

Fintan O'Toole: The United Hates of America has raised its middle finger to the world

There is still another America, an America that will wake up feeling it has lost its country

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Fintan O'Toole

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 Video

 Images



Crowds from opposing camps confront each other outside Donald Trump's headquarters in New York.

 Take down the Stars and Stripes. And raise in its stead the new flag of the United States: an all-white banner with, at its centre, a big fist with the middle finger raised.

 The US as we have known it, in all its guilt and glory, has become a giant insult: to women and people of colour, to its continental neighbours and its allies, to its traditions of enlightenment and scientific rationality, to a planet threatened by the climate change he denies, above all to its own intelligence.



The sleep of reason, as Goya put it in the title of a famous etching, brings forth monsters. Who would have thought that the monster would be Donald Trump, such a risible opportunist, a loud-mouthed self-promoter who was as surprised as anyone else to find himself with a serious chance of power and who must this morning be secretly terrified of his own unlikely triumph?

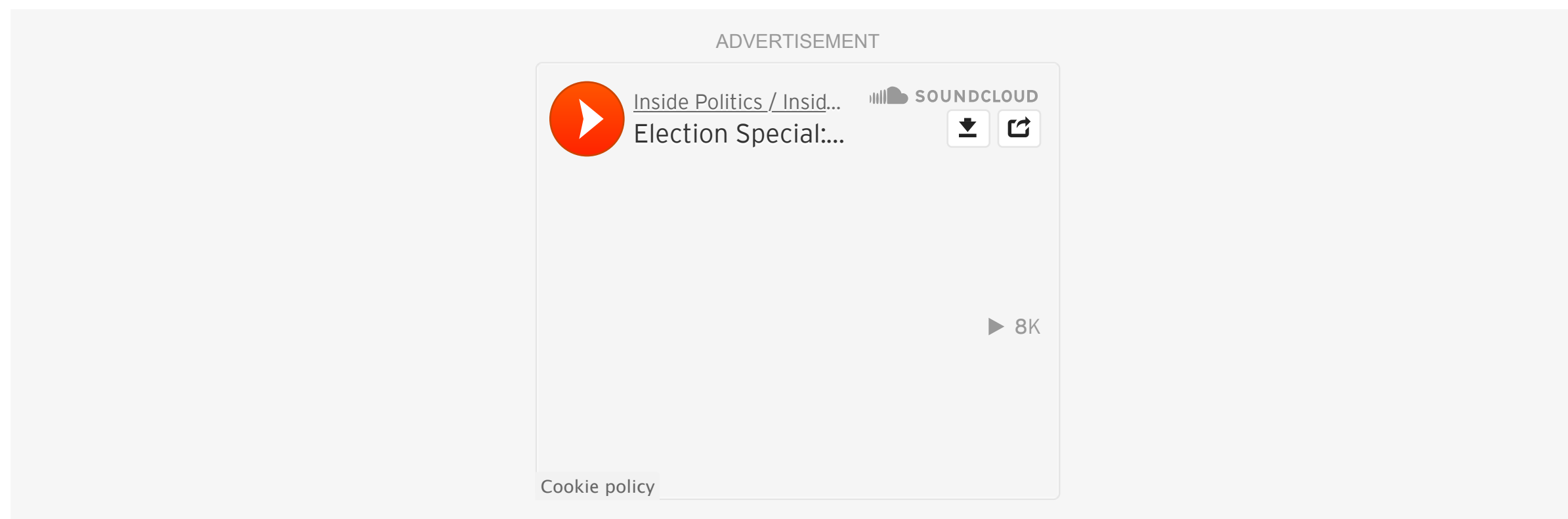
That triumph is both utterly improbable and, in a deeper sense, inevitable. It is still scarcely believable that this is really happening – are we not living in a dark, dystopian satire, some not very convincing combination of Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*?

The republic of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt is now the United Hates of America, held together, insofar as it will hold together at all, by fear and loathing.

To ask whether this can be real is not a mere expression of immediate shock. For there is a serious sense in which Trump is genuinely unreal. His signature policies – the ones that have swept him to the world's most powerful office – are pure fantasy or, if they are to be made actual, will require a tearing up of the US constitution.

Extreme vetting

Mexico will not pay for his impossible wall. His threat of bans or “extreme vetting” for Muslims targets people on religious grounds and undermines one of the founding principles of the US, the separation of church and state. His promise to begin rounding up and deporting 11 million illegal immigrants immediately on taking office will require the creation of a police state and the suspension of normal democratic protections.



The point about all of these policies is that, if Trump is not to become a joke even to his own followers, he has to push these crazy impossibilities over the line from reality TV entertainment to documentary actuality.

This is a New Frontier indeed. Americans used to glory in the thought that there were no limits to their possibilities. Now, that is a very dark thought. Donald Trump inherits a country in which the bounds of possibility have been expanded to include a takeover by a clumsy demagogue, spouting hatred and vulgarity, promising to overturn some of the most basic elements of its constitution and threatening to jail his opponent.

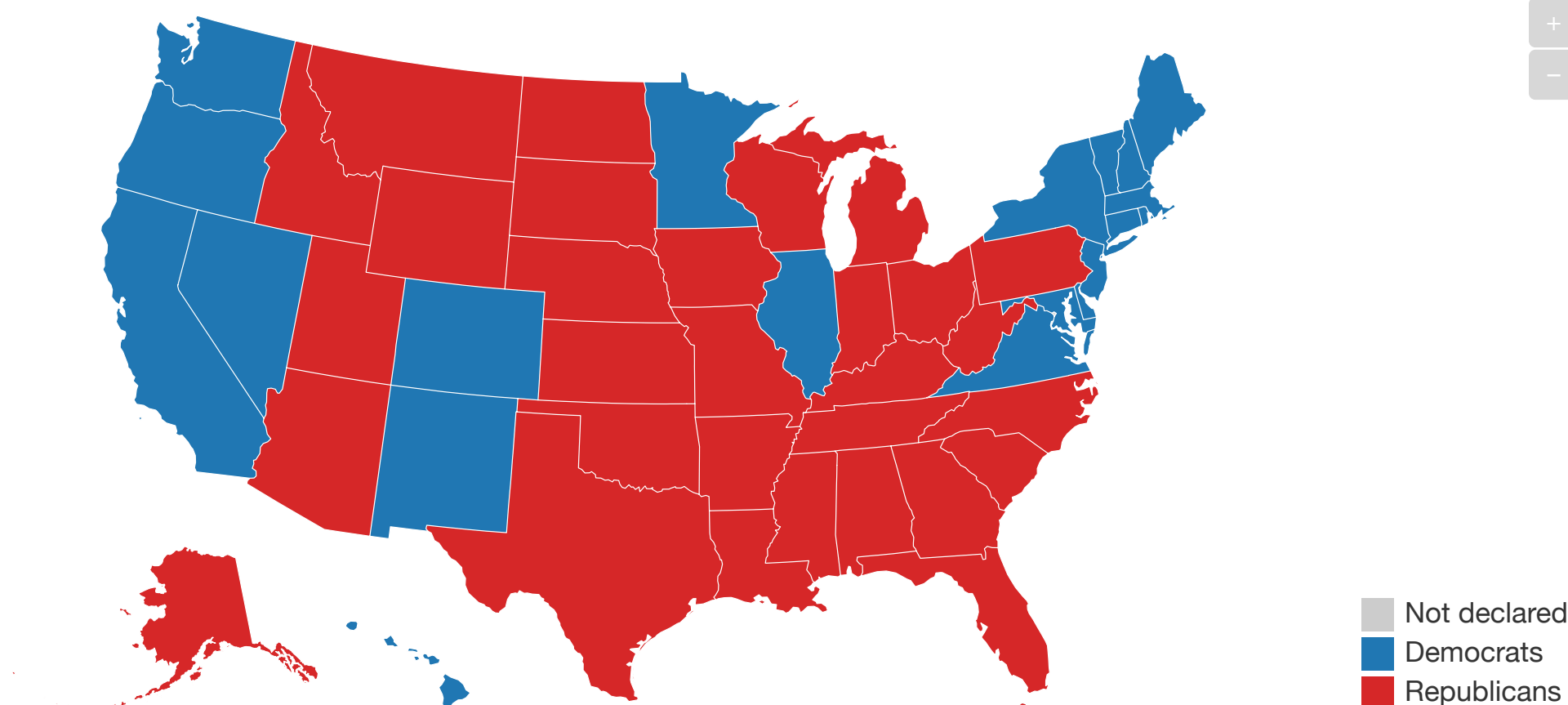
After a campaign that aimed above all to delegitimise the very notion of President Clinton, long before a single vote was cast, the possibilities of a new authoritarianism loom before us. If Trump's election is possible so is the Putinisation of the US.

The evolution of a “managed democracy” on the lines of Russia, Turkey and Hungary, is at least within the vastly expanded limits of the thinkable. Trump, after all, explicitly presented himself at the Republican convention as the American Duce, the one big man who could save a country that had gone to hell in a handcart.

Trump will double down on the hatred

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What makes it more thinkable is that Trump will be forced, not to attempt sweet reconciliation, but to double down on the hatred. Why? Because his actual policies, the ones that will be driven by the professional Republican pols in the Congress they will continue to control, and the lobbyists who fund them, will be the policies of the very oligarchy Trump's supporters have revolted against: tax cuts for the super-wealthy, with attacks on welfare and a further marginalisation of the lost communities who adopted Trump as their saviour.

The core of Trump's appeal is the belief that he is going to magically bring back the heavy industries and the good union jobs that went with them. To which we can only say: good luck with that. Even if Trump tears up the trade deals he and his followers blame for their plight, how long will it take to recreate the industrial base of the Rust Belt? And given that the biggest cause of the loss of industrial jobs is automation, is Trump going to stop computerised machinery replacing muscle?

But we know what happens when authoritarians are failing, when the waves do not obey the commands of King Donald to retreat. They turn up the hatred and double down on the nationalist rhetoric. They need someone else to blame, some conspiracy that is preventing the great leader from producing the milk and honey.

And Trump has his hate figures all lined up: the mainstream media, the Muslims, the Mexicans. If he runs out, he can and will invent more: educated people (who failed to understand his appeal), scientists (who do not realise that climate change is a fiction invented by the Chinese), feminists (who made such a ridiculous fuss about his misogynistic boasting).

He will fail spectacularly

The more Trump fails – and he will fail spectacularly – the more he will turn up the dial on the blame game.

Will he get away with it? It has to be borne in mind that the Trump movement is already a triumph of perception over reality. It is important, even while we are still in shock, that we get a fix on the Trump phenomenon. It has too often been characterized as a backlash by people who are impoverished, who are competing with immigrants and minorities and who have lost their jobs because of globalisation.

There are of course many such people among Trump's winning coalition, but they are not typical. Analysis of massive polling data by Jonathan Rothwell of Gallup has shown that the core Trump supporter is slightly better off than other working men, more likely to have a manufacturing job, less likely to be exposed to globalised competition and more likely to live in a homogenous white community: "Surprisingly, there appears to be no link whatsoever between exposure to trade competition and support for nationalist policies in America, as embodied by the Trump campaign."

Virtual phenomenon

In fact Trumpism is a virtual phenomenon – it is not about actual immigrants or minorities and not really even about an actual experience of trade competition. It's about these things as tokens of something else – the fear of losing status. And history shows us that this fear is both toxic and potent. President Trump is the creation of the same demographic that gave Europe its far-right authoritarian movements with such disastrous consequences for the world. This does not mean that we are facing an American fascism. But it does mean that Trump will not be able to rule without stoking and manipulating fear. And fear is a highly combustible fuel. It burns up reason, tolerance and sanity.

This all seems highly improbable but at another level, it all seems so obvious – obvious in the specific detail of the election campaign and in the bigger picture of the crisis of democracy that is much broader than the US.

History happens partly by accident, partly because of long-term shifts in the tectonic plate.

The accident is that Hillary Clinton was a terrible candidate. Trump's ability to suck the air out of every room made it very difficult for her to construct a positive narrative of change and hope even when she had a policy platform with some genuinely radical ideas.

But in an era of massive anti-Establishment feeling on both right and left, Clinton, the ultimate Establishment figure who used her public profile to enrich herself, was disastrously out of kilter with the public mood.

Even her good qualities could be made to look bad – "experienced" translating as "insider", resilience looking like the dogged pursuit of power, a command of policy detail feeding the image of a robotic politician, dignity in the face of provocation caricatured as coldness.

Learning the lessons

She could have countered this by waking up from her dream of entitlement and learning the lessons that Bernie

Sanders tried to teach her – that only a clear left-wing campaign could beat Trump. Her choice of Tim Kaine (rather than, say, Elizabeth Warren) signalled instead that she thought she would win merely because Trump is so obnoxious to so many people.

Clinton’s campaign, especially towards the end, came to resemble the old joke about the priest pleading for someone in the congregation at the funeral of a deeply unpopular man to say something nice about him. After a very long silence, a voice pipes up: “His brother was worse”. Clinton was unable to prevent herself, fairly or otherwise, from becoming the “but Trump is worse” candidate.

This was never going to be enough. “America is already great” was not a good reply to Trump’s promise to “make America great again”. America is not all that great right now and Americans know it.

Trump presented a ludicrously exaggerated dystopian view of the US and in a sense it was just too easy for Clinton to counter it by falling back on the old clichés of American uplift, to match his fatuous pessimism with an equally fatuous optimism. For if the US is not the land of marauding murderers, mad Muslims and Mexican rapists that Trump invented, neither is it the land of endless opportunity and harmony that Clinton evoked.

American dream is dead

One of the very few things Trump was not lying about was his insistence that “the American dream is dead”. Well, it is now. Trump is the American nightmare: the Id of hatred and vulgar self-interest has elbowed aside the Ego of a liberal, rational, tolerant self-image that was never as well-founded as it seemed. And in the big picture, this too was obviously likely to happen.

For what has been obvious is that republican democracy is incompatible with an oligarchic form of capitalism in which the one per cent dominates the 99 per cent. There was always going to be a revolt. America’s tragedy is that it is not a revolt of the poor demanding justice. It is a revolt of a white, male middle America terrified (with good reason) of losing the privileges that once came with being white, male and middle class.

This terror will not make America great again. Its very ascendancy is, on the contrary, a signal of awful decline. Too many Americans looked in the national mirror and saw an ugly thing, a rough beast slouching towards the abyss. They have despaired of the promise, of the dream, of the republic itself.

And there will have to be a counter-revolution. There is still another America, an America that will wake up today feeling that it has lost its country. Amid the ruins of the American dream, they will have to wake up to another reality: that the republic they thought they inhabited is not theirs and that, if they want to live in it, they will have to rediscover its most basic value of equality.

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The Irish media's dreadful attempt to get Norris elected president here should have taught them something. The real world prevails.

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Guillaume Rank 0

@tomnewnewman.org

Easy solution here, Tom, pay an equivalent wage to the loss of benefit.

I picked up a prescription from my GP the other day. As I waited at the pharmacy for the items that were to cost €140 I listened to two customers that complained about €5 and €7.50 respectively.

This is one occasion that I can see where you are coming from.

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tomnewnewman.org Rank 32

@Guillaume The business can't pay €700 p w per employee and borrowing to pay wages is only endangering other jobs.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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MarkH Rank 3479

Maybe just maybe the liberals in US and elsewhere have had it too easy for too long and the conservative right is pushing back - it's not a middle finger it's a thumbs up to change - many people see those at the tip and those at the bottom being looked after with the middle forgotten

8 months ago 5 Likes

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tomnewnewman.org Rank 32

@MarkH The left are now the conservatives clinging onto the long since discredited Marxist sophistry that is sweet to the ear but creates mass poverty and corruption. The poor and workers want progress even if some do better than others.

8 months ago 3 Likes

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IrishmaninMoscow Rank 0

Maybe the Irish will now finally realize that it's time to look eastward to Berlin Moscow and Beijing and dump the slavish "please give us more J1 visas" fawning to the Washington consensus

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Clanrickard Rank 1432

@IrishmaninMoscow You the thuggish Putin regime and the equally thuggish Chicoms. No thanks. Trump any day of the week.

8 months ago 3 Likes

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MichaelNolan Rank 2688

the first paragraph you wrote ...really... the good ol u s of a has been given the world the middle finger for as long as I remember..... maybe you should stop reading the papers and start reading some non fiction books.

8 months ago 2 Likes

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Govinfos Rank 0

Say hello to President Trump planet earth.

Say goodbye to US disinterest in invading new places, the Paris Climate Change Agreement (as far as America is concerned) and the dissolution of the EPA and affordable medical insurance for millions of Americans. If you're black, LGBT or an immigrant of any sort, be very afraid. The stuff about a Mexican wall and the deportation of millions of immigrants was probably just sloganeering nonsense but after last night, I'm not betting against those... » more

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sam Rank 340

Prepare for more homelessness in Ireland, if Trump pushes ahead with his threat to expel all the illegal immigrants. All those undocumented Irish having to return home with families too, invest in Boeing and Airbus.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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RobertBrowne Rank 1135

@sam They will not be homeless they are not helpless drones those people are workers who would build this state they were ejected by the political class who will worry about them causing trouble back home.

8 months ago 5 Likes

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tomnewnewman.org Rank 32

@sam Or create the conditions that make house building viable.

8 months ago 1 Like

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Lastmanalive Rank 0

All of what you have said Fintan may be right but the real truth from your article is that Clinton was just a terrible terrible candidate who has consistently lost campaigns she should have won. And yet the primaries were manipulated to make her the candidate. Next up National Front in France followed by collapse of European Union. Believe it or not, the last hope for decency on the planet may be Germany. How strange is that.

8 months ago 2 Likes

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Lastmanalive Rank 0

@PartialObserver

Genuinely hope you are right but I have a history here - I thought the UK would go for Brexit and that Trump would win. As regards consequences, try this alternative scenario. Russia, declaring discrimination against ethnic Russians, provokes civil war in the Baltic states NATO under Trump fails to respond. Back to the good European great power politics of the 19th century and remember where that ended up. Oh and by the way, the Euro is by no mean home safe, watch Italy.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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Sparky1 Rank 554

@Lastmanalive No France is the last real hope, as France is the originator of Liberty, equality and fraternity. If France elects Marine le Pen all bets are off. A French woman said to me tonight, Le fin de monde arrivera.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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davids Rank 6047

Lazy Lazy Fintan. "An insult to women" "a revolt of a white, male middle America terrified (with good reason) of losing the privileges that once came with being white, male and middle class." The usual feminist opinions rather than facts. Here are the facts Fintan and you can look a them on NBCNews.com if you would like to verify. The polls show that the vast MAJORITY of WHITE WOMEN voted for TRUMP. Yes Fintan apparently women don't like being told by feminists who to vote for because of their... » more

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RobertBrowne Rank 1135

@davids O Toole should have to make his way in the world and be forced to get a real job. The nerdy living if the clouds stuff is not cutting the mustard anymore.

8 months ago 4 Likes

Like Share

jean-citoyen Rank 464

@RobertBrowne Come off it : he has clearer insight and original thought than most of the other journalists put together !

8 months ago 0 Likes

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georgemcnulty Rank 10

Donald Trump made a gracious acceptance on his election. Clinton showed her class and respect for the thousands of her supporters, both young and old, who stood for 10 hours, a lot of them crying, waiting for her words of sympathy and thanks . She went to bed knowing that she had lost and her distraught followers straggled on home. It really shows her caring nature.

8 months ago 1 Like

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ECOB Rank 1597

Get real Fintan .

It is not surprising that a vulgar egomaniac destroyed a shrill nasty woman .

A blow for the media driven feminist storm and political correctness.

There are some conservative women out there .

8 months ago 5 Likes

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jean-citoyen Rank 464

@ECOB I could not agree that HC is a "shrill nasty woman". She happens to be the best qualified candidate ever presented to the USA electorate - her problem was she was too good - and her opponent, one of the least qualified candidates ever has been chosen.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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Celticmary Rank 0

@ECOB Never knew you missed me, ECOB.

8 months ago 0 Likes

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