

The Center of Mediocrity



by Theodore Dalrymple

A correspondent who knows precisely the type of things that I habitually complain about (and without such complaint I would have nothing to say) kindly drew my attention to the proposed Obama Center in Chicago. The Center is completely mad, the madness in question being an attack of megalomania that makes the Pyramid of Cheops seem like a statement of modesty by the pharaoh.

The vast proposed building is in Jackson Park, and it was the subject of legal actions because a group called *Protect Our Parks* believed that it was contrary to the covenant governing the park's usage: but, perhaps not surprisingly, the friends of Obama won the actions.

The Obama Presidential Center says of itself that "it will be

a welcoming, vibrant, campus where people from across the street or from around the globe can come and get inspired, find common ground, and take action.” The Obama Presidential Center “will feature a world-class museum, public library, and gathering spaces.”

Note that an institution that does not yet exist declares not what it intends or aspires to be, but what it “will be,” as if vibrancy and inspiration could be decreed by executive mandate. As to what the people from around the globe will be inspired and find common ground about, the Center does not inform us, but we could have a pretty good guess.

The word “world-class” gives the total mediocrity of the whole scheme away: It is mediocre except for its megalomania, which is exceptional.

No one would say of the Louvre that it was a world-class museum, that Velasquez was a world-class painter, or that Bach was a world-class composer. Whenever any scheme aims or claims to be “world-class,” you may be sure that it is the brainchild of megalomaniac mediocrities. Alas, our world is full of them, they dominate public affairs. There is nothing wrong with mediocrity in itself, of course, because by definition there must be a lot of it, and we are most of us mediocre (at best) at most things. It is when mediocrity is combined with overweening ambition, as it increasingly is, that it becomes dangerous.

What will the supposedly world-class museum at the Obama Center contain? Again, I quote:

The Obama Foundation is looking to hear from members of the broader Obama family—including longtime volunteers, friends, and staffers—who would like to offer artifacts for possible acquisition or loan consideration for the Obama Presidential Center Museum.

These range from artifacts from the Obamas’ early lives and

careers, to materials from the Presidential campaigns, administration, and beyond.

It will contain Obama memorabilia and perhaps his toenail clippings and other holy relics—hence the inspired crowds from around the globe. Chicago will become the Lourdes of Illinois, where people in wheelchairs and various forms of paralysis will come to be cured. Candles will be lit to the Virgin Michelle, and there will be a room where the crutches no longer necessary will be hung, with little messages of thanks. There will be a committee formed of members of the broader Obama family, which includes the whole of humanity apart from the renegade skeptics who doubt Obama's sanctity, to decide which miraculous cures wrought by prayers asking for the intercession of Michelle are genuine and which are doubtful.

The proposed building looks like an Egyptian pyramid designed by someone with visuospatial agnosia. It “echoes movement upward from the grassroots. Its form is inspired by the idea of four hands coming together, a recognition that many hands shape a place.” This is a tribute to Obama's deep-felt egalitarianism: Everyone should have several mansions costing tens of millions.

We learn that “The exterior of the Museum building will feature words taken from President Obama's speech marking the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, and will be cast into the structure in such a way that visitors will be able to look out through the words onto the South and West sides of Chicago.” Kim Il-Sung would be envious. He has only Pyongyang to indoctrinate.

There will be “Dynamic Museum exhibits across four floors [that] will highlight the events, policies, challenges, and accomplishments of the Obama Presidency.”

Certainly, the museum will be world-class when it comes to Obama relics. There will be nothing, one hopes, to touch it.

But I suspect that even the most ardent devotees might, by the end of it, feel they have had something of a surfeit. As I read, I couldn't help thinking of a poem by Ernesto Cardenal, "Somoza desveliza la estatua de Somoza enel estadio Somoza" ("Somoza Unveils a Statue of Somoza in the Somoza Stadium").

Cardenal was a Nicaraguan Catholic-cum-Marxist priest who became a revolutionary and was then disillusioned by the Sandinistas. He was his country's foremost poet. His poem, "Somoza desveliza" etc., is a satire on the dictator, Anasasio Somoza, whom the Sandinistas overthrew:

*It is not that I believe that the people erected this statue
to me,
because I know better than you that I ordered it myself.
Nor that I can claim with it to pass into immortality
Because I know that the people will one day pull it down.*

Once, in Paraguay, during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, I arrived at Puerto Stroessner on the M.V. Alfredo Stroessner to the sound of the Alfredo Stroessner polka playing over the public address system.

I have been to quite a number of countries with museums glorifying politicians. For example, there was a pyramid in Tirana, capital of Albania, glorifying the life and work of the vile Enver Hoxha. In it was a film of Enver Hoxha in his library, selecting a book to read in his armchair. He selected one and settled happily to read it. It was a volume of his collected works.

Of course, Obama is not in the same league of evil as Hoxha. But Hoxha's pyramid was better than his, and at least Hoxha was dead when it opened as a museum. The best that one can say of the Obama Museum is that it is better than the Eisenhower Memorial in Washington: At least it wasn't designed by Frank Gehry.

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