

CHAPTER 9

God and Man in Las Vegas

Las Vegas, August 2023. The documentary film team from Germany meets me in the hotel lobby near the Strip. They are young, vigorously athletic, tall, mostly blond, and dressed in hipster grunge. They are vegetarian, drink moderately if at all, and are devoted to their early morning workouts at whatever hotel gym they happen to find themselves, like a perfectly Teutonic Fantastic Four. They have spent much of the past year traveling and filming in conflict zones around the world. They laugh and tell me about their Starbucks game, which they call “Starbies,” where each of them orders something crazier than the last. They are here to show their viewers some of the glorious weirdness of America, and they are in a good mood. I am happy to have been invited to accompany them as a guide of sorts. With Trump facing, at this time, ninety-one felony counts across four criminal cases and his supporters growing increasingly surly, I am especially eager to get their take on what we are about to experience here in Las Vegas.

We bundle into the team van, drive about a half hour from the Strip, and spill out in a parking lot crammed with pickup trucks and midsize SUVs. We head into a public park whose grounds are dominated by enormous white tents. A large placard announces the event: REAWAKEN AMERICA. The setting is somewhat atypical for the ReAwaken America Tour, as I know from prior experience. The organization usually prefers to host their roving events at

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megachurches.

Outside it is scorching, with temperatures in the low hundreds; thankfully, the tents are lightly air-conditioned. Inside the tent complex, the mood is collegial, with the sense of kindred solidarity that comes with shared struggles against a common enemy.

The first thing I notice is that the T-shirts are getting nastier. SIZE MATTERS blares one man’s shirt over enlarged images of bullets of various calibers. IT’S RINO SEASON, reads another, with an image of Trump carrying a long gun. Another man’s T-shirt features dozens of white male soldiers and the words DIVERSITY IS DESTRUCTION across the bottom. Quite a few bear slogans associated with QAnon, along with numbered fragments of text from the Bible that are associated with battle. To be sure, I see plenty of the old standbys: GOD, GUNS, AND TRUMP, a few F*CK BIDENs, and a MAKE MEN MEN AGAIN on a man who glares around the room like he wants to start a fight.

And then there is BLITZKRIEG. The Germans find this genuinely shocking, and I see them attempting to capture the wearer on video as he sits in his seat.

The first tent, closer to the entrance of the complex, is filled with rows of booths hawking “non-woke” books for children, antivax books for all ages, membership in evangelistic communities led by “prophetic” entrepreneurs, drinking water purifiers and nutritional supplements, the *Epoch Times*, a conspiracy-filled far-right media outlet affiliated with China’s Fulan Gong religious movement and whose CFO was later arrested and indicted for a \$67 million

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money-laundering scheme (he has pleaded not guilty) , Trumpy swag, and a whole lot of survivalist gear. At one booth, women are raising donations for the January 6 insurrectionists, cast here as heroes unfairly imprisoned “in the DC Gulag.” As I walk past the menacing T-shirts and through to the entrance of the second, much more capacious tent, I estimate that today’s attendance is just south of two thousand. Most ReAwaken America tour stops, including one I recently attended at

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a California megachurch, draw crowds of this size or larger.

The man behind ReAwaken America is Clay Clark, a Tulsa, Oklahoma-based entrepreneur and business coach who

discovered a whole new angle on life during the COVID pandemic. When his media production company began to run short on business in 2020, he knew who was to blame. He filed suit against the city of Tulsa for its mask mandates, and

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quickly gained prominence in the rapidly emerging antipandemic movement. Like so many who came of political age in that moment, he soon discovered cures that the government was supposedly hiding. He also maintained that the COVID

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vaccines contained “luciferase,” a dreadful compound allegedly made of Jeffrey Epstein’s DNA. Having lighted on a plot that went all the way to Davos and involved every bad actor imaginable—Bill Gates, Black Lives Matter, the World Economic Forum, the Serbian conceptual artist Marina Abramovi, along with a nefarious climate activism movement—Clay resolved to spread the word through his movable conference series. In publicity materials for its gatherings, ReAwaken America bills America’s political and spiritual challenges as a battle between “the Great

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ReAwakening” and “the Great Reset,” the Holy Bible versus the evil masterminds behind COVID-19.

Other key figures in the ReAwaken syndicate include Mike Flynn, the disgraced former national security adviser; Mike Lindell, the pillow man and election fraud funder; Eric Trump, who speaks frequently at these events; and Trump’s longtime mentor Roger Stone. Sean Feucht, the guitar-strumming spirit warrior, often drops in to lead the crowd in song, and maybe raise some extra cash—at a previous ReAwaken America Tour, a woman who claimed to be a representative of his ministry, Let Us Pray, was selling stickers bearing the organization’s name for \$5 apiece. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. delivered presentations at several ReAwaken America events before launching his run for president (with a massive wad

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of cash at his back thanks to Timothy Mellon, heir to the Mellon banking fortune, who is also a Trump megadonor). Speakers scheduled for appearance in Las Vegas include Alex Jones, the infamous purveyor of the most heinous

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conspiracy theories; Sherri Tenpenny, identified by the Center for Countering Digital Hate as one of the top twelve most

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influential COVID deniers; the podcaster and conspiracist Mel K, who pushes elaborate fairy tales involving global

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treachery; Jackson Lahmeyer, who founded Pastors for Trump, which claims to have over seven thousand pastor

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members across the nation; Peter Navarro, a former adviser to Trump who was convicted of contempt of Congress for

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failing to comply with a subpoena from the House select committee investigating the January 6 coup attempt; and a squadron of demon-haunted apostles and prophets from the Christian nationalist movement.

The Las Vegas conference is the third such event I have attended in person, and it is by a significant measure the most bloodthirsty. The rhetoric coming from the podium is even more violent than the slogans on the T-shirts.

Clay Clark, speaking at a breakneck pace, cheerfully gets the conspiracy machine cranked up like an auctioneer on crystal meth:

“The World Economic Forum has the logo 666, look it up, their logo is 666, and if you’re new to reading the Bible, in the Bible it tells you where Satan lives. The Bible tells you in the book of Revelation, it tells you Revelation 9-11, okay, that Satan dwelleth by the former temple of Apollo. Satan dwells where the former temple of Apollo is. Who knows that? Revelation 9-11. Okay? And it also tells you that Satan dwells where Antipas was partnered. And Geneva is the location of that, and that is the location of the World Economic Forum, and that is the location of the World Health Organization, and that is the location of the United Nations, and that is the location of SERVE, and SERVE’s logo is 666, are we all on the same page here?”

Clay hands off the microphone to Mike Flynn, who describes the “global alliance against the United States America.” He offers a variant of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory—the idea that devious elites are plotting to replace good (white) Americans with aliens, Jews, or other undesirables. With the help of Alex Jones, this kind of garbage has spread faster than fidget spinners through the far-right propaganda-sphere.

Stew Peters, a former bounty hunter and antivax conspiracist with a large online following, steps up to the podium next, and the gathering takes a grisly turn. “When [Anthony Fauci] is convicted after a short and fast but thorough trial, he will hang from a length of thick rope,” says Peters. The audience roars their approval. “When [Hunter Biden] is convicted

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... he will get ... Death!” More roars.

“We all have one common enemy, his name is Satan, and right now his minions are trying to run the country,” Peters continues. “Liberals, democrats, communists, lizard things, we got a lot of words for these creatures.”

He demands the “restoration of the rightful president of America.” What does he want the anointed one to do once restored? Revenge, cold and bloody. “All we need is a body of water, a length of rope, and a heavy millstone.” “What we want is Nuremburg trials 2.0.” “We are going to see extreme accountability. Natural accountability,” he shouts, his voice getting louder. “Permanent accountability with extreme prejudice!”

One of the German team members asks me, uneasily, “Are we safe here?” I reply that this place is probably no more dangerous to us personally than the rest of Las Vegas. I believe this to be true, but it sounds hollow even as I say it. “So the danger is to the rest of the country,” he says, nodding.

The racism, too, is more transparent than usual. “Big Fani. Big fat Fani. Big fat *Black* Fani Willis,” Peters shouts as he launches into an attack on Fulton County DA Fani Willis and on the Georgia judge who is presiding over Trump’s criminal charges in that state. While the overwhelming majority of attendees at ReAwaken America events are white, people of color are not entirely absent. They show up in similarly themed T-shirts and are featured on the podium. At a ReAwaken America tour stop I attended the previous year in San Marcos, California, I spotted in the audience several dozen individuals wearing caps or T-shirts bearing the word LEXIT, an acronym for a faith-based organization that encourages Latino voters to exit the Democratic Party and support Republican candidates instead. In Las Vegas, the presence of a smattering of people of color in the audience doesn’t stop speakers like Peters from linking Blackness with everything bad in America or displaying an interest in lynching-style retribution.

Even the preachers invited to speak at the event seem exceptionally focused on making their enemies feel the pain. The Black pastor Mark Burns, a stalwart warm-up act at Trump rallies, follows Peters onstage. There is no acknowledgment of Peters’s anti-Black racism, but there is plenty of additional rhetorical bloodshed. “This is a God nation, this is a Jesus nation, and you will never take my God and my gun out of this nation,” he says. “I have come ready to declare war on Satan and every race-baiting democrat that tries to destroy our way of life here in the United States of America.”

Jews are not entirely absent from the event, either, although their religious identity may be like that of Roseanne Barr, who was born to a Jewish family but has gone on to push Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic tropes. Introduced from the stage by Clay Clark as “sure to offend, challenge, trigger and force you to wake up to the mind control of your

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underlings,” Barr opened her fifty-minute religious confessional with the declaration that “I am here to do some spiritual warrior stuff with you guys today.” Then she begins to shout. “It’s time for the heavens to open and people to receive,

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people to receive the truth about Jesus!” She continues in ever-higher registers, “No weapon formed against us shall have dominion, it shall not proffer. On earth as it is in heaveeeeeeeen!!!” She screeches for some time, then moderates

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her tone. “That’s our task, to lift this place from the hell they’ve created for our children!”

Who is the “they” she’s talking about? It’s “the people who own every cent in this world and also keep track of it,” she explains. For the record, Barr recently put one of her two L.A. homes on the market for \$3.5 million and then purchased

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an additional home before decamping to her forty-six-acre macadamia nut farm on Hawaii’s Big Island.

In Las Vegas, as at other ReAwaken America tour stops, Jews, or at least their supposed cosmopolitan alter egos,

inevitably come in for abuse. In preparation for the tour stop in Miami, the organizers invited Charlie Ward, who had praised Hitler for “warning us,” and Scott McKay, a “Patriot streetfighter” who has expressed openly pro-Hitler views on Rumble. They were meant to share the stage with Eric Trump, who had appeared on podcasts with each man on numerous

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occasions.

“Hitler was fighting the same people we’re trying to take down,” McKay had said. “These people are so elusive and

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slippery and cunning that we ended up having World War II.”

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When the clips were publicized on MSNBC, McKay and Ward were disinvited. Even so, as my German friends can easily pick up, the dog whistles keep playing the old fascist tunes, and you don’t even need a dog to hear them. Mike Flynn, Clay Clark, Peters, and conspiracy podcaster Mel K all identify the archvillains as “globalist billionaires.” The masterminds are “the IMF, the World Bank, and financial elites,” Ms. K intones. In case there was any doubt about what

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these villains look like, she and the others repeatedly name George Soros and “the Rothschilds.”

Flynn takes back the floor to hawk his latest book, *The Citizen’s Guide to Fifth Generation Warfare (CG5GW)*. The point, he says, is “to prepare Americans and freedom loving people everywhere for our current global wartime reality.”

Clay Clark pops up again to say that there is hope for persecuted real Americans after all. You just need to put your money in the right place. As ever at these events, the transition from demonizing to fleecing is seamless—at least for those who are cashing in. Clark introduces the audience to the head of a company called Beverly Hills Precious Metals. The man from L.A. offers the promise of a financial bolt-hole for the coming apocalypse. “Typically people are saying, I’m going to turn my 401K or my IRA into one of the gold or precious metals, and not have it be a taxable asset,” he says. “You can do that now for minimal fees.”

The fact that some number of people here have retirement accounts with enough money on hand to consider precious metals investment strategies strikes the Germans as curious. The amounts under discussion—you can start with as little as \$100!—are perhaps more revealing, I reply. There appear to be few genuinely poor people in this crowd, but apart from those on the podium or their support staff, no obviously rich people, either—at least as far as the eye can tell. You can see it in the parking lot, which features neither clunkers nor Range Rovers. You can see it in those clothing choices that are not conspiracy-themed: Tommy Bahama shirts for men, department-store clamdiggers and light jewelry for the women. The attendees are older than the average American—I’m going to guess the median age is fifty—and they look on balance slightly overfed but not in a terribly unhealthy way. Many appear to spend a fair amount of time outdoors. Even the one woman who lets me know she has a vacation home in Las Vegas doesn’t look like the kind of urban professional that populates the law firms and banks in America’s big cities. They are in a sense what is left of the non-college-educated middle class in a country that has left that class behind in a cloud of dust.

I fall into conversation with a woman who is wearing a T-shirt with the Bible verse Ephesians 6:11, and the words “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” This passage is especially popular with today’s spirit warrior charismatics, and from what I can glean from our conversation, she communes with the Holy Spirit every Sunday. She briefly tells me her life story: She runs her own hair salon but revenue has flatlined. Her marriage fell apart a decade earlier, and one of her kids no longer speaks to her. “I think they got to him,” she says. “Who?” I ask. “Them,” she says distractedly, gesturing toward some presumably evil plot taking place outside the tent. “The homosexual lobby.”

When she speaks of her son, her expression is so sad and desperate that I feel a certain sympathy. The spirit warrior creed is undoubtedly her answer to the frustrations of her own life, a means of securing the joy and self-respect she struggles to maintain at work and is unlikely to find in her turbulent home life. But then she blames it on the “gay agenda” and would no doubt support a nihilistic strongman to smash it. It is perfectly understandable that some people develop the urge to burn it all down. But that doesn’t make it a victimless crime.

My informal impression of the Las Vegas crowd matches with economist John Komlos’s analysis of 933 individuals arrested in connection with the January 6 attack on the Capitol. (By January 2024, more than 1200 individuals had been arrested in connection with their actions on January 6, with charges ranging from disorderly conduct and assaulting police officers to seditious conspiracy. Over 700 pled guilty. Around 170 had been convicted, including 210 who pled guilty to

felony offenses, while some individuals had their cases dismissed.) Only 36 insurrectionists came from zip codes with average incomes below \$20,000—whereas one would have expected 230 such people from a random sample of the population. Only 18 came from zip codes making \$150,000 or more—compared with an expected 165 from a random sample. “This finding dovetails with the argument that the right-wing populist movement is driven primarily by the anxieties associated with transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy,” says Komlos. “That includes America’s enormous income inequality, the frustrations caused by globalization for those without a college education, and the financial crisis that bailed out the upper echelons of society without paying much attention to the problems of

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Mainstreet America.”

But there are other factors at play. A 2021 survey published by the University of Chicago’s Chicago Project on Security & Threats, titled “Understanding American Domestic Terrorism,” reports that many of those who were arrested for the Capitol attack live in communities with increasingly diverse populations.

“The greater the decrease in non-Hispanic white, the higher the rate of sending insurrectionists,” say the authors. Principal investigator Robert Pape gets to the heart of the matter: “We’re finding evidence that the key driver is fear that rights of Hispanic people and Black people are outpacing the rights of white people.” A complete explanation, then, does not reduce to either economic anxiety or racial anxiety on their own. We need to think in terms of the toxic combination

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of these factors (and others).

The German crew and I decide to take a break from the speeches and walk the crowd. I chat with a man working one of the vendor booths. He is hawking nutritional supplements for people who believe they have been harmed by COVID vaccines. Literature for his product bears an endorsement from Mike Flynn. The man working the booth tells me Flynn is a partner in the business. Another man joins the conversation and turns to me for a view. I confess that I have been vaccinated and feel just fine. He edges away, laughing nervously. His fear seems genuine.

I notice boxes of free booklets at the entrance to ReAwaken America, and I see the same booklets throughout the event—placed on seats, stacked in a few tables, and in boxes scattered around the event for free distribution. As I pick up a copy, a man working at one of the booths nods and tersely adds, “You should read that.” It is titled “Battlefield United States.” The cover features photoshopped tanks and warplanes attacking the Statue of Liberty. The all-caps subtitle speaks in prepper code: PREPARE FOR EMP “GRID DOWN” NUCLEAR ATTACK WHEN SUMMER IS NEAR. TIME IS SHORT. STOCKPILE SUPPLIES A.S.A.P. A line at the bottom helpfully reminds readers that “Coronavirus was planned ‘event 201’ global pandemic exercise.” The back cover adds, “All human population to be RFID chipped *All firearms to be confiscated *All resistance to be eliminated ... TOTAL ENSLAVEMENT OF MANKIND.”

Mainly Las Vegas is about fear. The overriding message is that nowhere is safe. “They” will come after you in the churches; they’ll come after your kids in the schoolhouses; they’re out to destroy your health; and they won’t stop until they have robbed you of every penny and changed your gender against your will. The thirst for blood raging through these tents, I can’t help but think, is unmistakably an index of this ever-growing, ever-morphing fear.

If there is a savior for this crowd, a man who will face down the demons and set the world right, his name is Donald Trump. Apart from the occasional grumble that Trump is sometimes not Trumpy enough, you are no more likely to hear a bad word about Jesus than about the orange-skinned savior that this crowd appears to worship. Enlarged pictures of Trump’s face, superimposed on a young Arnold Schwarzeneggeresque body, with eagles and crosses and Jesus by his

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side, are displayed throughout the venue. And even while the event is taking place, everyone knows that Trump is the front-runner—by far—in the race for the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential election. The runners-up in the Republican contest are notable mainly for promising to pardon Trump and/or fill his mighty shoes. Which makes clear that this conference, contrary to outward appearances, is a partisan political gathering.

In another time, ReAwaken America could have been laughed off as just another festival of snake oil hucksterism in the long American tradition of separating suckers from their money through entrepreneurial gifting. But this group isn’t fringe; it is representative of what one of the nation’s two major parties has become. Majorities of Republican voters live in the same fear-filled, fact-free world that the Las Vegas crowd inhabits. They continue to believe in the Big Lie that the 2020 election was stolen; they think Trump was the greatest president ever; they say that Trump’s indictments are just

political persecution from a “weaponized” system of justice; and they have been persuaded that a global cabal is trying to strip away from them everything they hold dear.

To be sure, ReAwaken America has many devotedly Christian critics, and some of them are organized. Among the most prominent is an Episcopal priest, Rev. Nathan Empsall, leader of the group Faithful America, which runs digital campaigns to mobilize the social-justice Christian vote. “ReAwaken America’s speakers and organizers have bragged that God is on their side,” Empsall tells me. “It’s either ‘Team Jesus’ or godless globalism, with no middle ground. The irony here is that in spite of the religious right’s victim complex, and its constant complaints about liberals attacking Christians, it’s the self-professed Christian nationalist leaders like Mike Flynn who are erasing countless other Christian voices by blotting out the Black church tradition, mainline Protestants, progressive Catholics and more.” Faithful America has paid for billboard messages that counter ReAwaken America’s messages of hate. But this does not seem to have put much of a dent in the ReAwaken roadshow’s schedule.

The first day of the tour has left the Germans looking perplexed but still somewhat upbeat. I recognize in them the ability to compartmentalize, an indispensable skill for anyone who routinely works in conflict zones. Though they seem disgusted by what they have seen and heard, they, too, are reporters, and they are clearly pleased with the footage they collected. “The worse the better,” I quip, sticking to the strategy of deflection for the sake of the story. We agree to meet up in the hotel lobby the next morning.

Day two of ReAwaken America proves mercifully brief. We head off into another scorching morning and arrive at the tour’s patch of parkland. But the Germans are not in the mood to linger. After two hours in the hot and dusty tents, a member of the team tells me they’ve seen enough. They seem exhausted. On the ride back home, he turns to me with a grim expression and says, “How does this happen?”

Paranoia and conspiracism have always been a feature of American life, I suggest to my German friends. From the assassination of JFK to the attack on the World Trade Center, some number of Americans have responded to moments of crisis by embracing conspiracy theories, and others have sought to gain profit or power by exploiting this vulnerability. In the aftermath of 9/11, David Ray Griffin, a professor at the Claremont School of Theology, developed a cottage industry retailing evidence-free theories that the Twin Towers fell through an internal demolition job intended to mobilize the

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American public for war. He persisted in pushing these conspiracy theories through a series of books and interviews with people like Alex Jones, even after they had been thoroughly and repeatedly debunked by independent experts.

I add that this kind of conspiracy theorizing has appealed to many people on the American left, too, pushing them into

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the political fringes and often into total distrust of the entire political system.

In the annals of conspiracy theory history, however, as the ReAwaken America Tour makes clear, the COVID pandemic was an epic event that may ultimately loom much larger than JFK or 9/11. And Sergeants and Power Players of the Christian nationalist movement were at the forefront of the war on the pandemic response. On March 15, 2020, the Florida pastor Guillermo Maldonado urged the congregants at his Miami megachurch to show up for worship services in

person. “Do you believe God would bring his people to his house to be contagious with the virus? Of course not,” he said.

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Rodney Howard-Browne, pastor of the River at Tampa Bay Church in Florida, mocked people concerned about the

disease as “pansies” and insisted he would only shutter the doors to his packed church “when the rapture is taking place.”

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In a sermon that was live-streamed on Facebook, Tony Spell, a pastor in Louisiana, said, “We’re also going to pass out anointed handkerchiefs to people who may have a fear, who may have a sickness and we believe that when those anointed

handkerchiefs go, that healing virtue is going to go on them as well.” Jerry Falwell Jr., the disgraced president of Liberty University, joined the chorus: “You know, impeachment didn’t work, and the Mueller report didn’t work, and Article 25

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didn’t work, and so maybe now this is their next, ah, their next attempt to get Trump,” he said.

The paranoia far outlasted the pandemic. Groups like Moms for Liberty and ReAwaken America rose up on the anger and frustration of the pandemic period, yet they found new ways to grow even after the threat of the disease subsided. With the public health crisis mostly resolved, the Germans want to know, why is the mood still so dark?

The immediate cause, I suggest, has much to do with Donald Trump and the movement that supports him. The Big Lie about election fraud took up where the pandemic left off. And the criminal indictments and convictions of Donald Trump were proof positive of the crowd’s fondest fears. For the leaders of the ReAwaken event, Trump’s legal problems are not a setback; they are like Red Bull on a Saturday night. They prove, in effect, as other T-shirts pronounce, that ALEX JONES WAS RIGHT and ROGER STONE DID NOTHING WRONG. More than that, the Trump indictments and convictions have lent audiences like this a political focus and meaning that far transcends their marginal status.

The Germans don’t seem reassured. The open endorsements of fascism, the grift, and especially the threats of violence against political enemies—it troubles them. “Isn’t that illegal?” they say to me. They seem genuinely shaken. “What has happened to these people? In Germany this kind of thing would be against the law.”

I note that much of America’s political class have mostly decided that they would rather look away than acknowledge what is happening on the ground in America. It’s easier for everybody, they think, if we just pretend that this is another round of politics as usual.

On the Republican side, the representatives of the supposed “establishment”—including some that the Las Vegas crowd calls RINOs, along with the ultrawealthy donors who bankroll the operation—have, with several notable exceptions, signaled that they are fine with the ReAwaken America mindset. They have let us know that it is okay to regard a convicted felon who put himself above the Constitution (in his own vice president’s words) as just another horse in the race. Sure, they may have at times put their money and hopes into other candidates who message differently—but they stop short of criticizing Trump, and they too echo his election lies and assert that his multiple felony convictions are nothing more than political persecution. They grasp that what really matters is defeating the big-government, woke-mob Democrats, who may, well ...

I lose the thread of the argument for a moment, and we sit in silence. I realize I’m getting worked up, but I resume.

Even some of the anti-Trump Republicans seem to participate in the delusion, I point out. They tell themselves that it is all about Trump, a single bad actor, and that the old Republican Party will come back with its patrician civility, small-government conservatism, and support for traditional values. They seem oblivious to the reality that, when asked to choose an alternative, much of the Republican base has been groomed to opt for whichever candidate most resembles Trump. The candidate that promises to break the most laws, crush the most skulls, offend the most liberals, and bulldoze through all democratic institutions tends to be the one that gets their vote.

It is the self-censorship of the rest of the American political world that I find harder to explain to my German friends. A good number of those who populate the political analysis desks at the big news operations and take seats on major media panels keep telling us that America has become increasingly “partisan,” that it is divided into “tribes” that have their own “epistemes” or “moral language” and prefer to signal in-group loyalty than acknowledge the truth. Some say this is a matter of letting “free speech” do its magic. They assure us we can restore civility by opening ourselves to the perspectives of others. If only we would listen to and empathize with the other side, everything would return to normal.

“I guess they haven’t been to Las Vegas,” one of my German friends says, and I laugh.

She is right, of course. There is no “episteme” in the ReAwakened world. There is no supposed fact that can’t be flipped with the next turn of the conspiracy wheel. There isn’t the slightest interest in other “perspectives.” There is only a concerted and well-funded effort to promote as much incivility as possible.

Above all, the idea that this event has much of anything to do with free speech is laughable. That principle is about establishing the basis for open discussion in a society that wishes to be governed by reason. The point of Las Vegas is to demolish the very possibility of reasonable discussion. Speech here is just the weapon of choice, and it is unapologetically aimed at anxious, vulnerable people for the purpose of separating them from their money and making them politically useful.

What the people on the podium are selling, and what the people in the crowd are buying, is the license to ignore reality

altogether, and to deny any fact that contradicts their emotional desires, including the desire for revenge.

One of my German friends smiles at me, as if suggesting that I can relax. By the time we pull up at the Strip, I can see that she and her colleagues got the point many miles ago.