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BOMBAST BURSTING IN AIR

The story, so far, of the 2016 election
BY LEWIS H. LAPHAM



RETHINKING
EXTINCTION

BY JAMES K. BOYCE

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The story, so far, of the 2016 election
By *Lewis H. Lapham*

We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both.

—Louis Brandeis

When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

—*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, directed by John Ford

Between democracy and concentrated wealth the country throughout most of its history has preferred the latter to the former, the body politic asking only that the big money make a credible show of caring for something other than itself. For the past thirty-five years the modest requirement has been met with prolonged and costly stagings of a presidential-election campaign invariably said to be, as it was this past summer by Jeb Bush, “everybody’s test, and wide open—exactly as a contest for president should be.”

It is neither wide open nor, strictly speaking, a contest. It is a ritual reenactment of the legend of democracy as fairground spectacle: the proving that our flag is still there with star-spangled photo ops and bombast bursting in air, the candidates so well contrived that they can be presented as game-show contestants, mounted on selfie sticks until they come to judgment on Election Day before the throne of cameras by whom and for whom they are produced. The contrivances don’t come cheap. Luxury items made to the order and under the supervision of concentrated wealth, they can be counted upon, if and when elected, to stand, four-square and true blue, for the freedom of money, moralizing and vigilant against the freedoms of movement and thought. Names of candidates inclined to think or act otherwise won’t appear on the November ballot.

But why then, if the race is already come and gone, the pretense of a democratic running for the White House roses and the heavy spending for multicolored sound bites and dawn-to-dusk press coverage? The short answer comes from John Ford, the Hollywood director, whose movies called forth from the mist of heavily redacted memory the existence of a wide-open American frontier West that never was.

The longer answer is Plato’s in *The Republic*, his calling forth Socrates to explain that “noble falsehood” is the stuff that binds a society together in self-preserving myth. To the young aristocrat Glaucon preparing to become a ruler of Athens, Socrates says that the children of the city must be

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WE ARE INVITED TO
UNDERSTAND GOVERNMENT AS
REPRESENTATIVE ONLY IN THE
THEATRICAL SENSE OF THE WORD

told that the god who made all of them mixed gold into the some of them “who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are the most valuable.”

Whether the intel is true or false matters less than the children’s remembering their duty to believe it, to know what their rulers would have them know.

In the American theater of operations the noble falsehood springs full-blown from the head of Abraham Lincoln declaring on the hallowed ground at Gettysburg in November 1863 “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Nowhere in the history of mankind does the record show a government so specified lasting longer than a few nasty, brutish, and short months; nor was such a government what the framers of the Constitution had in mind in Philadelphia in 1787. They envisioned a government in which a privileged few would arrange the distribution of law and property to and for the less fortunate many, an enlightened oligarchy that would nurture both the private and the public good, accommodating both the motions of the heart and the movements of a market. The balancing of the two sets of value they entrusted to a class of patrician overlords for whom, presumably, it was unnecessary to cheat and steal and lie, men like themselves, to whom Madison ascribed “most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society.”

But not enough wisdom and virtue to free the republic of its slaves. That task was left to men neither enlightened nor rich giving their “last full measure of devotion” to consecrate “the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln’s poetic framing of the high resolve that these honored dead “shall not have died in vain” established the myth that in the years since has preserved the society from disunion, become the duty of the children to believe, of the rulers mixed with gold to teach.

Sound policy, but difficult to implement with a myth that has lost its power to enchant the populace and with presidential-election campaigns designed to be seen, not heard, the viewers invited to understand government as representative in the theatrical, not the constitutional, sense of the word. This simplified concept of politics installed Ronald Reagan in the White House in 1981 to represent the country’s preferred image of itself, uproot the democratic style of thought and feeling that underwrote Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, restore America to its rightful place where “someone can always get rich.” The business at hand was show business, the message up there in lights at the welcoming ceremony produced by Frank Sinatra at the Capital Centre in Landover, Maryland, on the night before Reagan’s inauguration. Seated onstage in overstuffed, throne-like armchairs, the president-elect and his wife graciously accepted the gifts of Hollywood frankincense and myrrh—Johnny Carson and Bob Hope cracking jokes, Charlton Heston standing in and up for Moses, James Stewart wearing the medals he won as an Air Force general, a clown performing in blackface, Sinatra himself singing “America the Beautiful.”

The evening set the tone of the incoming Republican political agenda, promising a happy return to an imaginary American past—to the amber waves of grain from sea to shining sea, the home on the range made safe from Apaches by John Wayne in John Ford’s *Stagecoach*. The great leap backward was billed as a bright new morning in an America once again cowboy-hatted and standing tall, risen from the ashes of defeat in Vietnam, cleansed of its Watergate impurities, outspending the Russians on weapons of mass destruction. During the whole of his eight years in office Reagan was near perfect in his lines—“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”—sure of hitting his marks on Omaha and Malibu Beach, snapping a sunny salute to a Girl Scout cookie or a nuclear submarine. The president maybe hadn’t read Plato in the ancient Greek, but myth was his métier, and he had the script by heart. Facts didn’t matter because, as he

was apt to say, “facts are stupid things.” What mattered was the warmth of Reagan’s bundle smile, his golden album of red, white, and blue sentiment instilling consumer confidence in the virtuous virtual reality of an America that wasn’t there. The television cameras loved him; so did the voters. To this day he remains up there with Abraham Lincoln in the annual polls asking who was America’s greatest president.

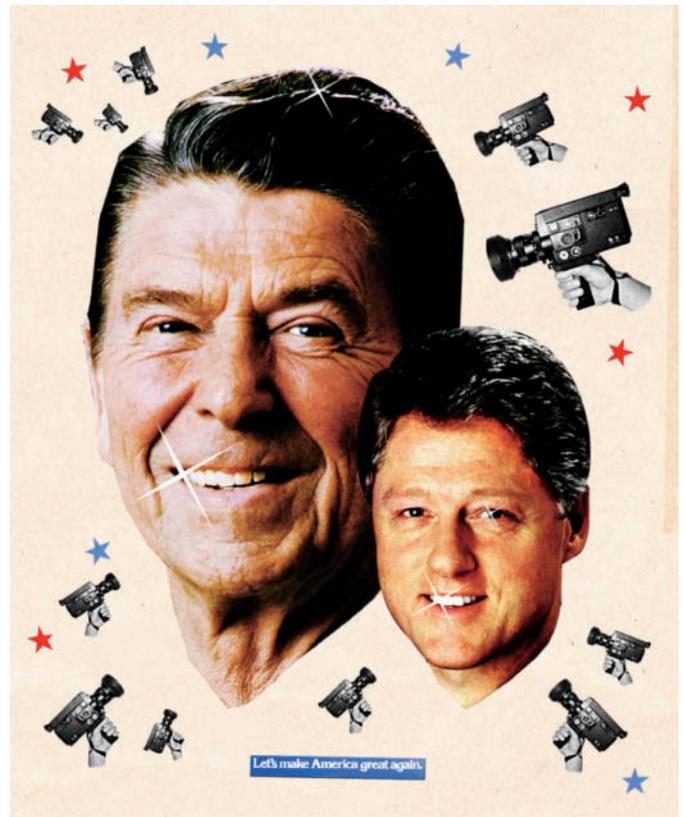
The cameras also loved Bill Clinton, who modeled his presidency on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* rebooted to star himself as both bighearted celebrity host and shamefaced celebrity guest, reaching out at the top of the hour for more love and more cheeseburgers, after the commercial break dealing bravely with the paternity of the stains on Monica Lewinsky’s blue dress. He was admired not only for the ease with which he told smiling and welcome lies but also for his capacity to bear insult and humiliation with the imperturbable calm of a piñata spilling forth presidential largesse as corporate subsidy and tabloid scandal. Like Reagan, Clinton had been hired to hearten and amuse the country, not to govern it but to show that Justice spoilsport Brandeis had it wrong, that the true meaning of American exceptionalism is the not having to choose between democracy and concentrated wealth.

The Arkansas prom king and the Hollywood drum major didn’t make tedious distinctions between story and myth. The difference between what is and what is not was simply a matter of what was in or out of the camera shot, and during both their terms in office they were careful to preserve on camera the noble falsehood of a courageous and selfless democracy; off camera, they puffed up the pillows for a comfortable settling into place of what has become a selfish and frightened plutocracy. Their efforts were in keeping with the spirit of an age in which money was seen to be the hero with a thousand faces, greed the creative frenzy from which all blessings conspicuously flow. Stock-market values floated ever higher on the bubbles of ingenious speculation; so did the prices paid for flipping real estate. Credit was easy, and the cotton was high.

The restoring of America to its rightful place where “someone can always get rich” (not every someone, some of the someones connected to the right place at the right time) has resulted over the past thirty-five years in the awkward imbalancing of the values treasured by a capitalist economy and those cherished by a democratic society—more laws limiting the freedom of persons, fewer laws restraining the license of property, the letting fall into disrepair of nearly all the infrastructure that provides the country with the foundation of its common enterprise. The heavy tilt toward the reactionary right has been accompanied by the systematic juggling of the public land and light and air into the private purse; the formulation of a national-security state backed by the guarantee of never-ending foreign war and equipped with increasingly repressive police powers to still the waters of domestic discontent; the subdivision of America the Beautiful into a land of the rich and a land of the poor, to the point where 10 percent of the population holds 76 percent of the nation’s wealth—animal and virtual, vegetable, cultural, mineral, or intellectual.

Wonderful news for the dealers in high-end automotive and financial instruments, but a set of circumstances that presents a problem to the vendors of the 2016 presidential election: how sell Lincoln’s noble falsehood to the children of the city who have neither reason nor inclination to believe it? The sales pitch loses its force when the rulers of the city bend down to

THE CAMERAS LOVED BILL CLINTON, WHO STARRED AS BOTH BIGHEARTED CELEBRITY HOST AND SHAMEFACED CELEBRITY GUEST



THE 2016 DEMOCRACYLAND
PAGEANT IS EXPECTED TO COST
\$5 BILLION FOR THE PUBLICITY
AND THE BALLOONS

the electorate as if to a crowd of juvenile delinquents; deem the body politic incapable of generous impulse, selfless motive, or creative thought; deliver the insult with a headwaiter's condescending smile. How then expect the people to trust a government that invests no trust in them? Why the surprise that over the past thirty-five years the voting public has been giving ever-louder voice to its contempt for any and all politicians, no matter what their color, creed, prior arrest record, or sexual affiliation?

Proofs of government by the people, of the people, for the people are as rare upon the ground as sightings of the golden-cheeked warbler. The proposition that all men are created equal no longer wins the hearts and minds of America's downwardly mobile working classes—employed and unemployed, lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, adjunct, and retired. Nor do the American people enjoy the privilege of direct participation in the naming of an American president. On Election Day they elect a slate of unknown persons to the Electoral College, their votes ignored if unaligned with the majority assigned to one or the other of two political parties. The rigged outcome relieves the rulers of the city of the duty to

address the children of the city as their fellow countrymen; they speak instead to the marketable demographics and target audiences—Americans distinguished not by the fact of being American but by the ancillary characteristics that reduce them to a commodity: gun-carrying American, female American, white American, gay American, African American, Hispanic American, Native American, swing-state American, Christian American, alienated American. The subordination of the noun to the adjective makes a mockery of the democratic premise and fosters the bitter separation of private goods, not the binding together of a public good.

Which is why the 2016 Democracyland pageant is expected to cost \$5 billion for the publicity and the balloons, up from \$2.6 billion in 2012. The democratic turn of mind and form of self-government having gone missing in plain sight, the sponsors of the 2016 election must deploy increasingly expensive virtual realities to make credible the show of the big money caring for something other than itself.

The campaign season begins with the ceremonial mixings of democratic clay with the aristocratic gold that makes the rulers of the city most valuable and therefore adequately equipped to rule. Money once again is the hero of the tale, called upon to judge the worth of a thing as the price of a thing, to rate the strength of the would-be nominees according to the cost of their manufacture. Like the weighing-in before a horse race or a boxing match, the ritual obliges the prospective champions of democratic freedom to set forth on vision quests within the kingdom of consecrated wealth, to bow and smile and

bend a knee, if necessary to crawl, before the various seats of power occupied by elite opinion in the political parties, and by the consortium of commercial interests (the banking, oil, communications, real-estate, and manufacturing industries) that constitute government of, by, and for the rich. The plutocracy is a nonpartisan equal-opportunity employer of folk-festival talent; its agencies and agents interview candidates of both parties applying for position in the White House, invite presentations at indoor banquets and outdoor barbecues, on conference calls or text messages, at a Colorado ski lodge or a California yacht basin.

On the go day and night, the would-be presidents of the United States parade like runway fashion models for the buyers of political product placement. On carpets mostly red but also blue, they walk, stare, pose



DONALD TRUMP, REAL-ESTATE
MOGUL AND STAR OF REALITY-TV
SHOWS, DOESN'T DO MYTH;
MYTH IS FOR LOSERS

(with attitude); turn, smile, and wait to see who sends money and whither blows the wind that bestirreth the opinion polls. Made to be seen and not heard, banned from using words that might depress a Q Score, unsettle a Gallup poll, narrow a profit margin, the candidates run for the office of an edifying totem pole to stand and serve as America's preferred image of itself.

Occasionally they interrupt their schedule of private showings to deliver some sort of speech or statement to a street or stadium crowd, but their remarks don't attract the media's attention. What is of interest is the Easter-egg hunt in the gardens of important money, not the questions that might be of interest to citizens concerned about the terms and conditions under which they can exercise their right—God-given, but increasingly expensive—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The punditry steers clear of the income-inequality issue, avoids the meaning of democracy as the why of who owes what to whom, and so we hear instead about PACs and super PACs, about pools of “dark money” drained of its pollutants by the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in favor of Citizens United, freely flowing in unlimited and anonymous amounts from the ghosts of Christmas yet to come. We learn that Hillary Clinton is Cinderella, who expects to fit \$2.5 billion into her glass slipper; that Jeb Bush, dynastic heir to fame and fortune, has more than \$100 million already well in hand; that Scott Walker enjoyed, before he dropped out after seventy-one days, the backing of the brothers Koch, billionaires said to have earmarked \$900 million to be scattered like baubles from a Mardi Gras parade float among Republican hopefuls able to quote from the Constitution as well as from the Bible. We learn that more than half the money has been collected from some 130 wealthy families, that many of the biggest donors live in the same buildings in New York and Houston, that Marco Rubio was given a sword named Chang by Jeb Bush and is supported by a billionaire car dealer in Miami, that Sheldon Adelson, billionaire statesman, has summoned candidates to his Las Vegas hotel and casino to examine their feelings about Israel.

During the fund-raising season the media ignored the failures on the part of the showroom models to give light and warmth to the noble falsehood embodied in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Some of them (most particularly Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush) were mixed with enough gold to serve as egalitarian figureheads on the prow of the plutocratic ship of state, but none of them were blessed with the talents of the drum major and the prom king. Nor were any of the other candidates at play in the fields of their landlord. A problem, but it had been a problem ever since Bill Clinton retired from the White House stage, and the media operatives in the big money's petting zoo were sure of their ability to fix it. The making of sows' ears into silk purses was what they were paid, and paid handsomely,

To achieve; why the bulk of the money raised for a presidential campaign deploys in advertising spots that cut and paste a human face on a block of wood or a pillar of salt.

he self-satisfied assumption didn't survive the stepping forward onto the political stage of Donald J. Trump, real-estate mogul, star of reality-show television, self-glorifying Jack of Diamonds and Ace of Spades. Mixed with his own gold, of a weight that he measures in tons, Trump doesn't do myth; myth is for losers. He does deals, “big deals” like those bragged about in his 2011 book, *Time to Get Tough*, deals that he'd been doing for years in high-stakes global finance, up against “hard-driving, vicious, cutthroat financial killers, the kind of people who leave blood all over the boardroom table.”

Trump declared his candidacy on June 16, a *deus ex machina* descending by escalator into the atrium of the Trump Tower on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, and there to say, and say it plainly, that Justice Brandeis had it right,

TRUMP IS A SELF-PROMOTING
CLOWN, A BRAGGART IN
BOORISH VIOLATION OF THE
POLITICAL-CORRECTNESS CODES

democracy and concentrated wealth do not a happy couple make. Money is power, and power, ladies and gentlemen, is not self-sacrificing or democratic. The big money cares for nothing other than itself, always has and always will; it is the name of the game and the nature of the beast. Trump didn't need briefing books or policy positions to front an outdated noble falsehood. He embodied—live and in person—the proof of the proposition that he deemed it the duty of the children of the city to believe.

Trump established the bona fides of his claim to the White House on the simple but all-encompassing and imperishable truth that he was really, really rich, unbought and therefore unbossed, so magnificently rich that he was free to say whatever it came into his head to say, to do whatever it took to root out the corruption and stupidity in Washington, clean up the mess in the Middle East, or wherever else in the world ungrateful foreigners were neglecting their duty to do the bidding of the United States of America, the greatest show on earth, which deserved the helping hand of Trump, the greatest name on earth, to make it worthy of his signature men's colognes (Empire and Success) and set it free to fulfill the destiny emblazoned on his baseball cap: MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN.

Not the exact words in Trump's loud and thoughtless mouth, but the gist of the message that he shouted to the camera as June moved forward to July, Trump reminding all and sundry that the uplifting drivel about government of, by, and for the people wasn't worth a plug nickel, much less a wooden totem pole, even if carved in Aspen Institute scented pine or artisanal Heritage Foundation redwood. The dearly deluded children of the city swallowed the sugarcoated nonsense at their peril.

The message was received with cheering and applause everywhere Trump dropped by in his helicopter to walk amidst the popular loathing for the inside-the-Beltway politics and politicians settled on the nation's capital like a plague of locusts. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont had launched his campaign for the Democratic nomination on the same tide of populist anger and resentment, but he was an avowed socialist, and his muttering was to be expected and summarily dismissed by the big-money media because he wasn't mixed with gold and refused to beg for it in the marble halls of concentrated wealth.

But Trump was rich and therefore wise, a man who knew whereof he spoke, and he was being heard not only by the usual suspects in the Fox News time zones but also, *mirabile dictu*, by women and evangelicals, by young people not yet two-and-twenty, and at the end of July the greatest name on earth was perched atop the opinion-poll leaderboards.

For the mythographers organizing the Republican parade floats in the 2016 election pageant the sight was not a happy one, their confusion so complete that they didn't know how to read, much less tell, the story unfolding before their lying eyes. Hot air blowing up the wrong balloons, platitudes going down like tenpins, raindrops falling on everybody's head. Trump was worse than an embarrassment; he was a disaster, likely to roust out of the Republican Party any potential voters who weren't devout bigots. The man was a preposterous self-promoting clown, a vulgar lout, an unscripted canary flown from its gilded cage, a braggart in boorish violation of the political-correctness codes, referring to Mexicans (some Mexicans, not all Mexicans) as "criminals" and "rapists," questioning John McCain's credentials as a war hero ("I like people who weren't captured"), telling Megyn Kelly on Fox News that if from time to time he had been heard to describe women he didn't like as "dogs, slob, and disgusting animals," he meant "only Rosie O'Donnell."

Although often and reprovingly repeated by the oracles in residence at both the *New York Times* and the *New York Post*, the objections weren't sustained by the opinion polls. Trump's numbers kept moving up, no mat-

ter how gross his displays of political incorrectness, or how obvious his lack of interest in, or knowledge of, the details of foreign and domestic policy. Other than the building of a wall along the Mexican border and the deportation of 11 million illegal aliens, he had little to say, specifically, about how or where or when he would get tough with the Chinese, handle the situation in Syria, make America great again.

Trump maybe was a brute, uncivil and unsafe, deserving to be removed at once from the sight of mother and the flag, thrown off John Wayne's stagecoach four miles west of nowhere, but his hold on the popular imagination attracted 24 million viewers to the first of the Republican debates, mounted by Fox News in the Quicken Loans Arena, on August 6. The protectors of the Republican Party's virtue hoped that one of the other nine candidates would topple Trump from his catbird seat, if not the slow and steady Jeb Bush (self-styled "joyful tortoise," mature and loving friend of the common man) then maybe Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, or Chris Christie, all of them rated by their touts as quick-witted, sharp-tongued, good at pretending that they cared about something other than themselves, able to find Aleppo on a map. During the summer of 2015, the collective attempt at Trump removal failed because the mogul didn't take the proffered bait, declined to do so with a sense of humor that his fellow candidates lack both the nerve and the permission to engage.

Between the first debate and the second, on September 16 (under the wing of Ronald Reagan's Air Force One in Simi Valley, California), Trump's poll numbers continued to rise despite the fond hopes of the Republican Party's spin doctors that his star would fade, wear out its welcome, pass and be forgotten with the rest. It didn't happen as expected at the second debate despite the concerted efforts of CNN's inspectors of souls to sink it below the horizon, and as of this writing (late September), it hasn't done so yet—for reasons that Trump, schooled in the savagery of reality TV, understands, and the moralizing punditry does not.

The camera sees but doesn't think, makes no meaningful distinction between a bubble bath in Santa Monica staffed by pretty girls and a bloodbath on a beach in Libya staffed by headless corpses. The return on investment in both instances is the flow of bankable emotion, in unlimited and anonymous amounts, drawn from the dark and bottomless pools of human wish and dream. The cameras following Trump's political campaign aren't covering a set or a play of ideas; they are attracted, like flies to death and honey, to the sweet, decaying smell of big-name celebrity. It doesn't matter what Trump says or doesn't say, whether he is cute and pink or headless; what matters is that Trump is a profitable return on investment in idols of the marketplace, up there onstage with Princess Di, Silvio Berlusconi, and Ronald Reagan.

Trump doesn't do myth, because celebrity, of, in, and for itself, is noble falsehood. The camera doesn't do democracy because democracy is the holding of one's fellow citizens in respectful regard, not because they are beautiful or rich or famous but because they are one's fellow citizens, and it is therefore worth knowing what they do and say. A camera addresses a valued customer, not a valuable citizen, substitutes for the rule of law the rule of men, men as images so graven in gold that, like the Phrygian king Midas, they lose the freedom of movement and thought.

Politics as spectacle meets the plutocratic temper of the times. The electorate over the past forty years has been taught to believe that the future can be bought instead of made, and the active presence of the citizen has given way to the passive absence of the consumer. A debased electorate asks of their rulers what the rich ask of their servants—comfort us, tell us what to do. The wish to be cared for replaces the will to act, the spirit of freedom trumped by the faith invested in a dear leader. The camera doesn't lend itself to democracy, but if it's blind to muddy boots on common ground, it gazes adoringly at polished boots mounted on horseback. ■

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