

Trashing Institutions  
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We would all do well to read Bret Stevens's wise column in the NYT: "Why Edmund Burke Still Matters." (August 5, 2020)

Edmund Burk was an 18th-century philosopher-statesman, a member of the British Parliament during two earth-shaking events: the French Revolution and the American Revolution. He annoyed most of his colleagues because he refused to be nailed down to a fixed political position. He was what one would call today "The Loyal Opposition," a person in opposition to the other party but loyal to the system. His criticisms and warnings were meant to stimulate thought, not to shatter the foundations of the system worthy of protecting.

Today's Lincoln Project members are just that: former Republicans, mostly with philosophical leaning toward conservatism, believing that change must be slow and careful, and that institutions must be supported. They can no longer be Republican when it is obvious that their party is now the Trump Party, the cult of Trump, in all its vulgarity and low-brow pronouncements, not the party of Lincoln, that enlarged America's model of self-government to the world by ending its poisonous institution of slavery.

Timely for us today is Burke's understanding of how good manners are central to good governance. Good manners are not "snobbery," a view of Trump admirers, who love how Trump speaks (rudely, like regular people), mistaking vulgarity for "telling it like it is."

Bret Stevens notes: "Above all, Burke would have been disgusted by Trump's manners. Manners are of more importance than laws," he wrote.

"The law touches us only here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us. They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them."

Burke's understanding of the centrality of manners to norms, of norms to morals, of morals to culture and of culture to the health of the political order means that he would have been unimpressed by claims that Trump had scored policy "wins," like appointing conservative judges or cutting the corporate tax rate. Those would have been baubles floating in befouled waters.

Trump's real legacy, in Burke's eyes, would be his relentless debasement of political

culture: of personal propriety; of respect for institutions; of care for tradition; of trust between citizens and civil authority; of a society that believes in and has reason to believe in its own essential decency. "To make us love our country," he wrote, "our country ought to be lovely [lovable]"

Both right-wing Fascists and left-wing Radicals share a common practice: trashing long-held institutions that were designed to protect our freedom and rule of law. Trump has methodically violated every norm, our customary practices that support our system, with such relentless speed that the governed can hardly keep up with it.

Manners were the first victim. Next came shamelessness, Trump followers forgiving their idol for fornicating, stealing money from the gullible who paid into his "charity" and fake "University," stealing from the taxpayers by using government funds for his many fraudulent businesses, and his relentless attack on truth.

The radical left is also on an ill-considered rampage against rule of law. While certain laws need revision when obviously flawed, such as reforming police practices, it is extremely unwise to trash policing altogether. In which imaginary world do they live where police are not needed?

The current zealousness against the obnoxious memorials to the losers of the Civil War has morphed into an attempt to obliterate our founding fathers because some owned slaves (legal in their time). Our founders were human beings of their time, but were far-sighted enough to create institutions that still work, providing that the public and the people they elect to office are what the Founders hoped they would be: honest, honorable, and intelligent.

Edmund Burke, were he alive today, would detest the greed and anti-intellectual ignorance of the Trump people, but would also detest the naive populists who want to produce a brave new world by destroying the current one. Without rule of law, only brutes rule.

688 words.

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