

## A REALITY CHECK

Ken Olson

There is a myth that masses of small Arctic rodents called lemmings blindly follow their leaders over a cliff, but it sometimes serves as a figure of speech about human beings. Millions seem to think they are in possession of truth merely by launching into a total commitment to some person or ideology, as if enthusiasm, fervor, sincerity, or faith are somehow self-authenticating. Authoritarians throughout history have taken advantage of that fallacy.

These days, there are people touting their political projects as being “faith-based.” But that means nothing, since absolutely everyone is devoted to certain ideas and ideals that are largely unseen and unverified. Thus, Hitler and Attila the Hun were “people of faith;” so was Torquemada (leader of the Spanish Inquisition) and so is the murderous Charles Manson and, likewise, any atheist --“believers,” all. Thus, hyper-enthusiasm in adopting a position does not mean that the belief describes reality. Someone’s “faith” might be, as Kierkegaard said, “only a heightened circulation of the blood.”

The reason we find the Westworld science fiction films, whether the 1973 original or the new versions, to be quite chilling is because it is almost impossible to distinguish the false and fabricated humanoids from actual people, and everything depends upon doing that. Something like that is true in real life. Thus, Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944), a French playwright and novelist, also a diplomat, once made an acerbic comment that he applied to actors, but also to certain politicians who were out to hoodwink the masses: “Once you can fake sincerity, you’ve got it made.”

In the upside-down world of Trump’s followers, they often say that they like what they call his “authenticity,” that “he tells it like it is.” –Ironic in the extreme, since The Consummate Faker almost always tells things as they are not. In fact, it is his small-minded vitriol, employed to stoke fear of and resentment toward others, that is sincere, genuine, and real. It is astonishing to see his hateful speech and texts regarded as “authentic,” simply because he shamelessly puts them out in the open for all to see.

In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington outlined future dangers, including those from corrupt and self-seeking individuals placing their own interest above that of the country. In 1837, Andrew Jackson, whose image is on our \$20-bill, was frail and ill when he turned over the presidential reins of power. Nevertheless, he hobbled to the Inauguration to hand-deliver a lengthy warning having to do with threats to the nation. He was not concerned about foreign powers; rather, he said, “It is from within, from cupidity, from corruption, from disappointed ambition and inordinate thirst for power that factions will be formed and liberty endangered. It is against such designs, whatever disguise the actors may assume, that you have especially to guard yourselves.”

Trump is that sort of actor, but “on steroids.” Prior to the election, he said many times that “Democrats really hate this country!” and, in another projection, labeled all who would not be voting for him as “the enemy within.” It was a crystal-clear indication that this authoritarian has

no intention of being a President to serve/help all Americans. His calls for unity, even in his own party, translate to intimidation, “Get behind me, or else!” Trump’s idea of “making America great again” is to elevate and favor billionaire oligarchs, thump his chest and wrap himself in the flag, all the while working to burn down the ideals of the republic for which it stands.

In 1580, the essayist Montaigne wrote, “I speak the truth, not my fill of it, but as much as I dare, and I dare a little more as I grow old.” It’s the same with many of us. Before election day, dozens of the highest former military and national security staff, as well as many Republicans who had worked next to Trump, stood up to raise the alarm that he is utterly unfit and has in mind only grift, domination, and personal vengeance, instead of the welfare of the nation, and that our democracy is, indeed, in grave danger. That’s reality: that’s the precipice by which we stand. America, we can’t say we weren’t warned.

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