

**THE BLOG** 01/13/2017 09:38 am ET

Should You Watch The Inauguration?



By Marty Kaplan



JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS

Many people are saying they won't be watching the inauguration on TV.

Just putting it that many-people-are-saying way gives me the creeps. Like "believe me," it's Trump's signature trick for turning lies true, the companion con to turning facts false by labeling them "fake news."

"I think we have one of the great cabinets ever put together," he said at his first press conference in nearly six months. "And we've been hearing that from so many people. People are so happy." A climate change denier in charge of the E.P.A.; a Medicare bomb-thrower to run Medicare; Goldman Sachs to manage the economy; a billionaire to protect laborers; a public school adversary to advocate for education; a social justice foe to fight for justice; an "oops" to head up nukes; a neurosurgeon for H.U.D.; Exxon Mobil for foreign policy; Putin for Intelligence — many people want to puke is more like it.

Watching Trump's press conference in real time was my trial run to see if I could stomach his inauguration. Here are the feelings it fired in me: fear, disgust, anger, shame, helplessness. Here are the ones it didn't: respect, duty, honor, patriotism, hope.

I felt even worse when I fed my news addiction with analysis of the event. "Masterful performance," Michael Moore told Chris Hayes on MSNBC, "He owned the day." "Observed as spectacle, Trump came away with a resounding victory," said Gabriel Sherman in New York Magazine. To be sure, they called Trump "dangerous" and "a disaster," but the five stars they gave his propagandizing hit me like a kick in the gut. I couldn't help imagining color commentary at a rally — to use Trump's metaphor for our intelligence community — in Nazi Germany. "Damn, that Hitler's a super showman!"

I tried to put myself in the shoes of someone loving every minute of the day Trump owned. "These papers are just some of the many documents that I've signed turning over complete and total control to my son," he said, pointing at hundreds of manila file folders. If his loyalists saw that the files were phony, with no labels on them, and nothing but blank paper in them, they must not have cared. If Trump seethed like Roy Cohn taught him ("Quiet... Don't be rude. Don't be rude.... Don't be rude. You are fake news," he told CNN's Jim Acosta), his fans must have shared his hostility. If he bullshitted like a goofus ("It'll be repeal and replace. It will be essentially, simultaneously. It will be various segments, you understand, but will most likely be on the same day or the same week, but probably, the same day, could be the same hour."), they must have been in denial about how it would hurt them. If that's what hope feels like, I'll gladly go with disgust.

A presidential inauguration is a hallowed ritual in America's civic religion. It's a secular rite that binds our pluribus into unum and confers legitimacy on our self-governance. I get that. I also get that the presidency deserves respect, and that the day is about the

office and not the office-holder. I'm mindful that, as Hillary Clinton said in her concession speech, "Our constitutional democracy enshrines the peaceful transfer of power," and that "we don't just respect that — we cherish it."

But respect is a two-way street. If Donald Trump respected the office of the presidency, it could mitigate the difficulty of the majority who didn't vote for him to respect his claim on the authority we're about to delegate to him. As it is, his legal authority will be corrupted from the outset by his refusal to subordinate his financial interests to the interest of our nation, as the Constitution requires. He has already nullified his moral authority by his deceit, his incapacity for accountability and his sociopathic absence of empathy. He's no more capable of respect for the sacred responsibility of his office than he is of respect for the civic responsibility of a journalist.

If our body politic had two heads — a head of state, and a head of government — it might not be as hard as this to recover from a bitterly divisive election. A monarch, a premier, a chancellor: an uncontroversial figurehead removed from the factional fray has a shot at uniting a nation. But in America, as George Washington apocryphally said, the people are the king, and we entrust the eagle of our freedom to a president who is simultaneously beyond, and buffeted by, politics.

Should you watch the inauguration? If that's what it'll take to mobilize you to join a progressive version of the Tea Party, a movement whose handbook is virally becoming "Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda," then go for it. But chances are, you're activated enough to do that now.

I'm not going to watch. If I miss something big, someone will tell me, or I'll read about it. I know that won't be a substitute for the real-time experience of it. But I don't need to experience the fouling of the nest the Founders made for us to know it would break my heart to be an eyewitness to it.

It may be in different words, but many people are saying that.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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