

Rasputin in the White House

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Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the world has grown accustomed to the daily White House press briefings, in which a scowling Donald Trump parades his staggering ignorance and promotes quackery, as medical experts contradict his harebrained and antiscientific justifications for a rapid return to work.

But even these daily spectacles could not have prepared audiences for Trump's performance Thursday, when the president urged Americans to inject themselves with disinfectant and insert ultraviolet lights into their bodies, measures which would kill those unfortunate enough to listen to the president's advice.

"I see the disinfectant that knocks it out in a minute, one minute," Trump said. "And is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside, or almost a cleaning? Because you see it gets inside the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it would be interesting to check that."

Trump continued: "So supposing we hit the body with a tremendous—whether it's ultraviolet or just a very powerful light—and I think you said that hasn't been checked because of the testing. And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or some other way, and I think you said you're going to test that, too."

These statements provoked a flurry of denunciations by astounded medical professionals. The maker of Lysol disinfectant was forced to publicly rebuke the president by issuing a statement saying, "We must be clear that under no circumstances should our disinfectant products be administered into the human body."

In recent weeks, Trump has pronounced that his "gut" instinct told him the pandemic would be over in April, that it was no worse than the flu, and that the medication hydroxychloroquine—produced by a friend who stood to profit from the president's recommendation—could cure the virus, despite Food and Drug Administration warnings that it would lead to increased deaths.

It is easy enough to point out that these statements express Trump's own stunning backwardness and callous

indifference to human life.

But what remains to be explained is: How did this grotesque sociopath come to occupy the White House, and what does his sordid presidency reveal about the state of the American political system?

A characteristic of a doomed political system, often observed in history, is the elevation of an especially despicable and even depraved personality to a high position in the state, frequently as a key adviser to the ruler. Such individuals often become the focus of public outrage.

Among the most notorious examples of such a personality in the twentieth century was Grigori Rasputin, the "mad monk," who exerted immense influence over the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra. A horse thief and rapist, Rasputin became the trusted and indispensable adviser of the royal couple, partly on the basis of his claim that he could treat their hemophiliac son through a combination of religious incantations, the conjuring of spirits and his own frightening stare. The Tsar and Tsarina took no major decisions without consulting their corrupt and dissolute "friend."

Fearful that the influence wielded by Rasputin was leading the regime to disaster, a group of disgruntled nobles carried out the "friend's" gruesome assassination in December 1916. Their action failed to stave off the revolution, which began two months later.

"Rasputinism" entered into the vocabulary of politics as a word that denotes an obscene level of state corruption and decadence. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky recalled that this bizarre episode, in the final years of the crisis-ridden Russian autocracy, "acquired the character of a disgusting nightmare overhanging the country."

Trotsky continued: "If by the word *hooliganism* we understand the extreme expression of those antisocial parasite elements at the bottom of society, we may define Rasputinism as a crowned hooliganism at its very top."

A century after the original version, a form of Rasputinism has emerged in the United States. But the

American Rasputin is not the adviser to the president. He *is* the president—a vile scoundrel and social degenerate, incapable of formulating a coherent sentence, let alone a logical argument—positioned at the apex of the American state!

Trump epitomizes an oligarchy whose wealth is based on a level of parasitism that is hardly to be distinguished from criminality. His thuggishness, cultural backwardness and contempt for the common people embody the attitudes and practices of the swarms of banksters, billionaire investors, vulture capitalists, hedge fund managers, asset strippers, real estate swindlers and media moguls who run both political parties and all three branches of government.

The US presently finds itself in the midst of a crisis of unparalleled dimensions, with the government in the hands of a person who is telling the population to inject bleach into its veins.

In the period of its historic rise, the American bourgeoisie could produce Abraham Lincoln, who embodied the democratic ethos of the American Revolution and stewarded the country through the Civil War. In the next great crisis—the Great Depression—Franklin Delano Roosevelt was capable of speaking seriously about social issues—as “FDR” did in his “fireside chats”—and appealing to the democratic sentiments of the broad masses of people.

Today, decades of US economic decline have eliminated any basis within the ruling class for the defense of the country’s democratic traditions. American capitalism finds its quintessential expression in the persona of Trump. That does not mean that all American capitalists like what they see. But looking into the mirror is not always a pleasant experience. In the final analysis, Trump is “their man.” They must take him as he is.

Truth be told, what use would Wall Street have for a man of science and high culture in the White House? The interests of the banks and corporations are not served by a scientifically informed approach to the pandemic. The factories must be reopened. Profit must be squeezed out of the working class. Monthly mortgages, rents and interest payments are due and must be met. Dr. Anthony Fauci and his fellow epidemiologists, with their endless jeremiads on the danger posed by the current and a second wave of the pandemic, are getting on the nerves of corporate America.

Within 24 hours of Trump’s statement on injecting disinfectant and using ultraviolet light “inside the body,” the fifty thousandth person died of the virus in the US. As

several states rushed back to work, April 23 almost set a record for new positive cases nationwide. The United Nations is preparing for famines that threaten to take the lives of hundreds of millions in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Though Trump says it more bluntly than his counterparts in Europe and across the world, the US president is expressing the viewpoint of the entire global ruling elite.

In Germany, Angela Merkel is opening the country by sending the working class back to their jobs, indifferent to evidence that this will lead to a new wave of deaths. The same is true in Spain, Britain, France and elsewhere. In Latin America, the position of the ruling class is summed up in the response of Brazil’s right-wing Jair Bolsonaro and Mexico’s ostensibly left-wing Andrés Manuel López Obrador, both of whom have claimed that God will protect their respective populations from the virus.

If society were directed rationally and democratically, on the basis of socialist policies, a globally planned and scientifically guided mass intervention could conquer the pandemic and save millions of lives. The pandemic is a biological reality, but the response to this phenomenon is conditioned by the class interests that dominate society. The lethality of the pandemic is determined less by the RNA of the virus than by the economic and social priorities of the capitalist class.

In the final analysis, the fight against the pandemic is inextricably bound up with the fight for the transfer of power to the working class and the establishment of socialism.



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