

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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September 15, 2020

Summer's done, the countdown (48 days) to Dump Trump Tuesday has begun, and one of our own shows us (page 4) how she's making a difference. Herein, too, we consider racism and cops and we cop a Dylan lyric. We consider good people doing evil things and excusing evil when it's done. We celebrate a separation in Africa and an overdue normalization in Washington. We raise the frightening-for-freeethinkers specters of a bogeyman and bogeywoman, and beg your definition of "soul".

But first, we take a stand as humanists, because it would be inhuman not to. —JR

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## BLACK LIVES MATTER A Statement of Commitment

The Secular Humanistic Society of New York (SHSNY) stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

We are part of a society where the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color continue to be blighted by structural racism, lack of opportunity, health disparities, and direct violence by agents of the state and others.

SHSNY hereby reaffirms its longstanding commitment, and pledges more fully, to act in solidarity with those who are targets of this violence and inequity.

Affirming that Black lives matter engages with our organization's mission of recognizing the value and importance of diversity, and recommits us to creating inclusive and equitable spaces wherever people gather to interact.

In affirming this commitment, the SHSNY recognizes that the ongoing history of oppression occurs not just in police departments, eviction courts, legislatures, banks, and hospitals, academia – and the traditions and standards that we inherit.

In summation, we stand with the Black Lives Matter movement as well as with the work of activists and peacemakers in the United States and around the globe researching and working to stop injustice wherever it may exist.

*Nancy Adelman, Kiwi Callahan, Jonathan Engel, Dorothy Kahn,  
Brian Lemaire, Carl Marxer, Claire Miller, David Orenstein,  
John Rafferty, John Wagner*

## "YOU DON'T NEED A WEATHERMAN TO KNOW WHICH WAY THE WIND IS BLOWIN'"

Jelani Cobb

*(Excerpted from "Our Long, Forgotten History of Election-Related Violence" on [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com), 9/6/2020)*

The United States is considered one of the most stable democracies in the world, but it has a long, mostly forgotten history of election-related violence. In 1834, during clashes between Whigs and Democrats in Philadelphia, an entire city block was burned to the ground. In 1874, more than five thousand men fought in the streets of New Orleans, in a battle between supporters of Louisiana's Republican governor, William Kellogg, and of the White League, a group allied with the Democrats. And the nation's record of overlooking the violent prevention of Black suffrage is much longer than its record of protecting Black voters. The general public tends to view such calamities as a static record of the past, but historians tend to look at them the way that meteorologists look at hurricanes: as a predictable outcome when a number of recognizable variables align in familiar ways. In the aftermath of events in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and Portland, Oregon, we are in hurricane season. ...

The Transition Integrity Project, a nonpartisan group of academics, journalists, and current and former government and party officials, recently released a report outlining a number of election scenarios that are both plausible and terrifying. Trump has primed his followers with repeated warnings of voter fraud, so there is a real possibility that they may denounce as illegitimate any outcome in which he loses. Beyond that, the report suggests, the Administration could seize mail-in ballots in order to prevent them from being counted, or pressure Republican-controlled legislatures to certify results before all mail-in ballots have arrived. The authors conclude that "voting fraud is virtually

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SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

non-existent, but Trump lies about it to create a narrative designed to politically mobilize his base and to create the basis for contesting the results should he lose. The potential for violent conflict is high, particularly since Trump encourages his supporters to take up arms."

This is where we are—at the perilous logical extension of all that Trump represents. A weather forecast is not a prediction of the inevitable. We are not doomed to witness a catastrophic tempest this fall, but anyone who is paying attention knows that the winds have begun to pick up.

### **"INCIDENTS": WHEN THE POLICE ARE CALLED ON TO DEAL WITH THE MENTALLY ILL**

**Brian Lemaire**

**A** distinction should be made between the temporary, but still real, emotional difficulties that we all find ourselves in, which can be helped by talk therapy, and the more permanent illnesses of the brain: schizophrenia, manic-depressive and clinical depression.

Many people who are not aware of this distinction think the latter illnesses are not real; they lump them in with those emotional disturbances that we all go through.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do when dealing with the sufferers of these illnesses is to treat them nicely even when they are acting out—knowing that their acting out is caused by the mental illness. Often if you assure them that you are there for them, their episode won't last as long. You have to keep reminding yourself not to blame the victim of the disease. This is harder to remember in the heat of the moment, especially since the illness causing the behavior is invisible from the outside, and your instinct is to react as if a healthy person was acting out. You must be for the person, not against him.

Police must receive training along these lines. Many or most police are not temperamentally suited for it. But only in this way will police afford the person dignity, and combat the stigma that persists around mental illness.

### **WHAT RACISM? WHAT PROBLEM?**

**Josh Dawsey and Jeff Stein**

*(Excerpted from Washingtonpost.com, 9/5/2020)*

**P**resident Trump is moving to revamp federal agencies' racial sensitivity trainings, casting some of them as "divisive" and "un-American", according to a memo by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

In the two-page memo, Director Russell Vought says OMB will instruct federal agencies to come up with a list of all contracts related to training sessions involving "white privilege" or "critical race theory," and do everything possible within the law to cancel those contracts.

The memo also tells all federal agencies to identify and if possible cancel contracts that involve teaching that America is an "inherently racist or evil country". Specifically ...

*"The President has directed me to ensure that federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions."*

### **WHAT IT TAKES FOR GOOD PEOPLE TO DO EVIL**

**Jonathan Engel**

**I** am both fascinated and frustrated with those people who say they voted for Donald Trump in 2016, but say they will not vote for him in 2020. Don't get me wrong; these folks are a hell of a lot better than the deplorables who will stand by the racist-in-chief no matter what. But what of those who have the decency and common sense to abandon Trump now? How on earth could they have backed him in 2016?

Did they not see what Trump was all about before that election? "I prefer people who weren't captured, okay?", said about war hero John McCain, came before the election. So did "grab 'em by the pussy". So did the \$25 million Trump University fraud settlement. So did the myriad bankruptcies, the stiffing of contractors, the birtherism, and oh so much more. If these people have enough redeeming qualities to now see Trump for what he is, what is it that prevented them from seeing the very obvious truth about Trump in 2016?

This brings us to the curious case of Elizabeth Neumann. Ms. Neumann resigned this past April from her position as the Department of Homeland Security's Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism and Threat Prevention. In a recent interview she explained that she had resigned in protest to the Trump regime's failure to take seriously the threat of white supremacist domestic terrorism. Hats off to her for that (and I rarely take my hat off for anyone). But she has acknowledged that she voted for the Orange Menace in the last presidential election.

Did she not know before she cast her ballot that Trump said he wouldn't repudiate the support of notorious Klansman David Duke because he "didn't know anything about him". Or about the "Central Park Five" and Trump's full-page *New York Times* ad calling for these now-exonerated Black men to be executed? (He still thinks this would be a good idea, exoneration be damned). Did Trump's racist birtherism just slip by her? How? She is an educated (B.A. in Government Studies from the University of Texas), seemingly intelligent person who has been working in government for almost 20 years. She has shown through her resignation from DHS, and from her willingness to speak out about it, that she has at least some measure of decency, fairness, and respect for the rule of law. How could she have been so blinded as to have actually cast a ballot for Trump in 2016?

I thought of all of this recently when I saw Ms. Neumann being interviewed on television. When asked why she voted for Trump in 2016, she began her response by saying, "Well, I was raised in a Christian household ...".

And there we have it: *Real Christians vote Republican.*

Real Christians want abortion criminalized, and that trumps (pun intended) every other consideration, even though research shows that outlawing abortions will not lower their rate, it will only increase the death rate from botched back-alley procedures. But why think for yourself when your religion is happy to do your thinking for you?

As a society we have failed to reckon with the way religion leads people astray. How it can lead a seemingly decent, intelligent person like Elizabeth Neumann to support for president an obviously unfit gargoyle like Donald Trump. As the scientist Steven Weinberg has said, *“With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion.”*

## WHY TRUMP SUPPORTERS CAN'T ADMIT WHO HE REALLY IS

Peter Wehner

To understand the corruption, chaos, and general insanity that engulfs the Trump campaign and much of the Republican Party right now, it helps to understand the predicate embraced by many Trump supporters: *If Joseph R. Biden Jr. wins the presidency, America dies.*

During the Republican National Convention, speaker after speaker insisted that life under a Biden presidency would be dystopian. Charlie Kirk, the young Trump acolyte who opened the proceedings, declared, “I am here tonight to tell you—to warn you—that this election is a decision between preserving America as we know it and eliminating everything that we love.” ...

This phenomenon has no shortage of explanations, but perhaps the most convincing is the terror the president’s backers feel. Time and again, I’ve had conversations with Trump supporters who believe the president is all that stands between them and cultural revolution. Trump and his advisers know it, which is why the through line of the RNC was portraying Joe Biden as a Jacobin.

Republicans chose that theme despite the fact that during his almost 50 years in politics, Biden hasn’t left any discernible ideological imprint on either the nation or his own party. Indeed, Biden is notable for his success over the course of his political career in forging alliances with many Republicans. ...

Still, in the minds of Trump’s supporters lingers the belief that a Biden presidency would usher in a reign of terror. Many of them simply have to believe that. Justifying their fealty to a man who is so obviously a moral wreck requires them to turn Joe Biden and the Democratic Party into an existential threat. The narrative is set; the actual identity of the nominee is almost incidental.

A powerful tribal identity bonds the president to his supporters. As Amy Chua, author of *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, has argued, the tribal instinct is not just to belong, but also to exclude and to attack. “When groups feel threatened,” Chua writes, “they retreat into tribalism. They close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them.”

That works both ways. Fear strengthens tribalistic instincts, and tribalistic instincts amplify fear. Nothing bonds a group more tightly than a common enemy that is perceived as a mortal threat. In the presence of such an enemy, tribal groups look outward rather than inward, at

others and never at themselves or their own kind. ...

“Motivation conditions cognition,” Jonathan Rauch, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, wisely told me. Very few Trump supporters I know are able to offer an honest appraisal of the man. To do so creates too much cognitive dissonance.

That they are defending a person who is fundamentally malicious, even if he makes judicial appointments of which they approve, is too painful for them to admit. They are similarly unable to admit they are defending an ethic that is at odds with what they have long championed. They have accepted, excused, and applauded Trump’s behavior and tactics, allowing his ends to justify his means. In important respects, this is antithetical to a virtue ethic. So once again, it’s easier for them to look away or engage in self-deception; to convince themselves that Donald Trump is not who he so clearly is.

But what’s different in this case is that Trump, because of the corruption that seems to pervade every area of his life and his damaged psychological and emotional state, has shown us just how much people will accept in their leaders as a result of “negative partisanship”, the force that binds parties together less in common purpose than in opposition to a shared opponent. As the conservative writer David French has put it, with Donald Trump and his supporters we are seeing “negative partisanship in its near-pure form, and it’s the best way to explain Trump’s current appeal to the Republican party.” His ideology is almost entirely beside the point, according to French: “His identity matters more, and his identity is clear—the Republican champion against the hated Democratic foe.”

I know plenty of Trump supporters, many of them people of integrity in important areas of their lives. Indeed, some are friends I cherish. But if there is a line Donald Trump could cross that would forfeit the loyalty of his core supporters—including, and in some respects especially, white evangelical Christians—I can’t imagine what it would be. And that is a rather depressing thing to admit.

Polarization and political tribalism are not new to America; fear and hatred for our fellow citizens have been increasing for decades. We’ve had plenty of presidents who have failed us, in ways large and small. But this moment is different because Donald Trump is different, and because Donald Trump is president. His relentless assault on truth and the institutions of democracy—his provocations and abuse of power, his psychological instability and his emotional volatility, his delusions and his incompetence—are unlike anything we’ve seen before. He needs to be stopped. And his supporters can’t say, as they did in 2016, that they just didn’t know. Now we know. It’s not too late—it’s never too late—to do the right thing.

***“Can you believe that bullshit? Can you believe people believe that bullshit?”***

— Donald Trump, after a 2016 Trump Tower meeting with prominent evangelicals, according to former Trump personal lawyer Michael Cohen in his new book, *Disloyal: A Memoir*.

## KIWI CALLAHAN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

John Rafferty

SHSNY Board member Kiwi Callahan has designed a Mobile Voter Registration Unit and has been attending Black Lives Matter demonstrations in NYC in the hopes of transforming all of the powerful political energy at these events into votes in the upcoming election.

The idea came to her at a march earlier this summer; thousands of people had taken to the streets in the wake of the death of George Floyd, but there was no guarantee that this energy would translate into votes that could elect leaders who were committed to fighting for change on a city, state and federal level.

“Nauseated”, she says, by the thought of trying to apply for a permit to set up a registration table at each impromptu demonstration or rally, she came up with a different solution: A wearable unit where she would have everything she needed to help register people to vote anytime, anywhere, and safely socially distanced.

Kiwi’s husband Matt provided the final and vital piece of the puzzle; it was his idea to implement a QR code, making the registration process touchless, and to set up a “Text to

Subscribe” function so that people could easily receive an email full of first-time voter resources. The final “perks” of the Mobile Booth are the multiple power blocks available for people to plug their phones in while they register to vote – they can use their own cord or one of the ones that Kiwi keeps handy (and clean).

“I do also have paper forms, envelopes and stamps in the booth as backups, in case people would rather not register online. I also keep

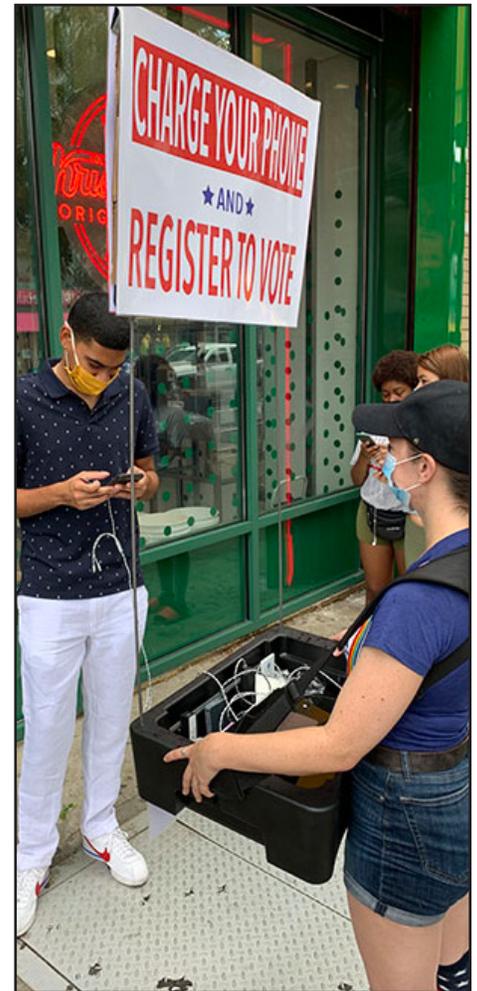


Think “Cigarette Girl”,  
but for Democracy!

antibacterial wipes as well so that I can wipe down the cord between users.”

So far, Kiwi has only registered six people to vote, but has spent lots of time answering questions about *how* to vote. Many people have approached her with questions about finding their polling place, checking their registration status, how to vote by mail, and more.

“It’s become clear to me that one



of the most proactive things that we can all do within our communities is to make sure that everyone who has even the slightest impetus to vote has all the information to do so.

“Ask those in your community if they’re registered, and if they are, ask them if they have a voting plan. Every vote really does count this time – we must all work to ensure that the popular vote and the Electoral College count are landslides. Do your part – talk to your friends and family.”

If you want to follow Kiwi’s adventures in the Booth, you can look her up on Instagram @letsgo.vote.

What we think, or what we know, or what we believe, is in the end, of little consequence. The only thing of consequence is what we do.

– John Ruskin



## A SHORT PRIMER ON THE SOUL

Dana Horton

(Excerpted from *A Tippling Philosopher* at [patheos.com](http://patheos.com), by Jonathan MS Pearce, 9/7/2020)

Here's a topic for your next virtual cocktail hour: Ask everyone on your Zoom call for their definition of the soul. (Yeah, I probably won't do that either.)

It seems like the answer should be forthcoming, because the term "soul" gets bandied about all the time:

Fundamentalists want to save it.

Romantics want to mate with it.

Mystics want to connect with it.

But defining the soul gets a little dicey. The concept of the soul for those of us in the West was largely influenced by traditional Christian philosophy. But Jesus did not invent the idea of the soul. It was Socrates and Plato who were the game-changers when it came to the soul. Yep, those guys. They argued (convincingly) that the soul is a separate entity from the physical body. And after the body ceases to exist, the soul carries on. Whether it carries on in the form of reincarnation or travels into another realm (think "heaven"), is still up for debate.

The concept of the soul was a great selling point for Christianity. Here's why. Let's say you are a peasant working for "The Man" from Rome all your life. No hope. No money. No escape even in death. If some itinerant preacher (e.g., Paul) tells you that your soul survives after your body dies, and that your soul will be at the same hierarchical level as the soul of the "The Man" from Rome in the afterlife, you're all in! Combine that with the apocalyptic idea of early Christianity that the end of the world was coming soon, and you have a great marketing plan. All you gotta do is switch from the mythologies of the Romans and turn to this new religion called Christianity. It worked pretty well.

Let's bring this back around to the definition of soul. Christianity does not have a lock on the soul. In fact, the soul does not require any kind of religious system. You can even be an atheist\* and still have a soul. But since this is only a short primer, let's finish it up with three ideas (grab a beverage). The soul is:

The Observer. Did you ever notice how every now and then you get the feeling that you are watching your own life movie? That watcher is your soul. Oooh.

The What's Inside You that loves. No soul = no love. No soul = no meaning, purpose, or happiness.

The Driver (Anima) in the body. It is the roohu or spirit or atma, the presence of which makes the physical body alive. Many religious and philosophical traditions support the view that the soul is the ethereal substance—a spirit, a non-material spark—particular to a unique living being.

### \*SO, ATHEISTS ...

... since "even we" are allowed to have a soul (assuming we'd want one), should we consider it? believe in it? define it? Putting Marvin Gaye lyrics aside, gentle readers, what's your definition of "soul"? Please send your definition, description, or denial to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

## SOME UNUSUALLY GOOD NEWS OUT OF AFRICA

Michael Atit

(Excerpted from "Sudan's Government Agrees to Separate Religion and State", on [voanews.com](http://voanews.com), 9/4/2020)

Sudan's transitional government has agreed in principle to separate religion and state after three decades of Islamic rule in the country.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and Abdel-Aziz Adam al-Hilu, the leader of the rebel SPLM-North faction, signed a declaration of principles in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, that says,

*"The state shall not establish an official religion. No citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion."*

### IT'S ABOUT DAMNED TIME

Democratic leaders have confirmed that the U.S. House will take up historic legislation the week of September 21 to decriminalize marijuana at the federal level by removing it from the Controlled Substances Act, and by taking up the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act, to regulate the sale and taxation of weed/marijuana/pot/spliff and to expunge the criminal records of those (mostly Black and Latinx) who have been adversely affected by the so-called War On Drugs.

### AND JUST IN CASE YOU STILL THINK THIS ELECTION ISN'T ALL THAT IMPORTANT ...

Donald Trump is considering appointing Ted Cruz to the Supreme Court.

And evangelicals are urging him to appoint Michele Bachman United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

### A LITTLE LATE FOR LABOR DAY, BUT ...



# SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER 2020 – JANUARY 2021

## FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom for the duration of our enforced isolation.

To be included and notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at sharonkrutzel@rcn.com

### TUESDAY, OCT 13, 7:00 pm **AMERICAN DIRT** Jeanine Cummins

Stephen King calls it "extraordinary", and this *NYTimes* best-selling story of a comfortable, middle-class Mexican family caught up in the flight to *el Norte* and away from drug violence has been called "the international story of our times". *Hardcover, Kindle.*

### TUESDAY, NOV 10, 7:00 pm **THE THIRST** Jo Nesbo

Harry Hole is one of crime fiction's greatest cops ever, but after promising the woman he loves he's through, something about the killer who targets his victims on Tinder pulls Harry back to the chase in this eleventh novel in the series. *Paperback, Kindle.*

### TUESDAY, DEC 8, 7:00 pm **THE VANISHING HALF** Brit Bennett

From the bestselling author of *The Mothers*, a stunning new novel about twin sisters, inseparable as children, who ultimately choose to live in two very different worlds, one black and one white.

### TUESDAY, JAN 12, 7:00 pm **THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS** Elena Ferrante Start reading.

## HUMANIST BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We continue online for the duration of our social distancing. Harry French will send the linking codes for the Zoom meetings. Send your address to: htfrench46@gmail.com  
Meanwhile, do the reading ...

### THURS, OCT 1, 7:00 pm **TWILIGHT OF DEMOCRACY: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism** Anne Applebaum

Thought-provoking and gracefully written, this is the book – by a Pulitzer-Prize winning historian – to read for "insight into what Trump's rise and rule really mean – here and abroad – for democracy in our time".

– Ron Elwing, NPR

### THURS, NOV 5, 7:00 pm **HOW INNOVATION WORKS: And Why It Flourishes in Freedom** Matt Ridley

Author of *The Rational Optimist*, Ridley chronicles the history of innovation – the reason we experience both dramatic improvements in our living standards and unsettling changes in our society – and how we need to change our thinking on the subject.

### THURS, DEC 3, 7:00 pm **THE HOOLIGAN'S RETURN: A Memoir** Norman Manea

At the center of this internationally acclaimed memoir/novel is the author himself, always an outcast, on a lifelong journey through Nazism and communism to exile in America.

## HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

### SUNDAY, SEP 13, 5:00 pm

Let's get together even when we can't get together, via Zoom. Get comfortable at your computer with your beverage and/or snack of choice – and join 15, 20, or more of your fellow humanists in our Humanist Happy Hour!

Zoom in at

<https://us02web.zoom>.

[us/j/9806344432?pwd=c0NrNUoweDVGWHo2ditvYmJlVjVlGdZ09](https://us02web.zoom/j/9806344432?pwd=c0NrNUoweDVGWHo2ditvYmJlVjVlGdZ09)

Meeting ID: 980 634 4432

Passcode: SHSny

Join by Skype for Business

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9806344432>

## MONDAY MOVIES

### MONDAY, SEP 14, 8:00 pm

We'll discuss *The Marx Brothers' DUCK SOUP*

Great 1933 satire of politics and patriotism. When Freedonia goes bankrupt, Margaret Dumont insists that Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho) become the country's president. Sylvania sends in spies Pinky (Harpo) and Chicolini (Chico), insanity ensues, and the countries go to slapstick war.

Rent (\$3.99 at Amazon), watch (don't miss the singing-dancing "Freedonia's Goin' to War" number), and Zoom in Sep 14, 8:00, at: <https://zoom.us/j/95662974132?pwd=VXRmWVZBazNUVmlMQ2hOb0RwNVpMZz09>

Meeting ID: 956 6297 4132

Passcode: Watch

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