

IRONIC POINTS OF LIGHT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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After a decade of economic expansion and widespread prosperity in the US during the 1920's, the 1930's began with an economic crash. The nation and ultimately the world plunged into an abyss of unemployment and poverty that became the Great Depression. The decade ended with Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, marking the outbreak of what became World War II.

In his poem titled "September 1, 1939," the poet W.H. Auden writes:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;

In some ways, our situation today is remarkably different than it was during those awful and uncertain days in 1939. But in other ways, it's not. Many of us feel uncertain and perhaps even afraid. It's certainly true that "waves of anger and fear circulate over the bright and darkened lands of the earth, obsessing our private lives."

Given what's happening in our nation and our world, if you are not yet obsessed with the potential consequences of Tuesday's election, then you probably haven't been paying attention.

In a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations two weeks ago, Martin Wolf, the chief economic commentator for the London-based Financial Times, spoke about what's at stake in the US election. I've been reading Martin Wolf for decades, and in my view, he's regularly one of the smartest people in the room.

From his perspective abroad, Wolf describes what's happening in the US as "an undoing project." America wishes to go backward, he says, in several important directions. It wishes to go backward on globalization — on the US economic integration with the rest of the world. It wishes to go backward on the idea of a multilateral world order embedded in rules, which is an American invention. It wishes to go backward on the idea of America as a global moral policeman, "whose job is to go around the world

and make it a better place and make regimes better in the process.” It also wishes to go backward on the idea of the West as an alliance centered upon the United States, organized around a coherent set of ideas.

Wolf concluded with the most telling backward move. He said, “I also think, by the way, much more profoundly and more significantly, it’s an undoing of the United States.” He added, imagining the situation if Trump is re-elected, “I think the key is that people have to get their minds around the idea that an America that has elected Trump twice with someone like JD Vance as his vice president is an America that basically is saying: we are not interested in any of that stuff anymore... So it is a profound undoing from the world’s sense of what America is about.”

What’s the cause of this great undoing? For his part, Wolf believes it’s a reaction to one specific phenomenon: immigration. He doesn’t think countries around the world set out to completely transform their population demographics by fundamentally changing who lives there. But that is what has happened — not everywhere, but certainly in the US and in Europe. These demographic changes have had economic consequences that have produced a political backlash.

Robert Pape describes in more detail these changes and the backlash that has followed. Pape is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats. He’s been studying political violence for the past three decades and has closely tracked violent attitudes and actions in the US over the past four years.

In the current issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Pape writes, “The principal danger to the United States is not any out-of-control technology or fringe militia group. It is not economic grievances run amok. It is not even Trump, who is as much a symptom of what ails the United States as he is a cause. Instead, the greatest source of danger comes from a cultural clash over the nature of the United States’ identity — one with profound implications for who gets to be a citizen.

Pape continues, “The country’s fight over its national identity has multiple dimensions. But the most serious is demographic change.” He points out that in 1990, more than three-quarters of the U.S. population identified as white. In 2023, the U.S. Census Bureau put that figure at a little over 58 percent. By 2045, the share is set to fall below 50 percent.

“These changes,” Pape says, “have led to rising anger among conservatives, many of whom see increased ethnic diversity as an existential threat to their way of life. These voters have embraced Trump and his nationalist movement, which promise to stop such change in its tracks. Trump’s exclusionary policies and rhetoric have, in turn, prompted a ferocious backlash from liberals, who embrace demographic change — or who at least fear that conservative success will cost Americans hard-won freedoms.”

The underlying reason many working-class Americans feel particularly upset about immigration, Martin Wolf points out, is that working-class jobs in the US, as in the UK, have declined from about 40% of all employment in the postwar era to about

10% today. He says, “So the working-class has become homeless, economically and politically. It’s really a massive shift. And the people who been successful in picking them up are populist demagogues of the right.”

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No matter what the political landscape looks like in the US when the ballots are counted and the outcomes are finalized, whenever that may be, our nation will remain deeply and bitterly divided. The divisions may be even deeper and more bitter after the election than they are now. After all, the demographic and economic factors that have produced these divisions will remain. And at least half of the nation will see them as having been even more deeply entrenched by the results of the election.

In his poem “September 1, 1939,” Auden continues:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Having witnessed Germany’s transition from a liberal democracy to a horrifically genocidal dictatorship, Auden understandably had a dim view of the state and its claim to be the ultimate authority. Amid the anger and fear that has covered the globe, Auden says, all I have is a voice. I will use my voice, he says, to undo two lies. One lie claims that the state is morally authoritative — that the government somehow can be or should be the source of our salvation. The other lie claims that individuals exist alone.

One of Auden’s closest friends during his lifetime was Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent public intellectual in the US from the 1930’s through the 1960’s. The Missouri-born son of a German pastor, Niebuhr spent most of his career teaching religion and ethics at Union Theological Seminary here in New York. Niebuhr believed that individuals are capable of virtue and compassion — but only as individuals. When individuals gather themselves into nations, they tend to perpetrate bad actions in the

name of good principles. In the name of freedom, for example, a nation might justify depriving people of their freedom — either its own citizens or citizens of other nations. Because the state operates in the ambiguous realm of violence and human wickedness, it sometimes uses morally ambiguous means to achieve its ends.

For this reason, Niebuhr says in his book titled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, “Individuals may strive to be moral, but collectively human beings are compromised and prone to immorality, even evil.” Niebuhr applies this principle to the United States in his book *The Irony of American History*, where he says, “No society, not even a democratic one, is great enough or good enough to make itself the final [goal] of human existence.”

Niebuhr’s ideas provide a backdrop for Auden’s caution against believing in the moral authority of the state. Instead, Auden says, we need to pursue moral purposes ourselves, as individuals. But we can’t pursue them on our own. He says, “We must love one another or die.”

Elaine Scarry, a professor of aesthetics and value theory at Harvard, says that the way we act toward others is shaped by the way we imagine them. And the reason we so often respond with anger and fear toward other people, and at times even violence, is that we are so bad at imagining them — their lives, their feelings, even their bodies. She says, “The human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.”

When people somehow develop the capacity to imagine the lives of others — that is, the lives of people they once considered “the other” — their attitudes and actions begin to change.

Auden closes his poem with these lines:

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

My focus this morning isn’t the political path to ensuring that our government embodies our ideals as a spiritual community, though it is my fervent hope that the great undoing will itself become undone, at least in some measure. Rather, my focus is our spiritual responsibility as individuals and as a community of faith in a world convulsed by anger and fear, and beleaguered by negation and despair. Our duty is to

become the irony — the irony that a nation founded by the violence of colonialism and made economically prosperous by the labor of enslaved people can somehow embody the ideals that our nation at its best has long pursued.

The day after Donald Trump was elected in 2016, Aaron Sorkin, the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *The Social Network* and mastermind behind *The West Wing*, wrote a letter to his then-15-year-old daughter Roxy and her mother Julia. After decrying the misogyny and bigotry that had carried the day, he concluded, “America didn’t stop being America last night and we didn’t stop being Americans and here’s the thing about Americans: Our darkest days have always — always — been followed by our finest hours.”

What does it mean to show an affirming flame in these dark times? It means committing myself to embodying the best of our nation’s ideals. It means treating people with dignity, insisting on equality, and working tirelessly for equal opportunity. It means standing with people who feel threatened or afraid — with women, with people of color, with immigrants, with Latinos, with Muslims, with LGBTQ people, with Jews, and with anyone else who feels marginalized or left out.

It means not losing hope, not ever, even though the voices of derision and the forces of division at times threaten to overwhelm us. It means keeping our minds open to other people’s problems and our hearts open to other people’s pain. It means keeping our spirits alive and our souls on fire, which is why we come to places like this sanctuary, where we find refuge and comfort, and we remind ourselves of the ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity to which we have committed ourselves.

We can do this work, you and I — along with millions upon millions of other points of light, shining with courage and conviction, even in the darkest night.