

THE BYSTANDER —★—

The Other Epidemic

Published in the Shepherdstown *Observer*, December, 2018

It would be challenging to name anyone more uniquely familiar with racism in America than Abraham Lincoln, who not only has been accused of being a racist himself, but often is described as too moderate even for his day. That might be because his quotes often portray him in his peacemaker mode, such as in his well-known phrase “with malice towards none, and charity for all” from his Second Inaugural Address in 1865. But in death, he was the ultimate victim of an act of domestic terrorism by a white man who was still fighting the war over the right to continue the permanent enslavement of four million Black Americans.

But what I have never seen cited is another sentence from that speech. Referring to “this mighty scourge of war” he says “yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’ ”

As inaugural speeches go, that’s an incredibly ominous accusation to invoke while celebrating one’s second term as the President of the United States. But it can’t be interpreted as anything else other than his conviction that if this country loses everything, it will be due to our sin of racism and our theft of labor, and that it would take an equal number of years to repay our debt to the “bondsmen” we whipped with the lash for centuries.

We’ve never lacked for hatred in this country. It was imported from the European settlers who were our ancestors; others arriving later mimicked their symptoms. It was etched onto the land and continues today in a more refined version. Like ore, it is as eternal as granite; like the aquifers, it flows freely unchecked underground. Now, with another swing of the pendulum, it is again surfacing, unafraid of any counterbalance.

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Our naiveté, as the unsuspecting hosts of a virulent virus, is that we thought we had prevented a relapse into another kind of scourge---that of renewed racial violence---partly through the evolution of Western civilization, but also because we're Americans and should know better. But we do not. Our Manifest Destiny is showing.

As the economist Hyman Minski said, stability breeds instability, and although he was referring to financial models, it's just as true about human behavior. We were complacent and saw progress through our own definition, while others saw a rationale for a resurgence of their anger, specifically racial anger. Statistics compiled by the Anti-Defamation League investigating deaths in the US caused by domestic terrorism from 2007 to 2016 show that 74% of those deaths were caused by members of far-right or white supremacist movements. Left-wing extremists were responsible for 2%.

We've again become a venom stew; it's not just breaking news, it's heart-breaking news.

In addition to having an Opioid Epidemic in this country, we also have a Hate Epidemic. This one is even more difficult to treat than drug addiction. It starts with a lie, both inward and external, in the belief that we are better than others and deserve more than others; the lie is exaggerated by repetition, then complimented and reinforced by our leaders. The lie is the root of what grows into self-deception and then metastasizes into racism, discrimination, and violence.

Steve Bannon said "let them call you a racist; wear it as a badge of honor." For these people, hatred is an opiate, and the speech of the current President is their *Gateway Drug* that leads directly from racism to violence.

Even here in the panhandle of West Virginia, where the demographics are overwhelmingly white with few immigrants and only a scattering of Black, Hispanic or Jewish citizens, watching the events around the country and world have an infectious effect on us all. The contagion of fear exposes us

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all to suspicion and disbelief in our own security. This epidemic started as a plague, and seems to be heading into a global pandemic. We are leading the march and paving the way for others to follow.

We seem destined to be unable to resist the gravity of the downward spiral; as Native Americans feared white settlers, Black people still fear white supremacists, Jewish people fear white Christians, immigrants fear white nationalists, gay people fear white Evangelicals, women fear the power of white men, and white liberals fear white conservatives---all for statistically justifiable reasons. And ironically, in this final stage, when white people are even afraid of other white people, we have hit the extreme, the most lethal form of the disease. We are in chronic overdose, with no antidote in sight.

We all bought into the magical thinking of “American Exceptionalism” and reaped the advantages of it. We all share the blame. And the payment will come from us all, guilty or innocent, in this contemporary age of America. We are the only ones who can make sure that the warning from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural does not come true, that all of this will not be “sunk.” There should be no need for white-male-bashing, finger-pointing, quotas, affirmative action, or reparations: all it would take is to respect the participation and contributions of all of our people, then and now. That’s the only way we can avoid invoking *the true and righteous judgment of the Lord*, which in modern language translates to “pay-back from God.”

Just as with any epidemic, this is one that can only be cured by eradicating the viral parasitic anti-logic of a toxin. The toxin in this case happens to be a lie; that lie is that we are superior to others. Our violence towards ourselves proves that we are not.