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## America Installs a Pope



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Can someone explain to me why, when a mob carrying spears and wearing Davy Crockett hats breaks into the Capitol, “our democracy is under assault” by insurrectionists and seditionists, while when another group takes over the Capitol with the likes of A-Rod and Bill Clinton, and lines the streets of Washington with storm troops, our democracy has suddenly been “restored”?

Yes, I watched most of the inauguration, although somehow I missed Lady Gaga singing the national anthem. But I did catch the aerial jumbotron shots of the Trumps slipping out of Washington and the 21-limo salute that new President Biden got on leaving the Capitol, and my take is that America has chosen a pope—not elected a chief magistrate. The pageantry had it all, lacking only white smoke coming out the chimneys of the Senate.

The day featured the return of Hillary Clinton to the national feel-good club (although her outfit looked like a home uniform of the Minnesota Vikings), culturally sensitive stage props (200,000 American flags?), and enough black Chevy Suburbans to warm the heart of any GM executive cutting a Super Bowl ad.

And at the center of it all was humble Father Joe, selected by the Electoral College of Cardinals, to serve as the American pope, in office to deliver daily benedictions for the salvation of the nation's soul.

### **The National Pardon Fantasy League**

Before the swinging White House doors hit Trump on his way out of town, Mafia Don figured out one last way to define his presidency as little more than a variation on the rackets—by issuing a pardon or commutation to every small-time swindler or con man in the federal prison system who had bilked funds out of city contractors, Medicare patients, political slush funds, or MAGAistas mailing in \$3 to help Mexico pay for the Wall.

I put the Trump pardons into two groups: those who at some later date can help Trump (at a Palm Beach fundraiser for the new Patriot Party?) or those who could hurt him (Bannon singing to the Feds about how the Trump presidency was just one large Ponzi scheme with Don and Don Jr. having set up a drain on GOP campaign funds).

Growing up, I have no memory of January 19th at the end of each administration being National Pardon Day, but now it's turned into an event, not unlike Cyber Monday. Given some time, I am sure the networks will figure out a way to promote it.

Maybe the NFL's Rich Eisen and the crew (Mooch, Kurt, Irv, etc.) could be brought in to review some pardon highlight film (video, say, of "personal lawyer" Rudy Giuliani accepting \$2 million in "legal fees", or perhaps an agent for a convicted rapper blitzing Jared with texts at his hotel in Dubai?).

Maybe NFL's computer analyst Cynthia Frelund can weigh the odds and bets in some fantasy pardon league? (I was sure that Trump would pardon himself, but then I had the Saints over the Buccaneers.)

### **It Takes a Village People**

Was I the only American watching President Trump and his wife Melania fly away to the soundtrack of "YMCA"? What happened to that cease-and-desist order issued by the Village People? Did the Trump 2024 campaign pay up for the rights so that the president could hear their consoling words of advice on his way out of town?:

Young Man, I was once in your shoes,  
I said, I was down and out with the blues  
I felt, no man cared if I were alive  
I felt the whole world was so jive  
That's when someone came up to me  
And said young man take a walk up the street

There's a place there called the Y.M.C.A.

They can start you back on your way.

At Trump rallies "Macho Man" is standard fare (it's his walk-on music), and other rally songs include Elton John's "Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)", Michael Jackson's "Beat It" (presidential historians, call your office), and "You Can't Always Get What You Want" (the Rolling Stones).

For the Trump farewell at Joint Base Andrews (not many supporters got up at 5:45 a.m. and dragged along five friends for the presidential good-bye at 8 a.m.), the Air Force or some imagineers in a console feed room capped "YMCA" with Frank Sinatra's "My Way" as *Air Force One* did its takeoff roll. It was the perfect Trump recession and, I am sure, had many in the home audience ad-libbing the words:

Gropes, I've had a few

But then again, too few to mention

I did what I had to do

And saw through it all with tax exemption

I planned each fluffed account

Each careful step along the AC freeway

But more, much more than this

I did it my way

As the presidential jet lifted into the Maryland sky, I couldn't help but wonder how David St. Hubbins (Spinal Tap) would have seen Trump off. Would he have remarked?: "It's such a fine line between stupid, and... clever."

### **The Bourbon Restoration of Democrats**

With Trump and his family—until the end they looked like the cast of *Dallas*—heading into Florida exile (real estate hunting in a state that exempts multimillion-dollar houses from bankruptcy creditors?), the camera angles could return to the live studio audience on the Capitol platform, last used to film that gritty Netflix blockbuster, *Taking Nancy*.

Except for the hyphenated It couple, J. Lo and A-Rod, it was a Bourbon Restoration of Democrats, with the odd Bush and Senate leader tossed in to goose the ratings in rural America.

Earlier that morning, many of them (including the GOP congressional leadership) were at mass with Father Joe. At the Capitol they were escorted to their seats of honor, which had enough safety glass to kit out a Bronx liquor store.

The guests were socially distant and appropriately masked, giving the occasion the look of a national bank robbers' convention—as Butch Cassidy liked to say, "A small price to pay for beauty."

### **Bernie Broods**

Bernie made it to the inner sanctum platform, as if dropped off on a snowmobile. He was wearing a thrift shop parka and idiot mittens that might well have had his name stitched inside by his mother, “BERNARD SANDERS, BROOKLYN.”

He seemed to be sitting alone (with the slouch of someone bored in traffic court), and I wondered what he made of all the references by Master of Ceremonies Amy Klobuchar to democracy’s renaissance in the shadows of the defaced Capitol.

In her opening remarks, the senator said:

Two weeks ago, when an angry, violent mob stage and insurrection and desecrated this temple of our democracy, it awakened us to our responsibilities as Americans. This is the day when our democracy picks itself up, brushes off the dust, and does what America always does. Goes forward as a nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

When Bernie heard this, did he think?:

I had this one in the bag until Obama reached you, Amy, and Pete too, and the all the others, and you hosed me by dropping out of the race before Super Tuesday so that Chuck, Nancy, and the rest could anoint a has-been like Joe to save the 1% from my wealth taxes and to keep me from towing away their Audis. Who voted for Joe in the Democratic primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire? About five union guys with lunch pails, that’s who. Who voted for Kamala before she dropped out? About 2%. And now they’re up there taking a victory lap with J. Lo, and I’m back here freezing my buns off, waiting for some staffer to tell me over Zoom that climate change is “off the front burner” until Joe, Chuck, Mitch, and Nancy figure out how to dress up another corporate bailout as a Covid-19 relief package. Some democracy, Amy...

### **Biden Heals the Faithful**

Biden’s inaugural speech was more a sermon than a statement of political goals or concrete plans for the future. It was a homily on American faith (“*We come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries...*”), and an encyclical to the patriarchy promising that a government leadership of men and women in their late seventies and eighties will somehow, magically (fishes, loaves, and a few bailouts?), come up with solutions to problems that they did so much to create.

Biden said:

My fellow Americans in the work ahead of us we’re going to need each other. We need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter. We’re entering what may be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus. We must set aside politics and finally face this pandemic as one nation, one nation. And I promise you this, as the Bible says, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” We will get through this together, together.

Biden used the word “unity” more often than the Village People intoned “YMCA” at Joint Base Andrews. (“*To overcome these challenges, to restore the soul and secure the future of*

*America, requires so much more than words. It requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy; unity, unity.... History, faith, and reason show the way, the way of unity.... Not of personal interest, but the public good and together we shall write an American story of hope, not fear, of unity not division, of light not darkness.”)*

In this utopia (one part Saint Augustine, the other part a gated community on the ocean?), Biden expects Trump to disappear into a Florida swamp, the Proud Boys to stand down and get jobs at Walmart, Mitch & Co. to reach across the aisle and vote for climate change legislation, racism to disappear, masks to cure the spread of the virus, and the United States to return to the Elysian Fields of the late 1950s, when the country had the optimism of a Chevy convertible and the good feelings of the Everly Brothers (“*Wake up, little Susie, wake up...*”).

### **The Bull Market in Domestic Terrorism**

The payday for the subsidy crowd gathered expectantly on the Capitol gibbet was all the invocations by Biden and other speakers to deal with “a political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism...”. Their task as a “good, safe menace” is to ratchet up fears now that the threat from the Taliban and ISIS hardly justifies pumping \$1 trillion annually into that biggest doorbell camera of them all, Homeland Security (“*Uses facial recognition software to detect very good people on both sides...*”)

Where are A. Mitchell Palmer or the young J. Edgar Hoover now that we need them? Can’t the Space Force be brought back to earth to knock down a few militia doors in Montana or west Texas?

No doubt when Biden reaches across the aisle to his good friend Mitch, one of the first palms he will fill (with billions in unmarked bills) will be that of yet another federal agency dedicated to marching the Trump crowd into re-education camps—to beat their spears and raccoon hats into ploughshares, if not into box work for Amazon.

### **So Who’s Winning the Civil War?**

Wasn’t there something a touch hollow in hearing all the tough talk about taking out “domestic terrorism” in a city that was under martial law and lockdown? With a Nuremberg field of flags across the national mall? With only troops in combat fatigues there to cheer on the heavily armed presidential motorcade as it crept along Pennsylvania Avenue?

Looking at the many centurions on duty around Washington, D.C. guarding the new American emperor, I was reminded of a World War II diplomatic meeting, held somewhere in Berlin. As the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was delivering an upbeat assessment to the summoned audience on the outcome of the war, the ambassador cut him off to ask: “If you’re winning the war, how come we’re having this meeting in a bomb shelter?”

### **Candid C-Span Camera**

At the inauguration, I did like the silent (at least on my feed) C-Span/PBS camera that moved effortlessly among the honored guests, as if that fly on Mike Pence's head during the vice-presidential debate.

I liked standing at the elbow of Barack Obama while he chatted up A-Rod and J. Lo—an attentive Bill Clinton was drawn there too. All this came just after Biden had invoked the tear-jerking images of Americans struggling to pay their mortgages and of the need to “put people to work in good jobs,” etc. (Maybe they can become A-list celebrities and buy houses on the Vineyard?)

### **The Capitol's Field of Dreams**

In lieu of the traditional congressional lunch with the new president, there was a short ceremony in the Capitol (no one was pounding on a desk in celebration, saying, “*Hey, let's call Trump!*”) in which a member of Congress asked the new president and his doctoral wife (and don't you forget it) to view an American painting on display in the Rotunda.

The painting was “Landscape with Rainbow” by Robert S. Duncanson, an African-American artist who painted it in 1859.

The landscape is a bucolic field giving way to a lake and distant hills. Some cows are grazing in the middle distance, and the day is clear. Out of nowhere comes the rainbow—sadly not painted very well—that has the look of a postcard waterfall, if not God's wrath, perhaps directed at some domestic terrorists hiding in a militia's log cabin.

I understand the symbolism of an African-American artist, on the eve of the Civil War, painting the hopeful scene of the American Eden, with a visitation of either a rainbow or the Lord to comfort the country at a time of peril. And I understand why Dr. Jill would have picked this painting to hang in the Capitol, to symbolize her husband's new presidency at a time of similar danger in American history.

That the painting isn't very good doesn't distract from the otherwise laudable initiative that our public officials should be required to spend a few minutes in their busy days with American landscape art, as they would learn a lot about the country (Frederic Remington's vision of the American West?) not always found in their briefing books.

### **Mike Pence's Second Act**

The pinhole TV camera said good-bye to Mike and Mother Pence in the parking lot of the Capitol. The Kamala Harrisese wished them farewell, and there seemed to be some good feelings between the two vice-presidential couples, as if they were overlapping in a time-share and happy to make each other's acquaintance.

During the inauguration itself, Pence sat in gloomy reflection, perhaps uneasy that the hangman might still cometh. That morning he had blown off the Trump farewell disco ball at Joint Base Andrews. (Is it possible that Pence could not think of five friends to bring along to an 8 a.m. line dance?)

His last conversation with the president, after Pence had evaded Trump's posse, apparently did not go well. Despite being a man who for the past four years bore any indignity for the greater glory of Trump, Pence did not warm, clearly, to being described as "a pussy".

So here was the Fugitive Pence ("*an innocent victim of blind rage...*") in the bosom of the enemy at its coming-out-party (all those Democrats who stole the election by letting their domestic animals vote) and now shunned by the MAGA base that he hoped would joyride him to the White House in 2024.

Pence should have taken comfort from looking around at all the former American presidents, vice-presidents, members of Congress, and cabinet types who had fought ruinous wars, bailed out endless failed corporations, pardoned grifters, gone AWOL from the military, run up trillions in wasted deficits, ignored the climate, pocketed millions in speaking fees and from ghost-written books, and groped women with impunity. Yet here they were, on the national stage with the curtain up, getting ready for a return engagement.

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*This essay is part of a periodic series on the 2020 presidential election. Some earlier pieces can be found [here](#).*

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