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"Nothing mattered, in the end. Not the probable dementia, the unfathomable ignorance, the emotional incontinence; not, certainly, the shambling, hate-filled campaign, or the ludicrously unworkable anti-policies.

The candidate out on bail in four jurisdictions, the convicted fraud artist, the adjudicated rapist and serial sexual predator, the habitual bankrupt, the stooge of Vladimir Putin, the man who tried to overturn the last election and all of his creepy retinue of crooks, ideologues and lunatics: Americans took a long look at all this and said, yes please.

There is no sense in understating the depth of the disaster. This is a crisis like no other in our lifetimes. The government of the United States has been delivered into the hands of a gangster, whose sole purpose in running, besides staying out of jail, is to seek revenge on his enemies. The damage Donald Trump and his nihilist cronies can do – to America, but also to its democratic allies, and to the peace and security of the world – is incalculable. We are living in the time of Nero.

The first six months will be a time of maximum peril. NATO must from this moment be considered effectively obsolete, without the American security guarantee that has always been its bedrock. We may see new incursions by Russia into Europe – the poor Ukrainians are probably done for, but now it is the Baltics and the Poles who must worry – before the Europeans have time to organize an alternative. China may also accelerate its Taiwanese ambitions.

At home, Mr. Trump will be moving swiftly to consolidate his power. Some of this will be institutional – the replacement of tens of thousands of career civil servants with Trumpian loyalists. But some of it will be ... atmospheric.

At some point someone – a company whose chief executive has displeased him, a media critic who has gotten under his skin – will find themselves the subject of unwanted attention from the Trump administration. It might not be so crude as a police arrest. It might just be a little regulatory matter, a tax audit, something like that. They will seek the protection of the courts, and find it is not there.

The judges are also Trump loyalists, perhaps, or too scared to confront him. Or they might issue a ruling, and find it has no effect – that the administration has called the basic bluff of liberal democracy: the idea that, in the crunch, people in power agree to be bound by the law, and by its instruments the courts, the same as everyone else. Then everyone will take their cue. Executives will line up to court him. Media organizations, the large ones anyway, will find reasons to be cheerful.

Of course, in reality things will start to fall apart fairly quickly. The huge across-the-board tariffs he imposes will tank the world economy. The massive deficits, fuelled by his ill-judged tax policies – he won't replace the income tax, as he promised, but will fill it with holes – and monetized, at his direction, by the Federal Reserve, will ignite a new round of inflation.

Most of all, the insane project of deporting 12 million undocumented immigrants – finding them, rounding them up and detaining them in hundreds of internment camps around the country, probably for years, before doing so – will consume his administration. But by then it will be too late.

We should not count upon the majority of Americans coming to their senses in any event. They were not able to see Mr. Trump for what he was before: why should that change? Would they not, rather, be further coarsened by the experience of seeing their neighbours dragged off by the police, or the military, further steeled to the necessity of doing "tough things" to "restore order?"

Some won't, of course. But they will find in time that the democratic levers they might once have pulled to demand change are no longer attached to anything. There are still elections, but the rules have been altered: there are certain obstacles, certain disadvantages if you are not with the party of power. It will seem easier at first to try to change things from within. Then it will be easier not to change things.

All of this will wash over Canada in various ways – some predictable, like the flood of refugees seeking escape from the camps; some less so, like the coarsening of our own politics, the debasement of morals and norms by politicians who have discovered there is no political price to be paid for it. And who will have the backing of their patron in Washington.

All my life I have been an admirer of the United States and its people. But I am frightened of it now, and I am even more frightened of them."

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