

It's not Trump but America the left hates

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 12 July 2020

Donald Trump's speech at Mount Rushmore on the eve of the Fourth of July was the most important and riveting of his presidency. It was mostly a soaring celebration of America, though with a presidential election just five months away, there were a few partisan jabs at his opponents.

By the standards of contemporary debate it was civil throughout. By Trump's own normal standards it was positively decorous.

Reaction to it was all but deranged and demonstrates the profound cultural crisis through which the West is passing.

A piece in Foreign Policy, a semi-official journal of liberal internationalism, in all seriousness described the speech as fascist. Fascist!

This bizarre reaction was sadly pretty widespread.

Time magazine said "Trump pushes racial division". Annie Karni in The New York Times was typical, indeed relatively mild, of much of NYT reaction saying that Trump had delivered a "dark and divisive speech". Esquire magazine called it "terrifyingly bonkers". An Associated Press headline said the speech was all about advancing racial division.

Perhaps the most magnificent bit of nonsense of all came in the increasingly deranged Washington Post. It ran a piece saying the speech demonstrated Trump's "unyielding push to preserve Confederate symbols and the legacy of white dominion".

That piece deserves a special Leon Trotsky award for ideological madness because Trump didn't mention, extol or support any Confederate figure at all. Instead he sang paeans of praise to Abraham Lincoln for abolishing the evil of slavery and constantly affirmed America's civic universalism.

It goes without saying Trump brings some of the misinterpretation on himself. He has said so many intemperate, foolish, offensive and just plain wrong things that it's what people have come to expect. At the personal level, Trump is an appalling figure to embody the defence of Western civilisation.

[The Room Where It Happened](#), by Trump's former National Security Adviser, John Bolton, is a brilliant read, but sobering and even disturbing in its depiction of Trump. Bolton is a lifelong hardline right-wing Republican, a natural America First type but from inside the system. You can discount part of his tone as self serving, though Bolton seems pretty self aware. But you cannot really argue he makes up the incidents where Trump is abusive and foul, or where he simply has no idea what he's talking about (constantly confusing the president of Afghanistan with his predecessor, thinking Finland is a part of Russia, not knowing Britain is a nuclear power). Most presidencies look ragged from the inside, but this is pretty weird.

However, as well as many foolish things, Trump has said and done brave and even wise things. It is also the case that there is no serious evidence that Trump is a racist. Nonetheless, even if you believe the very worst of Trump, a sensible reaction to the Mount Rushmore speech might have been to argue that while Trump expressed noble and traditional American sentiments in this speech, he frequently doesn't live up to those sentiments, that he was a hypocrite.

But I suspect we are dealing with something much more troubling than merely the normal Trump Derangement Syndrome. Many of the speech's critics hate it partly because it expresses traditional American liberalism on issues of race and history. It is the turn away from that liberalism, towards a wholly destructive hatred of the Western project and of all Western history, combined with a profoundly illiberal desire to re-racialise society, that is disturbing in the reaction to Trump's speech.

The Economist magazine addresses this a bit in this week's issue. It is important for a moment to situate the Economist culturally and ideologically. The Economist was once an intelligently conservative magazine. It would be wrong to characterise it that way now. It is a strong proponent of markets, and mixed-economy capitalism, and of free trade, but on all social issues it has moved to the progressive side. Nothing wrong with that. Magazines, like people, are entitled to change their minds, change their outlooks. They go through different stages, adopt different identities.

But now on social issues The Economist is a journalistic expression of corporate wokeness. Partly one suspects to emphasise the devoutness of its adherence to the new religions, The Economist is seldom outdone in its detestation of Trump and all his works.

Yet this week, remarkably, The Economist finally finds in itself the wit to denounce the left-wing extremism of aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement and its recent efflorescence in protests. After running through its normal liturgical denunciation of Trump, The Economist actually made an interesting point. The cancel culture and extremists in the racial justice and social justice movements are actually attacking liberalism. It said: "... a dangerous rival approach has emerged from America's universities. It rejects the liberal notion of progress. It defines everyone by their race, and every action as racist or anti-racist... it is spreading out of the academy and into everyday life. If it supplants liberal values, then intimidation will chill open debate and sow division to the disadvantage of all, black and white."

That looks like The Economist has been mugged by reality. It's the first recognition for a long time in that august journal that the threat to liberalism comes from the activist left, the race-centred, history-hating, which nonsensically sees West as the enemy of humanity.

It is just this illiberal spirit that The Economist derides which I suspect animates so much of the denunciation of the Mount Rushmore speech. That is, the Trump haters have not assumed that Trump said something worse than he did and reacted against this. They actually heard what Trump said but have moved to a position where they now denounce the great liberal ideal of abolishing race as a constraint in civic identity, and building on the strengths of our liberal and conservative heritage, while of course always recognising the many times Western societies have failed to live up to their ideals.

I recommend people read Trump's speech. Mount Rushmore is the site of carved likenesses of four great presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. Each of these men had their faults of course, they were, after all, human beings. And each was a creature of their time, no-one can really escape that either. But on any rational assessment each was a friend and enlarger of liberty and each contributed magnificently to the American dream and the American achievement.

Trump partly uses the four men as the frame for his speech, which was certainly crafted by expert speech writers. Consider some of its key passages. Repeatedly, in this speech Trump denounces the evil of slavery and its contradiction of American ideals. He says of Lincoln: "He rose to high office from obscurity, based on a force and clarity of his anti-slavery convictions... Lincoln won the Civil War; he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he led the passage of the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery for all time, and ultimately, his determination to preserve our nation and our union cost him his life...giving every ounce of strength that he had to ensure that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, did not perish from the Earth." Trump cites and praises many African-American heroes.

Frequently, repeatedly, joyfully, Trump cites and celebrates the universalism of the American promise, that the American dream is open to every citizen of every background. He says: "We believe in equal opportunity, equal justice and equal treatment for citizens of every race, background, religion and creed. Every child of every colour – born and unborn – is made in the holy image of God."

That is not fascism, but traditional liberalism, in this case, if you like, Christian liberalism.

Trump cites Martin Luther King, whose vision he supports.

King did not denounce the American dream. He did not denounce America's core documents. Rather, in his famous I Have a Dream speech, he asked America to live up to those documents fully. Indeed he began that speech with a heartfelt tribute to Lincoln: "... a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand, (who) signed the Emancipation Declaration. This momentous decree is a great beacon of hope..."

In a powerful formulation, King said he and his followers had come to Washington "to cash a check. When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."

It's pretty clear isn't it that if King were saying things like that today he would be denounced as a racist, a stooge for colonialism, as someone who refused to acknowledge the structural racism of America and its institutions, as someone who did not understand that, as The New York Times ridiculous 1619 Project has it, the central purpose of America was slavery. King would surely be denounced as threatening the safety of students who might have to listen to such shocking sentiments and he would be subject to the cancel culture.

King was also, like Trump, strongly, vigorously, stridently opposed to violence in demonstrations.

In his famous speech, King instructed: “In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for justice by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must not allow our creative protests to degenerate into physical violence.”

None of this, of course, is remotely to equate the heroic moral leadership of Martin Luther King, which has inspired millions of people across the generations, including me, with the often odious personality of Trump. However, those who style themselves as King’s heirs have become too often progenitors of ideological extremism he would hate.

In attacking Trump for his Mount Rushmore speech they are not just displaying an irrational hatred of a particular political leader, they are actually attacking Trump for espousing the same positions as King himself espoused.

Of course there were some contemporary, partisan, sharp edges to the Trump speech, but nothing remotely racist, or even race specific, nothing remotely offensive.

In his speech, Trump promises that the nation’s monuments to its founders will be protected. He promises that the police will “arrest the rioters”. He does not say protesters should be arrested. This is a vital distinction and one which Trump’s enemies never acknowledge. Barack Obama himself called violent protesters “thugs” and said they discredited the movements they claimed to support.

Republican senator Tom Cotton caused a firestorm by writing an oped in The New York Times in which he argued that violent protesters whom city police forces could not control justified the deployment of active service US military. That was probably a mistaken call at the time, though by no means extreme. But the real moral of the story is that when the newspaper staff revolted and the paper’s leadership went into craven surrender, and then full jihad denunciation of Cotton, they routinely claimed he had called for troops to be used against demonstrators.

These constant elidings and misrepresentations cannot really be seen any longer as accidental. The crime the ultra woke militants of illiberal liberal conformity want to punish is actually failing to support the new civic religion which involves hatred of Western civilisation and hatred of the societies this civilisation has created.

Trump at Mount Rushmore also had some shorter passages condemning the contemporary cancel culture and the left-wing indoctrination of students with hostility to America. In the attacks which claimed Trump was a fascist they claimed Trump was making this up, that no such thing really existed.

Are they kidding?

The West is under profound challenge internally and externally today. The irrational hatred of the West, within the West, is one symptom of a deep malaise. Trump was right to call it out.

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