

SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND BRANDS

KEN OLSON

Branding irons are an interesting aspect of cattle ranching in the old West, and, of course, they are still in use here and now. Their purpose was to declare ownership of livestock and prevent thievery, but rustlers quickly learned to alter brands, presenting false ones as the real thing.

A 1976 movie, *The Missouri Breaks*, starring Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson, is all about rustlers and ranchers north of the River. Places mentioned include Zortman, Landusky, Big Sandy, and The Little Rockies. At one point, the rustlers took a long ride north across the Canadian border to steal a herd and drive it down into Montana. But the Mounties did the completely unexpected: they came after them, ambushed the astonished outlaws, and took the cattle back. In the shootout, one of the rustlers was wounded; afterwards, beat-up and clutching his bloody hand, he raged, "Hell, it ain't even legal!"

Trump, too, is irrationally furious. He fumes that he has been impeached, indicted, and "illegally investigated" many times more than any other president: therefore, it's politically motivated, "a witch hunt." He obviously never heard of Ockham's Razor, named after a 14th century monk and philosopher, William of Ockham, who put forth an elementary principle of logic that "Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity," i.e. the simplest explanation is most likely to be correct. Applying the razor to Trump, the reason he's been pursued by justice "more than Al Capone" is that –duh-- no other president has ever racked up such a pile of wrongful deeds as he has. Period.

The family name of Trump's German immigrant grandfather was Drumpf; here in America, he changed it. So, Trump is now Donald's name (imagine a Drumpf Tower), domination is his game, and he keeps his Sharpie re-brander handy to alter just about anything, maps and mountains included. Protocols be damned, to control programming at the historic Kennedy Center for the Arts, he fired the Board, appointed new members, and named himself Chairman. A wit named Borowitz says Trump wants the job of Prima Ballerina.

Decades ago, a welder friend made me a branding iron with my initials. I've never heated it red-hot to sear those letters into another's property, just because, on some dark night, I could. Trump, on the other hand, acts as if he owns The White House. The US Institute of Peace, resources and personnel slashed, has been rebranded with Trump's name on the front of the building. (History's dictators have had no qualms about radical re-dos: the swastika, an ancient sign of peace, was turned into the now toxic symbol of utmost evil.)

On the morning of the January 6 insurrection, another “date that will live in infamy,” Don Jr. summed up the radical alteration of the kidnapped Republican party: “This is Trump’s party now!” It became another of his possessions; loyalty was transferred from Republican ideals to Trump himself, even enabling executive orders of one man to override Congress, the courts, and the rule of law. “The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands ... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.” --Yes, I’ve been reading James Madison, Federalist Papers # 47.

Trump’s compulsion to create his own reality extends to the absurd. He simply must lie about crowd size. But the scope of his lies now is astonishing, for the independent Justice Department is being refashioned into an agency for Trump’s personal retribution and revenge. Rudy Gulliani will receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his nonstop promotion of the Big Lie of a stolen 2020 election. And White House Press Secretary Leavitt recently told Fox News that “the Democrat Party’s main constituency is made up of Hamas terrorists, illegal aliens, and violent criminals.” For her, freedom of speech means freedom to lie in the most radical terms. One thinks of Jerry’s friend George in the Seinfeld TV series saying, “Remember, it’s not a lie, if you believe it.” (Check the definition of a cult.)

Trump uses bogus lawsuits backed by billions of dollars to silence critics; says that protesters “should be put in jail;” labels ordinary US citizens as “traitors, Marxists, and communists,” and his compliant supporters, far and near, chime in. Ironically, it is Trump & Co. who are using communist methods with news outlets mimicking state TV, demonizing truth-telling reporters, banning books and even words, and rewriting history in museums --tactics that served communism under Mao Tse-Tung in China and Stalin in the old Soviet Union.

The Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” –What truths are those? The ones that are being rustled and rebranded in the image of Donald J. Trump. And that is not America.

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