

HONG KONG, PUERTO RICO, AND RUSSIA



What I wanted to write about in this issue of the Caliban Chronicles is our desperate need for cultural/historical griots, or “memory heroes” as I call them. The sheer chaos of our political situation—some of it created on purpose, some not—makes the memories of the most intelligent journalists and commentators go haywire. We need to restore that shared memory bank of fact and truth, and Google will not help us to get there. In fact, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have done a masterful job of destroying our collective memory.

But I will save that discussion for a future date. This chronicle is dedicated to us, all of us, who seem to have gone AWOL since the midterm election in November 2018. What happened to the demonstrations? I look back fondly at the Women’s March after Trump’s inauguration. And to the impressive anti-gun march on Washington after the Parkland High School massacre. But recent demonstrations in Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, and Russia have been even more impressive. After Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, tried to shepherd through a new law that would allow for the extradition of Hong Kong citizens into mainland

China’s justice system (something like falling into a black hole), over 2 million people, more than a quarter of the entire population of Hong Kong, took to the streets. The photographs of this moment were mind-blowing, even for a frequent participant in demonstrations during the 60s and after. Not one of the demonstrators in Hong Kong was unaware of the horrendous massacre of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in 1989. They all knew they were risking everything, but they recognized the existential threat of the new law. The special semi-autonomous status of Hong Kong was about to be erased. They have continued their daily protests.

Online chats between the corrupt governor of Puerto Rico and his cronies were leaked. They all had great fun trashing women in general, gays, and political opponents. To top it all, they mocked the citizens of the territory who had never really recovered from devastating Hurricane Maria—and the racist abuse they received (instead of help) from Trump. The public was enraged. They filled the streets of San Juan day after day, demanding Ricardo Rosselló’s resignation. He finally agreed not to run for office again.

But the demonstrators made it clear that resignation was the only thing they would accept. On July 25 he announced his resignation, effective August 2, and the public celebrated.

In Russia there have been growing demonstrations against the government over the past few months. Since Putin and his henchmen have frequently jailed or assassinated dissenters, the Russians taking part in these demonstrations know they are risking their lives. What Trump has fantasized about, becoming President for Life, Putin has achieved. And yet these Russians continue to demonstrate, hoping for a return to the democratic government (imperfect as it was) that existed for a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Unlike the people in Hong Kong, the Puerto Ricans, and the Russians, what keeps us from demonstrating against this mad tyrant named Trump is not fear of jail or death or some other kind of retribution. It is the fantasy that someone—Robert Mueller, Nancy Pelosi, the FBI, the AG of New York state, Letitia James, or a paladin Democratic candidate for President—will save us the trouble of getting out there and doing it ourselves. Is it a cynical disbelief in

the power of mass public action? Is it sheer laziness? Is it a result of the numbed lives people live within the endless carnival of social media? Can anyone doubt that we too are living with an existential threat to the survival of our democracy? Flawed as it is, it is a million times better than an autocratic state. The occupant of the White House has banned Muslims, created concentration camps on the southern border (and yes, they are concentration camps, by every possible definition), encouraged white supremacists with the vilest racist spewings in the modern history of the presidency, openly mused about serving as president for another ten years, suggested that we (he?) purchase Greenland from Denmark, proclaimed himself the Chosen One, the King of Israel, and the Second Coming of God. I cannot believe that in any previous time since its institution in 1967, Article 4 of the 25th Amendment would not already have been invoked. The fact that he is a raving lunatic does not in any way diminish the danger we are in. We've got to stop laughing.

The center and the left have failed this country before. The 2000 presidential election was clearly stolen in Florida and the theft endorsed by a hyper-partisan Supreme Court.

And yet the press continued to congratulate all of the country on the stability of our institutions that enabled a peaceful transfer of power. A coup, even with the stamp of approval from the Supreme Court, is not a peaceful transfer of power. Where was the protest march? How durable are institutions that are openly abused? Four years later Republican officials floated the idea that the 2004 election should be delayed for fear of a terrorist attack. The Congress quickly shot that down. Would the Republican-led Senate object to that today?

Every time we don't show up when we need to, the authoritarian contingent of our country feels a little more emboldened. I'm talking about showing the flag in a convincing way. I can hear the cynics saying demonstrations never led to change. They usually refer to the Viet Nam era and all the actions that didn't seem to get us closer to ending what Maxine Hong Kingston called "the darkness that covered the world." My father was a Kodak executive in New York City. He often argued with me about my anti-war activities. In 1971 he and my mother drove to Washington D.C. and participated with a million others in a march against the war. The fact that my non-political mother and

father took that action made it clear to me that the Johnson/Nixon war was over. It lingered on for a few more years, but it was over. And it was over because people were in the streets in huge numbers. I firmly believe that if it weren't for the marches and political pressure, the Viet Nam war would have gone on as long or longer than the war in Afghanistan.

Why is everyone walking on eggshells? Why are the Democrats fussing about whether to back an impeachment inquiry or not? We all know he is a criminal and will be indicted the moment he leaves office. If the Democrats don't show any guts, the people who voted for them in November 2018—in order to contain Trump's rampage—will not show up in November 2020. If we can't take down this criminal and his enabling crew, then we have no business calling ourselves citizens of the United States. Demand that your congressional representative and senators join the call for an impeachment inquiry. If they don't, camp out in their offices like the activists against the attempted Obamacare repeal. Get into the streets. If we can't get through our current crisis and remove this cancer on the Republic, there will be no do-overs.

