

SPARTACUS/77



SPARTACUS #77 is a zine by Guy H. Lillian III

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(Apologies also to the members of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance, who have already received a close version of the following.)

November 6, 2024. I don't understand this country. Or maybe it's that I don't understand its people, which is the same thing – at least the millions who on November 5 returned Donald Trump to the office he has so disgraced. For the next four years, America is in for despotic rule with permanent implications, changing the fundamental relationship between her citizens and her government, a mutation enabled by yesterday's unmistakable mandate, and I can only guess in confusion and anguish as to why.

The election itself makes some sense. Kamala spent most of her campaign time appealing to female voters over the SCOTUS' reprehensible *Dobbs* decision, and of course she was right. But she was off-target. Trump's fiery and racist emphasis on immigration and the populace's inchoate economic panic hit much closer to home. This was an election about who was being put-upon, and the Republicans chose the right victims. The great unwashed felt under attack themselves, and Trump, champion fraud and liar that he is, capitalized on that. *Us versus Them*, the oldest and slickest trick in the literature of scummy politics. We can see how it worked.

What confuses and disgusts me, though, is however effective the message, Trump was the messenger, a proven, outspoken racist, predator, perjurer and swindler. He's a convicted criminal and a national embarrassment, with contempt for the government he's been elected to lead and for small-r republican small-d democracy. His corrupt character is both evident and relevant. America has chosen idiot fantasy over calm reality, posture over competence, and deceit over decency. **Why would Americans sacrifice their national birthright for the promise of a few cents off the price of a gallon of gas, and on the word of such a man?** With the exception of a few maniacs, we are better than that. Even the Trumpys. *We are better than that.* An illustrative story:

One day in early October, after the hurricanes and before the election, I walked out to the curb to fetch the mail. The county had come through the neighborhood and trimmed all the trees of all the branches that might interfere with the power lines. They had left the clippings in thick piles along the roadway. Our neighbor Chris said the clean-up crew were probably super-busy on Florida's west coast, where Helene and Milton had rampaged ashore, leaving homes and cities trashed. They'd get to us, on Florida's east coast, when they could. In the meantime, we would have to live with the leavings of nature's winds. Someone told Rosie that Brevard County would need *sixty trucks* to haul the windblown crap away.

Beset by Parkinson's, and not yet signed up for physical therapy, I was still unsteady on my pins and a bit uncertain about walking outside. But if I didn't fetch the mail, Rosie would have to, and the increased burdens on *la belle* brought on by my illness chewed on my conscience. So I went. Pretty day; the residual breeze no threat. I stepped off the sidewalk into the thinnest part of the jumble of branches, and opened the mailbox.

A single blue-edged envelope sat within, addressed to my father-in-law. An ad. *Not even a bill*, I said to myself, *I risked my life for an ad*. Haltingly, because that's the way I move these days, I turned to leave. Like tentacles the tree limbs at my feet wrapped around my ankles and clutched at my feet. I crashed into the pile of storm debris.

With my recent luck, you'd think I'd have been impaled through my heart by a sharp branch, and like Dracula, skeletonized on the spot. But I wasn't hurt. I *was* helpless ... but almost immediately Rosie was there to help me to my feet. But my 200 pounds was too much for the slender beauty to budge. I foresaw another rescue call to the fire station == convenient, but embarrassing. But then succor appeared. Neighbor Chris emerged from the house next door. At long last I reach the point of this little story.

Chris and his wife Ellen are transplanted Philadelphians. They fly an Eagles flag during gridiron season. Chris is a retired self-described "working man" who obviously pulled in a substantial pile in his day, because their house is renovated and attractive: lots of space, a covered patio and pool, a boat dock and a boat to go in it. Clued in by a hearty argument I overheard between Chris and a Democratic pollster going door to door, I long ago guessed that unlike Ellen he was a rock-ribbed right-winger, a Trumpy all the way. Maybe it was Ellen's story about talking him out of buying an AR-15.

But. In the years we've lived here – and it *has* been years – Chris has proved himself to be a helpful neighbor indeed. Read the account of Florida'sc2024 hurricanes that follows. This time he trotted over to where I lay, tangled in tree trash, grabbed me beneath my shoulder, and *voila*, he and *la belle* had me back on my feet. I've often been lucky with my neighbors – wonderful Ricki-the-nursing-student in New York, "Ol' Boo" Cindy in New Orleans. Obviously, I still am.

But you get my overriding point. We who call ourselves progressives have to remember that however baffling is the loyalty of good people to a corrupt creature like Trump, most are still good people – they're just wrong. I have a mantra about the good people who vote Trump. You've heard it before.

Do I respect their opinions? Not at all. Their opinions are manipulable,



thoughtless and crippled by conscious and unconscious prejudice. Among the inroads Trump made into the Democratic base was support from black men. *Misogyny* is at play. I'd say it was a more powerful bigotry than racism, at least in Kamal's case, because wharf identifiable ethnic group deserted Kamala do distinctively Black *men*.

Do I respect their rights? More than they do. Our side will not invade the Capitol or threaten opposition congressmen. Is true that we progressives must re=absorb the art of dirty politics, the path to better self-defense, But the weapon cannot overwhelm our purpose.

Do I respect their feelings? Not nearly enough. Which brings up the question of *Woke*. In this decade progressives gave shown themselves deaf to the problems and perspective of Americans outside of certain groups. Our sense of injustice was too narrow. People were *worried*.

There's no doubt that the primary issue in 2024 was almost entirely economic. The overall economy booms along, but ordinary citizens haven't felt the success; they suffer from high prices, and worry that they can't even afford living space == housing. The woman on TV who said she was voting for Trump because she had a few more dollars to spend when he was President was certainly short-sighted but her concern was human and real. Protecting gay rights and promoting sane feminism are important, sure. But the ordinary worries of ordinary people in their ordinary lives are universal. We need to respect and address those worries.

And we need to remember some magic numbers: **2026** and **2028**. Those years will come. Progressives had better be ready to greet them. *Listening to voters ... not preaching to them.*

This is not over.

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An addition to the above, thoughts a little less conciliatory. Since the election Trump has named some doozies to vital cabinet posts – several as repulsive as himself. I can't imagine any reasonable administration embracing a maniac like Matt Gaetz as the nation's chief law enforcement officer, but by such appointments Trump is simply fulfilling his practice of filling posts based not on competence but on obeisance.

Something more disturbing has come out about this miserable election: the youth vote. Young men – kids, first-time voters, Gen Z or whatever they call themselves – apparently went big for Trump. Young women balanced this advantage somewhat, but in those precious swing states, it was the males who made the most impact. Why did they go that way? What will they do now?

John Updike once wrote that there is an almost parental bond between America and its Presidents, that the country comes to reflect the POTUS, to identify with him, to adopt his "Vibes," his character. Perhaps it's the obverse, and the President is elected because, in some way, he embodies the way Americans feel. I've seen enough contemporary history to bear this out. Sometimes it's for the good – JFK's seeming "vigah" and optimism – but often the impulse is questionable – Nixon's suspicion and paranoia poisoning his talents, Reagan's giddy greed spawning the "Me" Generation. I belong to an era of alienation and doubt, of Vietnam, Kent State, Manson ... and People's Park, let's not forget that. Whether a reaction to

the violent defensiveness of the “Greatest Generation” that bore us or its cause is a question I’ve worked on my whole adult life.

So now we have Trump getting his second swing at American government. The general disgust with our national life he embodied through his negative, often obscene campaign clearly reflected an angry national mood. What sort of national mindset will come of it? A JFKish optimism, a Nixonian lust for vengeance, Reaganite yuppie greed or – as I suspect and fear -- a bullyboy swagger closed to argument or alternative?

It's a question of national character, and I wouldn't hazard a guess.

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Speaking of youth and truth and character, the Menendez murders have been all over the media lately. In addition to two very informative documentaries, the show *Monsters* produced a superb miniseries about the case. It was of particular interest because in a way, it pushed the point of view that Erik and Lyle Menendez slaughtered their parents because they were in fear for their lives.

I'm sure readers know the story but here's a quick rundown. The Menendez family was wealthy. The father was a brilliant businessman, the mother supportive, the two semi-grown sons in fine colleges on the edge of success. According to the two young men, the father was also domineering, controlling, and perversely predatory, the mother submissive to his will. They claimed their father molested them both for years, and they were in fear of their lives when they nought shotguns, burst in on their parents as they were watching TV and blew them apart. The boys went on a reckless spending spree afterward, arousing suspicion, and were arrested, tried and convicted of their parents' murders. They admitted the crime, saying they ere in fear for their lives, drew life sentences and now, after 35 years in the cooler, are appealing for a new trial, which could free them.

The dramatized miniseries was excellent – the episode which brought the abuse excuse front and center (done in a *single shot*) was beyond superb – and clearly tilted towards the killers' point of view. So: what do *I* think? Remember, I had no objection to Leslie van Houten's parole based on her rehabilitation and founded my defense of a serial rapist on the fact that he'd been sexually abused by a sheriff. Would it be hypocritical, then, to reject the Menendez Bros' similar plea?

Okay –cut to the ground rules, specifically the one that commands that we must always judge a case on its own merits. Do we believe the brothers that they were molested by their father and felt threatened sufficiently to justify two hideous homicides? Is 35 years in the happy hotel adequate punishment for their crime? Does their wild spending orgy signify anything more damning than the psychosis of grief? Should the Menendez brothers go free?

I say no. You?

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Mayhem and horror are not alone on current streaming. We are blessed, also, with the talents of Ken Burns, the day's premiere documentarian, who has educated, enlightened and entertained viewers in the past on such topics as the American Civil War – still his masterpiece – baseball, Hemingway, country music and the Brooklyn Bridge. This year he

took on the life of one of the supreme lives in our species, that of **Leonardo da Vinci**, with a two-episode, 4-hour doc that educated, enlightened and entertained as much as any broadcast in years. Only the unique documentary on Shackleton's *Endurance* has rivaled it. I'll have more to say about that masterwork later.

Here one is stunned by the sheer scope of da V's genius incarnate, the depthless curiosity, commitment and quality of the work that filled his life. Most of this doc is devoted to his incredible notebooks, ablaze with his mirror writing and drawings. But his art, and fabled feud with Michelangelo, are by no means neglected – *The Last Supper* is given much attention, as is his abandoned *Battle of Anghiari*. But you're thinking of *La Joconde*, the



portrait da Vinci worked on for nine years, off and on, the painting he personally schlepped across a mountain range on horseback, the painting Napoleon hung in his bedroom, the painting held in almost religious reverence, commanding an entire wall (and soon, I hear, a whole gallery) to itself in the Louvre. This da Vinci study loses its academic distance when, at last, it discusses *La Gioconda*. It's universal: when talking about *Mona Lisa*, you lapse into poetry.

A wonderful experience.

I mentioned *Endurance* above. The documentary deals with the Shackleton expedition to Antarctica in 1914, and its leader's efforts to bring his crew back from certain death. It's an incredible tale given righteous life with hyper-advanced CGI and AI tech. Antique film of the expedition and interviews of survivors from the '20s and '30s are colorized and modernized, voices recreated through AI, as the original epic tale is intertwined with the modern search for the sunken *Endurance*, crushed in the implacable southern ice. A tremendous

story told in a tremendous, worthy way.

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This must do it for now; I have a deadline coming up and I must get this *Spartacus* done and submitted before then. Who knows? Maybe, for the next issue, I'll find something *science fictional* to write about. (Good chance – *Silo is back*.)

I expect December to be a difficult month, crawling with doctors and therapists. Hey, though, today I got *my own walker!* *An early Christmas!*

Enough. Y'all have a good one, and stay brave, I'll be watching – maybe courage is catching.