

Camp in American Politics

by Michael Curtis



What is this thing called camp, and who can solve its mystery? In 1964 the 33 year-old American writer Susan Sontag, the high priestess of the New York intellectual world, published her iconic essay on “the sensibility, unmistakably modern, that goes by the name of ‘camp.’” Without precise or exact definition, camp indicates love of the unnatural, artifice, exaggeration, esoteric, something of a private code. Camp is discernable in objects, movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, buildings, and people. In people the sensibility is markedly attenuated and strongly exaggerated, playful, anti-serious, attempts to be extraordinary.

Camp is now present in almost all facets of popular culture, in artifice and stylization, easy to discern but difficult to

articulate. Sontag's essay is the framework for the themes of the exhibition, "Camp: Notes on Fashion," at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. It is a stunning exhibition, displaying historic objects, art, and countless fashions, 250 objects from the 17th century to the present, to illustrate the concept of camp. It indicates the concept embraces irony, humor, parody, artifice, theatricality, exaggeration. It transforms what was previously dismissed as ugly into aesthetic pleasure. Banality and artifice become performance.

This is particularly the case with homosexuality, and a sensibility that was until recently an underground gay culture has become accepted as mainstream. Different versions of Judy Garland singing "Over the Rainbow," provide the background for the changing sensibility, and the integration of gays into society. The Met suggests that the first instance in camp in literature was Moliere's 1671 play, *The Impostures of Scapin*, in which the cunning servant adopts various identities. More influential were the activities of French King Louis XIV and his courtiers in the showplace of Versailles with its extravagant protocol, flaunting and posturing, emphasis on surface at expense of content, costly flamboyant dress of both sexes, and the King's effeminate brother Philippe I, Duke of Orleans. The transition occurred from sun kings to drag queens.

Camp, artifice and exaggeration is present in American life as elsewhere in the world, say in the ceiling of the unfinished Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, or in personal behavior such as Russian President Vladimir Putin's posture on horseback or scuba diving, or British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's diatribe that the U.S. is the great Satan, and U.S. imperialism is the root of all crimes and evils, or Korean leader Kim Jong-un with his peculiar hair style and uncertain sex partner.

It is certainly present in the American cultural world in

aesthetic style and sensibility of frivolity and excess, at times bad taste and irony. One can choose, though perhaps differ on the individual selection, contemporary personalities who illustrate camp and popular culture in the artistic and theatrical world, Andy Warhol, Bette Midler, Lady Gaga, Cher, and Madonna, who in light hearted fashion combine silliness and serious professionalism. It is more arguable in the political world, but intriguing to suggest some figures who illustrate aspects of camp, artificiality, exaggeration, and theatricality with little concern for accurate appraisal.

Perhaps the most prominent example of camp in American politics is Adam Schiff (Dem-Cal), presently chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. For years he has claimed to have seen, or been told, of evidence of collusion between Donald Trump or members of his campaign team and unnamed Russian officials to influence the 2016 presidential election. On fourteen occasions, starting on March 22, 2017, Schiff mentioned he had evidence or there was some evidence on the public record of this collusion, but up to the present he has not revealed this evidence. In an audit posted on You Tube by notorious Russian jokers, nicknamed Vovan and Lexus, one of whom claimed to be the chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament, Schiff had seriously discussed the existence of photos held by the FSB, the Security Service of the Russian Federation, of a naked Trump with a Russian reality show star. Schiff told the pranksters he would welcome the chance to get copies of those recordings.

In spite of the Robert Mueller Report which acknowledged there was no evidence of collusion or conspiracy between the Trump team and Russia, Schiff still acts like a short-sighted detective, still looks for the financial leverage that Russia, which has done business with Trump for many years, holds over the President. He searches for criminal activity in the business of lending money. In a jest, two Republican Congressmen joked at Schiff's expense by saying they had

Schiff's elusive evidence in an envelope. They opened it but showed it was empty.

Donald Trump may be another excellent example of contemporary camp. Irrespective of policy issues, Trump is familiar for his overstatements, sensational and exaggerated remarks. About this there is room for disagreement. Some of the hyperbole of his exaggerations or misstatements, say estimates of the size of his audiences and parades, may be boasting, but many may be deliberately provocative to provoke the political opposition and the mainstream press and dominate the news cycle.

Is Trump crazy like a fox? He is a self-made man who adores his creator. Genuine criticism can be made: he is impulsive, has short attention span, is histrionic, unpredictable, often lacks empathy, and is narcissistic, focusing mainly on himself. Yet, if he is the center of attention and provides his own spotlight, Trump is calm under pressure. He is shrewd in making his hair a controversial topic: is his blond mane a toupee, a combover, a transplant, or a bald spot, more than his policy towards North Korea. He benefits from a good hair-day. Curiously enough, it is ironic that Trump flaunts his yellow hair since a yellow mane was an element in the visual iconography of homosexuality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

From recent revelations, camp seems to have been manifested by leaders of the intelligence services, and by members of Congress, including candidates for the presidency. CIA Director John Brennan, who acknowledged he had voted communist in 1976, said Trump had committed "treason" by collusion. James Clapper, Defense Intelligence Agency Chief, denied the NDSA was spying on Americans in 2010-2017, though Edward Snowden had divulged the evidence of this. Clapper also had already told the Intelligence Committee in 2011 that the Egyptian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood was "secular." In fact it was and is a Sunni Islamist religious and political movement, some of whose adherents assassinated President Anwar

Sadat on October 6, 1981.

The controversial FBI chief James Comey under oath in Congress said that the FBI had not put the Trump presidential campaign under surveillance, and joined the signing of the FISA application for domestic spying including on Trump. The confused Comey was blamed by Hillary Clinton, still searching for explanations for her electoral defeat other than her own inadequacies. She said "I was on the way to winning (the 2016 election) until the combination of Jim Comey's letter of October 28, 2016 and Russian Wikileaks raised doubts in the minds of people who were inclined to vote for me but got scared."

In many of their actions and statements, members of the U.S. Congress continue their embodiment of camp. Lindsey Graham (Rep-SC) Senate Judiciary Committee chair, who once referred to Donald Trump as a kook and bigot is now a golf partner and defends Trump against allegations that the president obstructed justice. Mitch McConnell (Rep-Ky), Senate leader is successful in steering federal money to his home state, but in general opposes increases in federal spending, as well as federal regulation of elections.

For House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who can count, to vote or not to vote that is the question, whether try to impeach President Trump or not, or simply to send him to prison on unspecified charges. Sen. Cory Booker (Dem-NJ) at the hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee on Judge Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court attempted to boost his candidacy for president and committed the ultimate version of camp, inadvertently an imitation of the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz. In his histrionic statement he said he risked expulsion from the Senate for releasing classified documents critical of the judge, but the documents had already been released.

Parody, artifice, theater, exaggerations, they are all there

in the camp of American politics. Yet that form of camp is more acceptable than the posturing of O. J. Simpson, who was found not guilty of murder of his ex-wife and her friend on June 12, 1994 and continues to declare his innocence. He and his present family are moving, he said, on to what "we call the no-negative zone. We focus on the positives." Simpson's bravado self-defense gives camp with all its banality and artifice a good name.