

American Tragedy: The Codification and Institutionalization of Violence

**Introduction to "The Song & Dance of the Clean Air Act"
and "The Saturation of the South" articles**

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New Year greetings. Maybe this time around the sun we can all make it a saner trip than those of recent years.

The other day, a *New York Times* Co. editorial called for new amendments to the Clean Air Act, last diddled with during the reign of Bush Senior. To refresh my memory of what happened back then, I dug up old articles of mine.

"The Song & Dance of the Clean Air Act" (1990) describes how the first Bush administration choreographed leaders of the nation's wealthiest environmental groups, Congress and the press to produce -- to rave reviews -- a grand political charade.

From the first nanosecond after Bush trumpeted that he wanted a new law, to the triumphant ceremonial signing at the White House, a splendid Greek tragedy played out in the nation's capital.

As the curtain was lifting on this heartbreaking tale, I trashed the president's script and started reading each House and Senate draft of the bill. Comparing the words on the printed legislative pages with the words which actors in make-up and costume -- including the national press corps -- were spewing under Washington DC's spotlights, I sought to separate truth from lie.

While rummaging in my files, I came across an article titled "The Saturation of the South," which I had written in 1985. This described the chemical poisoning and political intimidation of an entire region. What struck me was that the "data" I summarized on poisoning and intimidation were quite well-known to the people interviewed for this article -- the victims and targets. Here was yet another tragedy.

Today, I understand both tragedies to be about the codification and institutionalization of violence.

In the early Greek tragedies, people dutifully play their roles (often with passion and eloquence) as the gods direct them toward destruction. In these dramas, the work of the few driving the many into hell uncoils in stylized, formal manner. The violences which inevitably result, however, generally take place somewhere else on Earth . . . that is to say, off-stage.

Professor of Greek Richmond Lattimore explained:

"Early drama was sacred, having to do with the cult of divinities . . . The early tragic poets drew, for narrative material and for metrical forms, on an already rich and highly developed tradition of

nondramatic poetry, epic and lyric. They also drew, no doubt, on the unwritten and almost inarticulate experience of a living people, on folk memory and folklore, cult and ritual and ceremony and passion play and mystery play. . . . By or during the career of Aeschylus, the features of Greek tragedy became fixed. At an Athenian festival, three player-groups, each consisting of two (later three) actors and chorus, act out competitively four-drama sets. The material is based on stories told or indicated in previous Greek legend. Tragedy is heroic. The costumes are formal, physical action is restrained, and without violence. . . ."

Introduction to the Modern Library's Complete Greek Tragedies, Volume 1; NY: Random House, © The University of Chicago, 1942, p. 6

Bush Senior puppeteers staging *their* heroic drama propped up every scene with the USA's "cult of divinities." They, too, drew upon folk memory and folk history -- but memory and history fabricated by generations of slavemaster and corporate manager operatives. How easy it was for them to act out a play called "Clean Air" while condemning yet another generation to breathing poisons!

By then, it was a tradition. The nation's poisoners and intimidators had long been engaged in play-acting -- see how they camouflaged the rule of law which guaranteed the flooding of the South under toxic chemicals and usurpers.

Of course, very important people throughout our society had to pretend not to see as government and corporate gods drenched the South in poisons and denials of rights, as they drove their Dirty Air laws into the books. These men and women appeared to suffer not as they devoured their reviews, back-slapped at cast parties, accumulated honors, and lived the good life.

Today in Washington DC there is a new generation of tragedy choreographers. The actors' masks may be different, but the violence is the same. And the corporate press, dressed for critical analysis, continues to fabricate swill.

But well-heeled national environmental groups think it's all still swell.

Believing that people today might find it easier to appreciate these tragedies from another era, I'm offering up these two blasts from the past.

Since rereading these articles, I've been haunted by the following questions:

- What will it take for millions of people resisting corporate and government assaults -- people organized around thousands of "single issues" -- to cover the stages with rotten eggs, to shout down these farces?
- What do we need to know about our country and about ourselves to drive the corporate choreographers -- and their actor politicians -- out of our viscera?
- What actions shall we take to accost our nation's realities?

What do *YOU* think?

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