

The Ascendency of the Noble Redneck
by
Robert Rietschel, August 11, 2023

Robert Fulghum wrote a book titled *Everything I Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. I would put a twist on that and say that everything you encounter as an adult, you saw on the playground. Whether you learned anything from that experience is another matter, but it was all right there. Take the game King of the Mountain. Who gets to be the boss is up to who can physically dominate the others. Simon says has one person in charge and that person calls the shots and punishes those who don't follow the rules. And of course, there are the bullies who won't play by any rules. In adult life, we just call all of this politics. Who is on top? Whomever it is becomes elite. Who has the power? Whomever it is makes and enforces the rules. The playground has moved indoors to the legislatures, courts, and executive office buildings. This is a tale of evolution, and it is all about who gets to be elite and powerful.

Let's start with who and proceed to how. Our story will start with the elites. You may think you know what that means, but I suspect my take on the term may not be what you first thought of when the word elite hit your brain. Traditionally, you could not be faulted for thinking of the elite as educated snobs who look down on lesser humans as inferior beings. Like when Hillary Clinton mentions the deplorables. That isn't how we were taught to speak of others in Sunday School. Shame. Scandal. There was a time when most folks were illiterate and those with the skill to read and write felt those skills gave them a right to be in charge. Now when almost everyone has that ability, that distinction is no longer in play. But that thinking that a higher level of education should have some entitlement is still with us. Even within the field of higher education, there is some deference to those who attended Ivy League schools or schools of similar stature. What privilege do we grant such people? It seems attending such institutions puts an individual in contact with other powerful people of considerable wealth and networks form between the like-minded and soon a disproportionate number of these folks are in positions of power. I'm speaking of government power.

Regardless of political party, there is an overrepresentation of individuals who attended schools of higher learning that are considered elite. It was a pathway to power. And power is the drug of choice for the elite. The ability to exercise power over your fellow citizens is what separates us. Power is the yardstick that determines your position in society. And education had been the pathway to the seat of power. I say had. My thesis is that this is no longer the case.

Democracy has been called the tyranny of the majority. A form of mob rule. When more people constitute a class of citizens, they can exert more power in a democratic system as they have the numbers on their side. If they act in unison. The aristocracy can't stay in control when the majority of the citizens are not aristocrats. For a time, the aristocracy can keep the majority disorganized and acting incoherently. But as they say, "There's a new sheriff in town." Social media has allowed a fragmented majority to sort itself out. Within the majority, there are multiple constituencies and social media has allowed them to discover each other. Still, that interest group needs leadership and that will consist of a puppet master and a ringleader who will serve the puppet master's bidding. The ringleader will be the public figure, the puppet master the power behind the throne.

Now for the how. Let's meet those characters and examine their rise to prominence. Rupert Murdoch made his fortune in tabloid journalism. I use the term journalism lightly. He hired writers to come up with stories that would garner your attention while you waited to buy groceries. Space aliens abduct Alabama farmer. Elvis seen buying bananas at Kroger. Each week, something more sensational. All

reported in the *Weekly World News*. I feel I have a right to say a few words about that publication for I am one of the few people you know who have been quoted in that tabloid. It was when I was involved with the minoxidil studies for hair growth. My quote was next to a picture of a bald Telly Savalas. The man in charge of that tabloid recognized that there was a large segment of the citizenry who would pay good money to be duped or entertained with stories that were totally invented by a staff of writers tasked with creating increasingly unbelievable copy. You could say that Murdock was just grifting off P.T. Barnum's dictum regarding the rate of birth of suckers. You'd be right. How to improve on Barnum? Why, take the duping, or entertainment to television "news".

News as entertainment for the underserved who crave a healthy dose of conspiracy. Thus, we have Fox News which has a sordid history of sexual harassment, but let's just chalk that up to boys will be boys. (It makes demonizing Fox way too easy.) The stars of this form of entertainment passing itself off as news have been forced to testify under oath in court about some of the things they have said on air. Their defense came in two parts. Their star, Se Hannity, testified that he never fact-checks any of what he reports. No reason to let the truth get in the way of a good story. That works when you are writing fiction, but as for a news program, not so much. When it was time for Tucker Carlson to testify his defense was "Surely you didn't believe all those things we said." Reporting outrageous things as though they were facts was just a matter of buyer beware for Carlson. Way too many people still think that if something is said on television, it must be true. Their sworn testimony is that they didn't believe what they were saying. Not that they would retract such a thing on the air. When news would upset their audience, the news was either not reported or contorted into something conspiratorial. Murdock is now showing you the side of the news that others won't. Why others won't, should be your question. The fact that it's not true is the answer you don't want to hear. When Trump lost his bid for reelection, the folks at Fox knew this would upset their viewers, so they played along with the notion that we in the US run rigged elections. No one had questioned the integrity of those same elections four years prior when all the same machines and processes were in place. Only a conspiracy could yield such a result. That would sell. And it was brought to you by the folks that saw Elvis buying bananas.

Someone needs to be the public face of the movement. Murdock knows he needs someone with more charisma than he exudes. He found that in Donald Trump. He groomed Trump and gave him all the airtime a candidate could ever hope for. He created his own Frankenstein monster. And as they say, "The rest is history." But who are the constituents of this movement?

Let's return to where we started. Citizens stratified into literate and illiterate. Or stratified into an elite education or something less. Citizens are now all literate and educated enough to use a smartphone. An elite university education in your pocket just waiting for you to ask it a probing question. Now everyone can be an elite expert. Now everyone does their own "research" by tapping on their phone. No need to consult the doctor, there's all the information you need to diagnose yourself right in the palm of your hand. Every man a king. That's Huey Long, the Louisiana populist. With a smartphone in hand, every man is an elite. All they need is power. Education done the old-fashioned way doing research in the stacks of university libraries is so 20th century. No need to go into debt to get that sheepskin. Every redneck is now an elite. And they have discovered the power of their numbers. It turns out there are a lot of them, and they have made contact via social media. Their worldview aligns with the Fox News content. No one can be trusted in the mainstream media; they are now the lamestream media. Your friends on social media will agree with that assessment. Not all Fox viewers make the cut as rednecks. Many are adherents because their worldview is reinforced by the content. They are comfortable with the conservative label and have no issue with demonizing liberals. [If only

people would focus on the content of ideas instead of dismissing their fellow citizens with a label. Sigh.] The rednecks are my label for the extremists on the right. There, I've used a label.

How did the rednecks become noble? I'm so glad you asked. They started life as religious fundamentalists and grew up to become the religious right. Not just right as a political viewpoint, but right because you are wrong. Their rectitude was reinforced by a hardy mix of religious zeal and strength in numbers. They took on the air of an elite in the form of self-righteous piety and presumed moral superiority. They were welcomed into the Republican party and their numbers soon allowed them to exert power. With all the same disdain associated with the old aristocracy, they demonized those whose worldview was deemed liberal. I have dubbed them the noble rednecks. It's not a compliment.

When things seemed bad, it was common to say that the inmates had taken over the asylum. If the asylum is a democracy, it is only fitting that the inmates take over as the majority rule in a democracy. Murdock thought he could play puppet master and control Trump. Like Dr. Frankenstein, the monster cannot be so easily controlled. And when Trump speaks to his noble redneck minions, if he dares to speak a line that they don't like, they will boo. If he tells them to get vaccinated, they boo. If he should decide to say a kind word about someone who usually gets demonized, they boo. He, too, must deal with the tyranny of the masses. The noble rednecks yearn for power to go with their enlightened status as researchers tuned in to the conspiracies that have kept them down too long. These ennobled rednecks are demanding the power to tell the rest of us how to live and behave. They are seizing school boards and dictating curriculum. They are wresting control by any means possible. Fear, intimidation, threats of bodily harm. Often these have been directed at public officials who are just doing their jobs as proscribed by law. It matters not whether the public officer is of their own party, if the official followed the law and that doesn't yield the desired outcome for the noble rednecks, the official gets driven from public service with constant harassment. This makes room for noble rednecks to take those positions of public trust.

This is what it has come to. The ascendancy of the noble redneck. Democracy run amok. Liz Chaney summed it up quite well when she said, "We are electing idiots."

Now I just know that someone will say that I haven't taken the other side to task. If you wish to equate people advocating for tolerance of alternative lifestyles as a threat to society, I can understand your fear of deviant behavior becoming normalized. But, that pales in comparison to threats of physical violence. What about the riots like when George Floyd was murdered by the police? The violence was not an appropriate form of protest and should be condemned. It was a response to a single event and not an ongoing movement. The passion of the moment passed. Slogans like "defund the police" are just hollow slogans and the police are still with us. So are the noble rednecks and they show no sign of fading. I get that people aren't interested in elevating what they see as deviant behavior to mainstream acceptance. But it wasn't very long ago that gay marriage was anathema and now that is legal and has your life been upended? Is tolerance something to be feared or is it intolerance that should be feared? For me, there is no contest. Intolerance is the road to a society that is un-American. Intolerance means freedoms must be surrendered to conformity. And conformity sounds too much like what we feared from communism. I fear the noble redneck and the accompanying intolerance that follows. I fear that far more than having pockets of folk who dance to their own drummer. They are living a lifestyle I wish to be no part of. I am more comfortable letting them live their way so long as it doesn't cause me harm. It doesn't take much effort to find harm in intolerance.

Murdock can't control Trump. Trump can't control the noble rednecks. The genie is out of the bottle. Heaven help us.

How to cope with such despair? Time to return to the playground. What happens when the brute wins at king of the mountain? People quit playing, they walk away and do something else. The same with Simon Says. You might call those playground dissenters forerunners of the silent majority. The playground lesson is that most folks just aren't interested in power games and would prefer to spend their time in more productive pursuits. The noble rednecks are a fringe movement who have been given too much oxygen by the likes of Rupert Murdoch. Fatigue increasingly sets in as the quest for attention and authority grates on the less zealous. In time, folks will drift away from the extremists. The passage of time tends to reveal the truth of a narrative, and false narratives become exposed. The only question is: Will enough folks and time be available for folks to reveal the noble redneck for what they are, or will the reins of power be wrested firmly enough by the noble rednecks that it will be too late? A democratically elected governor in Florida has started purging history books and pronouns. To paraphrase Jeff Foxworthy, "He could be a noble redneck." Did you ever expect an elected official in America to dictate what pronoun folks must use? Talk about micromanaging something. This is the tyranny of the masses that democracy can deliver. The democratic counterbalance to this form of tyranny is for the silent majority, who have better things to do, to realize they need to interrupt their busy lives and vote the noble rednecks and those who enable them out of office.

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