

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Do we have a 'great man' for 2021?

Today is the last day of 2020, and no one is sorry to see it go.

More than 300,000 Americans have died from the pandemic, many of whom would be alive today if President Trump had taken the coronavirus seriously when it first arrived on our shores.

This country has survived worse. The 1918 Spanish flu killed 675,000 Americans, the equivalent of 2 million today when adjusted for population growth over the last century.

Whether it can survive the wreckage caused by Donald Trump is another matter.

Instead of dealing with climate change, the greatest threat to the human race since the beginning of civilization, we've been reacting to Trump's "burn-the-government-down" diktats designed to satiate his constant craving for attention.

The 19th century philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle gained fame for his "great man" theory of history. Rather than arising from the people, Carlyle wrote, the destiny of civilization has been determined by "great men" (not necessarily good men) who arose to dominate their era. "The history of the world is but the biography of great men," Carlyle said.

There's considerable merit to that argument.

For example, German culture had militaristic and anti-Semitic tendencies long before Adolph Hitler came along. But if there had been no Hitler, would Germany have invaded Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland? Would there have been a Holocaust?

Not likely.

And when Germany overran France in the spring of 1940 and offered a peace deal to Great Britain, would the English have accepted?

It was only the steadfast defiance of a "great man," Winston Churchill, that inspired the English to fight on.

There is no question that Donald Trump fits Carlyle's description of a "great man."

Five years ago, the casino huckster took on the entire Republican Party and conquered it so completely that today only a handful of its officeholders are willing to show anything but complete fealty to him, no matter what he says or does.

Even after four years of trashing democratic norms and principles, Trump aroused a massive turnout of supporters on Nov. 3 that was higher than any previous presidential candidate that lost an election.

Joe Biden, because of his long history of national prominence and moderation, is probably the only Democratic candidate that could have beaten Trump.

The pandemic is still killing tens of thousands, yet despite the pleadings of the medical profession, many Americans refuse to wear masks.

That is a minor inconvenience compared to the lifestyle changes that will be needed to curb global warming. It will take a "great man" to conciliate and inspire.

"The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been," observed former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. "The public does not fully understand the world into which it is going. Leaders must invoke an alchemy of great vision."

Trump has left the American people more divided than any time since the Civil War. If Biden can bring us together, he will be a "great man" for the ages.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton



19TH CENTURY HISTORIAN THOMAS CARLYLE argued that "great men" have always controlled human destiny.