
This Andrew Jackson Jihad

Thoughts from the first forty days

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1. Donald Trump is President of the United States of America

I was a sexy little viper rune
In the corner of a King Tut tomb
When the hate train started
Going "Choo-choo"

— ["Kokopelli Face Tattoo"](#) by AJJ

Radical social change is difficult; much easier is Cynicism: just awkwardly excuse yourself from society and then bark unconvincingly at passers-by as they try to go about their business. And of course if you can't change a thing, you

can always change its name. If you were in St. Petersburg on March 8, 1917, for example, you would say you were in Petrograd on February 23. But regardless of calendar or map, to the war protesters staging a march in that city on that day it was International Women's Day, and, to everyone's surprise, that little Women's Day demonstration prompted a spontaneous strike of workers and soldiers. The [rebellion](#) lasted for days in the streets and shook the establishment to its top, resulting in the abdication of the Tsar and the replacement of his autocracy by a contentious dual government of liberals and socialists — and eventually to the Bolshevik revolution and civil war.

Now, after so much intervening Russian history — the rise and fall of Stalinism and European Fascism including another world war, a nuclear cold war, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, other things, Putin — it is in the headlamps of the approaching centennial of those days in 1917 that I've set about trying to understand the crisis Donald Trump has brought both to America's ruling classes and to my own personal political views.

Because of his anti-political and buffoonish style, his denuncements of the press, his early push of executive power targeted at immigrants, and the encouragement his success has provided to white nationalist movements, there has been some debate as to where Trumpism fits in the Fascist family tree. If Trump is the farcical reappearance of one of those tragic 20th-century personages, then he is something like an inarticulate ghost of Mussolini. But as far as comparisons to other political leaders go, Trump is probably best understood as an American Berlusconi with a platform heavily flavored by his old Reform Party rival Pat Buchanan (but without Pat's dedication to non-interventionism) who is assembling a band of robbers to exceed the cronyism of [Warren Harding](#)'s cabinet.

His own administration seems to favor comparisons to Andrew Jackson (seventh President from 1829 to 1837). In [an interview](#) with a journalist for the *Hollywood Reporter* in

November, [Stephen Bannon](#) said of the Trump campaign that “Like Jackson’s populism, we’re going to build an entirely new political movement.” Pat Buchanan [described](#) Trump’s ‘America First’ inauguration speech as “Jacksonian” in that “he was speaking to and for the forgotten Americans whose hopes he embodies.” And during his first days in the White House, Trump had [a portrait of Jackson](#) installed in the Oval Office so that a painted Jackson could watch him sign his flurry of executive orders beside a real-life Bannon.

Most of the parallels that could be drawn are shallow, but Jackson *was* a populist candidate who was elected as a champion of angry white men who felt disenfranchised by the East Coast elites and bankers. While its opponents accuse Trumpism of implicitly empowering white supremacists (as do some of its proponents), Jacksonian democracy explicitly emphasized the whiteness of citizenship. As was the fashion of southern job creators of that period, Jackson enslaved almost two hundred black men, women, and children as workers at his Tennessee cotton plantation. Jackson also developed a reputation for sometimes flexing his executive powers, like when he ignored the spirit a Supreme Court ruling by continuing to help Georgia in its negotiations with the Cherokee government. The result of those negotiations was the forced relocation of tens of thousands of indians (and [their slaves](#)) during extreme weather which killed thousands.

2. Neoliberalism with nationalist characteristics

To a formalist, the way to fix the US is to [...]
] figure out who owns this monstrosity, and let them decide what in the heck they are going to do with it. I don’t think it’s too crazy to say that all options - including restructuring and liquidation - should be on the table.

— Menciuis Moldbug

As if in a nod to that brutal 19th-century primitive accumulation, on his fourth day in office Trump [directed](#) the Army Corps of Engineers to expedite their review and approval of the easement required to complete the Dakota Access Pipeline. The next week North Dakota police [raided](#) a camp established by the Standing Rock Sioux to protest the pipeline and arrested 76 people. The easement was granted, and on February 22 [the main Oceti Sakowin camp was cleared and razed](#).

Andrew Jackson was true to his commitment to the common white man, including [standing up to a central bank](#) he felt unduly privileged the wealthy. But during Trump's transition to the White House, there have been strong indications that not only does he intend to continue the plutocracy as usual, he intends to further it toward a naked fact. Like his role as a billionaire non-politician in the highest executive office, his executive actions and appointments tend to erase the imaginary line between business and government.

With now-former Goldman Sachs COO as Director of the National Economic Council and hedge fund manager (and former Goldman Sachs partner) [Steven Mnuchin](#) as Secretary of the Treasury, the Trump Administration is posed to reduce corporate taxes and rollback regulations put in place by the so-called Dodd-Frank legislation in response to the 2007 financial crisis. Trump's appointee to Chairman of the FCC is [an opponent of net neutrality](#) and [an advocate for private telecommunication monopolies](#) which charge prisoners and their families exorbitant rates on phone calls. [Jeff Sessions](#), Trump's controversial Attorney General, has already [rescinded an Obama-era memo](#) that directed the Justice Department to reduce the use of private prisons. In a rent-seeking parallel to support for private prisons, his appointee to Secretary of Education, the billionaire [Betsy DeVos](#), is a proponent of public funding for privately owned schools. The fact that Trump's Administrator of the

Environmental Protection Agency, [Scott Pruitt](#), has sued the EPA several times on behalf of industrial profiteers indicates probable deregulations in that agency's future. Etc.

In some ways the orientation Trump's administration seems to be taking with its planned regulation cuts, infrastructure spending, withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and increased immigration restrictions are consistent (one of the precious few consistent points through Trump's campaign) with what Bannon (who is a former Goldman Sachs deal maker himself) calls a policy of "economic nationalism." But Bannon has also spoken out against bailouts and crony capitalism, qualms which Trump obviously does not share.

In any case, deregulation and de-facto privatization are the major economic motifs of the emerging Trump administration. Bannon has described the goal behind those trends as a "[deconstruction of the administrative state.](#)" It looks a lot like typical neoliberal fare taken around an introspective turn. Using David Harvey's terminology, the Trump folks are reverting from a spatial to a temporal fix to the recurring overaccumulation of capital. Will it be enough to revive the profitability of American manufacturing and mining? Or has the Eye of Sauron turned its gaze inward to Mordor too late?

In much the same way as Sauron could only respond to the movements of the ring bearer, I think Trumpism is a response to global economic conditions more than a determining cause. Take, for example, this sentence from Trump's executive order on [border security and immigration enforcement](#):

The recent surge of illegal immigration at the southern border with Mexico has placed a significant strain on Federal resources and overwhelmed agencies charged with border security and immigration enforcement, as well as the local communities into which many of the aliens are placed.

It is a strange and circular justification for the executive order, because other than the [possible increase](#) in illegal immigration triggered by Trump's own rhetoric about building a wall, there has been no surge of illegal immigration. In fact, as [reported](#) by the Pew Research Center, the net immigration from Mexico between 2005 and 2014 was *negative* and the Mexican immigrant population has been in *decline* since 2007.

For decades nationalists and wage-jealous racists have been screaming about the porous southern border, but the ruling class paid them little heed and instead maintained whatever level of control at the border was deemed necessary to steer wages and keep illegal immigrants abundant but vulnerable and easily exploitable by employers. Now, when migration levels are such that controlling the border provides little in the way of economic leverage, the xenophobes and protectionists have won the day. How convenient.

3. Culture/Wars

The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

— Esther 3:15

Steve Bannon must be some kind of a genius. In a span of about two years he boosted the significance of Breitbart News (a pro-Israel right-wing news site) by aligning it with the antisemitism-riddled alt-right, then leveraged his position at Breitbart to become CEO of a presidential campaign where he got Donald J. Trump elected as President of the United States of America (?!), and he has now managed to get himself appointed to the National Security Council. Yet everything I've heard him say sounds typical, a mundane obsession with defending the "Judeo-Christian West" against its conspiring enemies (represented most fiercely by "jihadist Islamic fascism").

He reminds me a bit of Robert California, the opaque, psychopathic, manipulative character featured in some of the more tedious episodes of the American version of *The Office* who was hired as a manager but then immediately convinced the owner of the company to give him her position as CEO. Not so much his personality, but in his enigmatic genius and his knack for landing in positions of power (including [a stint](#) as the CEO of the company running the Biosphere 2 project in Arizona).

The 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Trump in the US signal a widespread discontentment with neoliberal globalism finally reaching the Anglosphere (almost ten years after the 2007 financial crisis and 17 years after the Seattle '99 WTO protests). Maybe Bannon's current success stems simply from his inclination to keep in touch with the underlying sentiments which have now surfaced in a cultural confluence.

I don't understand much of what motivates the [alt-right](#) and its reactionary fellow travelers in Europe. I do suspect that in many ways they can be seen as 'Western' counterparts to the patriarchal revolts against globalism in the developing world. As racial and gender hierarchies are being reformed to better serve capitalism, and as oppressed groups continue to further the progress of their own liberation, old local and familial forms of privilege, wealth, and exploitation are being lost at both ends — whisked out to financial centers or destroyed by feminists and other progressive reformers.

Trump and company hitched a ride to power on the conservative cultural impulse desperately opposing those changes. They have an ideology to execute. Even if they are adrift in economic currents they have little power over, they seem determined to do more thrashing than floating. So opposite the most extreme, violent patriarchal groups like [ISIS](#) we now have Donald Trump as Commander-in-Chief of the world's most powerful armed forces. Trump has no business being president, and the powerful machines of war at his disposal have no business existing. Yet he is and they do.

In the [words](#) of Bannon, “We are—I believe—at the beginning stages of a global war against Islamic fascism.” (Or more concise is Trump’s own analysis: “I think Islam hates us.”)

It should go without saying here—but American [leftists sometimes fail to make clear](#)—that denouncing Trumpism and its Islamophobic tendencies is certainly not to side with Islamist regimes. Frankly, Bannon’s “jihadist Islamic fascism” is an apt description of the war Salafism espoused by groups like ISIS in the wake of America’s overt and covert imperialist actions in Iraq and Syria (respectively) and elsewhere. While the movements may draw on much different traditions, the label ‘fascist’ applies more cleanly to ISIS—which maintains totalitarian rule through terror while adhering to a philosophy of endless war and is using its newfound state powers to institutionalize slavery, genocide (including antisemitism), and rape—than it does to America under Trump. I will always oppose American militarism, but you won’t hear me complaining very loudly about NATO airstrikes which protect Yazidi villages and Kurdish forces in Syria.

The Obama State Department spent eight years waging slow-burning proxy wars against Russia. Trump has already tried to bring about a realignment of foreign policy by consistently making nice with Putin (likely for the sake of some shady Crimea deal or other scandalous intrigue). An improved relationship with Russia could have a drastic effect on the priorities of America’s intelligence/military adventures—a shift from maintaining American oil interests to a more ideologically-driven crusade against Islamist militias (though, like Obama, I expect the Trump administration to fight Islamist groups in places that just happen to be oil-rich and where America is already heavily invested: places like Iraq but not Nigeria).

But it is far from clear how Trump’s foreign policy will evolve. His Secretary of State, former CEO of ExxonMobil [Rex Tillerson](#), has extensive business experience in Russia and personally with Vladimir Putin. Tillerson has [expressed](#) his

opinion that Obama's sanctions against Russia for invading Ukraine were too weak and the US should have instead responded with military support to Ukraine. Tillerson also holds more conventional views on free trade (he supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership) and may be a counterweight to the Bannon wing of the administration.

Trump has already demonstrated he lacks the light touch required by Obama's drone war approach. The first raid he authorized in office, a continuation of the [Obama-Saudi offensive](#) against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, resulted in a reported 24 civilian deaths (including 9 children) and the Yemeni government's [revocation](#) of its permission for US ground missions (it still allows drone strikes). Who knows, maybe with Tillerson keeping the State Department on the same hawkish anti-Russian line as Clinton and Kerry, combined with the anti-immigrant and anti-Islam schemes of Trump and Bannon, we could be in store for one of the worst of all possible foreign policy positions in American history.

For a president who has never had a popular mandate — but who *does* have enemies in the intelligence community, the tech sector, the media, and probably the judiciary — Trump's noisy entrance to the White House resembles a page from the ISIS playbook: usurp a few pieces of artillery, declare war on *everyone*, enjoy a life of heroic conflict while it lasts.

Trump remains unpopular and his executive excesses in check by the courts, but I can't shake an uneasy feeling that he has managed to wriggle onto the throne in such a way that the sword of Damocles is hanging at least as much over American civil liberties as it is over his own head waiting for (almost taunting) any self-motivated terrorist to cut the thread. A patriotic fervor uniting behind Trump could easily be more devastating than it was with George W. Bush in office — and the wars it would make possible could be more bloody than anything even the deranged minds in ISIS could hope for.

And so it is with Trump and Bannon in the White House that those who are obsessively frightened of violent Islamists

destroying our way of life have made it possible that violent Islamists can trigger the destruction of our way of life to an unprecedented degree.

4. Politics

How's the world so small when the world is so large?
And what made the world, may I please speak to who's in charge
Everything is real, but it's also just as fake
From your daughter's birthday party to your grandmother's wall
And your bipolar illness, it comes and it goes
Your parasymphathetic nervous system reacts
And you're in fight or flight mode

— [“People II: The Reckoning”](#) by AJJ

From my vantage point here at *American Cynic* (where [I never vote](#) but I do occasionally bark unconvincingly at a passer-by), there is a silver lining to Trump's electoral victory. Well, there is a grey lining and an opportunity.

If you are like me, there is also a fleeting moment of joy: it is a delight to see democracy backfire, smug liberals despair, and the federal government so embarrassed. By “like me” I mean a healthy, white, straight, uneducated, contrarian, broken-hearted American man who was long in the process of giving up on fitting in to any meaningful extent within capitalist society before Donald Trump became president. I realize that for people not like me in those regards, Trump may be more terrifying than fun.

There is one quick distinction I'd like to make, because I *do* see some of myself (and Diogenes) in the trolls celebrating the folly of Trump. That is that there is a difference between Cynic [parrhesia](#) and what is sometimes defended as free speech these days: one is a homeless man telling Alexander the Great to step out of his sunlight; the other is an internet shock troll stepping into the shadow of the White House.

The grey lining is that Trump's victory in the face of a nervous establishment demonstrates that the American electoral system is more democratic than I thought. Not only did Trump—a controversial, unpredictable, perhaps uncontrollable populist candidate—survive the Republican primaries and that party's safeguards against popular misfits (unfortunately the Democratic Party was much more successful in defeating Bernie Sanders), but he survived a general election despite (or unintentionally *because of*) hostile media coverage, and he got the requisite votes from the Electoral College, the last defense against democracy, despite [a record number](#) of faithless votes (okay, only seven) and a [plot](#) to use the electoral college to replace him with a mainstream Republican post-election (Colin Powell ended up in third place with three electoral votes, good enough to have been considered if nobody got a majority).

And, as always, I was impressed by voter turnout. About 55% of American adults *voluntarily* cast a ballot in the presidential contest (59% if you count only eligible voters).

I'm aware, of course, that given those points many people would not find evidence for the resilience of American democracy—America maintains an unusually *low* voter turnout for a rich republic, Trump *lost* the popular vote, and his administration may be the biggest threat to the American system in recent memory (in my lifetime, anyway). But those people, I submit, hold an overly optimistic and realist, almost magical, view of formal political process.

With the election of Trump, concrete reality is seeping into the liberal delusions that constitutional republicanism can produce equality and liberty. Faced with a rising cognitive dissonance, many progressive liberals have retreated from democracy to the safety of the institutions. This retreat can be seen in the current hysteria over Russian influence. They are willing to believe that by [exfiltrating](#) a bunch of boring emails from the DNC, which almost nobody read and even fewer people considered when voting, the Russians have successfully subverted the electoral process. (*I'm* not even

that cynical about elections.) And, despite being shocked (*shocked!*) that rival imperial powers would dare interfere with each other, those same liberals, who have become [little neo-McCarthyites](#) suddenly discovering all-powerful Russian spies lurking in every corner of the White House, while whining about a lack of democracy, and with a straight face, are putting their hopes in the intelligence agencies, the judiciary, and the media — powerful institutions with little democratic allegiance or oversight — to save us from Trump.

But there is nothing like a state of emergency to reveal the nature of sovereign power—or at least a state of epistemological crisis to shatter one’s illusions. The opportunity provided by the Trump victory is in its revelatory (apocalyptic?) potential. As the embodiment of the [dishonest lie](#), Trump reveals the truth of political power: its reality is something more like blind obedience and brute force than the formalisms of monarchy, democracy, et cetera that it is so often clothed in. Thanks to Trump, even true-believing liberals have found themselves faced with the insight, as David Frum put it in [his story](#) about what America might look like under a Trump dictatorship, that “checks and balances is a metaphor, not a mechanism.” Maybe some will also realize the same applies to politics-as-usual.

Karl Marx observed that the liberal forms of governance and wage work simply mask old relations of brutal rule and slavery in an idyllic, ideological veneer. Carl Schmitt noted that no matter how seriously parliamentarianism takes itself, the rule of law can never completely do away with sovereign power or escape the fundamental political distinction between friend and enemy — as exemplified in [the possibility] of war. These two philosophers, Karl the Communist and Carl the Nazi, can provide a crude schematic of the bifurcated post-liberal possibilities which Trump’s moment has brought back into view. One path, socialism, seeks to take out coercive social hierarchies including those upon which capitalism relies; the other, which we can generically call fascism, seeks to preserve social hierarchies against the leveling and self-

destructive tendencies of capitalism. Liberals pretend that equality and liberty exist where they don't. Socialists seek to create equality and liberty where liberalism has failed. Reactionaries believe equality and liberty are undesirable (and probably impossible anyway).

Interestingly, some of Trump's most sophisticated supporters cling to the possibility of a third way. They see the futility of existing liberalism and are revolted by equality, but they cannot stomach the reality of fascism. So they hope to ditch the democratic elements of liberalism and thereby arrive at a stable, peaceful version of capitalism (using the right-wing definition of 'peaceful' that means 'undisturbed status quo'). Peter Thiel, a billionaire donor to Trump's campaign and member of his transition team, [wrote](#) in 2009 that "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." By "freedom" he seems to mean capitalism (he goes on to call "capitalist democracy" an oxymoron), and he cites the enfranchisement of women as one of the major stumbling blocks to his vision of a "free" society. Thiel, [who was a student of the late René Girard](#), hints that through meritocratic monopolies, the elimination of economic competition, humanity's cycle of mimetic violence can be escaped (and then king-CEOs can finally sleep peacefully without worrying about becoming scapegoated victims of mob violence, or something).

Thiel's ideas are a variation of Silicon Valley neoreactionary thought as propounded by [Mencius Moldbug](#), the movement's pioneering theorist. Moldbug views democracy as a source of inevitable violence (and latent totalitarianism). Many of his essays are dedicated to exploring capitalism-preserving alternatives to democratic systems. One possibility is what he calls [neocameralism](#) in which a state is a joint-stock business that owns a country. A more obvious name might be "neofeudalism" (and Moldbug has half-jokingly described his anti-democratic project as neo-fascist).

But despite its fascist-like qualities, the apolitical, non-democratic capitalist utopia proposed by Moldbugian

neoreaction, in which wars for survival have been made impossible and economic categories blur with and replace the political, would seem to represent everything Schmitt was against. From a Schmittian view, we might conclude that such neoreactionary thought is not an alternative to bourgeois liberalism, but its most degenerate form.

Whether neoreactionary schemes are classified as fascism or extreme liberalism, Karl Kautsky's famous [dictum](#) from 125 years ago has gained a renewed relevance in Trump's shadow: "As things stand today capitalist civilization cannot continue; we must either move forward into socialism or fall back into barbarism."

Of course no matter how interesting or illuminating I think Trump might be on questions of political theory, it is not the case that police and customs enforcement agents are about to look at him and then resign en masse. The fundamental conflict of politics is now the same as ever: between police and their victims. Resistance is also the same: finding means of disobedience — with a renewed emphasis in America on defending immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and people of color against police and white-supremacist violence.

Trump didn't invent borders or deportations or prisons or torture or execution or the military-industrial complex or patriarchy or racism or theft or taxes or profit. They have been normal for my entire life, so I don't really understand my own visceral response to his presidency. I traditionally struggle alternately with apathy and pacifism — the Trump victory has muted both impulses within me.

Still, I'll grudgingly agree with liberal opponents of Trump that a contingent retreat to the institutions may be the only practical chance to minimize the damage he can do in the short term, but it would be nice if in doing so we manage to avoid the intellectual retreat to liberalism's false promises.