

NATIONAL REVIEW

The World Keeps Not Ending

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We were not supposed to have made it this far.

George Orwell saw night descending on us in *1984*. Orwell was, on paper, a radical, but in his heart he was an old-fashioned English liberal. He dreamed of socialism but feared socialists. He feared them because he knew them. I was in the sixth grade in 1984, but I remember the magazine covers and pundit panels, and the insistence that though we had not arrived at dystopia on Orwell's schedule, that eternal jackboot was sure to find our face soon enough. Tom Wolfe joked that "the dark night of fascism is always descending in the United States and yet lands only in Europe," which wasn't quite right: There's Saudi Arabia, and China, and Burma . . .

But not here. And, increasingly, not there, either. As our friends at HumanProgress.Org remind us (to little thanks — nobody is less popular than an optimist) the world has in fact become more democratic and more liberal since 1984, rather than more autocratic and more illiberal. Orwell was the better writer and the more profound thinker, but Aldous Huxley was the better prophet.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Willi Schlamm offered a useful proverb: "The problem with socialism is socialism. The problem with capitalism is capitalists." There's something to that. But the hyper-capitalist corporate dystopia of the science-fiction imagination and the socialist imagination has not come to pass. There is much to criticize about Amazon and its Cult of Fulfillment, and about Apple and Google, but they aren't the Tyrell Corporation of *Blade Runner* or Weyland-Yutani, either. I do not use Facebook, but I am glad that it exists. There is a great deal about technology and culture Anno Domini 2018 that I find perplexing and off-putting, but I prefer to live in a world with wild and free innovation rather than in one that is more bland and more predictable.

The catalogue of apocalypses is thick, and its contents are easy to mock. There are many who are skeptical about current global-warming claims in part because they remember that only a few decades ago we were in a worldwide panic about global cooling and the new ice age that was supposed to be descending upon us, and they are not much inclined to turn over the levers of economic and political power to the same people (or the same kind of people) who wanted to cover the polar ice caps in coal soot to stave off the frost of doom. Paul Ehrlich was sure that hundreds of millions of people would starve to death in the Seventies irrespective of any change in government policy or developments in agricultural technology. There were many horrors in the Seventies (you had to be there) but mass starvation caused by insufficient agricultural production was not one of them. Famine today is an almost exclusively political phenomenon rather than an agricultural one — starvation is man-made, famously in the case of the socialists who decided that a few million Ukrainians needed to be starved to death to clear the way for utopia. The Malthusian terror is eternal: Thanos, the big bad in *Avengers: Infinity War* (hey, I

had a long flight home from Zurich) is a thoroughgoing Malthusian, one who dreads the depletion of natural resources and so decides to kill every other sentient being in the universe as a salubrious cull. His means may be the stuff of comic-book villainy, but his end is one that is very much shared by a great many people (including a great many who should know better) on the left and on the right captive to the fear of overpopulation. Never mind that the people who study this sort of thing are predicting a decline in world population in the near future — again, nobody likes an optimist.

We did not descend into Orwellian totalitarianism. We are not under the heel of galaxy-bestrident eternal corporations. (The average corporate life expectancy is in fact in steep decline and has been for some time as our ever-more efficient markets reduce the once mighty corporation to an increasingly temporary, tenuous, and ad-hoc nexus of intelligence and capital. The nature of the firm is changing, and the tragedy is that Ronald Coase is not here to update us.) We are not starving to death because of overpopulation, and countries such as India, once identified with the Malthusian terror, are thriving.

Things look pretty good at home, too. There are things I would prefer to see done differently, and some important problems that are not being treated as seriously as I would prefer. But the nation is at peace, and it is prospering. (For the most part.) Americans have developed a weird, cultish, caesaropapist attitude toward the presidency, without ever stopping to consider that the nation has thrived under the administration of a succession of very different men with very different political agendas: Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and, now, Donald Trump: The fact that America just keeps on trucking irrespective of the qualities or character of the man in the Oval Office ought to make us think rather less of the presidency and rather more of ourselves — and think better of our neighbors, our businesses, our public institutions, our civil society, and much else — including the citizens who do not share our political views.

So why the mass hysteria?

The argument from our Democratic friends is that these are not normal political times, that current events present a unique threat to our institutions, a clear and present danger, and, hence, that the normal rules of civility must be abandoned, as Mrs. Clinton insists, that norms of civilized behavior and citizenship must be overthrown, as with the mobs chasing political enemies out of restaurants and stalking them in their homes, that honorable public servants must be traduced in the face of this emergency, etc.

All of that would be more compelling if the Left had not said the same thing and made the same exaggerated and hysterical claims during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (they were sure he would cause the nuclear annihilation of all life on earth) and George W. Bush (He'll peep at your library records!), if they had not attempted to do to Mitt Romney more or less the same thing they attempted to do to Brett Kavanaugh. Among reasonable people, the market for wolf tickets is getting pretty saturated. There aren't any death camps being set up in the suburbs.

One begins to suspect that the same people who insisted that things in these United States could hardly have been better in November of 2016 and that they could hardly have been worse two months later are not acting *entirely* in good faith.

In a healthy society, politics is a small part of life. There is a life outside politics, and there are places and situations that are outside politics. We have, for the moment, abandoned that distinction, especially for those on the left who insist on a totalitarian model of political life in which everything is subject to political scrutiny, in which the personal is truly and categorically — and horrifyingly — the political. They insist that this is necessary because of the extraordinary times in which we live, the extraordinary threats that we currently face, the emergency under which we are living.

But there is no emergency.

Those familiar with the political career of Indira Gandhi will have a special appreciation for the concept of “emergency.” The Emergency refers to a 21-month period during which Mrs. Gandhi suspended civil liberties, ruled by decree, jailed political opponents, censored newspapers, and laid the foundations for what might have been a permanent dictatorship. Dissident political parties were banned, regional governments were dissolved and their leaders incarcerated. (The Malthusians never sleep: India also set on a course of involuntary sterilization during this period, as a means of population control.) There had been political unrest and political violence (as, unhappily, there long had been in India), but the proximate cause of the Emergency was the fact that Mrs. Gandhi had lost a court case that might have resulted in her being removed from office. The Emergency was the fact that there was political opposition to her government, and that the opposition was effective.

Our situation is not quite so stark, but it is analogous. Longstanding American institutions ranging from the First Amendment to the Electoral College to the Senate have been suddenly and rashly declared “illegitimate.” Why? Because, at the moment, they are keeping the Left from getting what it wants. The Left wants to silence certain right-wing critics and dissidents, and the First Amendment stops them. The Senate and the Electoral College perform their intended constitutional role in protecting the interests of the less-populous states and their residents, ensuring the protecting of minority interests from the tyranny of the majority. This annoys the would-be tyrants. (They are, to their discredit, unable to truly appreciate that political tides turn, and that majorities are fickle things.) The ordinary political processes of the United States have produced results that the Left does not like, and, hence, those processes and the institutions that enable them must be considered illegitimate. The nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court is to be understood as a national emergency because . . . Democrats would prefer to have somebody else, and they believe they having something like a divine right to rule.

At that level, this is about something other than politics per se. I have spent about 30 years covering political protests of various kinds, and, of course, people rarely show up at a protest because they are happy about something. But many of the people one encounters at such events (from Occupy Wall Street to the tea-party rallies) are categorically unhappy, bereft and adrift in a way that is only tangentially related to politics. They turn to politics to provide a sense of meaning that might once have been provided by family or religion, two anchors from which many of us enlightened moderns have cut ourselves away. But politics provides a sense of meaning only when we convince ourselves that there is a great deal at stake. I do not know how many planning-and-zoning meetings I have been to, how many suburban school-board meetings and small-town municipal board meetings. Rarely does one get the sense that there is much that is urgent going on. They are boring, and, generally, free of drama. (Not always. A visit with the San Bernardino, Calif., city leadership will cause one to despair for democracy.) That isn't

very much compared to communing with God or being a father. The people who fall into politics as a source of personal meaning must believe that what's at stake is . . . everything . . . or at least something meaningful, otherwise — well, that's obvious enough. Political fanaticism is not rooted in ideology. It is the hollow clanging sound that social life makes when banging up against an empty soul.

The world *must* be ending. It *must* fall to us to prevent the apocalypse. Because, if it isn't, if life is just going on more or less the way life does, then what's the point of all this huffery and puffery, all the public weeping and dressing up in silly costumes and cutting ourselves off from family and what friends we have? The angry partisan cannot believe that life is good, because he must then ask himself: If life is good, then why am I not enjoying it? Why do I feel so alone, so frustrated, and so meaningless?

When you look into the Abyss, the Abyss does not, contra Nietzsche, look into you. It certainly does not look into your voting record or your frantic, rage-inflected social-media posts. It doesn't have any feelings about you one way or the other. You will not spend your last seconds on this earth, gasping in your death bed and terrified by what might come next, thinking: "Well, at least I put on a funny hat and screamed, 'Go f*** yourself!' at Ted Cruz."

The Abyss isn't out there — it's in here.

The world keeps not ending. But we cannot say as much about ourselves, our lives, and our own little worlds. The *New York Times* reports on Hurricane Michael:

Sarah was killed when strong winds from the storm tore away a carport and sent it hurtling into the modular home she was in, officials said. The girl is one of at least six people whose deaths have been attributed to the storm.

"She was sitting right next to her grandmother," said Chad Smith, the coroner of Seminole County, Ga., who described the death as a "horrible accident."

Mr. Radney cannot recall exactly when he got a call from his brother with the news of what had happened; he thinks it was around 4 p.m. Wednesday, but acknowledged that much of the last day or two had been a blur. The reception was bad, so Mr. Radney could not quite make out what his brother was saying. But he could tell he was crying.

"When I finally got through and spoke to my mom, my mom said Sarah had been hit in the head," Mr. Radney said.

The wind, he was told, had lifted up a portable carport that had been behind the house and thrust it toward the home such that one of its legs burst through "the ceiling or the window, I'm not sure which," Mr. Radney said. It struck both Sarah and Mr. Radney's mother; his mother's lung was punctured, her rib broken; the carport struck Sarah on the head, leaving her gasping for air for 45 minutes to an hour.

As Sarah suffered, the storm got worse and worse, Mr. Radney said, and cellphone reception got spottier and spottier. Sometimes he would call and could get only a word or two in — or a single question: "Was she still breathing?"

"Last night was just hell," said Mr. Radney, who lives in Cairo, Ga. "I'm an hour and a quarter away, and my daughter's dying, and I can't do anything about it."

Writing in *The Week*, Joel Mathis wonders what this means for . . . Donald Trump.

What should we make of the time we have? What is important? What is *worth* it? There are answers out there, and they are not associated with hash-tags or summarized in *The Week*. If you are going to stand in a crowd of like-minded people, chanting, what are you going to chant about? If the answer is a politician, then that's no answer at all.