

# Death and the Salesman

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I got together last night with an old friend. Inevitably, our talk turned to politics. He is a good man, smart, unflinching. He said that it was no surprise to him that Trump won. He has worked in social services, teaching kids, adults, and inmates. He knows the dark side more intimately than I do. He has seen how the system corners decent people, leaving them no way out. He has seen how the denial of prospects and fairness distorts their decency. He knew there had to be a backlash, and since Trump was the only backlash available, he knew Trump would win. Now he says that he sees no option but to ride out Trump's presidency. It's a blip, he says. Demographics are shifting. In the near future we won't believe we elected someone like Trump. But here's the thing - and the reason I'm sharing this: after 4 or 8 years it may be too late to forget that this happened. We may have no viable future in which to operate. As we speak, Trump is foreclosing the future. It is now apparent that Trump can only conceive of one logic for making decisions and managing affairs: the logic of the salesman. This logic transforms every endeavor into a zero sum game. The sale is a contest. The winner is the one who extracts greater value than he forfeits. Trump's one and only measurement of value is victory. (Thus, his most damning insult: "Loser.") His cabinet appointments reflect this absurdly reduced social Darwinism. His appointees are all "winners." Which is to say, they have engaged life as a contest and have acted with the impunity of the boxer, the gambler, the quarterback. Everything is justified, so long as the game ends with more points on your side of the scoreboard.

The very specific depravity of people like Rex Tillerson, Scott Pruitt, and Andrew Puzder rests in their ability to shut out the effects of their actions on things and people that are not formally engaged in the game they're playing. This depravity has a name: psychopathy ("characterized by persistent antisocial behavior, lack of empathy and remorse, and bold, disinhibited, egotistical traits"). The logic of neoliberalism has

invented euphemisms for the harm that the game does outside the confines of the game. In the military: "collateral damage." In legal parlance: "assumed risk." Under Trump, we must all assume that we are collateral in the risky game that this menagerie of winners is playing. Damage is a foregone conclusion. But to these salesmen, this damage is subsidiary to the winning of the game. Exxon, Hardees, are winning. And for the new leaders of our major governmental agencies, that's what counts. Governance, equity, fairness, justice - none of these are the point anymore. The point is the accumulation of points. So, to my friend, love him though I do, I say: You are wrong and history will not abide your optimism, your patience, or your inaction. We must recognize that we are confronted by a truly existential threat. These men have a loyalty to an ideology without ideology. There is no moral component in their worldview. They are motivated merely by the buttressing of their senses of themselves as winners. They drive by a rudderless engine. Their sudden violent swerves, their unprecedented accelerations are justified, so long as they reach the finish line first. The whole planet and every person now living, or soon to be born, is in their blind and merciless path. To my good, upright, friend I can say only this: The logic of Trump cannot go unchecked. The only regulator that might conceivably slow their murderous maraud is us. Each of us, and all of us together, must call upon our decency, our justice, our empathy, and the righteousness that rejects the prefix "self-." We must block the way. We must lay our bodies down to bring their drive to a halt.



So what to do? We're all trying to figure this out right now. Both the quantity and the quality of the news from Trump's America conspire to subdue us. Like my friend, many are withdrawing, unable to cope with the daily onslaught of previously inconceivable news. Long-banished ghouls (Bob Dole) are back for revenge. Figures we thought were historical anomalies (Rick Perry) are newly empowered. Antagonistic foreign leaders, straight from central casting (Vladimir Putin) emerge as administrators of our American lives. Day after day, another agency of government's commitments to its citizens is turned over to the most vehement critic of that very agency and the values it represents.

Trump has shaken off the yoke of the enlightenment. Reason and facts are discarded as the merely optional constraints of something we might call the “real world.” Al Gore’s choice of the adjective “inconvenient” for the noun “truth” now seems tragically apt. The salesman cannot abide the inconvenient. On the contrary, the logic of the salesman is the logic of convenience, ease, and least resistance. We have willfully returned to the condition of the 17<sup>th</sup> century peasant on the outskirts of a central European village. It’s not simply that we don’t know the facts. It’s that we no longer value knowing them. Knowledge is the ultimate inconvenience. Our hearts and our guts and a transcendental voice from the other side of the divide are authority enough.

So what to do? Of course, it would be foolish to think that I could answer this question neatly or satisfactorily for myself, never mind anyone else. Yet, a word loops in my head with conviction: RESISTANCE. We’ve been warned to remain vigilant about the Technicolor, 3D, surround-sound illusions of capital. Gramsci warned us of the seduction of hegemony, the Situationists of the spectacle, Baudrillard of the simulacrum. Recently, Adam Curtis, the BBC documentarian, has warned us of “hypernormalization.” The logic of the salesman comes to seem commonplace. It all appears so natural: “the way things are.” Yet, we are not bound by this pact of least resistance. We are free to choose *greater* resistance, *less* convenience, *harder* work, *more stubborn* opposition. We can refuse the apparent naturalness of the logic of the salesman. We don’t need Marx to recognize that value is not always best measured in dollars. Extraction and accumulation are not ends in themselves. We are free to think of others, the greater good, fairness, and simple kindness. There may even be a moment when I decide that my individual interests are not paramount. Despite what the economists might tell us about ourselves, it is possible to act both rationally, *and* against one’s own self-interests. In fact, there is a name for this kind of thing. It’s called “morality.”

A dozen years ago, in a bar in Berlin, I was introduced to Benjamin, a well-put together young urbanite of the global cosmopolitan class. Over the course of a few drinks he got around to telling me about his grandfather who, in July of 1944, along with a small group of German officers, planned and participated in what was known as “Operation

Valkyrie,” an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler inside his Wolf’s Lair field headquarters near Rastenburg, East Prussia. The attempt was unsuccessful and Benjamin’s grandfather, along with many others suspected of being involved, was executed. Benjamin’s mother grew up without her father.

It occurred to me immediately how rare this story was, told from the barstool in the city center of Berlin, at the gravitational center of German political history, surrounded by so many members of so many families with so many stories that most of them would rather not tell. Human beings may serve as executioners, but only history is qualified to judge. So it seems a necessary exercise – always, but especially at times like these – to query the future. What judgment awaits the life I am living? Will my granddaughter, seated at a bar in some city of the future, tell my story proudly? Or will she swallow my story along with her shame? How will my actions be understood when the dust settles and time reveals the graphic, consequential differences between doing one thing or another, between doing something and doing nothing at all? I’m trying to think this way now, as if reading my own obituary.