

## Forgotten people: Trump the populist

President Trump is so unusual, so unexpected and so wayward that most of us are having trouble finding the right responses to him. It is as if a bull had invaded a china shop, and then turns out to be a pig in bull's clothing, and then begins speaking Mandarin - backwards. And yet our intuitions are very much alert. Something about this man, and the program he is about to launch makes us very anxious - as it should. But what, exactly, is it? Like you, I've been trying to figure this out, with mixed results. But then, on January 20 he gave his inaugural address, and I thought I could see something more clearly.

It was a very strange inaugural speech - rancorous, bellicose, insular, and above all, saturated with a kind of drama that is both uncomfortable and familiar. In it, Trump addressed, not the 'American people', meaning each and every one of his fellow citizens, supporters and opponents alike - something that is routine and necessary in democracies - but a mythical group he named "the forgotten men and women of our country". These people had come together, he said, "by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement" unique in the history of the world. It was to them he promised the benefits of his rule. When he spoke of unity, which he did several times, he was still talking to them. Nothing in the speech acknowledged the deep divisions in American society, nor the urgent need of mending them. On the contrary, he declared war on a loosely defined group of betrayers, seemingly inviting his audience to join in their humiliation and defeat.

The reason we recognise this language is because we've heard it from the mouths of demagogues before. The leader telling his loyal followers they are the true people, the real people, and he, their chosen one, sharing their hopes and dreams, unites their common purposes in one person, and promises to be the executive for everything just and good. This, he said, "will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again". What about those others, the oppressors, "a small group in our nation's capital", "the establishment"? Did Trump give any account of who they were, how their power had been captured and exercised? How that monopoly would be broken, and how the actual apparatus of power would be reincarnated and made fit for the rosy era he saw before them? No. He didn't need to. It was dream-talk, designed to stir passions, ignite hopes, and - excite vengeance.

Speech like this does exactly the opposite of what a victor's speech is supposed to do in a democracy. The men who worried about tyranny as they wrote the constitution all those years ago knew perfectly well the kind of trials their design would have to face. History teaches, they said, that men will always form tribes to promote their interests when leadership is contested. 'Factions' they called them. And sure enough, in just a few years it came to pass, as the first American political parties were born. Of course, parties have been with us ever since, and we cannot conceive of politics without them. But experience has shown that running a democracy with political parties takes care, as well as wisdom, patience and forbearance.

The founding fathers saw two big problems with factions: first, they routinely work against majorities. The best organised and motivated faction will always prevail over a larger one that is more diffuse and feels its interest less urgently. Second, factions tend to seize power, rather than contest it, compelled as they are by a sense of their own rectitude. This has several big consequences. Strongly motivated parties view elections as winner-take-all contests, where the prize is the absolute right to execute the victor's will. This, of course, is a thoroughly anti-democratic view of things. When all is said and done, electoral contests in democracies are for the purpose of choosing representatives - that is, making the people 'present' in the law-making assembly. Any loyalty of those representatives to their party is subordinate to their duty of faithful representation.

Originally, and for a century or more after its founding, the American republic lived and survived by this concept. The connection between congressmen and their electors was lively, articulate, reciprocal, and more or less respectful. Despite stresses and strains (and a disastrous civil war), the

parties most often understood that it was their responsibility to make the whole people present in the place where laws are made.

A populist like Trump doesn't think this way at all. His naked partisanship has been licensed by 30 years of steadily deepening rift in the body of America, as if the right and left halves were becoming incapable of inhabiting the same frame. He dug levers into this energy of rupture and stirred into it hatreds and fears, always latent and rousable, to generate the tidal wave that swept him to power. Though it might look as if Trump created the conditions of his empowerment, it would be more accurate to say he exploited them, cleverly amplifying destructive forces already at work. It's not as if no one saw it coming.

Ben Franklin, toward the end of his life, having done everything he could to improve the new constitution of the United States, gave voice to his misgivings about it in a famous speech in 1787, saying that after all, the system they had launched to govern the world's first modern republic "can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other". He had in mind the permanent weakness of people for fractiousness, and their habit of clumping together the better to prevail over those with whom they disagree. In the end, he said, these foibles would destroy the one essential principle that allows a self-governing people to prosper - trust. He went on, "Much of the strength and efficiency of any government, in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends... on the general opinion of the goodness of that government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors." If only he could see what has just befallen.

Democracy is a weird sort of invention. There seems to be no doubt it springs from something deep in our human nature - the wish to be free from oppression. You only need to think of all the popular movements that have overthrown tyrants and colonists in modern times to know that this impulse exists. But it coexists with other, incompatible impulses too. How often have these brave assertions of liberty come unstuck because of failure to unite, or because something else, in the same people, elected security before freedom? The one indispensable thing that can bind a democratic people together is trust. A kind of confidence in the good intentions and capacity of the legislators they choose, and (perhaps more important) a faith that all citizens, regardless of their convictions, status, wealth, race or origin, have exactly the same rights under the common law that governs them all.

This is special. It makes democracy the champion of something we can call diversity - or plurality, or tolerance. Everyone who has ever experienced the fruits of this way of ordering a society knows that it somehow enjoins a noble and dignified human capacity. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a genuine morality without it. But ... there is that within us which can revolt against diversity - a deep wish for uniformity and confirmation, and the security of a leader who can enforce it.

To me, the really jarring thing about Trump's speech from the capitol was that it spoke to this wish. His picture of an ideal America was of a people bonded to the nation by a fierce patriotism, yielding their will to him, rewarding him with devotion, and heedlessly pursuing self-interest in all things. It was a speech about recovering greatness; but a small, undemocratic greatness, whose only components were power and wealth.

If there is to be anything good the other side of Trump, it will be because the Americans have enough interest in the work that Ben Franklin and his colleagues bequeathed to them, and because they can find enough trust in each other to restart their great democratic experiment - just as they did after a dark time, in 1864. In that respect, and in no other, Trump just might turn out to be useful: a sort of cathartic to stimulate the immune system. Once, about the time I was born, America really did save the world from malignant populism - with sacrifice, inventive energy, open generosity, and direct dealing. Those would be just the things, now that the populist is one of their own.