

Without the trite sanctimony, Trump invokes a sacred duty to raise up America's magnificence

by Conrad Black



With four of his predecessors on the platform with him, President Trump blasted all those responsible for the recent government of the country as self-interested incompetents, compulsive, impotent talkers who had allowed America to decay and to be out-maneuvered by its rivals in the world and to take leave of the interests of the people of modest means and no influence within America.

It was a forceful message, powerfully delivered with a completely disciplined attachment to his prepared text. And in a sense, the fact that he was giving the speech having taken the presidential oath was a vindication of some of its content, as it was essentially the message he had been giving for 583 days, since he announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination to almost universal mirth,

scorn, and hilarity.

The new president was very gracious in personal conversation with the Obamas and the Clintons and more than civil toward the Bushes and the congressional leaders, all of, whom, in both parties, he implicitly rebuked with a severity unprecedented in such addresses. The usual practice of trying to de-escalate the pyrotechnics of the campaign was replaced not only by continued polemics, but by a patriotic and quasi-religious evocation of, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's parlance, "the forgotten man." No one can fault him for inconsistency or waffling once the prize was his.

Americans often swaddle themselves on official occasions in a patriotism that most foreigners find oppressive, naïve, and often tasteless. In this case, I found it less annoying because patriotic fervour was trumpeted in spite of the graphically highlighted facts of urban blight, civic violence, economic stagnation, official corruption and racial hostility. The new president was not building on America the beautiful, nor rhapsodizing about "alabaster cities ... undimmed by human tears." It was an enduring, almost recessed or somnolent patriotism with the magical powers of a panacea, which, when called forth, would be a balm of Gilead that would anneal the nation and vaporize the many failings that afflict it, which he had just recounted so thoroughly as he laid them at the door of the political class that has governed for the past 30 years, and whose exemplars surrounded him as he spoke.

Substantively, he didn't say any more than he has already about how he proposed to help the disadvantaged, clean up the cities, reduce violence, reorder the country's relations with the world, and specifically, as he promised, stamp out "radical Islamic terrorism," words that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton notoriously declined to utter. But that also meant that he did not back off his pledges to replace Obamacare with a more efficient and less onerous universal system of health care, for higher taxes on luxury spending and

non-essential financial transactions, lower taxes on small incomes and corporations, and a mighty effort to repatriate jobs and rebuild infrastructure.

While I have the same reservations as most foreigners and many Americans about too much flag-waving, I agree with his program and think it is rivalled only by (F.D.) Roosevelt's and Reagan's as the most imaginative and timely that any presidential candidate has advanced. (Lyndon Johnson was as ambitious, but was too dependent on just throwing money and more government agencies at complicated domestic problems. Reagan was much closer to the mark with "The only welfare system that works is a job.")

I even liked the religiosity of Trump's speech, not least because it was so unexpected. I don't believe he and his wife are regular religious communicants, but his invocation of divine power and obligations was not sanctimonious or pious or fervent, but rather respectful. It wasn't the hackneyed cant about God having made America exceptional and superior, but an invocation of a sacred duty to make more of such a magnificent country. It was a legitimate lamentation of what a mess America has become, and of both the duty and the possibility of raising it back up and above the heights that once seemed to justify some of the insinuations of a chosen and preferred nation.

And since I believe that there are spiritual forces in the world and that religion is to some degree a legitimate intellectual belief and impulse, it was a refreshing departure from the relentless promulgation of the state religion of atheism by the Obama administration, with its outrageous persecution of some churches and mollycoddling of hostile sources of Americophobic sectarian zealotry, and the tedious pious lip-service of the Clintons and Bushes before that.

In a letter in the National Post last Tuesday, a reader, Dee McCuaig, wrote generously of me but criticized my relative

support of Donald Trump. My excuse is not that I don't see the unattractive aspects of Trump, but that I share his rage against those who have misgoverned that great country, and except for his over-the-top comments on law enforcement and drug suppression, I agree with his program. (I also thank that writer for calling me an "esthete," which I took as praise and has given rise to some exuberantly ribald exchanges with my wife.)

The polls are not now overly favorable to Trump personally and that could hardly be otherwise given the extremely nasty campaign and the fact that he ran against all factions of both parties, everyone who has exercised great office in the U.S. since Reagan, and practically every adult resident or jobholder in Washington D.C. But he has a clear mandate to implement his program, the congressional majorities to do so, and the negotiating talents to break the paralytic gridlock of the last 15 years and be one of only seven or eight transformative presidents in American history.

In the history of these addresses, only Lincoln's two, FDR's first, and John F. Kennedy's are well remembered. This one might be also, not for such eloquent wordsmithing, but because of its radical and forceful ambition. It is less easy, and less fashionable, to dismiss Donald Trump as a boor and a blowhard now that his every appearance is greeted by the Marine Corps band playing "Hail to the Chief." The closest comparison with such a populist upheaval in American politics was Andrew Jackson, but he was a general and briefly a senator, had run once before, and gave a rather brief and reserved first inaugural address (1829), highlighted by the sober reflection: "A diffidence, perhaps too just, in my own qualifications will teach me to look with reverence to the examples of public virtue left by my illustrious predecessors." That was not Donald's tone at all, though he is unlikely in four years, to threaten to hang his vice president, as Jackson did. ("When General Jackson speaks of

hanging, it's time to look for rope," cautioned a leading senator.)

If Donald Trump enacts the program he has promised, and confirmed on his induction into the presidency, he will be an outstanding president; if he does not, those who have castigated him as a blowhard will be vindicated. All Canadians should wish the United States and its new leader well.

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