

# Unpleasant Facts

by Bill Herbst

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I begin this commentary with an extended quote from an essay by Paul Fussell, now-deceased American cultural and literary historian, author, academic, and general curmudgeon. (Fussell was also strident about his belief that astrology was hokum, and that its practitioners were charlatans, but I appreciate much of his writing anyway...)

*Some exemplary unpleasant facts are these: that life is short and almost always ends messily; that if you live in the actual world you can't have your own way; that if you do get what you want, it turns out not to be the thing you wanted; that no one thinks as well of you as you do yourself; and that one or two generations from now you will be forgotten entirely and that the world will go on as if you had never existed.*

*Another is that to survive and prosper in this world you have to do so at someone else's expense or do and undergo things it's not pleasant to face: like, for example, purchasing your life at the cost of the innocents murdered in the aerial bombing of Europe and the final bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And not just the bombings. It's also an unpleasant fact that you are alive and well because you or your representatives killed someone with bullets, shells, bayonets, or knives, if not in Germany, Italy, or Japan, then Korea or Vietnam. You have connived at murder, and you thrive on it, and that fact is too unpleasant to face except rarely.*

from Fussell's 1981 essay,  
"A Power of Facing Unpleasant Facts"

It's no secret to readers of my commentaries that I regard Donald Trump as a thoroughly despicable human being, among the worst our species can produce. Try as I might, I am unable to feel any compassion for him.

The Washington Post reports that Trump has now passed the 10,000 mark in lies he's uttered openly and in public since assuming the Presidency in 2017. Some of those lies are simply Donald Trump being the uneducated ignoramus he is — getting things wrong because he doesn't know any better — but many of them are total, looney-tunes fabrications offered with purely malicious intent as attacks on his enemies (of which he has so many), often delivered at "rallies" as red meat for the most susceptible within his fervent base of support. The most recent fiction of Trump's is his ludicrous accusation that new mothers and doctors are executing newborn babies. I mean, c'mon, abortion is a somber and

difficult issue no matter which side you're on, and making up crap like that is disrespectful to everyone. Trump doesn't care, of course.

The mainstream media — in this case MSNBC — has already jumped on that bit of video footage with all the usual reactions of horror and dismay. The hosts and other talking heads ask, *"Is there no limit to how low Trump will go in his lies?"* The answer, as if we didn't already know, is that no such limit exists. Trump will say anything to demean and belittle those who do not bow down to him, and he will say it in public. This is who he is and what he does.

Trump has been getting away with that kind of reprehensible bullshit his entire life, and, so far at least, he continues to get away with it. That rankles me. I want Trump to get some serious comeuppance. Forget therapy or rehabilitation. I want that prick to suffer punishment and retribution. We are all very lucky that I am not King or Dictator — for a whole host of reasons, of course, one of which is that if I were the Supreme Ruler I would have Donald Trump forcibly arrested, clapped in irons in a dungeon, then tortured with extreme prejudice, no pity, and no relief, for as long as he could be kept alive. I'm glad that I will never have that power.

Other negative reactions to the Trump presidency come from people in the federal bureaucracy or from the privileged and permanent political class. These are institutionalists — hard-working, faithful, and loyal servants of the American Empire who take their jobs seriously and feel that they stand for goodness. They loathe Trump's disrespect for law, his flagrant dismantling of norms, his insufferable crudeness and utter lack of decorum. All of that means that they feel Trump to be unfit for the position he holds, and that he is dishonoring the office of the Presidency, as well as undermining the Constitution and threatening our vaunted democracy.

One could presume that I might agree with such sentiments, since I hate Trump and the damned Republicans who are all too willing to kiss his ass, but I have a somewhat different perspective.

Despite Trump's contemptible lack of character (or perhaps precisely because of that), he is performing a valuable service. Trump is ripping the cover off an even bigger lie than the ones he spouts. Somewhat perversely, Donald Trump is just about the perfect instrument to show Americans the dark side of what this country has too often been and is.

Americans cling to the mythology that we are "the good guys" — the belief that America is exceptional in its goodness. In the hearts and minds of many Americans, our country is and has always been the shining city on the hill, the last best hope for humanity. History, however, challenges that view. Not the history we were taught in school, but the real history of what actually happened.

During our first century as a young, vital, but violent nation, America engaged in prolonged and brutal genocide of indigenous native populations, along with the wholesale destruction of their cultures. We enslaved millions of Africans, since the cruel practice of enslavement lies at the very heart of civilization. We fought an unjust war of aggression with Mexico and took territory, claiming the entire western hemisphere as our sphere of influence, as if we owned it. Then, after the Civil War and the closing of the continental frontier, we turned our attention outward to the world and became an Empire, not to colonize, but to gain resources and markets. Since then, over the past 130 years, we have meddled time and again in the affairs of other countries, overthrowing or subverting foreign governments for our own economic benefit.

Now, I'm not suggesting that America was or is exclusively evil. Far from it. Instead, I'm saying that America is, like most cultures, a combination of good and evil, which coexist. We are sometimes beneficent and other times malevolent, sometimes generous and other times selfish, sometimes peaceful and loving and other times violent and murderous. We have both care in our hearts and blood on our hands.

The problem is that Americans, especially those patriots whose hearts swell with pride at seeing the flag or hearing the singing of the Star Spangled Banner (which I prefer to call the war anthem, since that's what it is), want to see just one side of the American coin. They acknowledge only the good, either denying our own evil or rationalizing it by claiming that it was necessary or that our hand was forced. Nope. Cubans and Philipinos didn't ask us to invade and then subjugate their countries. Central and South American and Iranian governments didn't force us to overthrow them. All those Iraqi civilians we killed didn't do anything to us to make us kill them.

We know from CIA whistleblowers that of all the terrible things that have been done supposedly in our names using the excuse of national security or protection of "American interests" — black ops, coups, military invasions, etc. — many if not most of them were known and approved by former Presidents. There is no "shadow government" or Deep State. There is only the Empire and those who serve it.

Then too, what we've done to people in other countries is not our only sin. Americans have a long history of treating many of our own citizens with disdain and cruelty, most often through economic unfairness. We live in a culture that is obsessed with monetary wealth, a country that systematically creates some financial winners and many financial losers, where too many of the privileged winners take advantage of the losers, or look down on them, or just plain ignore them.

America is also a country where racism, xenophobia, religious bigotry, and hatred of The Other raged from the get-go and have never stopped. We try very

hard to transcend those hurtful Us-versus-Them exclusions at least a little for a time, then they rise up repeatedly, like a viral pandemic, as is happening again today. We no longer allow chattel slavery, but we incarcerate a disproportionate percentage of black men in prisons run for profit. And wage slavery is a given, keeping workers indebted through college student loans or trapped in bullshit jobs that don't pay a living wage.

Donald Trump shows us America's dark side — our greed, our cruelty, our arrogance, our narcissism, our lack of grace and our spiritual cynicism. He acts it out shamelessly, for all of us to see. In Trump's demented insistence on his own greatness, he mirrors back to us our culture's disturbed vanity. You know — the illusion (actually a self-deception) that we're so precious and special because we're always the good guys. Trump *is* the epitome of American evil.

Some Americans, no doubt, would support Trump for any of various reasons. They may believe in the strong man theory of social order or the strict father model of family systems. They approve of autocracy and perhaps even cruelty. These people actually like Trump and all he represents, and they would always enthusiastically affirm Trump or someone like him to lead the country. With 330 million Americans, it's inevitable that some millions among us will feel that way.

I'd like to think that a much, much higher percentage of Americans will eventually tire of who Trump is. Having the dark side of America shoved so directly and painfully in their faces might cause many of them to reconsider their former belief in the simplistic and false narrative of "America the Good." Whether that's an awakening or just a reckoning with reality in all its messiness and complexity, I think we need to stop believing in fairy tales if America is to have even a slim chance of successfully addressing the challenges that lie ahead.

In walking that very fine line — the tightrope high-wire act of doing well for ourselves yet also promoting good for everyone — America has lost its way. As I wrote in last week's post, we live now in a culture that accepts, encourages, and even rewards corruption, so much so that many people don't feel even the slightest pangs of conscience. That is tragic.

I hope that by 2021 we will have had as much of Donald Trump as we need to acknowledge who we are in reality — both the good and the bad — so that we can make headway maturing as a culture and a people. I also hope it's not too late for us to change the balance.