

# The Politics of Grievance

by Bill Herbst

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A famous quote attributed to acerbic Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken is:

*"No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public."*

While that quote has a certain pithy P.T. Barnum quality, it's a compressed and slightly inaccurate paraphrasing of what Mencken actually wrote in a newspaper column published in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* on September 19, 1926. Below is the full and correct quote, which I like even better:

*"No one in this world, so far as I know — and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me — has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby."*

The last line of the original version is particularly relevant to this commentary.

A second quote, attributed to many different people from ancient to modern times, is:

*"(In a democracy,) people get the government they deserve."*

Taken together, the two sayings tell us a good deal about our current situation in American politics.

I knew America was skating on thin ice when we elected an ex-movie star to the Presidency in 1980. Ronald Reagan had been a successful Hollywood actor (and President of the Screen Actor's Guild) in the 1940s who morphed into the role of pitchman and spokesperson for corporate capitalism in the 1950s by hosting the anthology TV series, *GE Theatre*, and getting rich speaking for the company around the country. Reagan then moved into big-time conservative politics and twice won the Governorship of California. As an actor, Reagan was affable and competent, but definitely a second-tier, B-List Star. The transfer of those skills into politics was a natural progression for a man who became known as "The Great Communicator."

While there is much to be said for moving beyond the permanent political class to find people to more effectively represent us in government, Hollywood doesn't strike me as the right place to find good alternatives. I believed that in 1980, and I believe it even more today.

Looking for political leaders among celebrities is probably unavoidable, however, given the supremacy of fame in America and the marked tendency of the American people to confuse imagery with reality. After all, in the post-modern world where seemingly everything is based on the visual performance arts of television and video, of course politicians are performers. In a sense, they are salespeople, selling themselves. Yeah, some of them — too many for my tastes — are snake oil salesman, little more than unconscionable liars looking to bilk a gullible public, but even those who are sincere are still engaged in making a sales pitch.

Many politicians speak of the inherent “wisdom” of the American people. I don’t buy it for a second. That’s just more ego-stroking of their customers. On the other hand, I don’t consider the American public to be stupid. Instead, I think they (we) are delusional.

We live in a country where one-third of the voting population fervently supports Donald Trump, and these Americans are not all pissed-off former factory workers. The rabidly adoring crowds who attend Trump’s ongoing “campaign rallies” may appear to some as the equivalent of World Wrestling Federation or Nascar fans — but Trump’s base includes tens of millions of people who don’t attend his rallies and sure as hell don’t fit that crude, class-based stereotype.

Trump’s “base” appears to accept everything he says, which, on the face of it, seems absurd. How is this possible? Can they not see that Trump is a thoroughly pathetic excuse for a human being — a pathological liar, a lifelong con man, a criminal, and a narcissistic demagogue — who doesn’t care about them at all? My guess is that some of Trump’s supporters can’t, but many can. They *know* he’s lying. It’s just that Trump’s lies don’t matter to them.

What they share with Trump, and what bonds them to him, are powerful feelings of grievance against and persecution by enemies, both real and imagined. In short, it’s not that Trump’s base likes him (some do, but many don’t) or trusts that he will help them (he won’t), rather they see in Trump a figure who embodies their own fearful hatreds and who shouts that hatred from the rafters. Trump gives their pain a voice — a crude, screaming, cruel voice.

Donald Trump’s core identity is defined not by what or whom he loves, but by what and whom he hates. To the extent that he loves anything (other than money), that love is made possible, literally brought into being, only by his deeper hatred of just how profoundly unloved he is. I might say that Trump doesn’t understand why he is unlovable, but I doubt that he has any such interior insights. Trump’s obsession with celebrity and fame are, at their center, about adoration. To be worshipped and adored by people he doesn’t know is as close to love as Trump is likely to get.

Lest I come off as bashing only the political right, let me state in no uncertain terms that far too many Democrats are also delusional. The whole RussiaGate frenzy, amped up to fever pitch for the past two years by MSNBC and the rest of

the so-called “liberal” mainstream media, has been outrageous. Not that Trump was ever clean, of course. The Donald is the ultimate snake oil salesman. But going after Trump by pinning their hopes on Saint Mueller proving “collusion” with the Russians was a serious mistake by the Dems. Although the Mueller Report is currently still missing in action, however much of it eventually comes out will not minimize the “gift that keeps on giving” from the Democrats to the Republicans. All those indictments against Trump’s slimy associates will amount to little if the Big Fish escapes, which he has so far.

So, I’m no fan of the Democrats. By and large, the Democratic Party is, just like the Republican party, drenched in Big Money, marinated in corporatist militarism, and a loyal, willing servant of the American Empire.

The difference between the two parties in the political duopoly is mainly in the constituencies each party supports. Trump and the Republicans represent the top 1%, which holds by far the greatest concentration of wealth. That top 1% owns and controls more resources — economic, financial, and social — than the bottom 80%. The wants, needs, and concerns of the 1% have become the constituency of Republicans. The Democrats represent the next 19% down from the top, comprised of those who are not ultra-wealthy but are doing fairly well in terms of economics and social condition. That 19% could be considered the professional and managerial classes. The Democrats serve them. Some politicians would no doubt disagree with me about this, but I remain unconvinced.

It’s not that no one in government, business, or public service supports the bottom 80%. Many such people exist, even in politics; most are sincere. But those activists and policy makers routinely run into the buzz saw of an entrenched system that supports the vested interests of the top 20%.

At this point, America is a society — and a government — based on the politics of grievance. Idealism is at a low ebb. Now it’s all about being wronged and getting even, with a fair amount of revenge added for spice. Extreme partisanship has replaced any norms of unity, harmony, or cooperation. Not only are we divided into tribal camps pitted one against another, but our allegiances seem to be forged mainly on the lowest common denominator of negative experience.

This is yet another in the seemingly endless list of hard truths about the persistence and power of human nature over noble aspiration. Those who call for bringing out our better angels are received with lukewarm response at best. The appeals that succeed are made almost exclusively from anger and resentment. Once again, biology wins (in this case, via the dominance of the amygdala). But perhaps that’s not such a bad thing. Maybe seeing ourselves as not being in charge is ultimately a wiser stance, since the hubris of our posing as Masters of the Universe hasn’t worked out very well.