

Joining the War Train: Trump's Liberal Cheer Leaders

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"Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions."
-Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (1904).

At the psychological heart of every liberal is a milk soft tendency to succumb to the authoritarian personality, a feeling that, just around the corner, resistance will fold. Before such authority, adoration and bruising follow in menacing union.

As US President Bill Clinton fumbled his way, fly-down, through the Oval office of the 1990s, his popularity ratings would soar with the next insidious missile strike on a place in Sudan or Afghanistan few US citizens would have been able to find on the map. What mattered was that impotence before official inquiries was not to be replicated by the man behind the trigger, even if it did entail the slaughter of a few anonymous darkies of Muslim faith.

President Donald Trump presents this problem in an even more profoundly obscene way. Impulsive, spontaneous, trigger happy at the end of a conversation, the boy man imperial figure is capable of doing anything that will change the game at a moment's notice. Those interested in examining such behaviour best dust off their copies of Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* to make sense of it all.

David Ignatius, ever long in having the ear of the intelligence community in Washington, dares find moral suasion in the action of firing 59 cruise missiles against a Syrian airbase.

"Even for a president who advertised his coldblooded pragmatism, the moral dimensions of leadership find a way of penetrating the Oval Office. In the case of President Trump, the emotional distance seems to have been shattered by simple, indelible images of suffering children in Idlib, Syria." [1]

The entertainment fetishized complex of suffering, the reality show of dead and dying children, becomes the centre point for supposedly sensible policy. In Trump's gibbering, not so presidential words,

"When you kill innocent children, innocent babies – babies! – little babies... that crosses many, many lines. Beyond a red line, many, many lines."

As Joan Walsh explains in *The Nation*, individuals such as Fareed Zakaria on CNN's *News Day* ("I think Donald Trump became president of the United States" with the strikes); or MSNBC's Nicholas Kristof (Trump "did the right thing") signal that dire, toxic embrace that

confuses power with purpose.[2] From seeing Trump previously as an incompetent, unable buffoon unfit for the White House, he bloomed in the field of conflict.

We have seen such instinctive support before, notably from those within progressive circles. The liberal establishment, be it the human rights defender Michael Ignatieff or the late polemicist Christopher Hitchens, both strutted the line that weapons could be used to advance humanitarian and liberal agendas even as they destabilised and amputated a nation state.

Ignatieff took his point of departure as the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States, admitting that backing the mission that took the United States on an ideological crusade into Iraq in 2003 involved keeping company with those he did not like because they were “right on the issue.”[3]

“As long as there was a much a 1 percent chance that rogue states would transfer chemical, biological and nuclear weapons to suicide bombers, Britain and the United States knew where their interests lay, and they did not lie in deferring to the reluctance of their allies at the United Nations.”

Such an observation has all the ingredients that have since been replicated by Trump: a castigation of the international community, a general scolding of the UN system as barrier to firm action against atrocity, and the sense of catastrophe in the absence of such action.

As he was scribbling in March 2003 with Iraq smouldering, Ignatieff would say that he wished for a world with stable rules, and limitations on the use of force. But he also made it clear that supporting the invasion “entails a commitment to rebuild that order on new foundations.”

Hitchens was similarly converted in the carnage of the collapsing Twin Towers of New York, embracing the thesis against incongruously named Islamofascism, and seeing any means to counter it, even those forces not so inclined towards it (Saddam Hussein was far more secular in his terrorising approach) as conflated enemies requiring extinction.

So convinced was he by the case that any attempt to suggest he had erred in joining the powerful was dismissed as ill-informed claptrap.

“We were never, if we are honest with ourselves, ‘lied into war’.”[4]

In other instances, Hitchens was positively bloodthirsty, exulting in the infliction of those deserving of death. These villains, he wrote in 2002, would receive “those steel pellets”; they would “go straight through somebody and out the other side and through somebody else... They’ll be dead, in other words.”[5]

Such symptoms of automatic support for the beast of purpose are typical of the seductive allure of muscular power, which is, by its very nature, anti-intellectual and consoling. Intellectuals and members of the professional classes, while feeling repulsed by such fronts, often swoon to its application. They would love to be riding the storm of ill-thought in sadistic bliss, but prefer idyllic shelter whilst daddy does his bit for the patria.

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Notes

[1]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-faces-a-moral-test-in-syria/2017/04/06/bea8bdde-1aee-11e7-bcc2-7d1a0973e7b2_story.html?utm_term=.9754e5055591

[2] <https://www.thenation.com/article/too-many-of-trumps-liberal-critics-are-praising-his-strike-on-syria/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/mar/24/iraq.world>

[4] http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2008/03/how_did_i_get_iraq_wrong_11.html

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/18/christopher-hitchens-socialist-neocon>

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