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End Times Coming?



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Donald Trump has been losing it a lot lately, mentally decomposing. The more he does, the more likely it becomes that the world will end with a bang. We cannot rule out a whimper, however – not with the Commander-in-Chief’s mind, what there is of it, fluttering hither and yon.

Or maybe Providence has something more Biblical in store.

In the Book of *Revelation*, six hundred sixty-six is “the mark of the beast.” For some two thousand years, that number has been associated with the Anti-Christ and with what

evangelicals nowadays call “the end times.” The number 666 figures in esoteric mystical and satanic practices, and in the folk traditions of peoples throughout Christendom. It is a point of reference in the popular culture of our time.

How ironic therefore that the address of the skyscraper office building that is playing such a prominent role in Jared Kushner’s fall from grace is 666 Fifth Avenue!

The demonic connotations of that building’s address have been part of the folklore surrounding it from the time that Tishman Realty and Construction, a far bigger deal than the Trump Organization, had the office tower built in the late fifties. Tishman had no problem renting out office and retail space on that account; in those saner times, Christian eschatology was less commercially and politically consequential than it has since become.

The Kushner Real Estate Group, which under Jared’s leadership acquired 666 in 2007, has had trouble making ends meet. Not all the blame lies with the resurgence of archaic modes of thought in recent decades. A bigger problem is that the Kushners who, as “modern Orthodox” Jews, know a thing or two themselves about archaic, beliefs and practices, borrowed heavily to purchase the building, and more still to maintain it. The income 666 brings in does not justify their level of indebtedness.

Even so, the building remains one of New York City’s prime addresses. Thank the First Law of Real Estate for that – location, location, location.

However, Jared paid too much for it, just before the market for Manhattan office space went south as the Great Recession unfolded. By now, that market has recovered somewhat, but not enough to get the Kushners out from under water.

Thus the man whom Trump put in charge of nearly every thorny issue facing his administration put his own family’s business seriously in debt.

Debt is something Trump knows well. If only for that reason, if he has any capacity for empathy at all, Trump must be feeling Jared’s pain.

In demeanor and personality Jared and the Donald are as different as can be. However, as real estate tycoons, the two of them are cut from the same cloth.

Plainly, Ivanka and her psychoanalyst, if she has one, have a lot to talk about: father (even in public she calls him “daddy”) and husband – same syndrome.

The two loves of her life both had sleazy landlord fathers, though only Jared’s actually did time. Both had fathers who provided them with money and political influence to spare. And they both set out from the metropolis’s hinterlands (Queens in Trump’s case, New Jersey in Kushner’s) to take Manhattan by storm. In the process, both indebted themselves up to the gills.

Trump Tower is an over the top monument to Trump's vanity, greed, and insecurity; it is an architectural mediocrity, a gilded flat screen TV, bulked up on steroids and turned on its side.

Kushner has more refined ambitions for 666. He wants to replace the existing structure with something more luxurious, more profitable, and more distinguished than the building there now.

To that end, he has enlisted the architectural firm of Zaha Hadid. Hadid, who died in 2016, was an Iraqi architect living in Britain. She had an outstanding reputation, and many fine buildings to her credit. In 2004, she became the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for architects.

Hooray for Jared! He may be as unfit for the tasks his father-in-law assigned him as Trump himself is for his own responsibilities, but at least he still believes in the "American dream" – or at least the part of it that has children being more couth than their parents and parents-in-law.

Kushner also wants to change the building's street number – to 660. Another smart move.

But getting all this done is going to cost money; in this case, at least \$12 billion.

Each day's news brings fresh reports of meetings in the White House or at foreign venues between Crown Prince Jared and the world's leading moneylenders. Some of them are American; two names that have come to light recently are Joshua Harris, founder of the hedge fund Apollo Global Management, and Michael Corbat, chief executive of Citigroup. But many, maybe most, of Jared's efforts to raise money for 666 and his family's other holdings have involved foreign oligarchs and potentates. It could hardly be otherwise. On the merits, no sane capitalist banker would want anything to do with his plans for 666, and America's homegrown high flyers have not quite yet descended to the level of their counterparts in modern day equivalents of banana republics and Third World dictatorships.

Harris and Corbat and others of their ilk may be willing to talk about helping the Kushners out, but they are loath to do it. From their point of view, it doesn't matter, or doesn't matter enough, that Jared is the president's son-in-law and one of his senior advisers. Despite all that has happened since Trump's election, they continue to believe that, in the banking business, there is still more percentage in sticking with First World norms than in caving in to the manifold corruptions emanating out of the Oval Office.

Jared's plight must feel like *dejà vu* all over again to his father-in-law.

Even up to the moment Trump surprised everybody (including himself) by winning the 2016 election, major American banks would have sooner flushed their money down the toilet than lend any of it to him. Deutsche Bank and other foreign-based financial titans would work with the Trump Organization from time to time, but American bankers, having been burned too many times in the past, wanted nothing to do with him.

When the dust finally settles from the several on-going “Russiagate” investigations, it should become clear how Trump was able to bounce back from seemingly irreversible financial ruin as often as he has; the kindness of German bankers only explains so much.

No doubt, political influence has had a lot to do with it. Trump inherited a tidy sum from his father and then, by fair means or foul, added to it many times over. It is also looking more likely than not that Russian oligarchs and similarly unsavory characters from distant lands with lax financial regulations figure in the explanation, and that person connected to criminal organizations or to Russian intelligence services played a role as well.

The way to find out is clear: follow the money. In this instance, there is a *via regia*, a royal road, a (comparatively) easy way to do that: look where the son-in-law has gone begging. What are Kushner’s problems, after all, but Russiagate writ small?

Talking with shady characters, Russian or otherwise, about business ventures is not the same thing as “colluding” with them to get elected. To the extent that any of that went on, “the Russians” should be ashamed – not so much for sullyng an already profoundly corrupt democracy, but for the pointlessness and amateurishness of their endeavors.

Our plutocrats are perfectly able to corrupt democracy on their own. They have been doing a fine job of it too – seemingly from time immemorial, but at no time more than now. Democracy’s foes don’t need Russians for that

It is telling that even such ardent Cold War revivalists as Joy Reid and Rachel Maddow and the other MSNBC and CNN bloviators don’t claim that the (unspecified) Russian meddling they go on about endlessly actually accomplished anything.

Because the United States is and long has been the world’s foremost serial meddler in the affairs of other countries, their hypocrisy is mind-boggling. That aside, the peril they warn of is almost certainly a red herring.

On the other hand, financial shenanigans involving Russia and the Trump organization almost certainly did take place. If Russiagate investigators do their job properly, it is extremely likely that they will find that this, not his campaign’s “collusion” with “the Russians,” is what Trump is trying so hard to cover up.

When Trump's remaining supporters realize this will they finally wise up? Probably not. But, if anything can get them to abandon their illusions, this will.

Trump's agenda is detrimental to the material interests of the people in his base, but, as has been demonstrated time and again, most of them could care less about that. Neither does it matter to them that Trump is an embarrassment, or that he and his people are incompetent, or that he poses a clear and present danger to every living thing on the planet. Old-fashioned corruption is another story; when that is exposed, everybody gets upset.

Thus even the most bamboozled Trump diehards will have a hard time maintaining their belief that the Donald is on their side when they are presented with evidence too compelling for them to deny that the only side he is on is his own.

But we must be careful not to give them or their opponents too much credit. As long as Trump supporters remain willfully blind, and as long as the self-declared Democratic "resistance" remains milquetoast and feckless, Trump could survive revelations of his financial shenanigans, just as surely as he has been able so far to get away with everything else.

Whether or not Trump's Teflon armor keeps on protecting him, the fact remains: the gods are closing in. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad," wrote Longfellow. We can see it happening before our very eyes.

Reasonable people will, of course, see it all as a consequence of the mounting pressure on Trump and everyone associated with him as the law closes in, and as the wages of incompetence fall due.

In this instance, however, there is a certain satisfaction in taking Longfellow at his word, by casting prosaic reasonableness aside and looking upon the goings on in the Trump White House as the handiwork of pagan gods amusing themselves at our expense. Or, better yet, and in a more sullen and less imaginative Christian vein, as a sign of demons portending the End Time.

In that spirit, let us therefore relish the profound, possibly terminal, disorder portended by the Mark of the Beast.

Kushner seems like a harmless enough airhead but as Trump's early backer and erstwhile crony, Chris Christie, can attest, that boy can be one vengeful son of a bitch. Christie was the prosecutor who put Jared's father behind bars.

Not long after the government of Qatar turned down Kushner's pleas for help, Qatar became the victim of a United Arab Emirates led, Saudi supported, and Trump endorsed blockade. It is hard not to see Jared's hand at work here.

The consequences for the region have been grave – for Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and, above all, for Yemen, one of the most war devastated places on earth.

As always, the peoples most directly affected have been the most harmed. But no good will come of this for the United States either. To the extent that the Kushner family's financial woes are a cause, Jared has much to answer for.

Even in an administration where the outrageous has become normal, letting the pecuniary interests of the president, his children, and, in the case of the Donald's favorite daughter, his children's spouses dictate the course of world events marks a new low.

How bad will it get, and what role, if any, have the Russian government and its intelligence services been playing? Will it lead to Kushner's undoing? To Trump's? As with the reality TV shows from which Trump learned most of what he knows, stay tuned and relish the spectacle.

Evangelicals surely will. They must be thinking that with 666 so prominently involved, the End Times – not just for Kushners and Trumps but for everybody, saved and reprobate alike – is near.

Or perhaps they are not quite as crazy as that, and are instead just looking forward to a time when Mike Pence will be the one calling the shots. He is one of their own, after all; and, if only by being less unhinged, he can do more for them than Trump can.

Mark of the beast, indeed! With or without Trump himself in the leading role, the Trump Show has at least two and a half more years to run. That is Hell enough already.