

Life in “Mueller Time”

The Politics of Waiting and the Spectacle of Investigation

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For almost two years now, faithful Democrats have waited for special counsel Robert Mueller to file his report about collusion between Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and Russian attempts to interfere in the US election, not to mention Trump’s involvement in obstruction of justice. Whenever Trump’s activity provokes them or a subterranean rumbling within the Justice Department emboldens them, the faithful take to the streets and social media with hand-held cardboard signs and internet memes to proclaim that Mueller Time is close at hand. Yet even if the Mueller investigation concludes with Trump’s impeachment, the spectacle of the investigation has served to immobilize millions who have a stake in systemic social change, ensuring that what comes next in the United States will be politics as usual—not liberation.

When you’ve fallen on the highway
And you’re lying in the rain,
And they ask you how you’re doing
Of course you’ll say you can’t complain
If you’re squeezed for information,
That’s when you’ve got to play it dumb
You just say you’re out there waiting
For the miracle, for the miracle to come

-The 20th century’s greatest messianic thinker, Leonard Cohen

Within weeks of the beginning of the investigation, there were already think pieces and t-shirts proclaiming “It’s Mueller Time.” Let’s take the t-shirts at their word: maybe it’s been *Mueller Time* all along. Maybe Mueller Time is not a specific date that is about to arrive, but the era we’ve been experiencing these past two years.

In that case, Mueller Time is not an hour on the clock, but a way of experiencing time, a *kind* of time—like *crunch time* or *quality time* or *go time*, but the opposite of all of them. It is not a scale of time, like geologic time, or a time zone, like Eastern Standard Time—Mueller Time is more like the End Times, perpetually anticipated.

To be precise, Mueller Time is the political suspended animation in which the Democrats have waited for a repeatedly deferred *deus ex machina* to deliver them from this unbearable pres(id)ent.

This condition of waiting, itself, rather than any of the grievous injustices that have taken place during it, is the very essence of hell.

Dante, the Marco Polo of the Abyss, located Limbo, the residence of those who wait, in Inferno, not in Purgatory. Waiting is not transformative or redemptive—it is the sort of sin for which the punishment *is* the crime. “Limbo” shares a Latin root with *liminal*—it is homeland of those who tarry on the threshold, those who are *on the fence*.

If you can get people used to waiting, you can get them used to *anything*.

To understand Mueller Time better, we can begin with its namesake. “Miller time” is a time to take a load off, to ease our pain by drugging ourselves into oblivion. It’s a profound expression of despair—“I can only relax in this world by deadening my senses”—disguised not just as relief but as celebration. What is the glee with which Democrats invoke Mueller Time if not an admission of their own abject powerlessness and dependence? “Rejoice,” says the Democrat, “Justice will be done! And thank goodness, as usual, the FBI will take care of everything.”

Miller Time and Mueller Time are both *chronotopes*, to use the term popularized by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin: they are specific relationships to time. You cannot understand a group of people without understanding how they experience the passing of time. Peering between chronotopes produces strange refractions, like looking through a glass of water. How different the world appears to a person whose activism consists chiefly of waiting, in contrast to how it appears to those for whom waiting and acting are opposites! It is the difference between spectator and athlete, between the consumer and the inventor, between those who suffer history as if it were weather and those who make history as a side effect of understanding themselves as the protagonists of their time.

And Miller Time and Mueller Time are both *marketed* chronotopes. Miller Time is the “5 o’clock somewhere” that unites wage labor and intoxication in a mutually reinforcing false opposition—but even more importantly, it is the branded colonization of that time. Likewise, Mueller Time is not just the “he’ll get his” which all people of conscience wish for Trump, but a particular deferral of responsibility. Both are successful advertising campaigns that concentrate capital in certain hands precisely by inducing people not to take their problems into *their own hands*.

“The politicians’ stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their ‘mass basis,’ and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing.”

-Walter Benjamin on how Social Democrats permitted the Third Reich to come to power in Germany

All this is familiar to those who were raised as Adventists, believing that the outrageous sinfulness of the prevailing world order indicates the imminence of the Resurrection and the necessity of repentance before authority. Mueller Time is the redemption, the arrival of the Millennium, when the legitimate authorities will reassert their dominion and the obedient will be rewarded for their patience. Good Christians have awaited this for two thousand years; they have made a religion out of waiting. You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.

To keep people waiting for salvation indefinitely, it helps to shift every once in a while from one source of dramatic tension to another. Some hoped Trump would run the country “like a business.” Now that the signature forms of evil associated with capitalism—nepotism, profiteering, corruption, race baiting, sexual harassment, misinformation—characterize the presidency,

Democrats are proposing to return to the good-old-fashioned signature forms of evil previously associated with government: bureaucracy, clientelism, experts deciding the fates of millions behind closed doors. All the things that helped Trump come to office.

For the purposes of relegitimizing government, it is ideal that Robert Mueller is not just a “good” authority figure, but specifically, a white male Republican—an FBI director who first made a name for himself overseeing the killing of Vietnamese people. He is everything the average Democrat would oppose if Trump had not moved the goal posts by pursuing the same Republican agenda by potentially extra-legal means. Mueller represents the same FBI that attempted to make Martin Luther King, Jr. commit suicide, that set out to destroy the Occupy movement. Under Mueller’s leadership, the FBI determined that the number one domestic terror threat in the United States was *environmental activism*.

Mueller Time is a way of inhabiting the eternally renewed amnesia that is America. This is the real “deep state”—the part of each Democrat’s heart that will accept any amount of senseless violence and murder and oppression, as long as it adheres to the letter of the law.

“Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to preserve itself. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken.”

-Walter Benjamin

What will be the fruits of Mueller’s labors?

Rank-and-file Democrats still don’t understand how power works. Crime is not the violation of the rules, but the stigma attached to those who break rules without the power to make them. (As they say, steal \$25, go to jail; steal \$25 million, go to Congress.) At the height of Genghis Khan’s reign, it would have been pointless to accuse the famous tyrant of breaking the laws of the Mongol Empire; as long as Trump has enough of Washington behind him, the same goes for him. Laws don’t exist in some transcendent realm. They are simply the product of power struggles among the elite—not to mention the passivity of the governed—and they are enforced according to the prevailing balance of power. To fetishize the law is to accept that might makes right. It means abdicating the responsibility to do what is ethical *regardless of what the laws happen to be*.

In the struggle to control the law-making and law-enforcing apparatus of the US government, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have secured a solid majority. They remain at an impasse. The most likely explanation for Mueller’s delays is that he has been biding his time, waiting to see if the balance of power in the US government would shift enough that there could be some consequences to his report.

The wait

The wait

The wait

The wait

The wait
The wait
The wait
The wait
-Killing Joke, “The Wait”

Ironically, the only thing that could *guarantee* that Mueller’s report will have an effect would be if this impasse were disturbed by forces outside the halls of power—for example, by a real social movement utilizing direct action. If millions of people were in the streets preventing the Trump administration from accomplishing its agenda, then the power brokers in Washington would consider sacrificing Donald Trump to preserve business as usual.

In standing back and waiting, affirming the authority of the FBI and Congress to take care of matters, Mueller’s fans make it less likely that his investigation will pose a serious threat to the administration. The rank-and-file Democrats are left gazing at their screens, watching the bureaucratic equivalent of the spinning wheel of death.

In this case, the more you clap your hands, the less Tinkerbell exists.

I’m in the waiting room
I don’t want the news—I cannot use it
I don’t want the news—I won’t live by it

But I don’t sit idly by
I’m planning a big surprise
I’m gonna fight for what I wanna be
And I won’t make the same mistakes
Because I know how much time that wastes
-Fugazi “Waiting Room”

The arc of history is long, but it curves towards—death. There is no excuse to delay. Tomorrow will use you the way we use today.

What would it mean to stop waiting?

It would mean to stop looking to others to solve our problems, no longer permitting a series of presidents, Speakers of the House, FBI directors, presidential candidates, and other bullies and hucksters to play good cop/bad cop with us.

It would mean figuring out how to deal with the catastrophes that Trump’s presidency is causing directly, rather than through the mediation of other authority figures. It would mean building up social movements powerful enough to block the construction of a border wall, to liberate children from migrant detention facilities and reunite them with their families, to feed the hungry and care for the sick without waiting for legislators to give us permission to make use of the resources that we and others like us maintain on a daily basis.

Remember when we shut down the airports immediately after Trump took office? It would mean doing more of that, and less sitting around waiting on politicians and bureaucrats. That was our proudest moment. Since then, we have only grown weaker, distracted by the array of

champions competing to represent us—the various media outlets and Democratic presidential candidates—all surrogates for our own agency.

Let's stop killing time. Or rather—let's stop playing along as it kills us.

“We live the whole of our lives provisionally,” he said. “We think that for the time being things are bad, that for the time being we must make the best of them and adapt or humiliate ourselves, but that it's all only provisional and that one day real life will begin. We prepare for death complaining that we have never lived. Of all the people I know, not one lives in the present. No one gets any pleasure from what he does every day. No one is in a condition to say *On that day, at that moment, my life began*. Believe me, even those who have power and take advantage of it are plagued with anxieties and disgusted at the dominant stupidity. They too live provisionally and spend their whole lives waiting.”

“Those who flee the country also spend their lives waiting,” Pietro said. “That's the trouble. But one mustn't wait, one must act. One must say *Enough, from this very day*.”

“But if you do not have the freedom to act?” Nunzio said.

“Freedom is not a thing you can receive as a gift,” Pietro said. “You can be free even under a dictatorship on the simple condition that you struggle against it. A person who thinks with his own mind and remains uncorrupted is free. A person who struggles for what she believes to be right is free. You might live in the most democratic country in the world, but if you are lazy, callous, and servile, you are not free—in spite of the absence of violence and coercion, you are a slave. Freedom is not a thing that can be begged from others. You must take it for yourself, in whatever share you can.”

-Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*

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