

With a modern P.T. Barnum act, Donald Trump is tapping Americans' anger to sell tickets to his own political circus.

*If the US election campaign currently has the air of a circus, Donald Trump can easily be seen as its P.T. Barnum. While the historical analogy is worth consideration, though, **Ron Pruessen** argues that Trump goes beyond (and beneath) the earlier Big Top impresario – and that the audience he is attracting is more than a gaggle of rubes and suckers.*



First: Think of Donald Trump as a modern day P.T. Barnum (the 19th century Big Top impresario).
Second: Ask who's filling all the seats at the circus.

Trump is a Barnum 2.0, of course. There's a shared talent for brilliant (or at least successful) promotion – plus a taste for tawdry bunkum and sideshows. “The Donald,” however, has imagined a fourth ring for his circus – politics – and has thrown his hat (and hair) into it. In the process, he's become his own star clown, craving attention as well as wealth in a way that wasn't really Barnum's cotton candy.

P.T. did have more of a way with an aphorism than D.T. (and aren't the latter suggestive initials?). “Every crowd has a silver lining,” Barnum said – and “Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.” It's tempting to see the Trump political phenomenon as confirmation, with misogyny, racism, and venomous ethnocentrism as elephants on parade. But it's too tempting to leave it at that. Although those buying tickets to the Trump circus may be making foolish, even reprehensible choices – especially given the ringmaster/clown hawking them in – many are also behaving in ways that are both very human and steeped in American traditions.

This is one of those moments, that is, when suspicions about the emperor's clothes (old as well as new) flame into fury in the United States. One of those moments when the powers that be – elected officials in and outside Washington, the wealthy, the highly educated, and the media stars – turn out to be less than the best and brightest. Far less. Blood and treasure wasted in unsuccessful wars, the economic problems sapping the middle class, social tensions sparked by race and guns, a dysfunctional political system: Trump may offer the worst kind of solutions to such problems, but they are real problems and he serves up his bunkum with a full-throated anger that provides at least temporary satisfaction for some. The crack of the lion tamer's whip may not change real life beyond the circus, but it can feel exciting in the moment.



(L) Parody of Jenny Lind's first American tour for P.T. Barnum, New York City, October 1850 (R) Donald Trump Credit: By W. Schaus [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons, ed ouimette (Flickr, CC-BY-SA-2.0)

There has always been an appetite for rough justice in the United States – a readiness to mete out frontier punishment in the Wild West or on mean metropolitan streets. Harsh treatment of those provoking anger can have degrees of intensity. It can be “rough” as in the sometimes rowdy style of the “average Joe” (or Jane) – as opposed to the refinement of a “blue blood” aristo. American culture has traditionally relished tales where the pomposity of elite 1%ers is pierced, where city slickers (and “pantywaists”) get their comeuppance at the hands of cowboys – where Groucho Marx plays cat and mouse with Margaret Dumont and where David Letterman or Jon Stewart skewer the high and mighty. The recent attention given to “New York values,” in fact – from candidates and the media – has missed a crucial dynamic: the clash of styles between ever more affluent Manhattan and the “rough” and tumble neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the Bronx. (Full disclosure here: I was born and raised in Brooklyn and admire some of its rawness. It isn’t always pretty, but neither are the deeds of the sleek elite.)

Trump’s great wealth has done nothing to smooth his edges – but this is a great strength in the eyes of some who are angry in their very American way. Critics who decry him for not being “presidential” just don’t understand that this is precisely what makes him appealing in certain quarters. Nor do the critics remember the alternating currents of American political history – where leaders considered crude and rude can become popular presidents: Andrew Jackson, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson – and George W. Bush most recently.

“Rough” has also taken more violent forms. Tar and feathers, lynching, vigilantes, and arson (with or without burning crosses) have pockmarked American history since colonial times. Even in our seemingly evolved new century, the world’s highest incarceration rate and 36 gun deaths per day reveal an exceptional proclivity for violence. It’s impossible for a historian to nod calmly when rambunctiousness turns to sucker punches at Trump rallies, but it is still important – and sad and frightening – to remember that the nation has been here before when anger was in the air.

Past experience does suggest that fury directed at the hypothetical “best and brightest” tends to peter out (even if violent thoughts and actions toward others continue). Most often, rough and tumble Americans have personal and family aspirations that keep them more restrained and focused on achieving their own “elite” status. Andrew Jackson never lost his knockabout impulses, but he became a wealthy slave owner before he became president—and Brooklyn’s Tony Manero (John Travolta) did move to Manhattan to find a better life at the end of Saturday Night Fever. There are those moments, though – as in 2016 – when envy and hope and patience are trumped (so to

speak) by anger. And then the circus comes to town.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/27v3Jbz>

About the author

Ron Pruessen – *University of Toronto*

Ronald W. Pruessen has served as the Munk School of Global Affairs' Director for International Partnerships & Research and is former Chair of the Department of History, University of Toronto. His primary research and teaching interests are in 20th century US foreign policy and international relations. Early work focused on the Cold War (e.g., John Foster Dulles: To the Threshold, 1888-1952) and he recently co-edited (with Soraya Castro) *Fifty Years of Revolution: Perspectives on Cuba, the United States, and the World*. He is currently writing a study of the way Barack Obama's foreign policies relate to deeply rooted American views and behavior.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP