

Presidents Are Gods

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A former Governor of Virginia is expected to be sentenced to a long stay in prison. The same fate has befallen governors in states across the United States, including in nearby Maryland, Tennessee, and West Virginia. A former governor of Illinois is in prison. Governors have been convicted of corruption in Rhode Island, Louisiana, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Connecticut, and (in a trumped-up partisan scam) in Alabama. The statewide trauma suffered by the people of states that have locked up their governors has been . . . well, nonexistent and unimaginable.

Locking U.S. presidents up for their crimes is a different story. Former President Richard Nixon's understanding that whatever a president does is legal has not been challenged since he made that comment. The *Washington Post* — not exactly a Nixon supporter — [has](#) the same understanding now. The *Post* recently justified the latest proposal to re-ban torture by explaining that even though torture was already banned, President George W. Bush tortured and therefore had found a legal way around the law. In other words, because he hasn't been prosecuted, what he did was legal.

The *New York Times*, which urged prosecuting former President George W. Bush for torture six years ago, recently [wrote](#) this:

"Who should be held accountable? That will depend on what an investigation finds, and as hard as it is to imagine Mr. Obama having the political courage to order a new investigation, it is harder to imagine a criminal probe of the actions of a former president. But any credible investigation should include . . ."

The editorial goes on to list the people who should be prosecuted, up to and including the former vice president. But the president gets a pass, not on the basis of some reasoned argument, but because the authors cannot imagine a president being held accountable for crimes. They or their colleagues could imagine it several years ago but have progressed to the point where it has become unthinkable.

The state flag of Virginia, or any other of the 50 states, can be turned into a table cloth or a picnic blanket. It can be used to keep the rain off your firewood. Or it can be burned to get your fire started. Nobody cares what you do with it. Children aren't forced to pray to it every morning in school. It's just a flag. And because it's just a flag, nobody has any interest in abusing it, and virtually nobody would recognize what it was if they saw it burned or trampled or turned into a bathrobe or a bikini. The flag of Virginia, although we don't actually imagine it as having feelings, is treated just fine. So are state songs, even though nobody is required to stand and sing them with a fascistic pose as troops march by.

The same is true of state governors. They're treated with civility and respect. They're honored when they perform well and held accountable when they abuse power. Understood as human beings, they aren't abused as anything less. But they are not gods. And they are not gods because they are not makers of war.

Presidents make wars. And they now do so without any formal checks on their power. They can destroy the earth with the push of a button. They can destroy a hut or a village or a city at their discretion. Their killer flying robots rain hell from the skies worldwide, and neither Congress nor the *Washington Post* nor the people who lock up governors for taking bribes can even imagine questioning that power, that privilege, that divine right.

Congress may, it is true, "authorize" one of the current wars for three more years after allowing it to proceed illegally for several months. Or it may not. Nobody cares. The pretense that it matters is a vestige of a time in which we saw presidents differently.

But if murdering large numbers of people doesn't disturb us, if we've all concluded that murder is morally superior to imprisonment and torture and that there is no third option, are we perhaps capable of spotting a problem in what presidents have become in relation to the rule of law? Should it not disturb us that we've given single individuals for 4- or 8-year runs more power than King George III ever dreamed of, and that we've collectively declared any declaration of independence unimaginable?

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