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7-25-2016

July 25, 2016: Trump

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2016). July 25, 2016: Trump. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1027>

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Title: Trump

Date: 2016-07-25T05:42:00.000-04:00

7/25/2016—I was traveling last week and so could not avoid watching some of the Republican National Convention. It is revealing to compare what observers are saying about it now versus how it seemed then.

Several people I respect have said that the convention atmosphere was toxic and unreal. Almost violent. Yet, it seemed strangely normal at the time. This is the power of the “is”. Nothing seems so extraordinary when it is happening.

There are several themes going on. One is Trump himself—self-regarding, ignorant, impulsive and dishonest. A bad President. Strangely bad. Unprecedentedly bad. You can have an ordinary man as President. Truman was ordinary. But Truman served in the army in WWI. It is hard to imagine Trump serving in the military.

Then there is the country. To get elected, Trump has to convince the country that things are a lot worse than they are and that he can fix them. Why is it that he might succeed? In coal country, here in western Pennsylvania, the answer is easy. The jobs were really good and Clinton is the perfect symbol for people who are killing those jobs on purpose for some liberal do-gooding goal of global warming that those people will not pay for but coal workers will. All you need is someone who is willing to lie about global warming and lie about coal jobs. There is plenty of evidence that these voters know they are being lied to. They would rather have someone who cares enough about them to lie.

But for everyone else? Things are just not that bad. FDR said it, at another time that fascism really did threaten democracy—the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. And it would be a lot easier today to actually improve things than it was in 1932.

But, would it be easier? There is something sick in the spirit of the nation today that was not so sick in 1932. You saw it in the hatred toward Hillary at the Republican Convention—and Trump had nothing to do with it. Hillary really had nothing to do with it. The feeling was the same for Bill Clinton, once, and Barack Obama until recently.

But it is also true for the Democrats, to a lesser extent. I’m not speaking about disliking Trump, who really is an exception. Some Democrats feel almost the same way about Hillary that the Republicans do. The policy divisions were so exaggerated in the primary campaign. The political narrative was so unreal. Trade was a symbol. Do all these educated people really want to end foreign trade? What would that even mean? Maybe the recent deal is not great—Krugman cannot make up his mind about it—but NAFTA? That deal strengthened the American auto industry. You can’t have good jobs unless you have an efficient economy. This economy uses foreign trade to become more efficient. This economy uses automation to be more efficient. Both these things eliminate some jobs. But they do work for the economy as a whole. And it is working right now.

Wages are stagnating, but that could be changed. The wealth all this produces just needs to be moved around a little more.

The feeling I have is that we hate each other. The issues are almost beside the point. That is the sickness.