

David Smith

Thank you for coming out everybody.

I know that this is a topic that creates a lot of anxiety. And even though all of you have actually volunteered to come out here and listen to this topic, so you want to feel this anxiety in some way, I don't want to lay it on you too heavily on a Tuesday night in Manning Bar.

So I'm actually going to start by talking about something that might produce a little bit less anxiety.

Let's talk about all of these scary clown sightings we've been having recently. So these have been so prevalent in the United States over the last couple of months, so many people reporting to the police suspicious or sinister looking clowns in their neighbourhoods that actually police are begging Americans, "please don't call us up to tell us that you've seen a scary clown -it's all in your head."

And, of course, the clown sightings have spread to Australia. I saw last night *Media Watch* comprehensively debunked the idea of scary clowns in Australia. But you know in Australia, its kind of a hipster millennial joke-y thing like \$25 avocado toast breakfasts, or not buying a house or whatever...

But in the United States, the scary clowns are tapping into deeper fears and even though we probably think of clowns as being universally scary -the scary clown is actually quite a uniquely American thing. And this worldwide wave of scary clown sightings didn't come from nowhere. It started in a specific place at a specific time.

The place it started was a city called Greenville in upstate South Carolina. Greenville is known as one of the most conservative cities in the United States. It's the home of Bob Jones University, a university so conservative that inter-racial dating was banned there until the 2000s.

In this most straight-laced city of America, this was where the clown sightings began, and I just want to read to you an item from some local news from there:

"It began in Greenville at Fleetwood Manor apartments, a complex nestled against the edge of several acres of woods. On August 31, a police deputy investigated a report of a clown with white facepaint trying to lure children into the dark thicket. A resident told him one of her sons had seen many clowns flashing green lights and her other son had heard pounding on the door and the sounds of chains clanking. Other children told him that the clowns had tried to tempt them with money, and that the clowns live in a house by a pond deep in the woods. Another resident said she had seen a clown with a blinking nose near a dumpster at 2:30am. He waved at her."

Now, I personally don't think it's any coincidence that these scary clown sightings are happening during this particular election campaign. And I don't have any hard evidence of this – there haven't been any studies of this so I went looking for evidence.

I got Stephen King's book, *It*, out of the library. But it's really big and I didn't have time to read it. What I did have time to read, though, was a book by Benjamin Radford published by University of New Mexico Press just this year, called *Bad Clowns*. And if you are going to read one academic book about scary clowns this year, this is the one that I recommend.

According to Radford, "bad clowns exist mostly in our imaginations as vigilante, anti-hero clowns of the id – these clowns are gleefully beyond redemption, cruel and comical, vituperative and violent, uncouth and (sometimes) unclothed."

Now as soon as I read that passage, I was like "Officer, we've found your suspect, his name is Donald Trump." And it just seems obvious, I could probably leave the talk here – these clowns are projections of Donald Trump. These poor, benighted, rural conservatives, these people of God, these good Christians, who have somehow nominated the least Christian man in the history of the United States, to the nomination of the most conservative party in the United States, that this is how they deal with all the contradictions, by encountering these clowns.

However, you've paid to be here for an hour and a half, I mean you've paid nothing but your here and you've got drinks in hand so I think we can actually take this a little bit further.

For me, it's not actually the scary clowns themselves. It's the phenomenon of something scary coming out of the woods. This is an extremely important, American folk archetype. We have to remember that the United States was once a predominately rural society. Now it's a predominantly suburban and exurban one. But in all of these situations there has always been people living basically at the border of nature. And what the woods symbolise is the dividing line. The dividing line between home, hearth and civilisation, and between what is left of nature, what is left of the wild.

So it's not surprising that the idea of something scary coming out of the woods is not just a staple of American horror movies, of American true crime literature, of all kinds of features of American culture. It's actually a part of American national identity that goes all the way back to the founding of the first European colonies of America.

Picture the puritan colonies of Massachusetts Bay, huddled against the winter with a huge encroaching forest around it. In the 17th century, the Puritans were terrified of this forest, they were terrified of what it represented.

These puritans believed that they were in this strange and forbidding continent on a mission from God. The Governor of Massachusetts Bay colony, John Winthrop, gave a sermon on the boat that carried the Puritans to Massachusetts

Bay, which has become one of the most famous and celebrated pieces of American political rhetoric. So presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama all love quoting this one line from the sermon:

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

This statement is the foundational statement of the ideology of American Exceptionalism – the idea that the United States is not just another country. The idea that the United States is a moral example to the world.

But no president is ever going to quote the sentences that come immediately afterwards:

“So that if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of our enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land where thee are going.”

The stakes were very high for these colonists. They believed that if the colony succeeded it would bring God’s light into the world – it would show the entire world the godly system of government. But they believed that if they failed, they would fail God and in fact that God would fail along with them.

The stakes could not be higher. And I believe in fact that the entire American culture obsession with success and failure comes from this moment.

It comes from the idea that has been there from the beginning of the United States that the country is at the centre of a cosmic struggle. And when you are the centre of a cosmic struggle the whole world depends on your success or on your failure.

Now going back to the woods and to the forest. So why were the puritans so terrified of this? It was because the forest represented to them the possibility of failure.

The puritans knew what had happened to the first colony that had been settled in the Americas’ by the English. It was an island called Roanoke off the coast of Virginia and in 1585 the Governor actually had to return to England because they were running very low on provisions to re-supply.

When he came back to Roanoke in 1587, the colony was deserted. All that was left was a fence surrounding an empty clearing. All of the houses had disappeared and all of the people had disappeared, but explorers in the region for decades afterward would remark on the Native Americans in the area who looked suspiciously like Englishmen.

This is what the puritans were afraid of.

That forest was dark, it was hostile, it contained escaped slaves, it contained Native Americans. And they weren't so much afraid of being killed by Native Americans; what they were afraid of was becoming Native Americans.

They were afraid that as sinful human beings they would fail in their mission from God, they would turn away from civilisation, they would turn away from Christianity, and they would turn away from the ways of the white world. And they would melt into the forest. They would mingle with the Native Americans, they would breed with the Native Americans, and they would become Native Americans, and they would lose their identity as a people of God.

This is why they were terrified of what was in the woods. They were terrified of their own selves. And I believe that this fear has continued to be central to American national identity.

Roosevelt may have said that, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" but Americans have always known, "no, the only thing we have to fear is ourselves."

In 1956, there was a movie made, a great movie, called *The Searchers*, which I am sure many of you are familiar with – it stars John Wayne and was made by John Ford – which really kind of continues this theme.

John Wayne plays a man who has returned from the Confederate side of the Civil War. His niece gets kidnapped in a raid by the Comanche Indians. And he spends five years searching for his niece. He eventually locates her in a Comanche camp and she tells him in this devastating moment she has become a Comanche.

John Wayne is so incensed that he attempts to kill her, but he doesn't. He comes back later, rescues her, basically slings her over his shoulder, takes her back to her homestead, puts her back in the white civilised world, but then finds that he can't cross the threshold himself. In his insane quest to liberate his niece from these Native Americans, he has gone wild.

Americans have always been aware of this anxiety. They have been aware as their nation marched across the American continent, displacing Native Americans, conquering Mexicans, that they were still to some extent strangers in this land.

They may have believed that the land was given to them by God but they were also aware that this wasn't a permanent arrangement, that they had to make it work and that they had to fight for it. They constantly had to be on guard against descending to the level of the people they had displaced.

In the south-west of the United States, people of Mexican descent have a saying, "we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us."

This is a terrifying sentiment for white Americans who live in the same region. It's a reminder of the artificiality of the border, of the artificiality of all borders, and of the permeability of that border.

In 2001, the well-regarded political scientist, Samuel Huntington, wrote a really grumpy and in some respects quite a strange book called *Who are we?*

Who are we? really cut against the multi-cultural tenets of the time. He essentially said that American national identity had very firm roots in the puritan heritage, in Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking, Protestant, goal-oriented liberalism.

And he said that the United States had successfully absorbed so many waves of immigration in the past but it would not be able to deal with Latino immigration.

He said that Latinos' were just of a fundamentally different culture – Catholic, family-oriented rather than individual-oriented, not goal-oriented. And the warning there that is implicit in the book is what Americans have always feared –if we let them in they won't become us; we will become them.

That I believe is one of the fundamental emotions that is animating the current election. It is an emotion that has been uncorked from a bottle and is going to be very difficult to put back in.

And that is why even though I think Trump will be soundly defeated in November, Trumphism or something that he represents is going to live on and has to be dealt with.

Harold Lasswell, who was a great American political scientist, described politics as the question of who gets what, when and how. At a fundamental level, politics is really about that first word: who.

Who is a member of our political community? Who has the right to participate in decisions that affect us all? Who has the right to demand protection from the state, from the collective? And who do we make sacrifices for?

In democracies, we like to pretend that these fundamental questions are settled. Basically, these questions of who are the people? But in reality these questions are never settled because nationality is an incredible fluid thing.

Nations with fixed national identities are ones that have disappeared. Nations like the Romans –ok, we've got a pretty good idea of who they are – they are no longer around. But for actually existing nations, nationhood is constantly changing. And also everyone in these nations has their own idea of what national identity actually looks like –of who actually belongs.

The kind of nationalism that we are seeing in the United States election at the moment is not the nationalism of national self-pride, it is not the nationalism of national self-confidence; it is the nationalism of anxiety. It is the nationalism of

weakness and woundedness. It is the nationalism of “we need to take some kind of political action to hold the nation together because the nation is not actually strong enough to stay together on its own.”

Trump may be set to lose in November, but if you look at the people that are devoted in him, you see a level of emotional engagement that hasn't been seen since Barack Obama's first campaign in 2008. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that Trump supporters in 2016 are prepared to go a lot further for Trump than Obama's supporters were prepared to go in 2008 and that's because Trump operates at the level of the politics of 'who.'

All of the other stuff, the what, when and why, that transactional politics – basically, the “let's decide how we divide up the pie” – that can get pretty heated. But it's the politics of 'who' that can inspire one human being to set another human being on fire. It is politics at its most basic, at its most visceral, at its most raw.

And it is always going to be there. Because grievances about the what, the when and the why of politics for people all around the world inevitably come back to the who.

And as long as there is some politician who is prepared to break with the consensus and to bring these questions back onto the table, we are going to continue to see this kind of politics, not just in the United States but all around the world.

But, of course, one of the key differences between the US and other countries like our own is that American nationalism in whatever form it takes, can never be inward-looking. America's national identity has always been related, closely, to America's place in the world.

Students of the United States Studies Centre will know, or I hope you know, that American exceptionalism – this idea of America as a moral example – has been used to justify all kinds of ideas about America's place in the world.

From the isolationism of the founding fathers' who believed that other countries were just too corrupt and immoral to deal with, to the Jacksonian imperialism of the idea that lesser nations and peoples were destined to fall before the might of the United States military. To the 20th century world of Wilsonianism, of building the globe in America's image, of fostering liberal democracy everywhere. All of this has been really fathered by the idea of American exceptionalism.

So what is it that Donald Trump has going on?

He's sometimes called an isolationist. I would say that this is fundamentally wrong.

Just to give a bit of history, for the years of the Cold War, the ideas of nationalism and globalism pretty much went hand in hand for Americans. Americans

believed because of their national greatness, they had the responsibility and the duty of leadership in the world – leadership of the free world.

Sure they were benefitting a lot from the system that they created but there was also some kind of fundamental idea that the politics of the whole world had an American stake in it.

If we think of the *Ich Bin Ein Berliner* speech by John F. Kennedy or the *Tear Down This Wall* speech of Ronald Reagan, delivered about 25 years apart on the same spot in Berlin. This to me epitomises the kind of nationalist globalism of the Cold War. The idea that the United States was proud to take the leadership of the free world, that national greatness meant it needed to be involved in the politics of other countries.

At the end of the Cold War once the existential enemy suddenly disappeared – and it disappeared more suddenly than anyone was prepared for – naturally things started to change. You had the rise of genuinely isolationist candidates within the Republican party like Pat Buchanan, who essentially argued that America needed to come home in order to morally revive itself – it couldn't be involved with all these other countries in the rest of the world.

Now interestingly Donald Trump was actually in favour of some of this stuff before it became fashionable. He was against American leadership in the world even while the Cold War was going on.

His very first political statement was written in 1987. It was an open letter to the New York Times, the Boston Globe and the Washington Post. And he writes:

“To the American people, for decades Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the US. The world is laughing at America’s politicians as we protect ships we don’t own, carrying oil we don’t need, destined for allies who won’t help. Its time for us to end our vast deficits by making Japan and other who can pay for it, pay. Make Japan, Saudi Arabia and others pay for the protection we extend as allies. Lets help our farmers, our sick, our homeless by taking from some of the greatest profit machines ever created, machines created and nurtured by us. Tax these wealthy nations, not America. End our huge deficits, reduce our taxes, and let America’s economy grow unencumbered by the cost of defending those who can easily afford to pay for the defence of their freedom. Lets not let our great country be laughed at anymore.”

Now Trump’s often criticised for incoherence and inconsistency but in fact in that letter in 1987, you basically see everything that he has been saying to this point.

Trump is not in favour of actually withdrawing alliances – he just wants them to turn a profit. Because the United States is the dominant military partner in the relationship, he believes that other countries should be paying for that protection – should be paying a lot. He’s not bothered by the fact that they already are paying a lot –he wants to turn a profit.

Now there's a name for this kind of system where you have the major, kind of dominant military power, and you have states that are allied to it, and the states that are allied to it are supplying tribute.

It's called imperialism. It is not isolationism.

Donald Trump is a classic imperialist.

You can see this in the way that he talks about the Iraq war. He thinks that the central problem with the Iraq War was that the United States didn't take Iraq's oil to which it was entitled by right of conquest. He thinks that the war on terror should essentially be fought with war crimes. He tells apocryphal stories about Americans who killed the entire families of insurgents in the Philippines as if to say if you kill the family of terrorists, there basically won't be anymore terrorists anymore.

And he wants to extract tribute from America's allies because he does not see us as friends.

Trump doesn't see the world in terms of good and bad countries; he sees the world in terms of good and bad deals.

In this way, it actually reflects his kind of political campaign in a weird way. You see the way that Trump treats his closest allies. Chris Christie was the first Republican, quite courageously at the time, to actually come out in favour of Donald Trump. How did Trump reward him? At a rally to honour Chris Christie, Trump mocked his weight – Trump sends Chris Christie to get his McDonalds.

Well, how about Mike Pence, Donald Trump's vice-presidential nominee? At the first two press conferences they held, Donald Trump didn't let Mike Pence say a word. Every time Pence was asked a question, Donald Trump answered directly for him.

This is known to animal behaviourists' as a dominance ritual, and Trump loves these kinds of dominance rituals. It's easy to say Trump is a bully, but we have to remember what the essence of bullying is – it's not dominating your enemies, it's dominating your friends. And as Australia, we're essentially facing the prospect of ending up as Donald Trump's Chris Christie.

The idea that we are being laughed at just seems to motivate Trump no end. This probably comes from his lack of acceptance in the world of the New York aristocracy. And when you read what Trump has allegedly written, you see that he actually places this idea of national humiliation at the centre of everything.

It's not national pride, it's national humiliation.

Even on the issue of immigration, he says illegal immigration, it's not about a few people looking to make a better life, it's about foreign government's sending us

their worst people so that they can escape the consequences of their behaviour, and we are the only country in the world that places the needs of other countries above our own in our immigration system.

His constant refrain is the idea that what's gone wrong with America is that Americans have constantly placed the needs of other countries in front of their own.

Now obviously from the point of view of the rest of the world, this looks a bit nuts.

But this has tapped into a very genuine sentiment in the United States. The idea that the country has failed to put its own people first.

For all of his extremely divisive rhetoric, what appeals about Trump to his supporters is that he is actually offering a vision of unity. He's offering a vision of all Americans on the same side. A country that has been so divided, a country that has been so weakened by feckless elites, all on the same side.

This is why he never believed that his very kind of obvious immorality or even amorality would be a problem.

Because he believed that what people wanted was someone who was not going to do the right thing by other countries, but someone who would act immorally towards other countries in order to act morally towards his own people.

This is a very old idea in political philosophy and its odd to see Trump as the bearer of an old political idea but this is essentially what its all about.

So in the end what do you have with Trump?

You have someone who is demanding that Americans be able to take what they are entitled to by right of national greatness.

He is not asking for a restoration of American leadership in the world. He's asking for the restoration of domination.

He believes that this broken, horribly fractured national identity can be repaired by making the United States dominant internationally again, but without all of the ties, without all of the encumbrances of having to care about other countries.

So essentially what you finally have with Trump is all of that American exceptionalism stuff but completely stripped of all of its moral content.