



THE BLOG 11/17/2014 02:26 pm ET | Updated Jan 17, 2015

The I-Word Isn't Impeachment — It's Idiocracy



By Marty Kaplan



SAUL LOEB VIA GETTY IMAGES

Is he — finally — the one we've been waiting for?

Just days after the midterm election, President Barack Obama made a big climate change deal with China, asked the F.C.C. to regulate Internet service providers as if they were public utilities and pledged to address the immigration mess on his own instead of continuing to wait for Congress to arise from its dysfunctional deathbed.

The president's inaction on these issues until now was intended to prevent the electoral debacle and partisan caterwauling that happened anyway. His previous patience has proven to be time squandered, and his search for common ground with folks who wanted his head on a pike turned out to be a case study in bad poker playing, if not wishful thinking.

This post-election Obama is the one voters thought they put into office in 2008, but who spent the next six years being called naïve for projecting their civic hopes onto a cypher. Whatever triggered his transformation — legacy clock ticking, nothing left to lose, stopbullying.gov — it's a heartening moment for his base. The challenge now for him is to deliver on that change; the challenge for his supporters is to rescue the stakes of these changes from soap opera.

We loves us our political melodrama. "Will the Republicans force a government shutdown by baiting Obama to veto a budget that defunds immigration reform?" is the Washington equivalent of "What will Lance do when Kimberly tells him his lover is

actually his sister?" "Will the House impeach Obama?" is as effective a cliffhanger as "Will the train slice Pauline into pieces?" The same narrative toolkit that makes stories entertaining — conflict, suspense, danger and rescue, power and perversion — also makes democracy theatrical and casts its citizens as spectators.

The news media cover politics like a long-running serial in chronic need of crisis. It doesn't matter whether they caused this or merely reflect it. Politicians are so accustomed to being performers that wondering whether Ted Cruz actually believes the things he says is as misbegotten a mission as searching for the real Justin Bieber. It's not our fault that the political characters angling for our attention seem no more authentic than the Punch and Judy roles they play — their words are scripted, their images are cosmetic and their stories hew to the genre conventions that spawned them.

The downside of storified self-government, and of experiencing pretty much everything else as entertainment, too, is that we relinquish our grip on reality. In a series of 36 tweets (the perfect vehicle for such an argument), Grist.org columnist David Roberts, writing about the Supreme Court's decision to hear a potentially fatal challenge to the Affordable Care Act — a case whose only conceivable basis is a typographical error in the law — calls this "postmodern conservatism." The right's "nihilistic oppositionalism," he says, makes its own reality. They have:

"realized that if you just brazen it out, there's no... ref to make the call. In this way, every dispute, even over matters of fact, becomes a contest of power — loudest, best funded, most persistent voices win.... Epistemology becomes competing tantrums.... So there will only be increasing impetus for cons[ervatives] to retreat into fantasy, into simple morality tales... [which] always yield more motivated, organized constituencies than 'it's complicated' ever will."

Conservatives, of course, accuse the left of worse than fantasy. The title of a book by James Inhofe, the Oklahoma Republican about to chair the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, depicts it as deceit: *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*. But all he's really doing is reframing the left's strategy - to inform voters about scientific data — as the plot of an airport thriller. "The bad guys are gunning for you!" is much more entertaining than, "May I please explain this graph to you?" And the studio funding that storyline — the fossil fuel industry — has the largest marketing budget in the world.

It's in the economic self-interest of the news media to make politics as fun as wrestling and as risky as a high-wire act. That's what drives ratings. But we pay a steep price for the pleasures of circus and spectacle. The most critical problem American society faces right now is, arguably, inequality, and the plutocracy that benefits from it, and the corruption that puts remedies for it beyond our constitutional reach. Every breathless story about impeachment occupies bandwidth not given to exploring the structural problems that Naomi Klein addresses in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, or the disinformation that Paul Krugman decimates in his columns, or the oligarchy that the Occupy movement was crushed for trying to put on the national agenda.

Have you seen the 2006 movie *Idiocracy*? It projects contemporary commercialism, anti-intellectualism and the showbizzification of everything into a dystopian America five centuries from now. Five minutes is more like it. "Welcome to Costco, I love you" is what superstore greeters say in the future, but today's nihilists already claim to be "fair and balanced." If you're more sanguine than I am about the news media's incentives to be the ref and make the call, to say what's real and what matters, just imagine what public discourse will be like when the 2016 campaign gets going. We will never get back those hours we spent watching Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum and Ron Paul. Sure, it was all very diverting. But distraction is the mother's milk of the 1 percent.

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

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