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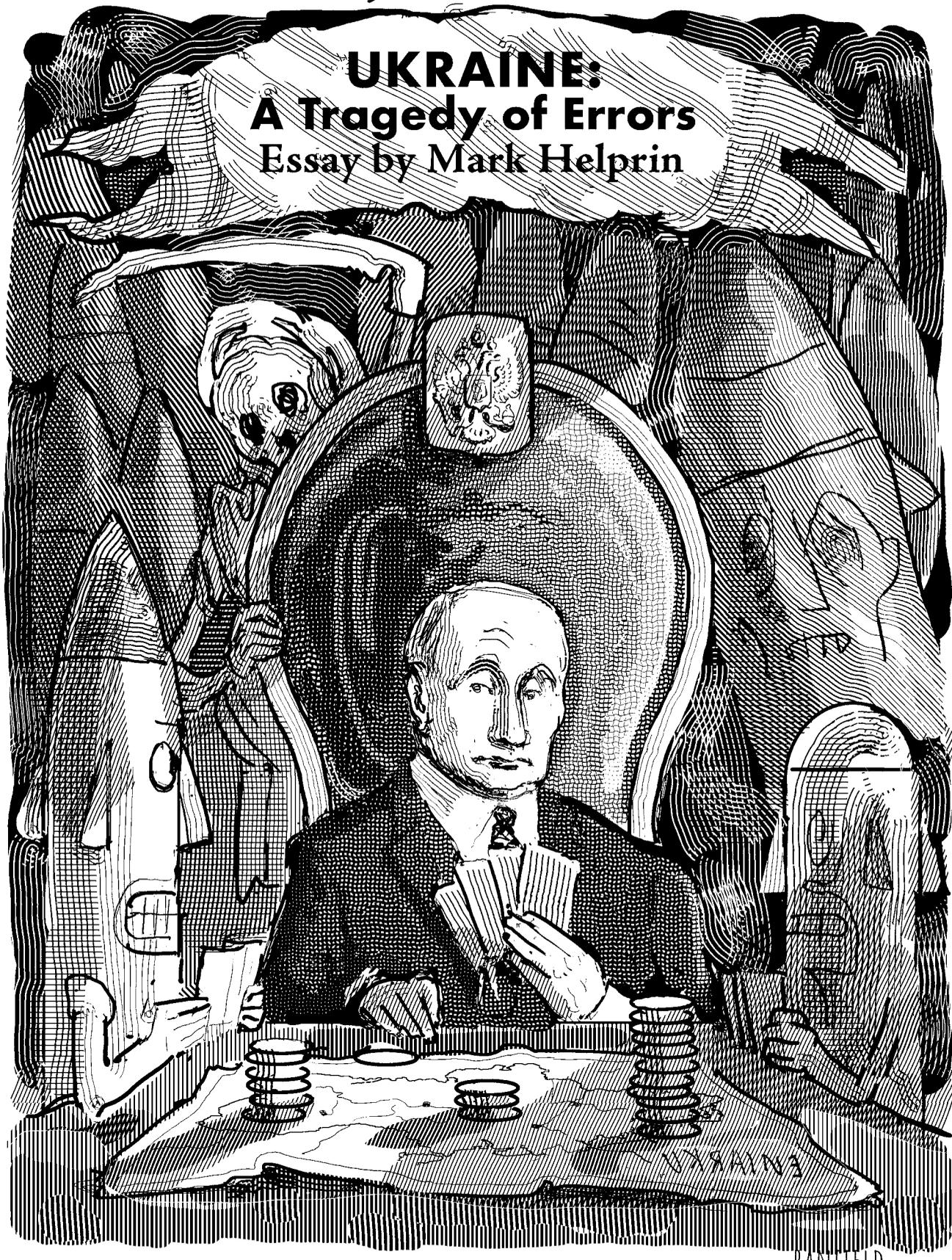
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## PRESENT AT THE CREATION

*Norman Podhoretz on the rise of the anti-American Left.*



*The prophet Nathan rebukes King David.*

CRB: Since our interview with you three years ago (Spring 2019), a lot has happened. In 2019, you told the CRB's readers that Donald Trump's election in 2016 was "a kind of miracle," and you called him "an unworthy vessel chosen by God to save us from the evil on the Left." And you finished that passage by remarking, "If he doesn't win in 2020, I would despair of the future." Now it's 2022. Trump didn't win. Are you despairing?

NP: Well, I have to resist being in despair—it's my natural default position anyway—but I still feel pretty much the way I felt to begin with. The fact of the matter is, the idea of his being an unworthy vessel for doing God's work—though of course not meant literally—I think makes sense. And my prime example always was King David, who did many bad things, which, according to the Bible, is why God did not allow him to build the Temple. I used to use this analogy so often that my son John, who was a mild Never Trumper, at some point said, "Stop with the King Da-

vid already!" But there is now a complication. Trump has done a few things that go beyond the vices that the imperfect vessel is allowed, even while doing God's work. For example, in 2020 he lost Georgia for the Republicans, which cost them the Senate.

CRB: But you consider that political malpractice? Losing Georgia?

NP: Yes, I do. However, I have to say that I am perfectly prepared to believe that the 2020 election may have been stolen. Yet the outraged reaction to anyone who says that or believes that has been absolutely astounding. Because think of Stacey Abrams, whom I regard as a nothing and a no one, lost her bid for the governorship of Georgia by something like 50,000 votes. And to this day, she has refused to concede, and for that refusal she was turned into a hero of the Democratic Party. So, the idea that it's shocking beyond belief to cast some doubt on the 2020 presidential election is utterly demented. Any-

way, the Democratic Party spent two and a half years and 20 billion dollars or whatever it was, trying to prove not just that Trump had stolen the 2016 election, but that he was actually a Russian agent, that is to say a traitor. The ignominious Representative Adam Schiff walked around for two years saying that he had definitive proof of Trump's treason, but he couldn't reveal it because it was classified. Not only did he get away with this, he was elevated. I mean, he became an even more important figure in the Democratic Party than he had been. I think this remains one of the great political disgraces of our time.

CRB: Do you think Trump should run again in '24?

NP: I was afraid you were gonna ask me that question. Obviously he wants to run. All his virtues, which are considerable in my opinion, are balanced by some serious vices, though nothing as bad as King David's. Take, for



example, his disgraceful treatment of Mike Pence. Pence was as loyal to him as any vice president could have been. And yet when he asked Pence to do something that Pence had no power to do, he treated it as though Pence were refusing to help him when he would have been committing some kind of unconstitutional crime if he had done so. Now I'll tell you why in the end I come down, with doubts and worries, to answering yes, I think he should run and I would support him if I thought he had a good chance of winning. On the other hand, I believe that Republicans have a very good bench—especially Senator Tom Cotton, but also half a dozen other very impressive young Republicans who would be okay with me. But I can't shake myself of the feeling that there was something miraculous about the 2016 election....

CRB: May we quote you on that?

NP: Well, you can quote me with a question mark! At any rate, as I see it, the struggle we're in is over the nature of this country. One side—call it the conservative culture—believes that America is a force for good in itself and a force for good in the world at large, and that to the other side—call it the culture of the Left—America is evil in itself and a force for evil in the world at large. I don't mean that every single member of that side is evil. I mean that the culture of the Left has been pervaded by evil ideas, which have seeped into the political realm through the Democratic Party. That's what I mean. And I thought then that Donald Trump turned out to be the one person who had what it took to stand between them and the rest of us, which he did imperfectly, but he did it.

He put the brakes on them, and he did a lot to expose what they were up to. And they did everything in their power to destroy him. I can tell you it's very tough to hold out against that kind of thing, and very few people are capable of it and I don't blame them. There are many people who won't run for office precisely because they know that they won't be able to take what's going to be thrown at them. And Trump not only took it, he overcame it. And even, oddly enough, took it with a certain amount of grace, the grace reflected in his humor and in the clowning.

CRB: Let's talk about what has happened to the Democratic Party, and to the American Left—your former party and your former political side. You wrote a book called *My Love Affair with America* (2000). Does it pain you to see what your former comrades think nowadays of America?

NP: Well, it pains me less than you would think because I was present at the creation, as Dean Acheson said in a different context. I was present at the corruption of the Democratic Party. I was a Democrat in the 1950s and '60s. I was not much of a party man, though I'd never voted for a Republican. I was—well, here comes my famous humility—I was one of the leaders of the new movement, later called the New Left, helping to disseminate and propagate its ideas and attitudes. I was not an activist. I didn't march, and I didn't like marching. But I was in on the formation and justification of the things that the New Left was saying. I hasten to add that some of them seemed very callow to me, and I rejected those.

CRB: At the time?

NP: Yes. At the time. I was editor of *Commentary*, and I rejected articles that were ideologically okay but callow. The most notable example was Tom Hayden's manifesto, which was the founding document of the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society. Hayden submitted the "Port Huron Statement" to me, and I turned it down. And some people, including many of

### The Left, black and white, talk now publicly the way they only used to talk privately.

my friends, said, "Are you crazy?" And I replied, "It's not intellectually up to par." And they said, "Well, what difference does that make?" Well, it made a difference to me, and still does. So there was a limit to my commitment to that movement, but I was committed to it.

CRB: Do you think the SDS would have been more dangerous or less dangerous if you had edited and published their manifesto?

NP: That's...what a hell of a question. I never thought of it that way. Hayden might not have accepted my editing.

CRB: Granted. But let's assume he did.

NP: Well, maybe it would have been more dangerous. Or maybe it would have been too sophisticated. I don't know. I mean, when I say callow, that is the exact word that I used then. So if I had edited it, I would have decalowed it. But all my friends and comrades, one in particular, said I was nuts because the piece would have created a sensation. And he

was right. It did go on to create a sensation, and that would have been in some ways good for my magazine. But I passed on it.

CRB: But even Tom Hayden, in 1962 in the Port Huron Statement, quoted Abraham Lincoln favorably and mentioned the Declaration of Independence. Hayden was still close in a way to the Civil Rights Movement of that time in arguing that America had to fulfill its own promises. Isn't the situation much worse now?

NP: Well, I've explained to people, or tried, over the years in every way I could that the enemy of the New Left was not the Right. The Right didn't exist for the New Left. It wasn't on the radar. It was so self-evidently bad. They didn't have to waste any energy on it. No, the enemy was the liberal community. And a lot of people had trouble understanding this because by the time they got around to hearing it, the word "liberal" had been co-opted or kidnapped, if you like, by the Left. When the Port Huron Statement came out, the original spirit of the young New Left was still there—which was America is bad, but it's only bad because it's not living up to its ideals. And our job is to make it live up to those ideals. And we had a great chance because of the circumstances. Stalin was dead. The Soviet Union was making peaceful noises, and we had a window of opportunity that we should take. And we knew what had to be done. We could, first of all, ban nuclear weapons. That was the main issue, and nuclear testing was the proxy for it. And we could get all that done if we got ourselves together and worked together. But at some point that analysis and that agenda changed dramatically—let's say, from Martin Luther King to Stokely Carmichael. Or from David Riesman to Saul Alinsky. Maybe it was 1972, with the bombing of Hanoi, or perhaps earlier when the whole movement turned and said this country was not bad just because it wasn't fulfilling its own ideals. In fact, it didn't have such ideals. Those ideals were fake.

They didn't go as far as the 1619 Project today, which condemns the country for having anti-black racism in its very DNA, but they came pretty close. I mean, they said America not only had become rotten in itself and could only be saved by a revolution, but America was the cause of all the troubles in the world. I mean, for my sins, I published one of the strongest arguments for the latter view by Robert Heilbroner called "Counterrevolutionary America." He was a very good writer, and he knew how to make an argument. From my point of view now he was terrible, though I was even a little worried about him then,



thinking he had gone too far by claiming that the Cold War was our fault. I never really believed that. In any event, I published a lot of stuff like that also on the issue of civil rights or “the Negro problem,” as we called it then. For example, I resurrected Paul Goodman, who, as he told me then, had 19 unpublished books. And I published one of them in full, *Growing Up Absurd*, which became the bible of the youth movement of the '60s. And that was what I mean when I say I was present at the creation. *Commentary* magazine was, if not the prime intellectual source, certainly one of them, where you went to find the intellectually sophisticated case for this movement. Now, we'll get to my love affair with America. It was the original New Leftists like me who believed that this country had not lived up to its ideals, but that its ideals were great. I never, never, never hated America. I was a child of immigrants, and it's not unusual for people like me to feel that way, I mean, to thank my lucky stars that my parents had had the guts to get the hell out of Europe and come here. As somebody told me, you have a shrewd birth certificate. To have been born here was the greatest blessing I could possibly have inherited.

CRB: How is today's woke revolution worse, or different?

NP: Well, it metastasized. I used to say that it took the long march through the institutions. That was a Maoist slogan. And I never dreamed that the march would wind up so quickly where it wound up. I mean, when Barack Obama was president and Bill de Blasio mayor of New York, I said would you ever have imagined that we'd have a Communist in the White House and a Sandinista in Gracie Mansion? Now, I didn't think Obama was a Communist, but I certainly thought he was a true leftist and a disciple of Saul Alinsky, whom I knew slightly. I knew those people. I knew what they said when they weren't being recorded. They were still, to begin with, careful enough not to go as far as today. They would not admit in public to hating the country. When you were having dinner together, however, they said terrible things, like Vietnam was Auschwitz, Harlem was Auschwitz. And I once had a loud fight in one of my then-favorite restaurants, the Palm, with Jason Epstein, who was a founder of the *New York Review of Books* and my closest friend in those days. And he was carrying on, and I actually screamed at him, I said, “If I felt that way, I would leave this country. What are you doing here?” I meant it, too.

But the hatred of the country was intense, sincere, self-righteous, and slowly infecting

more and more people. My transition rightward in response was not Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. It was a gradual process. And it took four or five years, little by little; it was difficult because a personal price was involved, as well as my own peace of mind. But when I finally achieved peace of mind, when I finally decided what it was I really believed and what I didn't believe, I went public, as it were. And from the very first minute, it was war.

But was it worse? It's worse now because the evil has spread and there's hardly a healthy spot you can find.

CRB: Say something about, if you wish, the difference between, say, James Baldwin, and today's black intellectuals on the Left.

NP: Well, Jimmy Baldwin is a complicated case. And I'd be delighted to talk to you about it, but I'll try to keep it short. When Jimmy Baldwin made his first appearance on the scene, I was an undergraduate at Columbia. He was writing for *Commentary* and *Partisan Review* mostly. And we used to wait for every new issue of those magazines, as though revelation were contained inside. Anyway, we had a kind of debate on the Columbia campus. Was this guy, whom we had never seen,

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white or black? And that's exactly the reaction he wanted. I think the title of that particular essay was "Everyone's Protest Novel." If it wasn't, it might well have been. It was an attack on Richard Wright and on *Native Son*. Eventually, I became a fairly close friend of Baldwin's and I even commissioned the essay that became *The Fire Next Time*. Which he gave to the *New Yorker*. You didn't do that in those days. I mean, if an editor commissioned a piece, you didn't give it to somebody else. But, of course, the *New Yorker* paid \$10,000 instead of the \$300 or whatever I would have paid him. (Incidentally, he died owing me a \$200 advance.) It created a real sensation, and it also marked the turning point for him. He was not a radical quite yet, but he started to move. As I was moving rightward, he was moving leftward. And he wound up as, I think, an insincere leftist. He was a very complicated guy. He was very elegant, both as a writer and in his manner. He didn't want to be the leader of a political movement, either.

CRB: Is that artistic consciousness, that desire to rise above politics and race, one of the elements missing in today's "anti-racism"?

NP: I would say yes. Not only missing, it's invisible. I mean, Ta-Nehisi Coates is a pretty good writer, but he's no James Baldwin. Baldwin's reputation kept growing, however, even though his work declined with it. Only poor Ralph Ellison remained loyal to Baldwin's original argument that it wasn't Richard Wright who inspired him, but William Faulkner; that he was not merely a black writer but an American writer and black people had made their own distinctive contribution to American culture. Ellison was not friendly with Baldwin or vice versa. He wasn't particularly friendly with me either, but that's another matter.

CRB: Where do race relations and American politics go from here?

NP: I've been working for the past 50 years to atone for a notorious article called "My Negro

Problem—and Ours," which I wrote in 1963. "It had something in it to offend everybody," as a friend told me. And that was true. That article was a response to Jimmy Baldwin and it was he who urged me to write it. All whites, I didn't write *hate* blacks, but have a problem with blacks, and all blacks have a problem with whites. It was basically an attack on integration, on the pleasant idea that if the two races got to know each other, we'd become friends. Now, I had grown up with Negroes in school and in the streets and I knew the opposite was the case. The better you got to know each other, the worse it became. And I thought integration was the illusion of white liberals who had never met a black, except for the cleaning lady, and who didn't know what they were talking about. Such was my contribution to the corruption of American intellectual-political life. But Jimmy Baldwin loved it, because he was on his way to that position, too. So having said that, I will now say that I was a little bit right. Mostly wrong, but there was some point to what I was saying in those days.

CRB: Almost in despair you came out in that essay in favor of miscegenation, in the sense that you disdained other forms of integration as too superficial.

NP: Yes, and I was widely denounced as a racist. But how could I be pro-miscegenation and racist at the same time! Anyway, what's going on now with "anti-racism" is really different from the past, because it's one of the main, or perhaps *the* main, weapon of attack on America. What's happened today is that the gloves are off, the disguises are off, the leftists, black and white, talk now publicly the way they only used to talk privately, it's out in the open and there is a tiny bit of resistance being mounted recently, but only a tiny bit so far. So, it is worse and a lot of people are now saying, "We are in a cold civil war." And we were not in a civil war yet in those days, in the 1960s. We were so to speak in the 1840s or early 1850s, not in the 1860s. But we're there now (except, thank God, for the guns). I don't know how this divide is going to work itself out, but I consider it evil

because I still believe, and I believe in a way more than ever, that this country is not only a force for good in itself and in the world at large, but one of the high points of human civilization. We don't rate in the arts with ancient Athens or Elizabethan England or 19th century Russia. We do pretty well, but we're not in that league. Where we do reach the highest heights is in socio-political institutions. Our founding fathers, I hate using that phrase.

CRB: You have something against fathers?

NP: There's a TV show, *Veep*. The vice president, the veep, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, calls them "the founding f-kers."

CRB: And they were that too, necessarily!

NP: They created a system whereby more freedom and more prosperity have been accorded to more people—including blacks—than by any civilization known to human history. That achievement is what puts us up there with Athens and Elizabethan England. That's why I don't hesitate to use the word "evil" in talking about the ideas and the people promulgating them who are trying their best to tear that precious system down. The last chapter of *My Love Affair with America* is called "Dayenu American-style." Dayenu means "it would have sufficed." It's a Hebrew term and at the Passover Seder, there is a whole litany of gratitude to God: If God had only done this, it would have been enough. If he had only done *this*, it would have been enough. Dayenu, dayenu. So I have a whole series of dayenus about why I love this country so much. So this is where I stand. We all have to face the fact that we are at war, albeit a cold civil war, and that this moment is not just an ordinary political disagreement in which we can be bipartisan, etc., etc. All that, that's gone. God bless America is all I can say. Amen.

*Norman Podhoretz is former editor-in-chief of Commentary magazine and author of 12 books. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004.*

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