority of the United States or the laws thereof, or gives aid or comfort thereto, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than ten years, or both; and shall be incapable of holding any office under the United States." [10]

Regardless of that pedantic parsing of *coup* versus insurrection, what we saw last week and might see again in the coming days and weeks was an insurrection. The questions immediately arise, "Who were/are the insurrectionists and how did we get to *now*?" A *now* vividly and forevermore symbolized by a motley crew of goonish terrorists storming the U.S. Capitol, breaking windows, defecating in its hallways, and threatening the safety of our legitimately elected representatives.

First, while we need to understand the legitimate grievances of poor people disadvantaged by globalization, that is not who stormed the Capitol. Or, more accurately, that is not only who stormed the Capitol. For we now know among the thugs and domestic terrorists were lawyers, elected members of some state legislatures, Army veterans, active military members, police officers, teachers, and other solid, middle-class citizens frenziedly turning against their government. Waving their Trump flags and banners, cosplaying for the reality TV star they adore, the insurrectionists were some representatives of the aggrieved middle-class and also a mixed bag of gawkers and fellow travelers swept up in events in which they were and always will be bit players.

They were, however, outnumbered by a toxic brew of conspiratorial fantasists,

both benign and malign, serious anti-government, anti-American militants and genuine terrorists. The anti-government terrorists range from Timothy McVeigh-inspired domestic radicals lugging Molotov cocktails into the Capitol to white supremacists waving the flag of treason to sovereign state militia supporters who deny the legitimacy of the federal government. They all intermingled with a bizarre stew of fantasists ranging from dangerously deluded Q-anon supporters and others of a similar ilk to slightly comic, yet still dangerous nitwits dressed like Captain America or a painted Viking warrior playing out some real-life version of an online fantasy of power and purpose.

Some want to say, “This is not who we are,” but, of course, it is who we, or at least some of us, are – a *mélange* of the alienated, the discontented and the disempowered seeking power and redemption through civil unrest, extra-legal protest, and violence.

How did we get here?

Well, as Jerry Garcia once said, “it’s been a long, strange trip.” It includes stops in fantasyland, an anti-elitist populism, Movement Conservatism, and the ongoing culture wars. We have traveled over many of its byways in a number of earlier *Book Notes* beginning with an exploration of Americans’ love of fantasy and cosplay that found its logical (illogical?) culmination when a bankrupt businessman who became a reality TV star playing a successful tycoon he never quite was conned and bullied his way into the presidency.

As noted in my *Book Notes*, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Norman Mailer saw it coming. Describing John F. Kennedy’s arrival at the 1960 Democratic Convention, Mailer wrote:

For one moment he saluted Pershing Square, and Pershing Square saluted him back, the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street, one of those very special moments in the underground history of the world ... all the while the band kept playing the campaign tunes, sashaying circus music, and one had a moment of clarity, intense as *déjà vu*, for the scene which had taken place had been glimpsed before in a dozen musical comedies; it was the scene where the hero, the matinee idol, the movie star comes to the palace to claim the princess, or what is the same, and more to our soil, the football hero, the campus king, arrives at the dean's home surrounded by a court of open-singing students to plead with the dean for his daughter's kiss and permission to put on the big musical that night. [11]

Of which Mailer continued – “the Democrats were going to nominate a man who, no matter how serious his political dedication might be, was indisputably and willy-nilly going to be seen as a great box-office actor, and the consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate.” [12]

“Staggering and not at all easy to calculate” – how prescient. But, now, after a long trail through Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, we can calculate where it led. Egged on by the President of the United States, it led to a fool in a bearskin headdress invading the Capitol of the United States to right wrong, to stop the steal and to??? What, really, did he think? And how was he going to do whatever it was he thought he was doing? By waving his magic wand, his ersatz spear? Or was it a real spear, the point sharpened? If yes, then what was he going to do with his fantasy weapon?

In another *Book Notes*, we explored this descent into fantasy and Americans love

of unreality. In *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire*, like Mailer, Kurt Andersen saw it coming. After detailing America's 500-year fascination with make-believe, Andersen saw its culmination in the counter-culture of the 1960s and its co-option by the Ayn Rand-inspired right wing of the late 20th and early 21st century's post-modern loss of faith in reason and supplanting it with magical thinking. As I wrote in that *Book Notes*:

The counterculture encouraged free thinking and finding one's own truth, which combined with serious academic attempts to understand the nature of truth led to a questioning of science and the rise of anti-vaxxers. It also led to a growth in conspiracy thinking, for if truth is elusive – perhaps non-existent – how can anything be verified?

If nothing can be verified, then, unfortunately not in Cole Porter's coyly teasing sense, anything goes. For, as Thomas Pynchon said in *Gravity's Rainbow*, when '... nothing is connected to anything' it results in 'a condition not many of us can bear for long.' [13]

Why is this important? Because we don't live in fantasyland, we live in the reality-based community. But, as Karl Rove has told us, that is now irrelevant. Because many Americans live in a fantasy culture of fake news, deluded conspiracies and alternative realities. Those of us who live in the reality-based culture, who attempt to make our decisions based on reality anchored in facts have failed to grasp that we live in a post-truth world. It is a world of tweets in which if one has the gall and the drive to tell a big enough lie and repeat it often enough, then, magically, it takes on, for some, a truth of its own.

And that non-reality-based, pseudo-truth grows in a culture that reviles elites. As examined by Michael Sandel in another *Book Notes*, "The Tyranny of Merit," that the elite have brought it on themselves does not refute society's need for people who *know* – experts and people who *know* how to get things done. Yet, the terroristic gang at the Capitol, as one lout opined when asked why he was doing what he was doing, "because people in high places are doing bad things," rejects elites, as do anti-maskers, anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers and a host of pushers peddling ignorance. Perhaps nowhere has that been seen with more tragic consequences than in the attacks on the Center for Disease Control and the advice of "experts" seeking to fight the pandemic. A great irony is at play here, for many of the anti-science, anti-elite mob, like all of us, are counting on elite scientists to perfect a vaccine to preserve us all. If not a vaccine, then a therapy that might save us.

That it is an irrational mix of attitudes is precisely the point. That it is hypocritical is precisely the point. When one hears Josh Hawley, son of a banker, graduate of Stanford University and Yale Law School, rail against elites, one has to either worry about his mental health or marvel in a kind of stupefied admiration at the sheer audacity of it.

For when make-believe takes over the world, common sense evaporates.

Mixing fantasy and anti-elitist ignorance has enabled Movement Conservatism to progress from Goldwater's "choice not an echo" to Reagan's the government is the problem to Trump's nihilistic attempt to dismantle government itself resulting in a moment when apparently no one was in charge and the Capitol police were not to be found. Truly, this is the end game of the infamous culture wars, that

“long strange trip” from the 1960s’ “do your own thing” to the 1980s’ “greed is good” embodied almost perfectly in Donald Trump to Newt Gingrich fire-blasting Congressional practice to Pat Buchanan at the ’92 Republican Convention declaring a culture war, a religious war for the soul of America, to the Tea Party revolt against America’s first black president to Trump himself to the vile hypocrisy of Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz.

I detailed all of this in multiple Jefferson presentations that can be found [here](#).

I take no pleasure that over the last year I brought a lot of this to your attention. We are here in January 2021 worrying our way to an Inauguration and a better future.

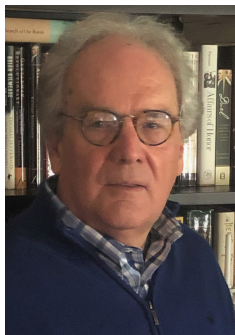
We hope.

To do more than hope, we are going to need to take action. We are going to need to reclaim the center that is not holding, empowering the worst of us to passionately permit things to fall apart.

How to reclaim the center? Well, this will sound elitist, but so be it. We can reclaim the center when the elites who lead America’s primary institutions reassert their authority as the primary custodians and champions of America’s central values. We may be seeing a faint glimmer of this beginning in the responses from corporate leaders, from religious leaders, from educational leaders and from some brave center-right political leaders like Tom Ridge and Mitt Romney.

Why is this important? Because, as William Weston recently wrote in a Niskanen Center essay *Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization*, “the ‘center’ is where, in its central institutions, the most crucial values of modern societies are translated and made real. Institutions imperfectly embody the central values of society. They conflict with each other regularly, but the center of society is strong to the extent that the central institutions, even as they clash, work with one another to embody society’s central values.” [14]

Next week in *Book Notes: Heroic Centrism and the Path Forward*. We will explore the Niskanen Center, its Open Society Project, William Weston, and *Heroic Centrism*.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

This content is copyrighted by the Jefferson 2021.

End Notes

1. Eisenhower, Dwight D. “Quotes,” in **Our White House** available at <https://ourwhitehouse.org/dwight-d-eisenhower-1953>
1961/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20middle%20of%20the%20road,%2C%20are%20in%20the%20gut%20ters.%E2%80%9D accessed January 11, 2021.
2. I say “400 year” because the first elective, representative governmental body in American history met in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Cf. Horn, James. *1619: Jamestown and the Forging of American Democracy*. (New York: Basic Books, 2018), p. 1.

3. Riotta, Chris. "Trump was more upset that Capitol mob looked 'low class' than about violent attacks, reports say" in **The Independent** available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/trump-mob-capitol-riots-poor-low-class-b1785099.html> accessed January 11, 2021.
4. Jefferson, Thomas. "Letter to Charles Yancey" in **Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters** at *ThJefferson Monticello* available at <https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/327> accessed January 11, 2021.
5. Madison, James. *Federalist No. 10* in **The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy** available at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp accessed January 11, 2021.
6. Boucheron, Patrick. **Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear** quoted in Andrew Roth "What Were Machiavelli's True Motives" in **Book Notes in Jefferson Educational Society** publications available at <https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Roth%20Book%20Notes--Machiavelli.pdf> accessed January 11, 2021.
7. "Coup d'état," in **Encyclopedia Britannica** available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-detat> accessed January 11, 2021.
8. "Insurrection," in **Merriam-Webster** available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/insurrection> accessed January 11, 2021.
9. "Insurrection," **FindLaw** available at <https://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-charges/rebellion-or-insurrection.html> accessed January 11, 2021.
10. *18 U.S. Code @ 2383 – Rebellion or Insurrection* at **Legal Information Institute** available at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2383> accessed January 11, 2021.
11. Cf. Roth, Andrew, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," in **Book Notes at Jefferson Educational Society** Publications available at <https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Roth%20Book%20Notes--Mailer.pdf> accessed January 12, 2021.
12. Ibid.
13. Cf. Roth, Andrew, "First things first: Let's Leave Fantasyland Behind" in **Book Notes at Jefferson Educational Society** Publications available at <https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Roth%20Book%20Notes--Fantasyland.pdf> accessed January 12, 2021.
14. Weston, William. "Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization" at **Niskanen Center** available at <https://www.niskanencenter.org/heroic-centrism-in-a-time-of-polarization/> accessed January 12, 2021.

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

In Case You Missed It

[Reflections on a New Year, Worry, and Great Poetry](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[The Ragman A Bay Rat Salvage Business](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

