**What I Saw in (Trump's) America:**

**Reading GK Chesterton's Classic Work 100 Years Later**

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**Introduction**

The English journalist and writer, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (GKC), visited the United States to deliver a series of lectures between January and April of 1921. His collection of essays about his experiences and observations, resulted in his book, *What I Saw in America*, published the following year. Chesterton’s uniquely pungent writing style and epigrammatic rejoinders, make for curiously fascinating reading, even today. But it is the book’s connection to other such historic works by foreign observers that give it its contemporary political value to historians and political theorists. While far shorter than Alexis de Tocqueville’s magisterial *Democracy in America* (1835), and relatively unconcerned with American political institutions, compared to James Bryce’s *The American Commonwealth* (1888), Chesterton’s *What I Saw in America* (1922), provides a kind of sociopolitical analysis of the United States one hundred years ago – one from a figure lionized by many contemporary conservatives – that makes reading Chesterton in the days after the presidency of Donald Trump particularly instructive.

Witness the debate between the *New Yorker’s* Adam Gopnik, and the *New York Times’* Ross Douthat, over Chesterton’s legacy.[[1]](#endnote-1) The dustup occurred in the summer of 2008, in the halcyon days of political commentary before the Great Recession, the election of Barak Obama, and the dramas and ills of the Trump presidency. At the heart of Gopnik’s criticism of Chesterton is his inescapable anti-Semitism. As Gopnik notes,

“Unfortunately, a little reading shows that there’s a lot of it, that it comes all the time, and that the more Chesterton tries to justify it the worse it gets.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This is indeed the case in *What I Saw in America*, with the only caveat being that Chesterton’s racism flows in many directions – and is often presented in a manner that seeks some nobler intellectual end. This does indeed make Chesterton a racist – context of his times or no; but it is not the sole dimension worthy of any Chesterton readers’ attention (not anymore than nearly every white literary critic, theorist, or political figure from Chesterton’s time on down to Jefferson’s – or today, one might add).

Douthat’s response was not to defend Chesterton’s racism, but to place it within the ordered system of Western attitudes towards Jews more broadly. “But the whole point of the ‘in the context of his times’ argument,” Douthat writes, “is precisely that by the standards of the '20s and '30s, it *was* morally impressive for a political writer to reject both fascism and communism, to praise Zionism, and to speak out forcefully against Nazi anti-Semitism - and not in its eliminationist phase, but in its very earliest stages.”[[3]](#endnote-3) So indeed, was the record of Chesterton. As Douthat notes, it was Chesterton who also published *Eugenics and Other Evils* (the same year as *What I Saw in America*), a time when the Henry Cabot Lodges of America were frothing at the mouth over the virtues of scientific racism.[[4]](#endnote-4)

What is of value in thinking of Chesterton as a charmed but nevertheless critical observer (in both the literal and normative sense of the word) of America is just how Chesterton’s host of racist beliefs illuminated not only his personal racial antipathies, but also his attempts to draw attention to the racist dogmas of America. This odd reversible raincoat of reasoning makes reading Chesterton a maddening exercise at times, but also, a highly informative one. The fact that two of our generation’s most influential liberal and conservative writers have found in Chesterton someone worth crossing swords over, speaks to his continued relevance of his political thought.

In this paper, I will attempt to place Chesterton’s very specific observations of America through an examination of what he has to say about class, race, gender, and religion, in American life. In doing so, my hope is to get at what Chesterton sees as important about the United States in the early 1920s, a period marked by a closed immigration system, the resurgence of the Klan and white supremacy, and the post-progressive period of unfettered capitalism. Reading Chesterton in our present moment, just as the presidency of Donald Trump recedes in time, if not in memory, offers an opportunity to consider just how the United States – and especially its conservative ideology – has changed, but also retained certain features, in the one hundred years since his visit.

*Hotels, Madness, and the Homogenizing Effect of Capitalism*

After an opening chapter which begins with a typically Chestertonian observation *(“I have never managed to lose my old conviction that travel narrows the mind”*), the subject of *What I Saw in America’s* second chapter is an odd one. “A Meditation in a New York Hotel” offers the kind of microanalysis Chesterton often provided with the intent of drawing out the nature of the larger thing being investigated. Today, as Americans settle into life in the aftermath of a presidency defined by its occupant’s identification with the construction of hotels, it is worth considering Chesterton’s subject through fresh eyes.

Noting the lack of proper inns that define the English countryside, America’s chief form of public lodging, Chesterton observes, is one of maddening similitude. “Broadly speaking,” Chesterton writes, “there is only one hotel in America. The pattern of it, which is a very rational pattern, is repeated in cities as remote from each other as the capitals of European empires.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This is well enough, but Chesterton then provides a knowing level of detail that is both humorous and telling:

As one hotel is like another hotel, so one floor is like another hotel floor. If the passage outside your bedroom door, or hallway as it is called, contains, let us say, a small table with a green vase and a stuffed flamingo, or some trifle of the sort, you may be perfectly certain that there is exactly the same table, vase, and flamingo on every one of the thirty-two landings of that towering habitation.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As if presaging the setting for one of America’s great late twentieth century horrors stories, Chesterton sees “something weird, like magic multiplication in the exquisite sameness of these suites. It seemed to suggest the still atmosphere of some eerie psychological story.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Indeed, it is the Overlook Hotel’s details in Stanley Kubrick’s rendering of Stephen King’s novel, *The Shining*, that gives the film its surreal quality: large spaces, repetitive carpet patterns, and maze-like floor layouts (and a maze itself), are all dizzyingly employed. Getting lost where one is to live, however briefly, is its own form of terror. Chesterton sees the link, and is reminded of American detective stories (mostly written by women at the time), already using the premise of recurring domestic patterns to inspire horror. Chesterton pokes grim fun at such repetitiveness, noting that a visitor to New York hailing from some American countryside, might find his daughter looking “for him in vain amid the apparently unmistakable surroundings of the thirty-second floor, while he was being quietly butchered by the floor clerk on the thirty-third floor.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

This is not the end of Chesterton’s careful observations about the layout of American hotels. He finds equally significant meaning in their public spaces – always reserved for the first floor; meanwhile their second floors (“furnished more luxuriously and looking down on the mobs beneath”) are always reserved for guests. Thus, “[t]here is generally something like a ground floor that is more public, a half-floor or gallery above that is more private, and above that the bulk of the block of bedrooms, the huge hive with its innumerable and identical cells.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

After giving similar treatment to the world of hotel elevators (an unnecessary multi-syllabic departure from the English “lift”) and bathrooms, Chesterton comes to his point. “In short, the American hotel is not America; but it is American,” he writes. “And it is symbolic of that society in this among other things: that it does tend too much to uniformity.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Notably, Chesterton invokes the great poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, to make his point. “Walt Whitman would be quite capable of including in his lyric litany of optimism a list of the nine hundred and ninety-nine identical bathrooms.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Where Whitman was hopeful in the pervasiveness of the democratic spirit – the equalizing effects of democracy on mass society, Alexis de Tocqueville was more alert to the despotic tendencies to be found in the allure of mass culture and conformity. It was a similar and deeply worrisome fear of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s as well. Chesterton’s advantage, if one is to be had from previous observers on the subject, is that his experience with America is in its period of industrial capitalism and its emergent excesses, a subject he indulges in in his third chapter, “A Meditation on Broadway.” It is here where Chesterton’s observations cast greater light on just why the repetitiveness found in American hotels are in their own way, politically relevant.

Like most every first-time visitor to New York, Chesterton is taken with the scale of all about him. Yet, his gaze is less attentive to the impressive heights of the city’s buildings (*“The very word skyscraper is an admirable example of an American lie”)* than to their enormous billboards and garish advertisements.[[12]](#endnote-12) By playfully altering Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address – *“Tang Tonic Today; Tang Tonic Tomorrow; Tang Tonic All the Time”* – Chesterton suggests that the new national ethos is more about profits than people. “What a glorious garden of wonders this would be,” he observed about Broadway, “to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

The bizarre allure of Times Square for Chesterton, is its screaming efforts to draw one’s attention, all the while lacking in anything worthy of holding it. And here, Chesterton turns serious:

[T]he democratic ideal of countries like America, while it is still generally sincere and sometimes intense, is at issue with another tendency, an industrial progress which is of all things on earth the most undemocratic. America is not alone in possessing the industrialism, but she is alone in emphasising the ideal that strives with industrialism. Industrial capitalism and ideal democracy are everywhere in controversy; but perhaps only here are they in conflict.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Perhaps too matter of factly, Chesterton concludes, “equality is still the ideal though no longer the reality of America.”[[15]](#endnote-15) From the aesthetics of America’s cookie-cutter hotels to New York’s advertising grotesqueries, Chesterton sees a drying up of democratic possibilities. What it would mean to him that America’s most recent president rose to prominence through a mastery of these twin affronts to beauty and contemplativeness can only be hazarded. For what is more Trumpian than skyscrapers not as tall as advertised; advertisements unable to deliver what they promise; and hotels whose offerings are both haunting and attractive – even as they divide the haves and the have nots, floor by floor?

*Who Chesterton Saw in America: The Affect of Cheerful White Supremacy*

Chesterton’s tour included visits to New York, Boston, a return visit to New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Nashville, Omaha, and Albany. His 6’4”, 300 lb. frame made him a commanding figure – though it was his eccentric attire and penchant for wry humor, that made him largely beloved by his listeners and the press.[[16]](#endnote-16) What regaled Chesterton, as much as anything, however, was the racial diversity of the United States. From the very beginning of *What I Saw in America*, he paces through an astonishing litany of racial and ethnic groups – often with pithy conclusions drawn about American life, taken from his observations. These include “Red” Indians, Negroes, Egyptians, Turks, Asiatics (autocrats), Jews, Japanese, and Italians (organ-grinders). We are not ten pages in before this litany is compiled. To what end?

Chesterton concludes that it is the racial amalgam found in America that gives reason, if not life to its founding creed. Nations largely devoid of racial diversity such as Great Britain, need no creed – nor any tests of loyalty. This point of emphasis is made after an innocuous observation when visiting the American consulate to register his passport. Among the questions Chesterton was asked to respond to in writing included, “Are you an anarchist?” and “Are you in favor of subverting the government of the United States by force?” the latter to which Chesterton cheekily replied, “I prefer to answer that question at the end of my tour and not the beginning.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

“We do not have any of that [loyalty test] nonsense in England,” Chesterton concluded, “because we have never attempted to have any of that philosophy in England.” That philosophy being a national creed, rooted in political equality. “We have not got an inquisition, because we have not got a creed; but it is arguable that we do not need a creed, because we have got a character…Because we have a type, we do not need to have a test.”[[18]](#endnote-18) This makes American citizenship a romantic enterprise; given the variability in human types, Chesterton sees a national commitment to political equality as the assertion of moral conviction that it is. But is it romantic in part, because Chesterton is a fundamental adherent of white supremacy?

There is an inevitable splitting of hairs necessary in pinning down Chesterton on this question, as he is ever writing in loops, parables, and chiastic phrases. Here’s the first example of such offerings applied to race in the book. Chesterton begins with a “first principle that nobody should be ashamed of thinking a thing funny because it is foreign; the second is that he should be ashamed of thinking it wrong because it is funny.” To wit:

[T]he mind which imagines that mere unfamiliarity can possibly prove anything about inferiority is a very inadequate mind. It is inadequate even in criticizing things that may really be inferior to the things involved here. It is far better to laugh at a negro for having a black face than to sneer at him for having a sloping skull. It is proportionately even more preferable to laugh rather than judge in dealing with highly civilised peoples.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Chesterton wants to uphold the human instinct to laugh at what is different, but also to chide the tendency towards assigning inferiority to difference. This places Chesterton firmly in the realm of the open-minded cosmopolitan. That he also holds that the black race is one of “sloping skulls” and that there are civilized and uncivilized peoples – marks him out as white supremacist common to his era. And, it must be acknowledged that his anti-Jewish disposition is a prevalent feature of his discourse. His good-humored observations invariably turn sour when Chesterton “prefers Red Indians to Turks, not to mention Jews.”[[20]](#endnote-20) He insists he “speaks without prejudice” because he is ultimately praising the American insistence on Americanization. The rationalization loses all intellectual steam later, however, as Chesterton props up his anti-Semitism by asserting custom founded in experience.

[I]f after moving about in the modern world and meeting Jews, knowing Jews, doing business with Jews, and reading and hearing about Jews, I came to the conclusion that I did not like Jews, my conclusion certainly would not be prejudice. It would simply be an opinion; and one I should be perfectly entitled to hold; though I do not hold it. No experience of hatred merely following on experience of Jews can properly be called a prejudice. Now the point is that this new American Anti-Semitism springs from experience and nothing but experience.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Chesterton professes not to give credence to racial essentialism, yet he tosses

about such pairings as “Moslem despotism” and “Asiatic autocracy” throughout the work with such frequency that Chesterton’s racism can only be thought to be part and parcel of his worldview. His more cosmopolitan vision is part of his political thought to be sure – and it is where Chesterton wants to land – but his intellectual vessel is often badly damaged upon arrival. Still, there are beautiful passages that seek to redeem the enterprise. “The extreme disproportion between men, that we seem to see in life, is a thing of changing lights and lengthening shadows, a twilight full of fancies and distortions,” he writes. “We find a man famous and cannot live long enough to find him forgotten; we see a race dominant and cannot linger to see it decay. It is the experience of men that always returns to the equality of men; it is the average that ultimately justifies the average man.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Chestertonian conservatism had a self-conscious understanding of history’s movement, however slow, towards proving an ultimate truth: the equality of human beings. That Chesterton’s racism was of this more “refined” state cannot excuse it; but it is remarkably distinctive in kind, from the form of Trumpian white supremacist ideology, which has little interest in history – its directionality or otherwise. And, if Chesterton has a populist streak, it has one stream that races towards addressing the economic implications of a society rooted in bigness, profit motives, and corporate power. The democratic ideal, Chesterton writes, “is besieged by inequalities of the most towering and insane description in the industrial and economic field. It may be devoured by modern capitalism, perhaps the worst inequality that ever existed among men.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

For a figure beloved, at least among a portion of today’s conservatives, Chesterton is decidedly progressive on economic questions – even as he sips from the same cup of ethnic fear that many on the American right drink from today. Another sometime acerbic and witty Englishman, Christopher Hitchens once wrote of Chesterton, “when he was charming, he was also deeply unserious and frivolous;…when he was apparently serious, he was really quite sinister.”[[24]](#endnote-24) This may be so – but where does that leave the racial politics of Trumpism in the landscape of historic conservatism?

*Feminism and Femininity*

When Donald Trump inveighed against the onslaught of low-income housing coming to the suburbs to disrupt people living their “Suburban Lifestyle Dream” in the summer of his failed reelection campaign, he was offering a rather old critique of urban life and its purported tendency to degrade and defile the soul.[[25]](#endnote-25) Moreover, he was stoking the fears of white voters – particularly women – that somehow their way of life might come to an end should he fail to be reelected. Trump’s suburban vision for white women was ostensibly to protect them from the vileness of the city – and the poor black and brown faces that would soon be living beside them. For Trump, freedom in a capitalist society was freedom from the poor and the nonwhite. Chesterton had something a bit different in mind in his critique of urban life and its connection to the lives of women. Indeed, it might be said that freedom for Chesterton, meant freedom from a decaying capitalist system.

In his chapter on the American country – what we generally call the suburbs today – GKC takes up the subject of “feminism and the factory.”

When I see women so anxious to tie themselves to all this machinery of the modern city my first feeling is not indignation, but that dark and ominous sort of pity with which we should see a crowd rushing to embark in a leaking ship under a lowering storm. When I see wives and mothers going for business government I not only regard it as a bad business but as a bankrupt business. It seems to me very much as if peasant women, just before the French Revolution had insisted on being made duchesses or (as is quite as logical and likely) on being made dukes.[[26]](#endnote-26)

For Chesterton, feminism is a fad, and a bad one at that. It is counter-progressive in that it seeks the wrong kind of equality: namely an equal place in a soul-crushing capitalist system. While obviously a profoundly different argument than Trump’s, it nevertheless is equally secure in its paternalistic notions of what women need, if not what they want.

Chesterton’s class-attuned feminism, not entirely unlike that espoused by Camille Paglia at times, argues that feminism is not feminine. Buy which he means, it is the province of elitist women who are out of touch with the majority of women, who do not seek a world of factories and Prohibition. “[F]eminist America” he writes, “is an entirely different thing from feminine America. I should say the overwhelming majority of American girls laugh at their female politicians as much as the majority of American men despise their male politicians.”[[27]](#endnote-27) What drives the minority faction of American women who are feminists (Chesterton has nothing to say about would-be male feminists), is an “abnormal” and “idiotic” tendency among feminists to channel the kind of domestic authoritarian power they exercise at home, on the body politic.[[28]](#endnote-28)

GKC writes as if every observation or belief is an undeniable fact – and the confidence and musicality of his prose has inclined some, perhaps many, to look no further. Yet, the occasional assertion has its streaks of merit that give one pause – even in its racist descriptiveness. Take this passage at the end of Chesterton’s opposition to feminism. Here, he argues that the elitist form of American politics portends a hostile, violent, and uncontrollable movement that borders on anarchy. It is hard not to have the events of January 6, 2021 in mind when reading this passage, even as its language is repellent:

The prigs who potter about the great plains are pygmies dancing round a sleeping giant. That which sleeps, so far as they are concerned, is the huge power of human unanimity and intolerance in the soul of America. At present the masses in the Middle West are indifferent to such fantasies or faintly attracted by them, as fashions of culture from the great cities. But any day it may not be so; some lunatic may cut across their economic rights or their strange and buried religion; and then he will see something. He will find himself running like a nigger who has wronged a white women or a man who has set the prairie on fire. He will see something which the politicians fan in its sleep and flatter with the name of the people, which many reactionaries have cursed with the name of the mob, but which in any case has had under its feet the crowns of many kings…And the last antics of their arrogance shall stiffen before something enormous, such as towers in the last words that Job heard out of the whirlwind; and a voice they never knew shall tell them that his name is Leviathan, and he is lord over all his children of pride.[[29]](#endnote-29)

This passage contains nearly every argument for Trump’s political rise rolled up

into one. It is the case for “economic anxiety”; for cultural bigotry; and for geographical bias (just substitute rural voters for Chesterton’s “Middle West”). In short, Chesterton sees a growing alienation among a rural, parochial, and dismissed white population leading to a violent uprising – led by a leader-Leviathan who speaks their language. Chesterton does not see the possibility that this is precisely the crowd from which African Americans run – even when they have not “wronged a white woman.” In a sense, this is the heartbeat of Chesterton’s feminism – a protected, remembered, and revered white woman of the unsophisticated American plains. Chesterton notably sees the rise of a wrathful white and anti-cosmopolitan violent right wing movement emerging – but he lays the blame for it on an anti-traditional progressivism, rather than the racist, sexist, and indeed, capitalist system, he so often otherwise is fond of critiquing.

*Faith and Capitalism*

In *What I Saw in America*, Chesterton observes the faint outlines of America’s Puritan past residing in the Midwest. But it is the Declaration of Independence that is its most lucid conduit of religious sentiment. “The American Constitution does resemble the Spanish Inquisition in this: that is founded on a creed,” he writes. “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature.”[[30]](#endnote-30) The edge implied by Chesterton’s allusion to the Spanish Inquisition lies in the idea that Americans persecute others for moral wrongs, rather than for being “wrong” peoples. “[T]he American may exclude a polygamist, precisely because he cannot exclude a Turk,” he writes.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Here, GKC is half right: America cannot exclude a Turk once a citizen, but it can attempt to exclude the Turks – or other ethno-national groups – altogether. This was the Trumpist rejoinder to Chesterton’s conservatism, one dazzled by the amalgamation of racial and ethnic variety – and its seeming connection to American religiosity. Trump’s Muslim nation ban reflected an inversion of this: it promulgated a false piety even as it sought to abandon the melting pot ideal Chesterton lauds.

Chesterton’s fascination along these lines tends to take hold outside of New York – in the religiously tolerant cities evolved from former colonies such as Pennsylvania and Maryland. The frenetic pace of capitalism threatens this history for GKC – “I never could feel in New York that it mattered what anybody did an hour ago,” he laments”[[32]](#endnote-32) Not so with William Penn’s Philadelphia or Lord Baltimore’s Maryland. As capitalism intensifies, it shreds history, and in turn, religious sentiment. This is why the “American talks about his work and the Englishman his holidays.”[[33]](#endnote-33) The United States is deeply religious – but its form of worship seems to be very much in transition.

Here is where Chesterton’s conservatism holds to its traditional and religious roots, where the nationalistic and grift-centered Trumpian ethic uses it as a prop.[[34]](#endnote-34) As he moves along towards the heart of his work, Chesterton poses two extraordinary questions:

What is the real Republic of our day as distinct from the ideal Republic of our fathers, but a heap of corrupt capitalism crawling with worms; with those parasites, the professional politicians?

If the pure Church has been corrupted in the course of two thousand years, what about the pure Republic that has rotted into a filthy plutocracy in less than a hundred?[[35]](#endnote-35)

At heart, Chesterton’s conservatism was religiously based. He would officially convert to Roman Catholicism in the summer of 1922, back in England, a few months after his trip to America *(“It all took place in the Railway Hotel, the which seems rather waggish on the part of the Powers who arrange these coincidences”*).[[36]](#endnote-36) It would go too far to suggest GKC’s conversion was connected to his journey to America; he had long been moving towards the Christian faith, as his numerous biographers have pointed out. But it may not go so far as to argue his trip to America underscored the connection between moral virtue and its importance in stemming the tide of capitalism’s excesses.

In his conclusion, Chesterton waxes zealous on this front. “There is no basis for democracy except in a dogma about the divine origin of man,” he writes.[[37]](#endnote-37) He is also, for this reason, a zealous anti-capitalist:

So far as that democracy becomes or remains Catholic and Christian, that democracy will remain democratic. In so far as it does not, it will become wildly and wickedly undemocratic. Its rich will riot with brutal indifference far beyond the feeble feudalism which retains some shadow of responsibility or at least of patronage. Its wage-slaves will either sink into heathen slavery, or seek relief in theories that are destructive not merely in method but in aim; since they are but the negations of the human appetites of property and personality.[[38]](#endnote-38)

If one substitutes “moral” or “ethical” for “Catholic” and “Christian” – something we cannot do and be true to Chesterton’s political thought – we have the makings of a moral philosophy de-centered from a particular faith. That matters more to us than Chesterton; but it also has the virtue of focusing our attention on the source of the real threat to democratic life as he saw it – unfettered capitalism and materialism. Indeed, that was a big part of what he saw in America. For a life rooted in acquisitiveness shatters meaning itself. “Men will more and more realize that there is no meaning in democracy if there is no meaning in anything; and that there is no meaning in anything if the universe has not a centre of significance and an authority that is the author of our rights,” he concludes.[[39]](#endnote-39)

**Conclusion: Kings and Presidents**

In thinking about how *What I Saw in America* contributes to our understanding of this postscript moment to the Trump presidency, it’s imperative to turn to what Chesterton saw in America’s president. He devoted an entire chapter to the subject, pointedly titled, “Presidents and Problems.” This analysis of Chesterton’s was like so much of the book, comparative in nature. “[Americans] arm the President with the powers of a King, that he may be a nuisance in politics,” he observed. “We [Brits] deprive the King even of the powers of a President, lest he should remind us of a politician.”[[40]](#endnote-40) This bit of logic would no doubt confound Alexander Hamilton, who devoted one of his Federalist essays (No. 69) to disavowing the American President’s monarchical powers. Was Chesterton closer to the mark by 1922?

Chesterton writes in the aftermath of the First World War and the advent of American dominance on the global stage. This pivot in world history has made the American president the dominant, king-like figure in national politics. Indeed, in the chapter preceding “Presidents and Problems,” Chesterton observes “American history is haunted with the shadow of the Plebiscitary President,” that resembles France’s Napoleonic past.[[41]](#endnote-41) “All the popular Presidents, Jackson and Lincoln and Roosevelt,” he surmises, “have acted as democratic despots, but emphatically not as constitutional monarchs.”[[42]](#endnote-42) English history has turned the king into a presiding executive; American history has converted America’s president into a king. But what of Wilson’s political demise and the reassertion of more conservative executive governance? Chesterton has a ready response:

Some people seem to suppose that the fall of President Wilson was a denial of this almost despotic ideal in America. As a matter of fact it was the strongest possible assertion of it. The idea is that the President shall take responsibility and risk; and responsibility means being blamed, and risk means the risk of being blamed. The theory is that things are done by the President; and if things go wrong, or alleged to go wrong, it is the fault of the President. This does not invalidate, but rather intensifies the comparison with true monarchs such as the mediaeval monarchs.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Where Hamilton saw the president’s identification with responsibility in the proposed Constitution as a democratic form of accountability, Chesterton interprets it as evidence of its outsized role in the American political system.[[44]](#endnote-44)

It is notable that in Chesterton’s chapter devoted to Abraham Lincoln (“Lincoln and Lost Causes”), he is most interested in viewing Lincoln through the lens of America’s hyper-capitalist present. “A wise man’s attitude towards industrial capitalism will be very like Lincoln’s attitude towards slavery,” he writes. “That is, he will manage to endure capitalism; but he will not endure a defence of capitalism.”[[45]](#endnote-45) It is a sign of Chesterton’s persistent habit to connect American politics, and even its religious tendencies, with the heavy burden of its materialist culture. This sets Chesterton at odds with not only Donald Trump’s Republican party, but that of Calvin Coolidge’s as well. The “business of America” may well be business, as Coolidge suggested, but therein lies the problem.

One hundred years after the publication of *What I Saw in America*, Chesterton remains a literary giant, if not a beloved figure for his politics. Conservatives of the old variety – i.e., those before 2016 – have tended to reserve a special place for Chesterton in their hearts. He inveighed against the rising tide of feminism, courted support for Christianity and its moral teachings; and he lamented the transformation of a rural people into a nation of city-dwellers beset by a host of architectural and aesthetic indignities. And he did all of the above with all of the fervor of a white supremacist – even if it were consciously and perhaps at times, apologetically so. But Chesterton’s great stream of thought – aside from that connected to his faith – was his admonitions against capitalism. This makes him a most intriguing, if not entirely welcome, friend of contemporary progressives. And, it makes him a decidedly carnivalesque conservative visitor to that realm of rightward political thought that saw something edifying in the election of Donald J. Trump.

**NOTES**

1. Douthat was still writing for the *Atlantic* at the time, and would become the *Times’*choice to replace William Kristol as its featured conservative opinion columnist in 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Adam Gopnik, “The End of the World: The Troubling Genius of G.K. Chesterton,” *New Yorker*, June 30, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ross Douthat, “Gopnik on Chesterton,” *Atlantic*, July 29, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Daniel Okrent’s *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics and the Law that Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. GK Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (Carousel Books, 2019), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of GK Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 255-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Chesterton, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
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