

September 24, 2014

John Fund spent some time talking with climate change goobers during their march in NY City.

The United Nations Climate Summit will begin in New York this Tuesday, but environmental activists didn't wait. All day Sunday, they filled the streets of Manhattan for a march that featured Al Gore, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio, and various Hollywood actors.

But they certainly didn't act like a movement that was winning. There was a tone of fatalism in the comments of many with whom I spoke; they despair that the kind of radical change they advocate probably won't result from the normal democratic process. It's no surprise then that the rhetoric of climate-change activists has become increasingly hysterical. Naomi Klein, author of a new book on the "crisis," This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate, said, "I have seen the future, and it looks like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina." In her new book she demands that North America and Europe pay reparations to poorer countries to compensate for the climate change they cause. She calls her plan a "Marshall Plan for the Earth" and acknowledges that it would cost "hundreds of billions if not trillions of dollars." But she has an easy solution on how to pay for it: "Need more money? Print some!" What's a little hyperinflation compared to "saving the planet"?

Nor is Klein alone in her hysteria. Actor Leonardo DiCaprio is releasing a new film in which he warns that the world is threatened by a "carbon monster" that is treated like a kind of Godzilla that must be killed off by ending the use of carbon-based fuels.

One reason the rhetoric has become so overheated is that the climate-change activists increasingly lack a scientific basis for their most exaggerated claims. ...

And Charles Cooke portrays one of the totalitarian left - Robert Kennedy.

Blissfully unaware of how hot the irony burned, Robert Kennedy Jr. yesterday took to a public protest to rail avidly in favor of censorship. The United States government, Kennedy lamented in an interview with Climate Depot, is not permitted by law to "punish" or to imprison those who disagree with him — and this, he proposed, is a problem of existential proportions. Were he to have his way, Kennedy admitted, he would cheer the prosecution of a host of "treasonous" figures — among them a number of unspecified "politicians"; those bêtes noires of the global Left, Kansas's own Koch Brothers; "the oil industry and the Republican echo chamber"; and, for good measure, anybody else whose estimation of the threat posed by fossil fuels has provoked them into "selling out the public trust." Those who contend that global warming "does not exist," Kennedy claimed, are guilty of "a criminal offense — and they ought to be serving time for it."

Thus did a scion of one of America's great political dynasties put himself on the same lowly moral, legal, and intellectual plane as the titillation website Gawker.

It is dull and dispiriting that it should need so often to be repeated, but, for the sake of tedious clarity, repeat it I shall: Freedom of speech is a wholly fruitless guarantee unless it is held steadfastly to protect even those utterances that most pugnaciously contravene the zeitgeist and most grievously offend the well-connected. Inherent to the safeguard, further, is the supposition that the state may not distinguish between speakers or make legal judgments as to whose words are valuable and whose should be frowned upon. Despite a concerted and

increasingly unsustainable attempt to suggest otherwise, the question of climate change remains an open and rambunctious one, and the debate that surrounds the topic remains protected in practice by the First Amendment and in civil society by the dual forces of taste and liberality. Robert Kennedy, by agitating for the suppression of heterodoxy, is casting himself as an enemy of all three.

Kennedy's insidious aspirations are the inevitable consequence of his conviction that he is in possession of the truth and that all who have the temerity to question him are, in consequence, wreckers. At the best of times, and on the least shaky of epistemological ground, this is a dangerous instinct. In this area in particular, it is downright frightening. ...

A couple of days ago Pickings covered the historical ignorance of the outfit in the white house. Today, [Peggy Noonan](#) writes on their lack of judgment. Pickerhead often points out the old saw about two levels of pay - getting paid for what you do or paid for what you know - actually has a third higher level; getting paid for what you know not to do. This is an area where the president fails. Noonan points out the great example of drawing the "red line" in Syria.

At this dramatic time, with a world on fire, we look at the president and ponder again who he is. Mr. Obama himself mocked how people see him, according to a remarkable piece this week by Peter Baker in the New York Times. "Oh, it's a shame when you have a wan, diffident, professorial president," he reportedly said, sarcastically, in a meeting with journalists before his big Syria speech. Zbigniew Brzezinski told Mr. Baker the president's critics think he's a "a softy. He's not a softy."

Actually, no one thinks he's a softy. A man who personally picks drone targets, who seems sometimes to enjoy antagonizing congressional Republicans, whose speeches not infrequently carry a certain undercurrent of political malice, cannot precisely be understood as soft.

But we focus on Mr. Obama's personality and psychology—he's weak or arrogant or ambivalent, or all three—and while this is interesting, it's too fancy. We are overthinking the president.

His essential problem is that he has very poor judgment.

And we don't say this because he's so famously bright—academically credentialed, smooth, facile with words, quick with concepts. (That's the sort of intelligence the press and popular historians most prize and celebrate, because it's exactly the sort they possess.) But brightness is not the same as judgment, which has to do with discernment, instinct, the ability to see the big picture, wisdom that is earned or natural.

Mr. Obama can see the trees, name their genus and species, judge their age and describe their color. He absorbs data. But he consistently misses the shape, size and density of the forest. His recitations of data are really a faux sophistication that suggests command of the subject but misses the heart of the matter. ...

Amity Shlaes reviews Ken Burns' latest effort to make us love government.

... When it comes to the 1930s, such twisting of the record becomes outright distortion. By his own stated goal, that of putting people to work, Roosevelt failed. Joblessness remained above 10 percent for most of the decade. The stock market did not come back. By some measures, real output passed 1929 levels monetarily in the mid 1930s only to fall back into a steep depression within the Depression. As George Will comments, "the best of the New Deal programs was Franklin Roosevelt's smile." The recovery might have come sooner had the smile been the only New Deal policy.

So great is Burns's emphasis on the Roosevelt dynasty that William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover come away as mere seat warmers in the White House. Especially puzzling is the neglect of TR's progressive heirs, Taft and Wilson, who, after all, set the stage for FDR. This omission can be explained only by Burns's desire to cement the reign of the Roosevelts. On the surface, the series' penchant for grandees might seem benign, like the breathless coverage of Princess Kate's third trimester in *People* magazine. In this country, elevating presidential families is a common habit of television producers; the Kennedys as dynasty have enjoyed their share of airtime. Still, Burns does go further than the others, ennobling the Roosevelts as if they were true monarchs, gods almost, as in Martha Gellhorn's abovementioned line. Burns equates progressive policy with the family that promulgates it. And when Burns enthrones the Roosevelts, he also enthrones their unkingly doctrine, progressivism.

To be sure: One documentary series, even one by Ken Burns, can reach only so many. But Burns is not alone. The new Advanced Placement history curriculum, which will touch a large portion of thinking high-schoolers, buttresses the myths of the 1920s as failure and the New Deal as rescue. Against such a lovable monolith, bound to influence our culture through multiple election cycles, conservatives and centrists offer — what?

The Roosevelts brings to light a failing in conservative investors and non-progressive educators: They don't deliver enough serious history of their own. ...

More in this vein from Scott Johnson.

When writer Mark Gauvreau Judge was repeatedly invited to review Ken Burns's 10-part, 18-and-a-half hour documentary on the history of jazz in 2000, his response was always the same: "I don't need to see it to write a review. It's Ken Burns, hippie granola-head and king of the documentary-melodrama, which means we're in for yet another race-obsessed orgy of political correctness." (In retrospect, Judge concedes, he was only "half-right.")

With slight variation necessitated by the differing subject matter, I think Judge's critique applies almost perfectly to Burns's current offering, The Roosevelts: An Intimate History, written by Burns's long-time collaborator (and Roosevelt biographer) Geoffrey Ward. And Judge would have been all right, not half-right. ...

... Interviewing Burns for a feature occasioned by the documentary, the *Wall Street Journal* asked what president from our history we would elect today. Burns responded with this mindless takedown of the American people: "I think we could perpetually elect the Warren G. Hardings of the world, not asking the essential questions about honesty and whatever, because they looked the part—they're out of central casting. And our greatest presidents, thankfully, are not out of

central casting. They're actually themselves." Burns's disparagement of the American people certainly applies to our election of the current occupant of the Oval Office, but you can bet that is not what he has in mind with his pseudosophistication that achieves vapid left-wing stupidity.

National Review

The Crumbling Climate-Change Consensus

Extremists' rhetoric heats up as their case falls apart.

by John Fund

The United Nations Climate Summit will begin in New York this Tuesday, but environmental activists didn't wait. All day Sunday, they filled the streets of Manhattan for a march that featured Al Gore, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio, and various Hollywood actors.

But they certainly didn't act like a movement that was winning. There was a tone of fatalism in the comments of many with whom I spoke; they despair that the kind of radical change they advocate probably won't result from the normal democratic process. It's no surprise then that the rhetoric of climate-change activists has become increasingly hysterical. Naomi Klein, author of a new book on the "crisis," *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, said, "I have seen the future, and it looks like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina." In her new book she demands that North America and Europe pay reparations to poorer countries to compensate for the climate change they cause. She calls her plan a "Marshall Plan for the Earth" and acknowledges that it would cost "hundreds of billions if not trillions of dollars." But she has an easy solution on how to pay for it: "Need more money? Print some!" What's a little hyperinflation compared to "saving the planet"?

Nor is Klein alone in her hysteria. Actor Leonardo DiCaprio is releasing a new film in which he warns that the world is threatened by a "carbon monster" that is treated like a kind of Godzilla that must be killed off by ending the use of carbon-based fuels.

One reason the rhetoric has become so overheated is that the climate-change activists increasingly lack a scientific basis for their most exaggerated claims. As physicist Gordon Fulks of the Cascade Policy Institute puts it: "CO2 is said to be responsible for global warming that is not occurring, for accelerated sea-level rise that is not occurring, for net glacial and sea-ice melt that is not occurring . . . and for increasing extreme weather that is not occurring." He points out that there has been no net new global-warming increase since 1997 even though the human contribution to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen by 25 percent since then. This throws into doubt all the climate models that have been predicting massive climate dislocation.

Other scientists caution that climate models must be regarded with great care and skepticism. Steven Koonin, the undersecretary for science in the Energy Department during President Obama's first term, wrote a pathbreaking piece in Saturday's *Wall Street Journal* in which he concluded:

We often hear that there is a "scientific consensus" about climate change. But as far as the computer models go, there isn't a useful consensus at the level of detail relevant to assessing

human influence. . . . The models roughly describe the shrinking extent of Arctic sea ice observed over the past two decades, but they fail to describe the comparable growth of Antarctic sea ice, which is now at a record high. . . . Any serious discussion of the changing climate must begin by acknowledging not only the scientific certainties, but also the uncertainties, especially in projecting the future. Recognizing those limits, rather than ignoring them, will lead to a more sober and ultimately more productive discussion of climate change and climate policies. To do otherwise is a great disservice to climate science itself.

Even scientists who accept the conventional scientific treatment of the subject by the U.N. International Panel on Climate Change increasingly question just how much it would help to curb emissions or to radically redistribute wealth, as activists like Klein urge us to do. Bjørn Lomborg, director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, told me that all of the carbon-reduction targets advocated by the U.N. or the European Union would result in imperceptible differences in temperature, at enormous cost. "We would be far better off and richer if we did simple things like painting roofs in hot climates white and investing in new technologies that could help us adapt to any change that is coming," he says. Even the U.N.'s own climate panel admits that so far, climate change hasn't included any increase in the frequency or intensity of so-called extreme weather.

At the Heartland Institute's Ninth International Conference on Climate Change last July, I ran into scientist after scientist who felt that the debate was finally going against the climate extremists. Several noted that the conference's organizers were on the offense and gaining real ground. Roy Spencer, a former senior scientist for climate studies at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, described the shift in opinion on his blog:

For many years we had been hearing from the "scientific consensus" side that natural climate change is nowhere near as strong as human-caused warming . . . yet the lack of surface warming in 17 years has forced those same scientists to now invoke natural climate change to supposedly cancel out the expected human-caused warming!

C'mon guys. You can't have it both ways! They fail to see that a climate system capable of cancelling out warming with natural cooling is also capable of causing natural warming in the first place. . . . To me, it feels like a climate skepticism tipping point has been reached.

Maybe that's why the climate-change extremists are basing fewer of their appeals on fact and more on hysteria. You scream the loudest when the opposition is about to tip over on you and pin you down.

National Review

Robert Kennedy Jr., Aspiring Tyrant

He'd like to charge the Kochs with treason and send climate-change dissenters to jail.

by Charles C. W. Cooke



Blissfully unaware of how hot the irony burned, Robert Kennedy Jr. yesterday took to a public protest to rail avidly in favor of censorship. The United States government, Kennedy lamented in an interview with *Climate Depot*, is not permitted by law to “punish” or to imprison those who disagree with him — and this, he proposed, is a problem of existential proportions. Were he to have his way, Kennedy admitted, he would cheer the prosecution of a host of “treasonous” figures — among them a number of unspecified “politicians”; those *bêtes noires* of the global Left, Kansas’s own Koch Brothers; “the oil industry and the Republican echo chamber”; and, for good measure, anybody else whose estimation of the threat posed by fossil fuels has provoked them into “selling out the public trust.” Those who contend that global warming “does not exist,” Kennedy claimed, are guilty of “a criminal offense — and they ought to be serving time for it.”

Thus did a scion of one of America’s great political dynasties put himself on the same lowly moral, legal, and intellectual plane as the titillation website Gawker.

It is dull and dispiriting that it should need so often to be repeated, but, for the sake of tedious clarity, repeat it I shall: Freedom of speech is a wholly fruitless guarantee unless it is held steadfastly to protect even those utterances that most pugnaciously contravene the zeitgeist and most grievously offend the well-connected. Inherent to the safeguard, further, is the supposition that the state may not distinguish between speakers or make legal judgments as to whose words are valuable are whose should be frowned upon. Despite a concerted and increasingly unsustainable attempt to suggest otherwise, the question of climate change remains an open and rambunctious one, and the debate that surrounds the topic remains protected in practice by the First Amendment and in civil society by the dual forces of taste and

liberality. Robert Kennedy, by agitating for the suppression of heterodoxy, is casting himself as an enemy of all three.

Kennedy's insidious aspirations are the inevitable consequence of his conviction that he is in possession of the truth and that all who have the temerity to question him are, in consequence, wreckers. At the best of times, and on the least shaky of epistemological ground, this is a dangerous instinct. In this area in particular, it is downright frightening. Of late, it has become dreadfully standard to hear the Kennedys of the world pretend that if one acknowledges basic climate mechanics, one is forced to take notoriously unreliable computer models at face value and, further, to acquiesce in whatever political "solutions" are currently *en vogue*. Nothing could be further from the truth. Whatever "consensus" can be said to exist in the realm of climatology is largely limited to the presumption that industrial activity is bound by the same chemical, biological, and physical rules as is any other human pursuit, and to the acknowledgement that if one changes the makeup of the atmosphere, the atmosphere will change. Quite *how* it will change, to what extent, and to what degree any such transmutation represents a problem for life on earth, however, remain open questions. At present, there remain serious disagreements as to what has caused the current "pause" in global warming; as to what accounts for the embarrassing failure of so many of the forecasts on which we are expected to rely; as to how much of an effect modulations in the climate are having on extreme weather events; and as to how much we can possibly know about the future anyhow.

Wide open, too, are the political questions of what exactly can and should be done about any genuine changes in climate — and at what cost; of whether some climatological alterations are in fact a reasonable price to pay for the astonishing improvements in life expectancy and material wellbeing that the industrial revolution has yielded; of whether man is better off attempting to leverage his ingenuity and to outrun Gaia as he has outrun Malthus; and of at what cost to our liberty and our safety any amendments to our way of life might come. When the likes of Robert Kennedy reveal themselves to be the nasty little tyrants that we have always suspected them to be, this lattermost question comes screaming back into focus. If this affair has revealed any "treason" at all, the guilty party is not the skeptical population of the United States, but Robert Kennedy and his enablers. To fantasize about jailing one's opponents is, I'm afraid, a sure sign of mental imbalance, and a gold-leafed invitation to be quietly excluded from polite society. Goodbye, Robert.

Scientific knowledge, by its nature, cannot ever be said to be so "settled" as to justify the silencing of critics. Still, even were the debate over climate change in some way to be resolved in perpetuity, the prospect of incarcerating those who dissented would be no less grotesque. In the small part of Planet Earth in which man can be said to be free, governments exist to secure the liberty of those that employ them, not to serve as arbiters of truth. When Robert Kennedy contends that there ought to be "a law" with which the state "could punish" nonconformists, he is in effect inviting Washington, D.C., to establish itself as an oracle, to ensconce in aspic a set of approved facts, and to cast those who refuse to accede as heretics who must be hunted down and burned in the interest of the greater good. In other words, he is advising that we dismantle that most precious of all liberties: the right to our own conscience. As the blood-spattered history of the human race shows us in appalling and graphic detail, the wise response to the man who insists that the Holocaust did not happen, or that $2 + 2 = 5$, or that the United States is geographically smaller than Sweden is to gently correct him — and, if one must, to mock or ignore or berate him, too. It is never — under any circumstances — to push him through the criminal-justice system. The cry "but this is different" remains in the case of climate change precisely what it has always been: the cry of the ambitious and the despotic. Once the principle

of free speech is subordinated to expedience, circumstances can always be found to justify its suppression.

It is alarming, perhaps, that the loudest condemnations of Kennedy and his ilk will come not from the scientific community, but from a small clique of classical liberals who remain uncommonly jealous of their rights and who are prepared to fight for them come what may. Where, though, is the outcry from the academy? A state that is sufficiently intrusive to jail anybody who dissents from the "consensus" of the "scientific community" is also sufficiently intrusive to jail those within it. By what mathematical standard might we determine who is to be saved? Worse, perhaps, the suggestion that the nation's courts exist to arbitrate intellectual disputes serves to plant in the minds of the general public the false and counterproductive notion that it is government force and not the interplay of unfettered reason and objective reality that determines "truth." Airplanes do not fly because the FAA grants them approval to do so, but because our engineers and physicists have correctly determined what they need to do in order that steel might conquer air. Insofar as it has one at all in this area, the role of the state is to facilitate debate and innovation and, at least as far as the exchange of ideas is concerned, then stay out of the way. That the actions of the government and the judgments of a particular subsection of society sometimes line up is an inevitable and, sometimes, a good thing. Nevertheless, taking advice from a group and punishing that group's critics are different things altogether, for hypotheses cannot be either proven or disproven by jackboots alone.

In its purest form, the case against Robert Kennedy's being permitted to subject the Koch brothers to "three hots and a cot at the Hague with all the other war criminals" is a relatively straightforward one: Namely, that the Kochs are not war criminals, and that nor, for that matter, are the politicians, pundits, entertainers, businessmen, and voters who have joined them in skepticism. And yet the importance of keeping Kennedy's view at the fringes goes much, much deeper, relating as it does to core questions about liberty, scientific inquiry, and the manner in which the two feed and support one another. There are fair arguments to be had about surface temperatures, chlorofluorocarbons, and the troposphere, but not a single one of them can be productively indulged if the price of the game is the destruction of its less popular players.

WSJ

[The Unwisdom of Barack Obama](#)

Is he weak? Arrogant? Ambivalent? Don't overthink the president.

by Peggy Noonan

At this dramatic time, with a world on fire, we look at the president and ponder again who he is. Mr. Obama himself mocked how people see him, according to a remarkable piece this week by Peter Baker in the [New York Times](#). "Oh, it's a shame when you have a wan, diffident, professorial president," he reportedly said, sarcastically, in a meeting with journalists before his big Syria speech. Zbigniew Brzezinski told Mr. Baker the president's critics think he's a "a softy. He's not a softy."

Actually, no one thinks he's a softy. A man who personally picks drone targets, who seems sometimes to enjoy antagonizing congressional Republicans, whose speeches not infrequently carry a certain undercurrent of political malice, cannot precisely be understood as soft.

But we focus on Mr. Obama's personality and psychology—he's weak or arrogant or ambivalent, or all three—and while this is interesting, it's too fancy. We are overthinking the president.

His essential problem is that he has very poor judgment.

And we don't say this because he's so famously bright—academically credentialed, smooth, facile with words, quick with concepts. (That's the sort of intelligence the press and popular historians most prize and celebrate, because it's exactly the sort they possess.) But brightness is not the same as judgment, which has to do with discernment, instinct, the ability to see the big picture, wisdom that is earned or natural.

Mr. Obama can see the trees, name their genus and species, judge their age and describe their color. He absorbs data. But he consistently misses the shape, size and density of the forest. His recitations of data are really a faux sophistication that suggests command of the subject but misses the heart of the matter.

You can run down the list. His famous "red line" comment was poor judgment. He shouldn't have put himself or his country in that position, threatening action if a foreign leader did something. He misjudged the indelible impression his crawl-back would make on the world.

Last month it was the "I don't have a strategy" statement on the Islamic State. That's not something an American president attempting to rouse the public and impress the world can say. But he didn't know.

ObamaCare top to bottom was poor judgment. It shouldn't have been the central domestic effort of his presidency, that should have been the economy and jobs. He thought his bill could go forward without making Republicans co-own it, thought it would be clever to let Congress write it, thought an overextended and undertalented federal government could execute it. He thought those who told him the website would work were truthful, when he should have been smoking out agendas, incompetence and yes-sir-ism. He shouldn't have said if you like your doctor you can keep him. That was his domestic red-line comment. It was a product of poor judgment.

The other night, at the end of his Syria speech, he sang a long, off-point aria to the economy. Supposedly it would be ringing and rousing, but viewers looked at each other and scratched their heads. It didn't belong there. It showed a classic misjudging of his position. The president thinks people are depressed because they don't understand how good the economy is. Actually right now they are depressed because he is president. It was like Jimmy Carter's malaise speech. It wasn't a bad speech, but he wasn't the person who could give it because voters weren't thinking malaise was the problem, they were thinking Mr. Carter was. He couldn't relieve public unhappiness because people had come to think he was the source of it.

Mr. Obama misjudged from day one his position vis-à-vis Republicans on Capitol Hill. He thought they were out to kill him. Some were! That's Washington. But Republicans in 2009 were more desperate than he understood, and some could have been picked off, because they thought he was the future and they didn't want to be on the wrong side of history. To get their support on health care he would have had to make adjustments, bend a little so they could play ball without losing all standing and self-respect. He couldn't do it. He didn't see their quandary. He allowed them to stand against him with *integrity*. That was poor judgement!

Libya? Poor judgment. A nation run by a nut was turned into a nation run by many nuts, some more vicious than the dictator they toppled. Russia? The president misread it, which would only

have been a mistake, if a serious one, if it hadn't been for his snotty high-handedness toward those who'd made warnings. To [Mitt Romney](#), in debate, in October 2012: "The 1980s—they're now calling to ask for their foreign policy back."

He misjudged public reaction to the Snowden revelations, did not understand Americans were increasingly alarmed about privacy and the government.

He can read a poll, but he can't anticipate a sentiment.

On scandals, and all administrations have them, he says something ringing, allows the withholding of information, and hopes it will all go away. Does Benghazi look to you like it's going away? Was the IRS's reputation buttressed by his claims that there wasn't a "smidgen of corruption" within it, or was its reputation ruined by its stonewalling?

In his handling of the Islamic State the president has been slow to act, slow to move, inconsistent in his statements, unpersuasive, uninspiring. No boots on the ground, maybe boots on the ground but not combat boots, only advisory boots. He takes off the table things that should be there, and insists on weird words like "degrade"—why not just "stop and defeat"?—and, in fact, "ISIL." The world calls it ISIS or Islamic State. Why does he need a separate language? How does that help?

In another strange, off-point aria, reported by the Times's Mr. Baker, the president told the journalists that if he were "an adviser" to ISIS, he would have told them not to do the beheadings but to send the hostages home with a note instead. Can you imagine FDR ruminating about how if Hitler wanted to win over Americans he wouldn't have invaded Poland, he would have softly encircled it and then thrown an unusually boisterous Oktoberfest?

Meanwhile time passes. The president's own surrogates this week seemed unsure, halting, sometimes confused. A month ago there was a chance to hit the Islamic State hard when they were in the field and destroy not just their arms but their mystique. At this point we are enhancing it. It is the focus of all eyes, the subject of the American debate. Boy do they make us nervous, maybe they're coming across our borders.

Maybe all this is the president's clever way of letting time pass, letting things play out, so that in a few months the public fever to do something—he always thinks the public has a fever—will be over. And he will then be able to do little, which perhaps is what he wants.

But none of this looks clever. It looks like poor judgment beginning to end.

National Review

Progressives Enthroned

by Amity Shlaes

"He is at once God and their intimate friend," wrote journalist Martha Gellhorn back in the 1930s of President Franklin Roosevelt. The quote comes from *The Roosevelts*, the new Ken Burns documentary that PBS airs this month. But the term "documentary" doesn't do *The Roosevelts* justice. "Extravaganza" is more like it: In not one but 14 lavish hours, the series covers two great presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, who served in the first decade of the

last century, and Franklin Roosevelt, who led our nation through the Great Depression and to victory in World War II. In his use of the plural, Burns correctly includes a third Roosevelt: Eleanor, who as first lady also affected policy, along with her spouse.

The contention of *The Roosevelts* is a plausible one: that this New York family altered the presidency forever, converting the office from a near-ceremonial post into one of near-regal responsibility for domestic policy. The Roosevelts both favored active progressivism and denied that any other presidential posture could do the trick. What “26” and “32” hoped, as one of the commenters in the film, George F. Will, notes, was that “the role of the central government from now on [would be] to secure the well-being of the American people.”

The Roosevelts got what they wanted. With the partial exception of Ronald Reagan, no chief executive since has dared to suggest that the economy might simply run itself. As the years have passed, the demand for progressive reform and federal oversight has only increased, especially when financial markets have turned. Citizens now expect, even demand, economic rescue from any chief executive. To demur and call for a reduced presidency would be to invite ridicule or worse.

The Roosevelts commences by establishing a pathetic picture of the presidency pre-Roosevelt: a timid office in which passive politicians served through “mere negation,” as Theodore Roosevelt referred to it, busying themselves with post-office oversight and coming out to lead as chief executive only for war. Then came the fateful day anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot William McKinley and his vice president, Theodore Roosevelt, came to the office. “Get action” was the new president’s motto. The change in style first became apparent at the White House: The Roosevelts and their six children did not so much move in as occupy the place in a loud clatter of toys and ponies.

Next Roosevelt proceeded to activate the presidency itself, his “bully pulpit.” Abroad, TR moved more boldly than previous executives. “I took Panama and let Congress debate that later” was the way the president later explained the U.S. seizure of Panama by proxy. On the domestic front Roosevelt proved likewise brash, ready to reform where others had hesitated. The Interstate Commerce Commission had been in existence since 1887. The Sherman Act had been on the books since 1890 but scarcely constrained two great industries, coal and railroading. Roosevelt turned paper statutes into substantial weapons, and also saw to passage the Elkins Act and the Hepburn Act, which gave the government the power to impose price controls on the burgeoning rail sector. The first prosecutorial president, TR initiated multiple antitrust actions against railroads and other companies. To be sure, TR told colleagues that he would prosecute only “bad” trusts, not “good” ones, but of course only the administration knew which was which.

In Burns’s telling, it was Franklin Roosevelt, TR’s distant cousin, who next picked up the baton. Having trained first as Navy assistant secretary and then as vice-presidential candidate in 1920, Franklin now raised his sights to the higher goal of the White House. Just as FDR was preparing to leap onto the stage of national politics, polio crippled him. Remarkably, Roosevelt surmounted personal tragedy and ran successfully for governor of what was, at least in terms of electoral votes, the California of the day, New York. Then came the Great Depression.

“Our greatest primary task is to put people to work,” the new president declared. With his New Deal, Roosevelt created a whole row of Obamacares, from the National Recovery Administration to the Tennessee Valley Authority, to assume management of vast sectors of the economy. FDR’s justification for this government expansion was one TR had used: that

businesses had failed the economy. And if business did not appear sufficiently dark, he would paint it so. While still campaigning, FDR assaulted business leaders by name, railing against “the hand of the Ishmaels and the Insulls, whose hand is against every man’s.” Later FDR would assail “princes of property.” If the president’s rhetoric evoked TR’s claim to a clergyman’s authority, that was intended: “I want to be a preaching president.”

Reasonably enough, the American people responded with deep gratitude. World War II brought not only triumph over Hitler but also the ultimate confirmation of the Roosevelt family’s leadership. FDR served as commander-in-chief; his son James flew combat missions. General Theodore Roosevelt Jr. led the Fourth Infantry Division as it landed at Utah Beach.

Absent, however, from the compelling footage is any display of the negative consequences of Rooseveltian action. The premise of Theodore Roosevelt’s trustbusting was that business was too strong. The opposite turned out to be true when, bullied by TR, the railroads promptly collapsed in the Panic of 1907. In the end it fell to TR’s very target, J. P. Morgan, to organize the rescue on Wall Street.

The documentary also neglects to mention that the economy of the early 1920s proved likewise fragile — casualty, in part, to President Woodrow Wilson’s fortification of TR’s progressive policies. Presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge poured their own energy into halting the expansion of an imperial presidency and sustaining the authority of the states. This endeavor, anti-progressive, also won approbation: In 1920, the Harding-Coolidge ticket beat Cox-Roosevelt. The result of the Harding-Coolidge style of presidency was genuine and enormous prosperity. The 1920s saw the arrival of automobiles, indoor toilets, and the very radios that FDR would later use so effectively to his advantage. Joblessness dropped; the number of new patents soared. TR had enjoyed adulation, but so did his mirror opposite, the refrainer Coolidge.

When it comes to the 1930s, such twisting of the record becomes outright distortion. By his own stated goal, that of putting people to work, Roosevelt failed. Joblessness remained above 10 percent for most of the decade. The stock market did not come back. By some measures, real output passed 1929 levels monetarily in the mid 1930s only to fall back into a steep depression within the Depression. As George Will comments, “the best of the New Deal programs was Franklin Roosevelt’s smile.” The recovery might have come sooner had the smile been the only New Deal policy.

So great is Burns’s emphasis on the Roosevelt dynasty that William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover come away as mere seat warmers in the White House. Especially puzzling is the neglect of TR’s progressive heirs, Taft and Wilson, who, after all, set the stage for FDR. This omission can be explained only by Burns’s desire to cement the reign of the Roosevelts. On the surface, the series’ penchant for grandees might seem benign, like the breathless coverage of Princess Kate’s third trimester in *People* magazine. In this country, elevating presidential families is a common habit of television producers; the Kennedys as dynasty have enjoyed their share of airtime. Still, Burns does go further than the others, ennobling the Roosevelts as if they were true monarchs, gods almost, as in Martha Gellhorn’s abovementioned line. Burns equates progressive policy with the family that promulgates it. And when Burns enthrones the Roosevelts, he also enthrones their unkingly doctrine, progressivism.

To be sure: One documentary series, even one by Ken Burns, can reach only so many. But Burns is not alone. The new Advanced Placement history curriculum, which will touch a large

portion of thinking high-schoolers, buttresses the myths of the 1920s as failure and the New Deal as rescue. Against such a lovable monolith, bound to influence our culture through multiple election cycles, conservatives and centrists offer — what?

The Roosevelts brings to light a failing in conservative investors and non-progressive educators: They don't deliver enough serious history of their own. Frustrated at their inability to penetrate such institutions as PBS and the Ivy League, many abdicate, turning to the instant gratification of spin-cycle journalism or politics. Conservatives and classical liberals — indeed, anyone looking for true balance — might also devote attention and resources to filming, writing, and drawing a high-quality narrative. PBS might in turn surprise by airing such work: It did air Daniel Yergin's history of the free-market movement, *Commanding Heights*. Through my own work I've attempted to supply a different perspective on the 1920s and 1930s. But an army of attempts is needed. Precisely at a time when they must decide whether to back yet further incursions by Washington, Americans can sorely use a more complete version of their own past — preferably one without thrones.

Power Line

[The Roosevelts: A hagiography](#)

by Scott Johnson

When writer Mark Gauvreau Judge was repeatedly invited to review Ken Burns's 10-part, 18-and-a-half hour documentary on the history of jazz in 2000, his response was [always the same](#): "I don't need to see it to write a review. It's Ken Burns, hippie granola-head and king of the documentary-melodrama, which means we're in for yet another race-obsessed orgy of political correctness." (In retrospect, Judge concedes, he was only "half-right.")

With slight variation necessitated by the differing subject matter, I think Judge's critique applies almost perfectly to Burns's current offering, [The Roosevelts: An Intimate History](#), written by Burns's long-time collaborator (and Roosevelt biographer) Geoffrey Ward. And Judge would have been all right, not half-right.

The series can be streamed online [here](#). Part 7 of the 14-hour documentary aired last night. At long last it was over. I'm pasting in the video of Part 5 (1933-1939) so interested readers can easily take a look for themselves.

The documentary covered the lives of Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt in what I found to be the predictably insufferable fashion Judge would have anticipated. Though Franklin Roosevelt died nearly 70 years ago, Burns's work is not for those in search of cool judgment or historical detachment. The series was a love letter to Progressives, Democrats, and liberals. Part 7 traced FDR's political heritage to Barack Obama, of course, which means it's a good thing FDR was good in all his works.

The timing of the series is interesting. Arriving six weeks in advance of the midterm elections, the series allowed PBS to make its in-kind contribution to the Democrats in a big way this year. Those looking for historical detachment or impartial judgment or simply a balanced perspective had best look elsewhere.

The Roosevelts have given rise to a critical literature that is of great assistance in raising issues and rendering judgment beyond hagiography. We did not hear from Amity Shlaes, for example, in the series' 14 hours (or Jean Yarbrough, or Gene Smiley, or Peter Collier, or Burt Folsom). George Will, whom we did hear from, did not fill the void.

Having written a revisionist history of the Great Depression in which FDR is not the hero, Amity Shlaes was too hot to handle. Amity takes a critical look at the series, however, in the NRO column "[Progressives enthroned.](#)"

The Roosevelts leaves us in the realm of hagiography. Seventy years after FDR's death, it is apparently too soon to ask Burns et al. to strive for a balanced perspective on the Roosevelts. My mom was a teen-age girl who cried when she heard that FDR had died; Ken Burns essentially wants his viewers to retain the perspective of a teen-age girl circa 1945 on the Roosevelts. This is "history" for wide-eyed innocents.

Among the (mostly) positive assessments of the series are reviews by [Neal Genzlinger](#) in the New York Times, [Robert Lloyd](#) in the Los Angeles Times, and [Mason Williams](#) in the New Republic.

Interviewing Burns for a feature occasioned by the documentary, the Wall Street Journal asked what president from our history we would elect today. [Burns responded](#) with this mindless takedown of the American people: "I think we could perpetually elect the Warren G. Hardings of the world, not asking the essential questions about honesty and whatever, because they looked the part—they're out of central casting. And our greatest presidents, thankfully, are not out of central casting. They're actually themselves." Burns's disparagement of the American people certainly applies to our election of the current occupant of the Oval Office, but you can bet that is not what he has in mind with his pseudosophistication that achieves vapid left-wing stupidity.



