



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The Deep State of the Figure 8

Much of last week was dedicated to moving manure.

I should be more precise: it was dedicated to breaking up fields of ice-manure, 8 or 10 inches deep, by hand with a pick, then coming along behind with the tractor to pick up the mess and move it away from the barn. It was a lot of hands-on work, as you might imagine and, eventually covered from head to toe in it, I could hear my granddad reminding me from beyond the grave: “Nothing to worry about, kid, it’s just grass and water.”

True enough.

What’s also true is that kind of labor instantly forces me to sing chain-gang songs — “Lightning Long John” is a favorite — or old spirituals like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,”

which I don’t have memorized in its entirety. So I was forced to short-shrift it with repeated offerings of the same verse in my best imitation of a James Earl Jones baritone.

The horses, dare I say, thought I was fantastic, and gathered at the rails to stare at me dolefully.

It also gave me ample time to digest some of the more frightening themes from Mike Lofgren’s book “The Deep State.” It’s a term we are hearing more of, lately, particularly as both sides of the aisle attempt to co-opt the indictment and wield it like a cudgel against the other. Much in the same manner that politicians use “Washington” as a term of derision, or “Inside the Beltway” as a condemnation meme meant to convince us that somehow they — podium chasers all — are the real bringers of light and truth. The reality is, as Lofgren illustrates quite clearly, it’s none of them.

The Deep State, in Lofgren’s definition — and which is a term he borrowed from the World War I era of Young Turks — roughly means this: “a hybrid association of key elements of government and parts of top-level finance and industry that is effectively able to govern the United States with only limited reference to the consent of the governed as normally

expressed through elections.”

Lofgren, after three decades of high-level staff work on Capitol Hill, was uniquely placed throughout his career to terrify the rest of us with his conclusions. Nominally a Republican, Lofgren rails intelligently, convincingly, and mercilessly against both parties and their leaders as essentially puppets, dangling by strings, and essentially controlled by an intricate web of tycoons, contractors, and fundraising puppet-masters.

Lofgren opines that “most of the art and science of politics these days consist of camouflaging a politician’s real stance on an issue.”

Lofgren notes the recycling of previously disgraced policy advisors, cabinet members, et al, in a laundry list of plutocrats who jump from government to the private sector, and back again, endlessly, making higher salaries each time they do, even as many of them have been disgraced in previous public-service incarnations.

Lofgren cites a study conducted by Martin Gilens of Princeton, and Benjamin Page of Northwestern, who examined two thousand public opinion surveys on policy matters between 1981 and 2002. They drew some interesting conclusions about status as they relate to policy outcomes. The authors concluded that the

preferences of economic elites have far more impact on policy than those of average citizens. And they doubled down on that conclusion: “ordinary citizens have virtually no influence over what their government does in the United States ... economic elites and interest groups, especially those representing business, have a substantial degree of influence.”

And that’s the real danger of The Deep State, as Lofgren describes it. There has been, he concludes, a “revolution within the form,” so that outwardly those most handsomely rewarded by the charade of a functioning republic are able to maintain the outward appearances of a government whose representatives are accountable through the ballot. They manage to rail against “Washington” and the “elites,” even as they are almost universally financed by, and thence controlled by, a host of wholly unaccountable and extremely powerful interests from Beltway contractors to the Silicon Valley.

Which leaves most of the rest of us out of the equation, regardless of how many envelopes we might stuff with placards telling the new president, or whomever, that we are mad and they are fired.

I don’t know if Lofgren’s conclusions are the final say in all this, but the bell he rings

has the peal of distinct clarity, and there can be little disagreement between honest people that the candidates offered up in the last election were both dyed-in-the-wool Deep State ventriloquist dolls — of the devious, narcissistic, incredibly dishonest sort, whose mood and policy positions depend upon which arm is leveraged up their fundament.

Which is to say, charlatans, and shills, and precisely why I refused to cast a ballot for either of them.

Maybe it doesn’t even matter. It’s possible the fate of such a large and unruly republic is foreordained. History certainly suggests a natural path in the decline of empires such as this one.

I hope I’m wrong about that, too.

And anyway, back home, some 2,700 miles away from the center of all things increasingly oligarchy, I’m singing chain-gang songs, and swinging a pick, knee deep in piles of horse manure. That’s the Deep State of the Figure 8, and I have to admit, it looks pretty good. The snow-crocus are up, and the only lobbyists I contend with are chickens, dogs, horses, and a couple of cagey barn cats. Granted, they lobby hard for their interests, but I get to hear them without a single Dick Cheney or George Soros hiding in the curtains.



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