

Seeking Refuge

by Bill Herbst

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Here we are at the beginning of another year, at least according to the calendar. I tend to go with the more natural timing of seasons, where winter is the fourth and last quarter of a year. For some of us — astrologers, pagans, and others — the Vernal Equinox that defines the beginning of spring is the true start of a new year (in the northern hemisphere), but no matter. Society chose the Julian calendar, then the Gregorian reform, however, so most people go with that.

Anyway, let me wish everyone a Happy New Year! Goodbye and good riddance to 2021. May 2022 be better for us all. Yeah, fat chance of that...

See, 2021 was supposed to be the year when we Americans regained some semblance of our sanity, as well as some of our lost respect in the world. But it wasn't, and we didn't.

The popular narrative put forth at the end of 2020 (and widely believed) was that Trump's eviction from the White House by a plurality of voters — who tended to be more *against* Donald Trump than *for* Joe Biden — would mean that an extremely ugly chapter in American history would come to an end, blessedly, and not a moment too soon. The problem with that story was that Trump was not the cause of what ailed us, only a particularly nasty symptom of it. Getting rid of Trump was supposed to solve the problem, but it didn't.

The Donald had always been among the most egregious examples of the Very Worst of Fucked-Up America — first as a failed real estate mogul and developer, then as a failed casino magnate, then as a partially-successful TV show star/celebrity, and finally as fake politician and real President of the country. That Donald Trump — like Ronald Reagan before him — could even become President said less about him than it did about America and Americans. And the volumes it spoke about us were not good.

Half the country breathed a huge sigh of relief when Biden squeaked out the election victory in November of 2020. And the year ended on an optimistic note: Biden promised an aggressive agenda of legislation and executive orders during his first hundred days in office. He set out to rein in the COVID pandemic, rebuild America's infrastructure, reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, forgive student loan debt, raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour, secure voting rights, and generally take on the role he wanted to play, that of Consoler-in-Chief whose healing embrace would restore American hearts and minds and nip in the bud the hatreds that were pushing us toward another Civil War. Hell, maybe we even had

a shot at getting single-payer Medicare for All. Joe Biden promised to do all this by working across the aisle, in the spirit of bipartisan unity. Golly, what a guy!

Besides the fact that Biden's entire political career had always been as a Big Money corporate lackey, the other looming problem was that the Republicans had other plans. The narrative had held that once Trump was gone, Republicans would come to their senses and return to their former honorable status as Everett Dirksen-style true conservatives of the 1950s. Well, that didn't quite happen. Not at all, in fact. Instead, the Repugs doubled-down on their Tea Party zealotry, becoming even more Trumpian than they had been during the Trump Presidency. It was as if Republicans decided to hold a competition to see who could become an even bigger asshole than Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the Dems continued their fecklessness, hypocrisy, and complete inability to read the room.

So, as 2021 came online, Americans' optimism lasted for all of five days until January 6th, when we saw *The Big Lie* in operation for the first time. *The Big Lie*, of course, is the made-up fiction that Trump actually won the 2020 Presidential election in a landslide, but that his victory was stolen by massive election fraud perpetrated by the Democrats. Trump's insistence on *The Big Lie* was all too predictable, but could be dismissed easily enough as just more narcissism. What couldn't be so easily dismissed, however, was the millions of Americans who bought that lie, thousands of whom gathered in Washington to assault the Capitol and stage a coup to prevent Joe Biden from taking office. What we began to discover so shockingly on January 6th and have been learning more fully ever since is that 40% of the country fervently believes *The Big Lie*. No, seriously, they really do.

Then there was all that proposed legislation to fix things. While Congress passed the \$700 billion appropriations bill for this year's Pentagon spending (to keep the coffers of the military-industrial complex full) without a moment's hesitation, Republicans (along with two DINO Senators — Democrats in name only — Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema) then endorsed a scorched-earth austerity policy for the American public. One by one, each bill in the promised legislation went belly up, effectively given away by spineless Democrats. Republicans even went so far as to announce their intention to stonewall any legislation proposed by Biden. Ah, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Meanwhile, on the Pandemic front, 2021 was a year of ongoing revelations about SARS cov-2 and the Everest-sized mountain of corruption behind it. Turns out that Vitamin D and Zinc might be potent prophylactics against the virus. And yet, it took forever for us to learn that. Why? Because the Big Money is in vaccines, not in common, easily available supplements. The Pandemic is confirming for anyone who cares to look just how total a racket America is. Some Americans are dead-set on lining their pockets with money, and if they have to lie, cheat, steal, and even kill (with plausible denial, of course), they will happily do so.

But fear not. The viral mutations — Beta, Delta, Omicron, etc. — will keep Big Pharma working like beavers to produce tweaked vaccines (that will yield phenomenally high profits) for years to come, which will then be mandated for

all Americans, regardless of the vaccines' risks or long-term effects. Meanwhile, anyone who questions the existing pandemic narratives — vaccination as our main policy and suppression of any information to the contrary — is instantly tarred with the epithet of "Anti-Vaxxer," called stupid or crazy, and accused of caring about no one but themselves.

Ah, what a country. America is like one gigantic Mafia crime family. Machiavellian fear-mongering is the order of the day.

The upshot is complete psychic exhaustion for a sizable percentage of the country, maybe a quarter or more. This includes damn near all the radicals on the left, most of the progressives, and a large chunk of the centrist liberals.

These people (and I count myself among them) have had enough. Enough lies and bullshit to last them a lifetime. Enough undelivered promises — whether defeated by political opposition, reneged on by incompetence or cowardice, or just never seriously intended — to choke a horse. Enough fake carrots dangled in front of the donkey, then yanked away, to make the donkey shake off its burdensome load and say, *"That's it. I'm done. No more carrying anything."*

The result is that tens of millions of Americans are retreating to some version of the monastery, looking for psychological relief, hoping for sanctuary. No, it's not a real monastery, not the kind of cloistered environment that fosters disciplined inner work on oneself. Instead, it's the monastery of hedonistic escape from a reality that has become too painful to bear any longer: binge-watching one streaming series after another from Netflix and HBO, watching football on TV until we're blue in the face, ordering spiffy new consumer toys from Amazon with next-day delivery, and no more watching the goddamned news on any media (mainstream or otherwise). Anything to dull the despair.

I don't know if this exhaustion is temporary or permanent. It's probably temporary, but it sure doesn't feel like it. It feels cumulative, like the final capitulation of surrender after holding out heroically during a long, terrible siege.

One factor that lobbies for the notion that this sudden flight from the principled effort of working for the greater good in the world may hold only a temporary grip on our psyches is the distinct probability that we are headed — probably imminently — into more advanced stages of breakdown and collapse. In other words, harsh reality won't stop intruding on our escapist reveries.

2021 was a bad year for environmental stability. Record temperatures and more carbon in the atmosphere. Fires, floods, droughts, hurricanes and tornadoes. Every time we turned around, another natural disaster was ravaging civilization somewhere. That is almost certain to continue (and increase), along with the additional possibility for a major economic and financial meltdown in America. Think inflation from supply-chain problems is bad now? Just wait until the polar ice caps are gone and see how our infinite-growth economy does then.

Welcome to 2022. Enjoy your vacation while you can.