

Spectacle

by Bill Herbst

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The “January 6th Insurrection” hearings being held by the House Select Committee, which are currently underway in Congress and making their inevitable but brief media splash, are little more than spectacle, a kind of ritualized pomp and circumstance, a show whose melodrama functions to provide the public with entertainment, but more importantly, to keep us distracted. I’m not entirely sure that this is their intention, but that’s clearly the overall effect. The hearings are akin to the magician’s trick that employs sleight of hand and misdirection of the audience’s attention, so that we rubes watching will focus only on actions that are inconsequential and fail to notice the “real moves” taking place, whether behind the scenes or otherwise out of sight. Those real moves might be visible if one knows exactly where to look, but the magician’s art and skill lies in obscuring them, so that they are invisible to the audience. Rather than present this as a conspiracy theory, however, I prefer to call it simply the best we can do, given our addiction to spectacle.

Spectacle: 1. anything presented to the sight or view, especially something of a striking or impressive kind:

The stars make a fine spectacle tonight.

2. a public show or display, especially on a large scale:

The coronation was a lavish spectacle.

Spectacle differs markedly from festival. Festival is a participatory event, like a barn dance or a local art fair. Spectacle is a passive event. It’s designed to awe the audience, to be “spectacular,” like the Super Bowl. Only the performers and selected guests are active players. The rest of us are just passive spectators. We watch the event, but that’s the extent of our involvement. Our emotions may be engaged and stimulated, but we have no say at all in the outcome.

Civilization loves spectacles, although some countries favor them more than others. For all those nations that aspire to become empires, spectacles are an essential tool of narrative creation, mind control, and propaganda. And to state the obvious, America is nothing if not an empire.

Since the end of the 19th century, after we had conquered the middle of the North American continent “from sea to shining sea” and turned our attention to international conquests (first by annexing Hawaii, then Puerto Rico and the Philippines), America has overtly pursued the path of empire. We’ve done so less by colonization, however, than by economic domination.

Following World War Two, when we were the only industrial giant left unscathed and intact by that global catastrophe, we decided to become the world's dominant empire, just as various other nations had chosen before us — the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire. Civilization had been rocked to its core by World War One, and the victors had been unable to reconstitute civilization in a way that would prevent that savage and murderous insanity from arising again, which it did, almost inevitably, with World War Two. Those two global cataclysms that spanned the first half of the 20th century and claimed 80 million human lives were really just one long event. In the aftermath of the second war, American elites recognized this and sought to create a new world order that would prevent a third chapter of massive violence and death.

Unfortunately, America achieved that by promoting violence and death on a somewhat smaller scale, and by scaring the bejeezus out of humanity with the Mutually-Assured-Destruction threat of Cold War nuclear Armageddon. But then, no empire I'm aware of has ever operated out of love and kindness, but instead on raw power and fear. And while American rhetoric has consistently denied this by babbling on about "freedom" and "democracy," our actions have confirmed it.

Because of the accelerating pace of change in post-industrial and technological modern civilization, America's reign as the world's 800-lb gorilla is turning out to be brief. Our vaunted democratic institutions, imperfect as all such human organizations are, have failed us fairly quickly after a relatively short period of vainglory — not even a single century. America didn't achieve true hegemony for even 50 years before cracks began appearing in the superstructure of our imperial domain. Vietnam may not have been the first nail in our coffin, but it was the most obvious Big Mistake early on. Others have followed.

In addition, the hyper-complexity of our mass society has proven to be unworkable and a steady factor in our undoing. Human genetics are optimized for social groups of no more than 75-100 individuals, effectively just small kinship bands. The whole idea of mass societies involving hundreds of millions, and even perhaps billions, of human beings is a recipe for disaster. It's proof positive that too much success is not a good thing for any species.

I have, of course, written much of this before (and even recently). So, please forgive the repetition. It's not my intention to deliver a sermon of mistrust, nor to preach to the choir, but this is what I see.

Will anything either meaningful or substantial come out of the current, televised Congressional hearings? I doubt it. Does anyone truly believe that the truth will be revealed in any way that matters, or that Lady Justice will actually be served? Will Republicans suddenly gain a conscience and regain a modicum of their lost sanity? And will Democrats no longer remain imprisoned and corrupted by their abject fealty to Corporate and Big Money donors? I'm certain there are people who believe that our politics can be healed, but I'm sure as hell not one of them.

What are the chances that devoted right-wing MAGA-heads will “see the light,” realize that they’ve been severely duped, and give up their illusions — their conspiracy theories about Stop the Steal or Pedophile Democrats, and their faux-patriotic self-annointing as modern-day revolutionary rebels armed with AR-15s rather than smooth bore muskets? I’d say slim to none. These Americans live in a universe of “alternative facts.” Evidence that seemingly contradicts their fervent beliefs means nothing to them. All such arguments fall on deaf ears, for their minds are made up. And who can blame them for mistrusting a government and mass media that has lied to them shamelessly over their entire lives? (Although why they believe Fox News is a mystery to me...)

On the other hand, if you’re an anti-Trumper who would dearly love to see the Donald shackled in an orange jumpsuit and led off to the pen in punishment for a lifetime of cruel, crude, and craven narcissism, along with a history of criminal grifting, prepare yourself for yet another disappointment. The elites currently in power are unlikely to pursue or allow anything that might inadvertently lead us closer to civil war. Putting the Trumpster behind bars might be all the trigger needed to foment an eruption of civil unrest and violence that would make school shootings look like Sunday picnics. I might be wrong about this, of course, but I think Donald Trump has what looks like a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card.

In my estimation, the downside of the hearings for Trump is not jail time, but rather that the whole spectacle comes off as a commercial for Ron DeSantis. If the hearings have any impact, it’s likely to be that Trump’s chances of running again for President and re-taking the White House will be tarnished beyond repair. That leads us to the unpleasant but very real possibility that the sceptre of leadership for Right-Wing Crazy Town will pass from an incompetent buffoon (Trump) to a much smarter, more sophisticated, and dangerously authoritarian fascist, someone like DeSantis or — God forbid — Josh Hawley.

Folks, I’m afraid the fix is in for an unhappy outcome. The hearings strike me as all smoke and no fire. What we have here is entertainment, like Netflix for politics. It might as well be a mini-series from HBO. Whether the testimonies, evidence, and conclusions are true or not doesn’t matter one whit. That’s irrelevant, since America gave up truth quite awhile ago as an essential component of our experience. No, this is spectacle, and nothing more.

So, if you choose to watch the hearings, get yourself some popcorn or potato chips and, if possible, enjoy the show. That’s what it’s for. If, on the other hand, you choose not to watch, or even to pay no attention at all to the event itself or the many commentaries and interpretive analyses that will accompany it — during and after — that’s fine, too.

Either way, you won’t have missed anything important, because democracy won’t be restored, the republic won’t be saved, America won’t be rescued from its own home-grown insanity, and modern civilization won’t be pulled back from the brink of self-destruction.