

Winning at Any Cost

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.3 (posted on 19 November 2019)

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Politics is a dirty business. Always has been, always will be. It's not even close to an honorable endeavor. Totally partisan, and all about winning, at damn near any cost. Fairness and honesty play no part (except as lip service to the illusion that politicians from "our side" — whichever side that is — are upstanding, fair-minded, and have values). Well, they don't, as I will illustrate later in the commentary). But, as they say, all's fair in love and war, and truth is the first casualty.

Take World War II. *Please, take World War II...* [That's a spin on a once-famous but now-ancient Henny Youngman joke. Half or more of my readers probably don't know either the joke or who Henny Youngman was. He was a stand-up comedian from the mid-20th century who specialized in rapid-fire jokes with short punch-lines. Youngman would be doing his verbal schtick, then insert "For instance, take my wife." He'd follow that immediately with the punchline, "*Please, take my wife...*" Rim shot. Late in Youngman's career, the joke had become so well-known that he didn't need to bother with the setup line. Just saying the punchline alone was enough to elicit a laugh from the audience. Of course, that was back in the days when wives and marriage were fair game among the all-male cadre of Borscht-belt comics. Then Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers came along and turned around jokes about spouses, but even they were gentler than their male counterparts. That's changed now. Women have become a major force in comedy, and their jokes can be just as acerbic, sarcastic, and penetrating as those of male comedians.]

When I was growing up in the 1950s, Americans were spoon-fed the belief that the Allies won World War II because of American heroism, grit, and can-do spirit. That was true perhaps a little, but most Baby Boomers didn't suspect that their fathers (whether they'd been soldiers in combat or not) were psychologically AWOL because they'd done their bit early on in their lives (i.e., surviving the Depression and then saving the world from fascism). After the war ended, that generation of men said, "*We're done. Don't ask us for anything else. All we want now is a decent job, a house in the suburbs, and martinis at lunch and dinner.*" And so, many of us grew up without a father figure.

No, America didn't win World War II with heroism, nor even with manufacturing. Yes, citizen-soldier GIs, the Garand M-1, Sherman tanks, B-24 Liberators, and

Rosie the Riveter all helped, but that War was won more than we imagined by forces other than just American bravery and economic clout, including copious amounts of trickery, lies, and deceit. Much of that has come to light over past decades. First we discovered Bletchley Park and breaking the Nazi's Enigma Code. Then the OSS and Patton's dummy army were revealed, along with all the other deceptions that the Allies pulled to successfully fool the Germans and Japs. Project Paperclip even came to light to reveal how many Nazi scientists had been given refuge in America following the war's end.

Finally, we learned that 30 million Russians had died on the Eastern Front. The massive, million-man military encirclements that characterized that horrific theatre of war were cataclysmic, like nothing American soldiers ever saw. The Soviets came very close to folding at the beginning of Barbarossa, but with almost unimaginable determination and willingness to sacrifice, as well as considerable American economic and military aid, they turned the tide, eventually blunting and then ultimately destroying the German Wehrmacht.

Revelations about The Great Patriotic War and its implications should have put a whole different spin on the Cold War, but didn't. "Better Dead than Red" remained firmly entrenched in America. We were the capitalist, freedom-loving Good Guys, and the Soviets and Chinese were the communist, totalitarian Baddies. Not what I'd call a very nuanced truth, and subject to profound contradictions. But then, narratives have little to do with truth and a lot to do with power.

In my childhood, relatively few Americans knew about Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and even fewer were aware of Von Clausewitz' *On War*. I don't know how much those numbers have expanded, but I doubt that public understanding has increased by a significant measure. We still tend to think that wars are won by heroic bravery and personal sacrifice.

Like war, politics is about winning. Winning is the end that justifies any means necessary to achieve it. Politicians elected to national office take an oath to serve the Constitution, but nothing is more important than winning.

Take Nikki Haley, for instance. (*Please, take Nikki Haley...*) Haley is a Republican politician, a former House Representative and Governor of South Carolina, and until this year the American Ambassador to the United Nations appointed by President Trump. During the 2016 President primaries, Haley was a fervent Never-Trumper, excoriating the Golden Golem of Greatness at every turn, in public, and in an aggressive manner that gave no quarter.

But oh, how that story has changed. This week, in a much-publicized interview, short segments of which have aired on all the mainstream media networks, Haley's stance was completely opposite. She has caved completely, morphing from a Never-Trumper into a Forever-Trumper. In the interview, Haley claimed

— and with a totally straight face, no less — that she had *always* supported and approved of Donald Trump. These were bald-faced lies, demonstrated by a wealth of video recordings from the 2016 primary campaign detailing her complete rejection of Trump's character, behavior, and unfitness for office.

Why would Haley do this? Why would she flip to so falsely rewrite her own history? She did it because she is an ambitious politician who wants to be President. Why would Haley think she can get away with such obvious lies that are so easily debunked? Because that's what passes for politics-as-usual in America. Journalists let her get away with this crap, but even if they confronted her with the evidence, Haley would probably say that her former criticism of Trump was limited to the campaign, and that following his victory and ascension to the presidency, Mr. Trump had "proved" himself capable and faultless. That might be a good defense, but it would also be utter bullshit.

With precious few exceptions, the entire membership of the Republican Party supports President Trump — Representatives, Senators, party apparatchiks, and 100 million other Americans. Nothing Trump does and no evidence to the contrary will sway them, especially the elected office-holders who fear being "primaried" if they admit the truth. They are now Trump's creatures to the bitter end — fawning, obsequious, totally committed, and immune to debate or argument. For better or worse, Republican politicians believe that their only chance of winning depends on total support of the President.

Conversely, and with equally few exceptions, Democrats are the polar opposite. The battle lines are clearly drawn, and the opposing armies are in place.

The impeachment of President Trump now underway is only tangentially about democracy, the Constitution, or the rule of law. Democrats can make those cases all they want, but they won't matter, and they won't change anything. Trump's impeachment and unlikely removal from office are about winning, pure and simple — not justice, not morality, and not common sense.

Half the country hates Trump. Another third of the country loves him. Within this third that comprises Trump's hard-core base of support are unemployed factory workers, suburbanites, and other "regular," hard-working Americans who attend his rallies, watch Fox News, and believe everything Trump says or Tweets. In other words, they are passionate but sorely deluded. (This is not to suggest that those in the other "army" are not also deluded. Many of them are, but the delusions are different.)

Trump's base wants to Make America White Again. They believe that Trump and the Republicans will do that, as well as give them relief with a bigger slice of the economic spoils. Sorry, folks. That's all lies and deception, nothing more than mind-control narratives. White supremacy is fading away in this country and never coming back, despite the violence of its death throes. Economically and

socially, Trump and the Republicans don't give a shit about anyone but the most wealthy — the top 10%. The rest of us in the 90% and particularly in the bottom half can go to hell, for all they care.

Trump was elected to wreck the government and destroy social institutions, and he's doing a crackerjack job of that. His impeachment is a power struggle, pure and simple. But, as I wrote at the beginning of the commentary, all's fair in love and war, and this is war. I'd be shocked if the House doesn't impeach Trump, but I'd be very surprised if the Senate convicted him. The battle will play out through the 2020 election and perhaps beyond.

It's as if we are all now spectators at a prize fight between heavyweights, pit bulls, or banty roosters. Some in the crowd revel in the primitive spectacle. Some place bets on the outcome. Some are fascinated, whether eagerly or despite themselves. Some flee the scene in disgust or horror. Just watching the fight represents a kind of complicity in the violence. That's what's happening, and that's where we are.

Which combatant will be left standing at the end, bloodied but unbowed, and which will lie mangled on the canvas, knocked out or even killed? I guess we'll find out, but it's possible that the outcome will be less than clear.

To some extent, this battle royale was predictable as far back as November of 2016. It's taken us three years to get here. All the pre-fight posturing is finally over, and now we're in the early rounds of the real fight.

I wish the fight were based on truth, or at least on some grounded reality, but I fear that it's not. Truth is far too complicated, and reality is much too vast for comprehension.