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The Way Out of the Wilderness

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MARK HELPRIN was raised on the Hudson and in the British West Indies. After receiving degrees from Harvard College and Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, he did postgraduate work at the University of Oxford, and he has served in the British Merchant Navy, the Israeli infantry, and the Israeli Air Force. He was published in *The New Yorker* for almost a quarter of a century, and his stories and essays appear in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Criterion*, *Commentary*, *The New York Times*, *American Heritage*, *Forbes ASAP*, and many other publications here and abroad. A Fellow of the American Academy in Rome, Member of the Council on Foreign Relations, contributing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, and former Guggenheim Fellow, he has been awarded the National Jewish Book Award and the Prix de Rome. Translated into more than a dozen languages, his books include *Refiner's Fire*, *Ellis Island & Other Stories*, *Winter's Tale*, *Swan Lake* (with illustrations by Chris Van Allsburg), *A Soldier of the Great War*, and *Memoir from Antproof Case*.

Mr. Helprin delivered the following speech at the first annual Hillsdale College Churchill Dinner, held on Tuesday, December 5, 2000, at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia.

I believe that we are in the wilderness, that we are in the wilderness because of too many lies told and too many lies believed, and that, if left unchecked, this habit of untruth will destroy us.

I was born in 1947, and in my lifetime have seen three American political crises. Of these, two have come in the last two years. Whereas European political crises are almost always about power, American political crises are almost always about truth, which is why Europeans almost always mis-translate and misapprehend us. It is also why Winston Churchill, wholly British and half American, was able to save the West. As a European he understood power, but as an American he brought into history's consummate struggle for

power the idea of truth as the consummate weapon. In those great moments when the world depended on his every word, it underlay every word he spoke. It was the foundation of the nearly meta-physical strategy into which he marshaled the allies to destroy the enemies that had nearly overwhelmed them. It enabled him to see when others could not, to speak when others would not, and to record his times with majesty, elevation, and wit.

It is almost an axiom of the Left that the wound that cleaved America from Europe and in which we found our special nature will heal, and that our political culture will come to tolerate the corruption it was born to put to an end: in short, that, embarrassed by our exceptionalism, we will race to abandon it. Unfortunately, this is true, it is happening on the instant, and it is the source of the crises in our political life that, mistakenly and superficially, we perceive and address as contests of power. But they are not contests of power, they are arguments about truth.

Blinded By Lies

PRESIDENT CLINTON was able to ride out his impeachment not merely because he has the conscience of a slot machine, but because he and his partisans managed to convince the nation that the matter at issue was not truth but power. Virtually all his arguments were founded upon lies. It was a lie that he did not perjure himself. It was a lie that he did not conceal evidence. It was a lie that he did not conspire to intimidate witnesses. It was a lie that all these things were personal mistakes. It was a lie that the assemblage of raw FBI files on 900 Republicans was not for the purposes of blackmail. It was a lie that these files came to the White House by mistake. It was a lie that Mrs. Clinton did not benefit from guaranteed transactions in commodities trading. It was a lie that this was not a bribe. It was a lie that the president did not receive millions of campaign dollars from China. It was a lie that he did not personally intervene to aid the transfer to China of military technology that China intends for potential use against the United States. It was a lie that these two actions were unconnected. It was a lie that the grounds for impeachment were not mystifyingly narrow. It was a lie that the Senate could not try on political rather than legal grounds. There were so many lies that they were like sand in a sandstorm. They got into everything. You could not see the ground in front of you for all the lies that swirled in the air like brown dust.

The President was able to compel these lies because, finally, the Republican Party was unwilling and unable to go into battle to defend American exceptionalism, to defend the idea that our politics depend upon self-evident truth, as once it had gone into battle at Antietam, Chancellorsville, Petersburg, and other places, where hundreds of thousands of men died in defense of principles that the modern Republican Party fails to defend because its leaders are interested not in truth but in power.

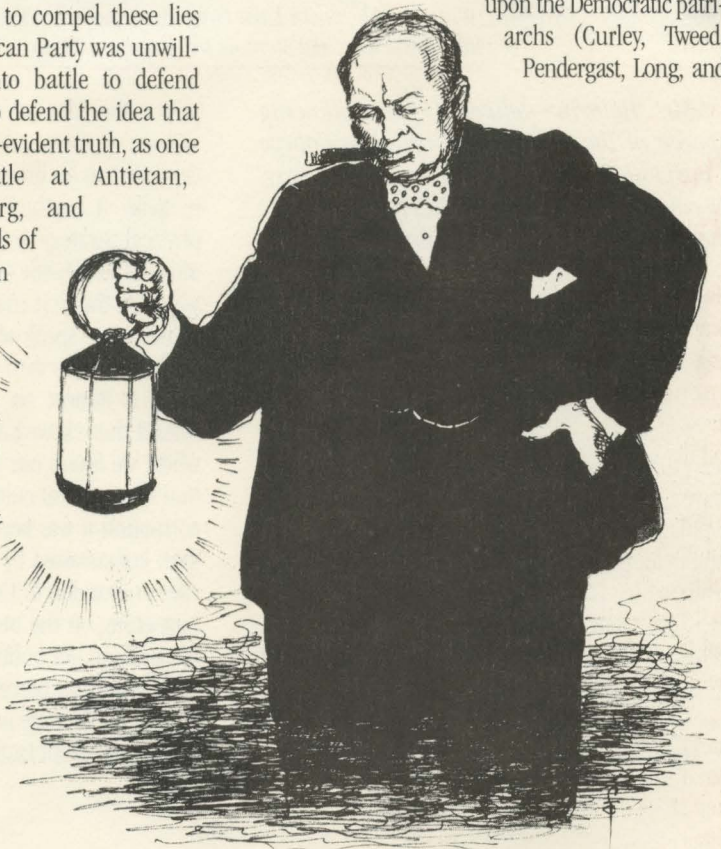
Soldiers and sailors, young eighteen-year-olds, are prepared to lay down their lives in defense of the Constitution. And for little more consideration than the privilege of doing so, they often do. Ending root and branch, families give of their children, of their sons and —

may God forgive the United States — of their daughters, for this idea. They have done so since the beginning and they do so even unto this day. What must they think of those who send young soldiers into battle, who take the same oath and serve the same Constitution, but who flinch and cower not at the prospect of giving up their lives but of losing an election?

The case that the impeachment was inconsequential, the work of hotheads without the capacity for nuance or moderation, rested upon the assurance that the issues of impeachment were inconsequential, or, if consequential, anomalous. Supposedly, there was no logic to such things as the impeachment sought to check, and there would be no extension of them. They would go away. This view received its ultimate endorsement when the Republican nominee for president said, only four months ago: "I have no stake in the bitter arguments of the last few years."

It seems, however, that he did have a stake. What the impeachment sought to check did not go away. It came back in the person of a horrible, fleshy, bovine creature in whose thick and sweaty hands the entire state of Florida became the victim of date rape. That which remains unsettled and unattended is usually destined to multiply. The forces that, during the impeachment, constituted the unspeakable defending the indefensible, rushed south in response to an election that had gone against them by only a few votes and that, drawing

upon the Democratic patriarchs (Curley, Tweed, Pendergast, Long, and



Daley), they were confident they could overturn by sheer force of manipulation.

In subjecting the established standards for the acceptance of ballots to recurrent free falls, they hoped via numbing recounts in predominantly Democratic counties to produce the Democratic votes required to tip the balance. They would allow themselves the Delphic privilege of divining the intent of unknown voters who had cast spoiled ballots; they would hold absentee and military votes to a strict standard while searching for indented Gore chads as desperately as cosmonauts searching for bottles of oxygen after punching a hole in Mir; they would count as many times and take as much time as necessary to achieve the outcome they sought; after their statisticians informed them that the Vice President would not win based only on the many rule changes to that point, they would change the rules yet again to include the infamous dimpled chads; their slogan, "All votes should count," would apply only to spoiled ballots in their target counties, ignoring spoiled ballots everywhere else; they would hurl upon the state of Florida a writhing mass of amoral lawyers and semi-human political operatives.

And after all this, unbelievably, they would accuse their opponents of trying to steal the election. They do not know that what they have done is wrong. They believe they have been commendably exercising power in search of a triumph of the will. How strong they are, how ruthless, how clever. No matter that what they seek is a triumph over truth, reason, established procedure, the Constitution, and the climate of decency that has sustained this country since its beginnings.

The Way to the Clearing

DEPREDACTIONS SUCH as these do not simply go away. About this, history is unambiguous. They build upon their own force, they attract opportunistic adherents, they destroy opposition. Therefore, it is essential that they are faced early and directly. It is essential that they are identified for what they are, in onslaughts that match them in assertiveness, and that whoever does this does so unflinchingly. The real power in politics is when politics are transcended, which is not difficult. It is necessary only to know and defend simple truths, and to hold to stated positions as if you believe in them, because, in fact, you do.

Who the victor will be and by what narrow margin or technicality is immaterial to the fact that the horrid election of 2000 was created by the over-calculation and dissembling of both parties, which directed their gargantuan efforts not to clar-

ify their positions but to obscure them. Had they argued forthrightly and drawn the clear lines the electorate deserves, the break almost certainly would have been less ambiguous. With a more truthful politics issues would be settled, things would get done, politics would actually recede. It is foolish to believe that because half the people favor blue and half yellow, what the country really wants is green. If a nation could put itself on the right path merely by splitting differences, history would be rather less sharp. You cannot properly address the questions of what constitutes an adequate national defense, of collective versus individual rights, of abortion, capital punishment, the redistribution of wealth, the role and effect of government, and the meaning of the Constitution unless you debate them with all the force of argument you can bring to bear for the purpose of determining the truth of contending propositions. Is it not astounding that this approach is associated with fanaticism and suicide, when in fact it is the *sine qua non* of survival in the long term?

Its exemplar is not a Pat Buchanan, who feeds on the absolutism of his positions more than on their content, and has yet to adjust to the Second World War. But nor is it a Trent Lott, who dwells behind the baseboards, ears cocked and fingers to the wind, surrounded by squadrons of ever-trembling mice.

With what instrument, then, does one calibrate what needs to be done and the means to do it? What magic allows a statesman to thread the needle without touching the sides, to choose the right rather than the easy course, and to keep politics stable and just? Churchill knew, as did Lincoln, Washington, and every statesman who, while practicing politics, transcended it. They lived by it. They saw their long-lasting power swell with it. It lay at the heart of their achievements, their beliefs, and their lives. It is what keeps them before our eyes even now. It is the truth.

Churchill's magisterial strength was not born of ideology: he crossed the aisle twice and was notably inconsistent in the little matters that bind little minds. It did not derive from language itself. No matter how finely language may be constructed, divorced from truth it is repellent. And it did not derive from the calculus of power: he was at his best when he seemed God-forsaken, when, as if by divine allowance, there appeared before him an ember of truth that then would illuminate his way with the heat and light of a Glasgow steel furnace. The heart of what a statesman says is in simple words that draw their force from the com-

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