

Disgusted by Donald Trump? Turning away from the spectacle isn't an option.



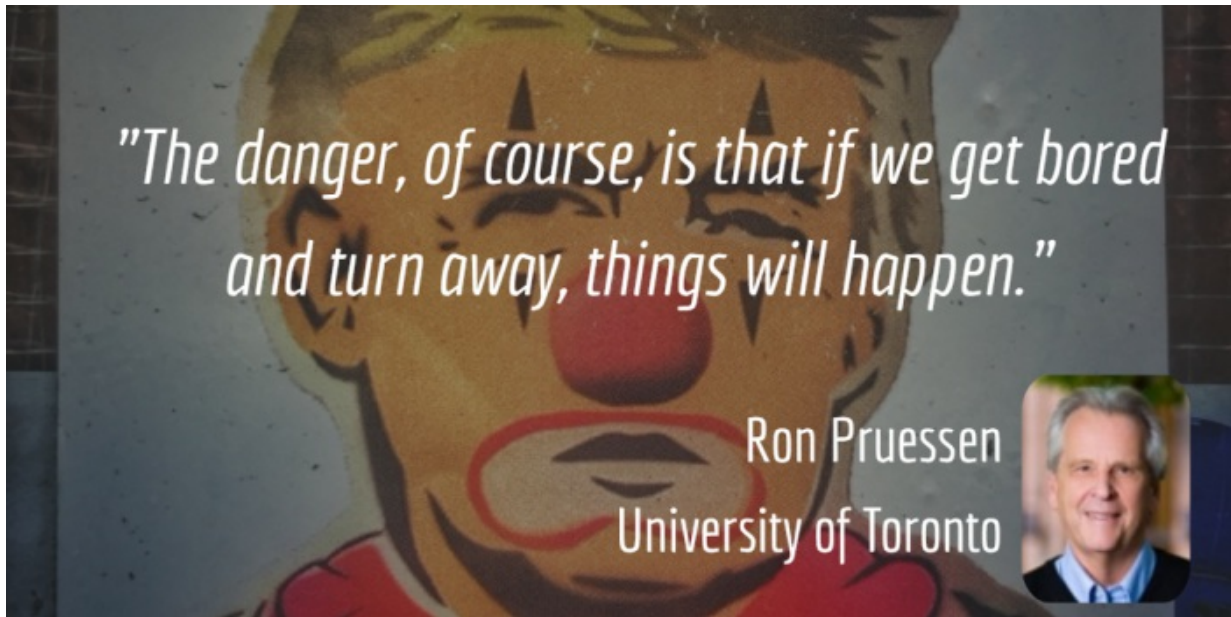
Almost nine months into the Trump presidency, it may be harder than ever to make sense of what is happening. How do we fully understand what seems to be a hybrid of Lewis Carroll and Stephen King imaginaries – of the Mad Hatter and Pennywise the Clown? [Ron Pruessen](#) considers his own frustrations and speculates about what to do with them.

David Axelrod's memoir, [Believer](#), recalls the warning of an old Chicago politico: "Just remember, the higher a monkey climbs on a pole, the more you can see his butt." Speaking for myself (though I'd bet not only myself), I'm wondering if I've now seen more than enough of Donald Trump's broad rear end. "Wondering" is the word, though, because I find myself of two minds.

On one hand, there's no doubt at all that the 45th president has already given us an almost countless number of images and words to spark fear, anger, and disgust. Threats of "fire and fury" for North Korea (in the "calm before the storm"); advice to police chiefs to "Please don't be too nice" to suspects being arrested; rants about S.O.B. football players who "take a knee"; adolescent braggadocio about what rich men with eager hands can do to women ("anything"). OK, there is occasional laughter mixed in – Frederick Douglass doing amazing things in 2017, to cite one of this historian's favorite Trump offerings. But there's not remotely enough unintended humor to make the mix palatable. Even before a year of the Trump presidency has passed, I have an all too clear picture of this monkey butt.

On the other hand, my distaste keeps bumping into my sense that there is so much about the rest of Donald Trump that I don't yet know – that there is so much I feel a need to know. What might the infamous undisclosed tax returns reveal, for instance, about financial machinations or biographical bloviating? Might the 1040s and attachments even throw light on the Russian ties that hover like Harry Potter Dementors around the president? Then too, I still find the nature of the Donald's mind as opaque as his accounts. He has climbed the pole to a heady height, but I rarely feel confident that I am fully understanding what thought processes or personality traits are the key wellsprings of his taunting tweets or wrestlemania challenges to policy traditions (much less decorum).

Like others, I can trot out lots of theories. Unbridled narcissism and pathological dishonesty; a Machiavellian basting of his "base" supporters; pretentious and risky performance art (e.g., "Nixon's [Mad Man](#) – the Sequel"), etc. At any given moment, I'd be inclined to pluck one or another of such possibilities out of the stew pot (or is it the septic tank?) of the Trump persona. It is all too likely, though, that the passage of a few hours – no more than a day – will bring evidence of another impulse, tempting analytical whiplash.



"Pennywise – iPhone" by Jim Nix is licensed under [CC BY NC SA 2.0](#)

Bottom line (pun intended): I'm not yet finding myself able to stop watching the monkey's backside. The view is ugly, but it feels necessary to keep searching for a clearer understanding of the patterns and perils that the 2016 election produced. The more evidence, the more potential clues. The more clues, the better the odds of feeling that I can complement gut-level repulsion with proximate comprehension. Perhaps I also live in hope that more information and insight would provide the means for appropriate powers-that-be to dislodge the "Apprentice" president from the circus tent he has pitched in the White House.

The president is, at the least, a [Stakhanovite](#) provider of clues. (Why not a bit of Russian content, given one of the dark undersides of the 2016 election?) Trump is single-handedly creating a massive midden of muck for those with the stomach to dig. This does come with risks, though.

Messing with muck can be dangerous, for instance, if you consider infection possibilities from E.coli-like contaminants. A fevered impulse to fight fire with fire is already sometimes apparent in the Trump era. The president's critics often stand on moral high ground, but a few have allowed understandable passion to tempt them down unfortunate paths: premature or over-excited news stories that require retraction and feed absurd "fake news" accusations; violence as an occasional complement to "antifa" messaging.

There's a perhaps opposite risk, too: so much Trump muck, so much media attention to each stink bomb that we reach "enough already" moments and tune out. Some combination of boredom and helplessness? Start with "been there, seen that, read that" saturation (conscious and unconscious, as in the way we inevitably stop watching or seeing CNN's constantly repeating loops of hurricanes). Then add dismay at the prospect of finding credible leaders or effective processes to solve freakish problems. Result: a functional "new normal" that finds us shrugging and moving on with our private lives.

Consider the possibilities:

"Yeah, yeah, Vice President Pence left the Colts/49ers match-up on the president's orders. I get it. Now step aside so I can watch the game."

"Yeah, yeah, the president is ranting about Pyongyang and Little Rocket Man (or Senator Corker or Iran or Puerto Rico or NBC). So what else is new? 'There he goes again,' as Ronald Reagan used to say. Get back to me when something actually happens."

The danger, of course, is that if we get bored and turn away, things will happen. Even while we are paying attention, we're seeing the gutting of Obamacare and environmental standards, the clear and present danger facing immigrant "dreamers," and an egomaniac cage match with Pyongyang – to mention a scant few items on a long list. Watching a bare butt monkey high on a pole may be unpalatable or even stomach-turning – but to turn away is to increase the consequences that may rain down.

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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.

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