WHAT COMES NEXT

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June 2, 2024

We indeed live in interesting times. For the first time in our nation's 246-year history, a former president of the United States is a convicted felon.

The trial that ended on Thursday was not the first opportunity to convict Donald Trump. As Boston University historian Heather Cox Richardson pointed out in her Substack column on Thursday, the Senate could have convicted Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors in 2019, after the House impeached Trump for trying to rig the 2020 presidential election, but Republican senators voted as a block to acquit him. The Senate could have convicted Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors in 2021 after the House impeached him for trying to seize the presidency by instigating an attack on the U.S. Capitol, but Republican senators voted as a block to acquit him. Richardson concludes, "Today, twelve ordinary Americans did what Republican senators refused to do. They protected the rule of law and held Trump accountable for his attempt to rig an election."

True to form, Trump responded to the verdicts by claiming that the trial itself was rigged. Writing on Friday in the Wall Street Journal, Akhil Reed Amar, a professor of constitutional law at Yale, recounted Trump's claims that the conviction was the result of President Biden's effort to wound him by pursuing the prosecution, evil big-money men like George Soros' determination to get him by backing Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, and trial judge Juan Merchan's procedural lack of fairness and conflicts of interest.

To the contrary, Amar says, "It was 12 ordinary citizens, not Biden, Soros or Merchan, who unanimously pronounced Trump guilty on 34 felony counts. In fact, the Trump trial shows why juries have long been considered an important anti-corruption device. A sitting judge — one person, known to future litigants long in advance — is in theory easy enough to bribe." But the 12 citizens who served on the jury "didn't know each other beforehand, and none exactly volunteered for the job. When summoned, they put their lives on hold, listened to the witnesses, examined the evidence, deliberated together and delivered a verdict."

Amar adds, "Somewhere the Founders are smiling, even if Donald Trump is scowling."

The scowling began almost immediately. In a series of statements that were as repetitive as they were brief, Trump said, leaving the courtroom on Thursday, "I'm a very innocent man," calling the verdict a "disgrace." He said that America has gone to hell. "We're a nation in decline, serious decline," he said. "Millions and millions of

people pouring into our country right now from prisons and from mental institutions, terrorists. And they're taking over our country."

In my view, Eric Lach, a staff writer for The New Yorker, wins the prize for best response to Trump's diatribe. He said, "Criminals taking over the country? Sounds bad."

It would indeed be bad if a convicted criminal ended up taking over our country, but as many legal experts have explained, it could happen. The vagaries of our legal system are finely attuned to procedural ploys and technical hijinks that often serve the narrow interests of legal combatants more than they serve the pursuit of justice.

What's bad about the situation, however, extends far beyond the outcome of a single court case. Writing again yesterday, Heather Cox Richardson observes, "Trump has been hailed as Savior by his supporters because he promises to smash through the laws and norms of American democracy to put them into power. There, they can assert their will over the rest of us, achieving the social and religious control they cannot achieve through democratic means because they cannot win the popular vote in a free and fair election. With Trump's conviction within the legal system, his supporters are more determined than ever to destroy the rules that block them from imposing their will on the rest of us."

Politics may be the arena where the battle is being fought, but as Richardson points out, the war is over socially-sanctioned norms and religiously-derived values — whether the defenders of a white, patriarchal, and heteronormative nation think of themselves as religious or not. The underlying struggle pits two fundamentally different ways of knowing against each other — one based on reason and experience, shaped by the disciplines of modern science, and the other based on revelation and scripture, shaped by the belief in a supernatural divine being. It's a war that has been going on for the better part of 500 years.

In the distant past, many thoughtful people believed — and some still do — that as our knowledge of the natural world and human nature increased, the human need for religion would decrease. This is not happening, and I believe it's because science and religion address fundamentally different aspects of human life. Simply put, science operates in the realm of facts and explanation, while religion operates in the realm of meaning and purpose.

Even so, the rise of modern science has changed the rules under which religion operates. Today, people of faith have two options: defend the old paradigm, in which religion and science vie for control of the facts, or accommodate the new paradigm, in which religion and science play complementary, not competing, roles. Put differently, the war we are fighting concerns which way we should be facing — backward toward the past or forward toward the future.

Last December, I read a column by Michelle Goldberg in the New York Times. It's been on my mind ever since. Goldberg says that our current divide stems from a crisis of faith in the possibility of progress.

She writes, “Liberals and leftists have lots of excellent policy ideas but rarely articulate a plausible vision of the future. I sometimes hear leftists talk about “our collective liberation,” but outside a few specific contexts — the ongoing subjugation of the Palestinians comes to mind — I mostly have no idea what they’re talking about.”

She goes on to say that it’s “easy to see what various parts of the left want to dismantle — capitalism, the carceral state, heteropatriarchy, the nuclear family — and much harder to find a realistic conception of what comes next. Some leftists who lose hope in the possibility of thoroughgoing transformation become liberals like me, mostly resigned to working toward incremental improvements to a dysfunctional society. Others, looking beyond the politics of amelioration, seek new ways to shake up the system.”

In contrast, she says, “the right has an advantage in appealing to dislocated and atomized people: It doesn’t have to provide a compelling view of the future. All it needs is a romantic conception of the past, to which it can offer the false promise of return. When people are scared and full of despair, ‘let’s go back to the way things were’ is a potent message, especially for those with memories of happier times.”

I agree with Goldberg’s analysis. People on the right tend to focus on a supposedly idealized past, while people on the left tend to focus on a supposedly idealized future. In so doing, both tend to shortchange the challenges of the present, which lie neither in the distant past nor in the distant future. People who believe they can create the future by re-creating the past misunderstand the arrow of time, which always moves forward. But people who believe they can create the future by decrying how badly the present compares to an ideal future also misunderstand the arrow of time.

In large measure, what comes next will be determined less by what happens on July 11, when Trump get sentenced, or on November 5, when we the people will have our say in these matters. Rather, what comes next will be determined by what happens now. The future gets created not one week at a time, or one month at a time, or one year at a time, but one moment at a time.

We live in interesting times. The word interesting derives from an ancient Latin verb meaning “to be between or among.” Something becomes interesting because of the way it relates to other things. Each moment takes shape by the way in which each element of experience that makes it up — physical, emotional, cultural, economic, political, and so on — relates to all other elements of experience. This is the fundamental process by which events take shape and time moves forward. In a culture that variously looks either to the distant past or the distant future for reasons to be dissatisfied with the present, our discipline as people of faith is to focus on the possibilities of the present — what progress we can make here and now.

Fifty-six years ago this week, Senator Robert Kennedy gave his “Ripple of Hope” speech to an anti-apartheid student group in South Africa. The year was 1966. As Kennedy left the US and traveled to South Africa, civil rights protests were roiling

American cities and anti-Vietnam protests were roiling American campuses. Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her new memoir titled *An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s*, describes the conditions in apartheid South Africa at the time of Kennedy's speech.

Goodwin says, "The oppressive power of the [South African] government had reached a frightening stage. Civil-rights had been decimated. There was no protection against arrest, torture, and jail. Once imprisoned, there was no access to lawyers. Leading opponents of apartheid, including Nelson Mandela, had been convicted of treason and sentenced to prison for life. Opposition parties were outlawed. Books were banned, television was forbidden." The president of the student group was under house arrest, and the South African security police were present in force to intimidate the crowd of more than 1,000 students.

Kennedy began, Goodwin explains, with a passage that seemed to refer to South Africa's troubled history. "I come here this evening," Kennedy said, "because of my deep interest and affection for land settled by the Dutch in the mid-17th century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day;... A land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that form of bondage."

Goodwin reports that the tension in the room was palpable, and then Kennedy said: "I refer, of course, to the United States of America." Laughter suddenly filled the room, followed by a sense of relief.

Kennedy continued with a now-famous passage that resonates with the challenges of our nation even today. He said:

> [We face] the danger of futility: the belief there is nothing one man can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's greatest movements of thought and action have flowed from the work of a single person. A young monk began the Protestant Reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and the thirty-two-year-old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal.
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> These people moved the world, and so can we all. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.

In the most famous passage of the speech, Kennedy said:

> Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Each of us can work to change a small portion of events. We can change what comes next — here and now. We can write a letter. We can make a contribution. We can show up at a rally. We can speak up in a situation of incivility. We can offer a helping hand, or listening ear, or gentle touch of reassurance. We can't control what will happen a month from now or a year from now, but we can influence what comes next. We can send out a tiny ripple of hope.

These are indeed interesting times — in some ways terrible, and in other ways wonderful. Again today, we have been given the gift of a new day, filled perhaps with pain but also with promise. The sun rises, flowers bloom, and people respond with compassion and concern. And yes, sometimes justice triumphs.