



Guest Column / Nathan Cullen

Tailgating in Trump's America

“I simply can't vote for Hillary Clinton. She'll take away all of this,” a woman told me, turning to the thousands of Louisianans gathered outside the college football stadium affectionately called Death Valley. “We won't be able to tailgate again.”

Death Valley might as well be what Democrats call the vast sea of Red America that turned out in such overwhelming numbers for Clinton's populist opponent, Donald Trump.

I don't believe Hillary Clinton planned to shut down tailgating—the great American tradition of gathering with scores of friends and neighbours each Saturday of the football season to consume truly impressive amounts of grilled, boiled, deep-fried, BBQ'ed, smoked and every other form of cooked meat known to humankind. I wonder if she's ever been to a tailgating party. But it's where conservative, Christian and Donald Trump's America live and breathe.

I spent the final 10 days of the U.S. election on a State Department-sponsored tour with a small but hearty band of Canadian academics, politicians, pollsters and political types. Looking back, milling around a college football game wasn't the most obvious place to see how this election would turn out to be one of the most shocking in modern history—but it might have been the most honest.

In the aftermath of the U.S. election, Canadians must avoid being smug. We're the country of Rob Ford and a (proposed) barbaric practices snitch line, after all. We've known dangerous divisions and real cultural and political solitudes over our time as a nation. Political leaders have targeted vulnerable minorities to gain advan-

tage at the polls. America is just doing it with a reality TV star at the helm, ushering in an even less polished, less “elite” but devastatingly effective form of campaigning.

What is most worrisome isn't just Trump's hard right, or ‘alt-right’, tendencies. If there is any guiding political philosophy at all, it's the obsession with the next retweet, “like” or earned media moment. What's most concerning is Trump's willingness to subcontract the economic, foreign, and domestic policy details out to ‘the best people’ who represent some of the hardest right-wing elements in America.

Three newspapers ended up supporting Trump. One was owned by the Ku Klux Klan.

Even in the midst of casting their votes for him, many Trump supporters openly admitted that he wasn't actually going to do the outrageous (and often completely impossible) things he had said that often first caught their attention. It was that their attention had been caught at all. Trump's ability to reflect back their fears and devastating sense of loss brought them slowly to support a man who had been a fringe and curiosity candidate up until he became the Republican nominee.

Bobby Kennedy once said, with great foresight, that “Too often we honour swagger and bluster and wielders of force; too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of others.”

The blind spot that media, pollsters and political elite (from both parties) had created was so large you could hide a Trump Tower behind it. The American media in particular had al-

lowed themselves to be willing and grateful accomplices in his rise to prominence. Never imagining him a serious threat, they allowed his Twitter account to drive the story of the day. And a willing and curious public reposted and gazed at this car wreck of a campaign throwing itself wildly down the highway to that November day.

Van Jones, the former Obama adviser and current CNN commentator, said it best when he warned a progressive crowd at the Broadbent Summit in mid-November that “Trump can happen here.” Indeed, his poor imitation in the form of Conservative leadership candidate Kellie Leitch is making her own tentative steps.

From D.C. to New Orleans to Baton Rouge and Cleveland, we found a love of country almost unparalleled in its proud and unreserved expression. Asking an American who they were voting for was the equivalent of asking for their life story and hopes and fears for the future. It was inspiring, terrifying and, honestly, refreshing for us—coming from a country that so often apologizes or codes our political feelings.

Yet they've gone and elected a candidate who carefully and surgically exposed some of the deepest racial, class and historical divisions within their country. The question isn't whether Trump can heal the damage done, it's simply a question of how much more damage his wanton and irresponsible form of politics will inflict on a country needing more solutions, not more problems. **P**

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