

'America First' Is More Than Politics



by Lee Smith

Why aren't **America First** supporters more concerned that their candidates fared worse in the midterm elections than many, left and right, had expected? Because, they say, it's more than a political movement.

"It's not necessarily ideology, or even economics," says writer Lafayette Lee. "This is a social movement that transcends those things, and that has all of the right ingredients to dominate in the future."

In the meantime, says Lee, Americans will have to stay in the wilderness a little longer. And the wilderness, he says, is a good place to be.

Lee, who writes under a pseudonym, frequently contributes to IM-1776, a new political and cultural magazine that wrestles with the history and future of American exceptionalism. His new article, "[Knives Out for America First](#)," discusses how the Republican establishment blames Donald Trump and the movement he leads for GOP losses. I spoke with Lee about that and other issues for a recent episode of "[Over the Target Live](#)."

"There has been a lot of talk about [how Republicans] need better candidate quality," says Lee. "I feel like that's just thinly veiled code for saying we don't want America First" candidates. And yet, "in many cases, we found that they were being thwarted by their own party members." Sometimes, says Lee, it seems like it's "America First versus the world. ... But for as many betrayals that have happened over the years, I do believe that we're ascendant."

The way Lee sees it, there's no returning to the status quo—that is, the corrupt political culture of the Republican establishment. This is what Lee describes pejoratively as "civilization." It is the world of horse-trading, deals made between the political and corporate elites, and even collaboration with the progressive faction and its praetorian guard in the intelligence services. This sort of civilization is not where America First belongs, says Lee. What's desirable rather is the "wilderness."

Here Lee has set up two opposing terms—civilization versus wilderness—that will resonate for those steeped as he is in scripture and American history. "The wilderness is the place that tests you and purges the impurities from your system so that you can hear the voice of the Lord," says Lee. "It's a place where you can find your destiny."

In Exodus, Moses leads the slaves out of the fleshpots of Egypt destined for the land of milk and honey. But it's in the wilderness where they shed their habits of servitude that they become a nation, ready at last to enter the land promised

them.

In Lee's view, the wilderness is where voters now rally under the banner of America First. The mission is to rebuild the nation and restore the people.

"The wilderness," says Lee, "can help us to be able to become better, stronger, to be able to understand the terrain better that we're on, to understand our place in history, and to also just to have that courage that we need to succeed."

Wandering in the wilderness is uncomfortable, he acknowledges. But he has faith in American resolve, ingenuity, and courage. He saw those qualities embodied by men and women he served with during the Global War on Terror.

"Even though I had a college degree, I enlisted," says Lee. "It was a great humbling experience. I had all this college education, I thought of myself as fairly sharp, ... and I had 17-year-old kids out-shooting me, out-moving and showing me up. And that was a great experience for me to realize that there are certain qualities and traits that float underneath the surface, but they come out of the woodwork in times of struggle and difficulty."

This is how leaders announce themselves, he says. Leaders "can create order out of chaos, by inspiring those around them, by moving them to action. ... And there are people that will rise to the occasion, and they just stand up, and they command your respect. And it happens in an instant," Lee says. "There's almost a magical quality about it, that they can just bring men to their side. ... It's more than a book. It's more than a credential. It's something deep, and it's always been with us. It's a human quality. And I want to see more of that on our side."

Speaking with Lee, it struck me that veterans are the solid core of the America First movement. These are men and women who saw their honor and patriotism exploited to wage

strategically pointless wars that the U.S. political and military class didn't know how to win.

"It's really sapped our energy as a nation; it's taken our focus off of our people," Lee says of America's military adventurism. "It's expended so much blood and treasure, good blood, some of the best blood of my generation."

As Washington, DC tried to export democracy to the Middle East, the U.S. establishment was laying waste to communities at home. Veterans returned from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere to find whole regions hollowed out by the 2008 financial crisis and trade deals that transferred American jobs abroad. When veterans and others dared to register their protest against the status quo by voting for Donald Trump, the elites wrote them off as resentful racists, globalization's loser class, "deplorables."

Perhaps it's time, says Lee, for Americans to redefine what we mean by "elites." Once, they were those who, in John F Kennedy's words, asked not what the country could do for them but what they could do for the country. Lee's family was among the first to settle it.

"[They] came over in the 17th century. So we have some of the first people to set foot in the colony of Virginia," says Lee. "I can trace my ancestry all the way back to those early days, with prominent families, first families of Virginia, and in certain places, that's a big deal."

He says he is bound by a sense of character, honor, and duty to the country his kinsmen helped build.

"I try to pass [that history] on to my children," says Lee. "There was a lot of blood, sweat, and tears that went into building this wonderful place that we all live in. Many of the things that we've inherited, the birthright that we all have as Americans in different ways—mine has been very much formed by sacrifices [of] honorable men and women, who really went

out and did impossible things.

What the current elite advocates, he says, “is incoherence. It’s paranoia. It’s fear. It’s anger.” What motivates Lee’s rising elite, by contrast, is “living good, strong, decent lives.” Battles are won every day by living in the light of what’s true.

“I have a family, which I love; I have a faith that I do believe God will guide us through this. I believe this is a blessed country, and I believe it has a divine destiny,” says Lee. “And I believe we need to be worthy of that. And I think that we can use this opportunity of being in the wilderness to reacquaint ourselves with those things.”

Lee says the wilderness has always been Americans’ central metaphor for understanding our condition. The wilderness, he says, is “so important to our national story. When we first got here, we had an ocean on one side, and we had this terrifying wilderness on the other that was incredibly dangerous, and some of the worst terrain on Earth. I don’t think people appreciate the geography of the United States, and how treacherous it is. But these people, they stuck by it, and they probed into the wilderness, and they became changed by it.”

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