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Branding Us. Branding Them.

Back in December of 2005 I published a piece called “How Propaganda Works: “Branding””. In it, I included the following amusing comment:

“‘Branding’ is one of those things that seems kind of simple when you first think about it, but it’s really quite complicated, as you’ll see when you read the next paragraph, which was my first attempt to spell it out:

“‘Branding’ involves avoiding any talk about what you make or do, and instead working to create a symbol of your product, then figuring out a way to get people to respond emotionally to the symbol. That symbol then gets confused in the public’s mind with the product itself (or the service itself, or the whatever-you-want itself). Then, people can be made to have a positive relationship with the symbol, and you can go on doing whatever you want and, even if people don’t like what you actually do, people will feel good about ‘you,’ because they are responding to the symbol that they think IS you. Best example: Ronald Reagan. Opinion polls during the Reagan presidency regularly showed a majority opposed to most of his policies, but people liked Reagan, himself. So, they voted for the man—or really the image, the symbol, of the man—and then they got his policies. He was a ‘brand,’ and people ‘bought’ it, big-time.”

Maybe I’m smarter now than I was when I wrote those words 18 years ago, but it’s amusing to me that I thought that the basic idea of “branding” was so complicated. On the bright side, I did offer what I think is a simple formula: Emotions + Symbols + Association = Branding. I’ll return to that in a moment.

I also said that the practices of advertising, or “public relations,” are increasingly used to manipulate political behavior. Then I went on to quote Edward L. Bernays, known as the Father of Public Relations. In his classic 1928 book “Propaganda,” (page 54) Bernays said —speaking of World War I— that “the manipulators of patriotic opinion made use of the mental clichés and the emotional habits of the public *to produce mass reactions* against the alleged atrocities, the terror, and the tyranny of the enemy.”

There are numerous concepts, personalities, and ideas in the political realm that have been successfully “branded.” That is, the symbol that represents them (a name, a photo, a word) “produces mass reactions” when presented to a public that really knows little about their actual underlying meaning.

Back to that formula I mentioned. Emotions + Symbols + Association = Branding. It works, more or less, like this:

If you can get people to FEEL a certain way when they SEE a certain thing, they will ASSOCIATE that thing with that emotion. Think of your daily life: Do you “feel good”—like there must be happy kids around—when you see that special flowery handwriting that means “Disney?” Are you inclined to gravitate toward the pop

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Greetings,

This issue of Nygaard Notes comes to you just before I go on a brief vacation, something I don't do very often. When I get back, shortly after Labor Day, I plan to start working on some sort of special series, along the lines of "The Best of Nygaard Notes." What's this all about, you may wonder.

Hard though it may be to believe, next month marks the 25th birthday of Nygaard Notes!

Yep, Nygaard Notes #1 came out on September 5, 1998.

I think that's worth commemorating in some way, don't you? I'm not sure exactly how... But I'll figure out something. I always do.

In the meantime, enjoy Nygaard Notes #704, as I talk about Boundaries, Branding, Categories, and the symbol that we know as Donald Trump. Not the man. The symbol. You'll see.

And I'll see you in September!

Nygaard

Branding *from page 1*

machine that has the familiar "Coca Cola" logo? Or maybe you "feel" better when you see the red-white-and-blue Pepsi logo. It's very subtle, but that's how Branding works: Emotions + Symbols + Association. It's not rational, it's not about thinking. In fact, if you make thinking a part of the formula—Emotions + THINKING + Symbols + Association—it doesn't work. And that is how one builds a resistance to Branding.

I published that Branding essay in 2005, and it took me 14 years to get around to publishing a piece called *Branding the Democrats*, in which I pointed out (quoting New Yorker writer Hendrik Hertzberg) that conservative Republicans by that time had developed a habit of referring to the Democratic Party as the "Democrat Party." Wrote Hertzberg, "There's no great mystery about the motives behind this deliberate misnaming. 'Democrat Party' is a slur, or intended to be—a handy way to express contempt."

Express contempt, yes. But such derogatory naming serves another purpose as well. It's a handy way of simplifying a bewilderingly-complex world into an easy-to-understand world. Into a world in which, when we encounter something new, we know where to put it, we know what it means. A world of categories. And as the reactionary right marshals its forces for the ongoing backlash that they have branded "Make America Great Again," there are only two categories that really matter: Us and Them. ♦

Getting Meaning from Categories

Editor's Note: This essay was originally published back in Nygaard Notes Number 532 on June 13, 2013. Being compulsive, I have edited it a bit (Hey, I've learned some things over the past ten years!). But it's essentially the same essay.

Facts come at us from all directions, millions of them but the only ones that come to have meaning for us ↗↗↗

→→ are the ones that we can attach to some anchors already in our heads. What does it mean for something to have “meaning”? (What is the meaning of “meaning,” is what I mean.) What do we do with the meaning that we attach to something?

One of the things we are saying when we say that a thing “means” something is that we know what it is, and we know where it belongs. In other words, things have meaning when we can fit them into categories.

People get really attached to knowing whether a stated fact is “true” or “false.” But many important things have significance not so much because they are more “true” than something else, but rather because they fit better into a desirable, pre-existing category. A proposal, after all—a proposal to raise taxes, or a proposal to balance the budget— isn’t really true or false. It’s more a matter of being in the category of a “good idea” or a “bad idea.” The meaning that we give to many things has less to do with “reality” or “truth” than it does with answering the question: “What is it?” Or, as I’m talking about here: “What does this mean?” And that kind of meaning falls into the realm of Categorization.

Most of the categorizing we do is so basic and non-controversial that we don’t really think about it. We know a “dog” when we see one. A car is not a bicycle. Snow is different from rain. But once we try to narrow it down a bit, even these categorizations get tricky. Is it a good dog, or a bad dog? Is it a cheap car or an expensive car? Is the snow evidence of a beautiful winter, or an absent summer?

Categories are everywhere: Good/Bad; Important/Unimportant; Us/Them; Civilized/Savage; Pragmatic/Extreme; Principled/Ideological; Normal/Weird; Black/White; Straight/Queer; Old/Young. It’s easy to compose a list like this, with either/or choices. And it’s easy, in part, because the dominant Thought System encourages us all to use the familiar Compare-and-Contrast technique to better understand things. But there’s also a deeper reason why it’s so easy to make a list of “opposites,” and that is because it fits so well with the conventional wisdom that the world is an either/or kind of place. It’s not.

In fact, the habit of seeing things dualistically—which is what we’re doing when we categorize things using such two-choice menus—reflects another pillar of U.S. ideology, to go along with the individualism that I mentioned earlier. And that is dualism itself.

Public relations people, and other propagandists, spend a lot of time trying to get people to put things in certain categories instead of others. And they spend a lot of time making sure we attach certain emotions to the categories from which we have to choose. And when the world is simplified into sets of two, where something is either “this” or “that,” it becomes much easier to provoke the preferred emotions in response to events, or to tap into already-existing emotions. Would-be demagogues love to paint a picture of a dualistic world, as such a way of thinking makes it easy to conjure a world of Good Guys and Bad Guys.

One of the sources of the polarization that plagues our body politic is the tension between visions. One vision for the United States is an expansive vision that celebrates an inclusive diversity: Everybody in; nobody out. Another vision is a restrictive vision that seeks a world in which some groups give the orders and other groups take them, based on a stratified social system that is seen as natural or logical. Who should be allowed “in”? And who should be kept “out”? Categories.

(And, yes, by listing just two visions, I am aware that I am perhaps encouraging the Either/Or thinking about which I am complaining; I’m intentionally simplifying here to make a point!) To page 4 →→→

Categories *from page 3*

The backlash against inclusive diversity has been on the rise in the United States for several decades. The rise of Ronald Reagan can be said to mark the beginning, or maybe the maturing, of that backlash, which continued through eight years of George W. Bush and which has now led us to Donald Trump. That vision, being restrictive, requires constant maintenance of the ranking system that tells us who is in and who is out. The *way that we are encouraged to think* encourages us to look for differences between us—Who is a Real American, and Who is Not?—and the polarizing language that we hear in service to that categorization is called Boundary Rhetoric, a subject to which we now turn. ◆

Boundaries Between Us and Them

The following paragraph was the Nygaard Notes “Quote” of the Week five years ago, in September of 2018:

Scholars have long observed a tendency within human societies to organize and collectively define themselves along dimensions of difference and sameness. Studies since the 1950s demonstrate the tendency of people to identify with whom they are grouped, no matter how arbitrary or even silly the group boundaries may be, and to judge members of their own group as superior.

The scholar Dina Okamoto at Indiana University uses the term “Boundary Rhetoric” to refer to “the ways in which people use words to create distinctions, or boundaries, between different groups.”

‘Us’ and ‘them’ are categories bandied about with little thought paid to their definitions. It’s implied: ‘us’ often refers to white, English-speaking Americans.

A 2021 release from the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) begins like this: “When political discourse in the U.S. turns to immigration, ‘us’ and ‘them’ are categories bandied about with little thought paid to their definitions. It’s implied: ‘us’ often refers to white, English-speaking Americans, who may only be a generation or two removed from a family history of immigration themselves.

“This type of rhetoric, or ‘boundary rhetoric,’ creates categories of belonging and exclusion between the in-group ‘us’ and the out-group ‘them.’ Over time, boundary rhetoric in political discourse may affect who is accepted, who is marginalized, and who receives access to important resources.”

SFI postdoctoral fellow Tamara van der Does puts it simply: “Boundary rhetoric is used to justify policies that exclude people.”

Of course, those targeted for exclusion rarely agree that their exclusion is justified. And, in the current political environment, membership in the various out-groups is growing, while the numbers of those that have traditionally had the power to enforce the boundaries between the groups is shrinking. Hmm... Something has to give. Could it be... democracy? ◆

Milton Friedman, Donald Trump, and The Trojan Horse

This issue of Nygaard Notes has been about Branding, and Categorizing and Boundaries. Why am I talking about all of this right now? I believe it's the key to understanding the phenomenon that I call Trumpism. The question is: How important, and how dangerous, is Donald Trump?

To begin to answer that, we begin by considering the Greek myth of the Trojan Horse.

As the story goes, the ancient Greeks were at war with the Trojans, and the Greeks weren't doing too well. But, according to the British Museum, "The Greeks finally win the war by an ingenious piece of deception dreamed up by the hero and king of Ithaca, Odysseus. They build a huge wooden horse and leave it outside the gates of Troy, as an offering to the gods, while they pretend to give up battle and sail away. Secretly, though, they have assembled their best warriors inside. The Trojans fall for the trick, bring the horse into the city and celebrate their victory. But when night falls, the hidden Greeks creep out and open the gates to the rest of the army, which has sailed silently back to Troy. The city is sacked, the men and boys are brutally slain, including King Priam and Hector's little son Astyanax, and the women are taken captive. Troy has fallen."

Next we jump ahead a few thousand years to the early 1960s, when the U.S. government was dominated by liberal Democrats to the point that the liberal Democratic vision for the nation seemed to be unchallengeable. Yet that was the very moment that a conservative economist named Milton Friedman published a book called *Capitalism and Freedom*, a book that articulated a very different vision, a vision of a capitalist America in which The Market reigns supreme. At the time the book went nowhere.

But time rolled on and twenty years later, in 1982, as Ronald Reagan was beginning to enact Friedman's vision, *Capitalism and Freedom* was republished. This prompted Friedman to reflect on his decision to publish such a book at a time when it seemed that virtually no-one was listening. "The role of books

such as this," he said, is "to keep options open until circumstances make change necessary. There is enormous inertia—a tyranny of the status quo—in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."

Trump The Symbol

Speaking of politically impossible, now it's time to talk about the powerful Populist cultural movement that appears to have been built around the charismatic television personality named Donald Trump. Truth be told: Mr. Trump does have a job beyond his obvious vocation as an entertainer. And that job is to serve as a symbol. But, a symbol of what, exactly?

Start by forgetting about the actual person named Donald Trump. He's a narcissistic buffoon with no political philosophy or program in mind, and as such is insignificant beyond whatever entertainment value he may have. He is huge, and hollow. Hmm... sort of like the Trojan Horse.

But, hollow though he is, Trump, and the politicians and propagandists surrounding him, have carefully created and refined a *symbol* that they call Trump, and that's a different animal. They have succeeded in branding that symbol as a leader of the ongoing and increasingly intense backlash against multiracial democracy that swept Richard Nixon into office, and then became a cultural phenomenon during the Reagan years. Today it's known as "Making America Great Again."

Like the backlash to Reconstruction in the 1860s and 70s, and the backlash to the Civil Rights Movement

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100 years later, there is a backlash underway in the United States today. “A backlash against what?” you ask. Unlike the earlier backlashes, the current backlash is not easily categorized because, unlike those earlier backlashes that were animated by specific issues (preserving slavery and preserving Jim Crow respectively), the backlash of which Trump is a symbol is based on a more generalized fear, a fear of a deeper change. And this fear of change goes beyond this issue, or that issue, but is born of the increasing evidence that a new generation is coming up, a generation that sees the need for the kind of deep, structural change that is born of what I call The Big Crisis. And when I say “The Big Crisis” I’m referring to what I have called “the increasingly freaked-out social order” in which we find ourselves living. The 21st Century in the United States is a time in which long-established structures, institutions, and ways of thinking are weakening or failing. That’s why it’s not hyperbole to call the current moment a time of Big Crisis. And just as the scale of the crisis is giving rise to unprecedented calls for change, so it is that the scope and scale of the backlash is unprecedented.

A BIG Crisis with Many Parts

Just think! We are living in a time of affluent arrogance and economic inequity that has been called the Second Gilded Age. A time when the American Empire, long unquestioned, is rapidly declining. A time when U.S. democracy—imperfect but also long unquestioned—is widely perceived to be under threat. A time in which white people are becoming aware that they are about to lose their grip on the power that comes with being the absolute racial majority in a majority-rules nation. A time when human disruption of the climate threatens to make the Earth uninhabitable for humans. A time when Capitalism—the Individualistic and Competitive socioeconomic system that forms the basis of American identity—is increasingly unstable and unpopular. A time of increasing threats to public health caused by rises in antibiotic-resistant diseases, future pandemics, and ever-more toxins in the

environment, all while under-funded public health systems struggle to keep up.

I don’t see how anyone can deny that we are living in a time of Big Crisis.

Milton Friedman was right when he said that “Only a crisis produces real change.” And as The Big Crisis deepens and increasingly makes real change inevitable, the currently-dominant ideas and ways of thinking will yield to new ideas. Familiar structures and institutions will die and new ones will be born. The nature of the changes that The Big Crisis will breed is not settled. What is to come will depend—to quote Friedman *again*—on the ideas that are lying around.

I often quote the scholar and activist John A. Powell, who says, “When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society.” In other words, who gets to be a member of the “in-group,” and who does not? Who belongs, and who has no place here? Who is Us, and who is Them?

In this issue’s “Quote” of the Week, Kermit Roosevelt III talks about two competing visions of America: one of which he calls Inclusive Equality and the other he calls Exclusive Individualism. This is what we are fighting about in this country, this is at the root of the polarization that so many people feel in their bones. It’s not new: we’ve been fighting about it since at least the Civil War.

This is why I discuss in this issue the idea of Boundary Rhetoric, which is employed—by Trump among many others—to reassure the members of the speaker’s in-group that they are indeed “in,” and to identify the various out-groups that they believe do not, and should not, qualify as full members of society. Trumpism champions a vision of Exclusive Individualism in which the definition of “full member” is narrow, indeed.



The Manichean World Of Trump

Shortly after the 2020 election in the United States the London Guardian published an article that began by saying, “In the Manichean world of Donald Trump, there is one epithet more pathetic than any other: loser.” (Someone with a Manichean view of the world believes that there are two opposites in everything, for example good and evil or light and dark.)

The dominant ideology in the United States is based on the two intertwined principles of Individualism and Competition, exemplified by our capitalist socio-economic system in which individuals compete for money and the power that money brings. One of the things that money brings is the power to decide who gets to be a full member of society. That is, to choose The Winners.

This is why Donald Trump will never accept his 2020 electoral loss, whether he is convicted of anything or not; he has branded himself a Winner, as someone who always wins. And he has convinced millions of people that to be on his side is to be on the winning side. And one of the promises offered by the Trump brand is this: If you are loyal to Trump and vote for Trump, you too will be a winner, you too will be a member of the in-group. (Especially if you make a financial contribution!)

In the Manichean world of Trump, Winners are Good People, and Good People win. And therein lies the source of the power of the Symbol that is Donald Trump. In a world of Winners and Losers, of Us and Them, Trump has become, for many, the ultimate symbol.

To his supporters, Donald Trump is a symbol of Us.

Before the 2020 election Trump warned his supporters about what would happen if “they” won the election: “This is going to be the most important election, in my opinion, in the history of our country. You got to get it right. Because if you don’t get it right, we will not have a country anymore. You’re not going to have a country. Not as we know

it. You won’t have a country anymore.”

In recent months Trump has used the indictments against him to reinforce his symbolic power as guardian of “us” against the evil “them,” saying “They’re not coming after me, they’re coming after you. I’m just standing in their way, and I always will stand in their way.”

By himself, Trump is not much of a threat. But he could be the Trojan Horse of the 2024 election. It’s possible that millions of people will vote for the symbol of Trump, casting their vote for US against THEM. Perhaps enough people will buy the Trump brand that he will once again be a Winner. And once he is in office he will surround himself with people who—while the world obsesses about what to do about Trump the Savior or Trump the Devil—will be busy putting into practice some of the very dangerous ideas that are lying around.

The Mandate for Leadership. Or something...

As the 2024 election approaches, thousands of MAGA Republicans, led by the reactionary Heritage Foundation, are coming together to make sure that their libertarian, market-oriented and white nationalist ideas are prominent among those lying around.

Their plans are laid out in extensive detail on the website of what is colloquially known as The 2025 Project. Their leaders describe it like this:

“The 2025 Presidential Transition Project is the conservative movement’s unified effort to be ready for the next conservative Administration to govern at 12:00 noon, January 20, 2025.”

The heart of The 2025 Project is a 920-page volume called *Mandate for Leadership*. Almost the first words one sees when one opens up the book are these: “In the winter of 1980, the fledgling Heritage Foundation handed to President-elect Ronald Reagan

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the inaugural Mandate for Leadership [which] set out policy prescriptions, agency by agency for the incoming President. The book literally put the conservative movement and Reagan on the same page, and the revolution that followed might never have been, save for this band of committed and volunteer activists. With this volume, we have gone back to the future—and then some.”

The full name of this volume is “Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise,” and fulfilling this promise does not depend on the election of Donald Trump. The Mandate repeatedly

refers to “the next conservative Administration,” making it crystal clear that the success of the comprehensive backlash outlined here could proceed with or without Trump; any Trojan Horse will do.

I’m not sure what it means to “go back to the future,” but what I’m worried about is that ominous phrase “and then some.”

You can find the full Mandate on the web here:
https://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf

Or you can wait for me to summarize the highlights—or lowlights—in a future Nygaard Notes.

“Quote” of the Week: Exclusive Individualism vs Inclusive Equality

In a recent interview with the History News Network, author and law professor Kermit Roosevelt III talked about his new book *The Nation That Never Was: Reconstructing America’s Story*. The interviewer said to Roosevelt “You note two visions of America: one of Inclusive Equality and one of Exclusive Individualism. How do you see these competing perspectives in viewing our history?” To which Roosevelt replied:

“Exclusive Individualism, to take that one first, says that there’s a sharp line between insiders and outsiders—between the people who count, whose rights the government must protect, and the people who don’t, who are different and dangerous. And it says that the government must consider people as individuals—it can’t think about the welfare of the community in general. More specifically, what that means is that redistribution is generally considered a bad thing, in particular if it’s done to promote equality. Taking from one person because they have a lot and giving to another person because they have little is bad according to this vision because it’s violating individual rights. “Inclusive Equality says that outsiders aren’t necessarily that different or dangerous, and they can become insiders. Maybe automatically, even if some people want to exclude them—maybe they become insiders just by being born here. And it says that promoting equality, even by redistribution, is a legitimate and even important thing for the government to do. These visions, I say, are fundamentally the ideologies of the Founding (Exclusive Individualism) and Reconstruction (Inclusive Equality). You can see this in the fundamental documents from each period, and in the political debates, too. The Declaration of Independence talks about the purpose of government as securing the rights of individuals, and it shows outsiders as threats to the colonists’ lives: rebellious enslaved people, Hessian mercenaries, and Natives.”

It’s a fascinating book; I highly recommend it. I imagine I’ll be publishing a brief book review before too long, actually; that’s how important I think it is.

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