

We Need To Talk About Tucker

By Jeffrey Blehar *National Review (Online)*
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When Tucker Carlson Got Fired From Fox News In April 2023 — Nominally For His As-Yet-Undisclosed Role In A Workplace Discrimination Lawsuit, But More Likely Because He Had Played A Key Role In Amplifying The “Election Truther” Lies That Cost The Network \$787 In Settlement Money — I Resolved Not To Write About Him Again. Once He Lost His Mainstream-Media Platform, He Lost His Ability To Truly Drive The Conversation. I Have No Doubt He Is Doing Well With His Latest Venture — His Core Audience Remains Faithful — But He Is Narrowcasting, A Sideshow. Now That It Is No Longer Nearly As Important To Pay Attention To Him, His Particular Brew Of Smug Disingenuousness And Feigned Incredulity Tastes Like An Unpleasant (And Potentially Spiked) Drink Best Left On The Bar.

But Of Course It Became Impossible To Ignore The Man Once He Made His Ill-Fated Trip To Moscow To Interview Vladimir Putin. The Interview Itself Is Long, Boring, And Predictably Pedantic. (Anyone Who Has Seen A Putin Interview Knows He Rambles On Forever About Russian History, Not Just Because It Is A Good Way To Kill Time But Because It Is A Genuine Obsession Of His. Far More Alarming, And Revealing, Were The Series Of Videos He Shot While There And His Comments About The Experience Made Afterward In Dubai. It Can Be Avoided No Longer: We Need To Talk About Tucker.

By Now, You Have No Doubt Seen Or At Least Heard About The Three Memorably Weird “TC Shorts” Carlson Posted Online, Relating His Sojourn In Moscow. Their Escalating Absurdity And Bizarrely Propagandistic Qualities Felt Calculated: First, Carlson Displayed To His Viewers The Moscow Metro, An Infamous Communist Showpiece Built For Stalin As A Way Of Duping Credulous Foreigners With The Urban (And Urbane) Glories Of The Socialist Fatherland While, Mere Miles Outside Of Moscow, Most People Still Lived In Abject Rural Poverty. (Many Still Do.) In A Ghastly Touch, The Video Ends On A Plaque Of Lenin, The Untranslated But Clearly Text Of Which Celebrates The Friendship Between The Russian And Ukrainian Peoples. Ignorance Or Sick Irony? You Be The Judge — But Note That Carlson Either Chose To Film At The Kievskaya Station Of The Moscow Metro Or Was Directed To By The Russians.

Then, Tucker Went Grocery Shopping. (We Can Only Assume The Store Was Chosen For Him By The Authorities, With All That Entails.) When Not Engaging In A Quasi-Sexual Relationship With Bread Or Marveling At Aldi-Style Coin-Operated Shopping Carts — Nothing Says “Robust And Thriving Civic Order” Like That Perfect Emblem Of A Low-Trust Society, The Coin-Operated Shopping Cart — He Boasts Of Spending Only A Hundred U.S. Dollars On A Week’s Worth Of Groceries. This Is Fine For An American Abroad In Russia, But Significantly Less So For Actual Russians, 60 Percent Of Whom Spend Half Their Monthly Income On Food Alone. In A Non Sequitur For The Ages, This Display Of Luxury-Priced Mediocrity Inspires Carlson To His Bluntest Denunciation Yet. “Coming To A Russian Grocery Store — The Heart Of Evil — And Seeing What Things Cost And How People Live, It Will *Radicalize* You Against Our Leaders. That’s How I Feel, Anyway — Radicalized. We’re Not Making Any Of This Up By The Way, Not At All.” I Wish I Could Say I Was.

It Would Be Superfluous To Relate The Details Of Carlson's Final Peregrination, Taking Him To Moscow's Flagship *Knockoff McDonald's*: It Must Be Watched Instead. By The Time The Bit Is Becoming So Strained And Weirdly Artificial You Almost Begin To Wonder Whether An Element Of Duress Is At Play. I Imagine The Hammer Of A Revolver Softly Clicking Back Into Place Just Off Camera The Moment After Every Scene Cuts. ("I've Gotta Say It Was McAwesome — The Non-GMO Version!" Is A Line That, In A Crueler World, Could Serve As The Man's Epitaph.

Why In God's Name Is All Of This Happening? What Sequence Of Events Has Brought Once-Bow-Tied CNN/MSNBC/Fox Cable-News Veteran Tucker Carlson To The Point Of Recording Walter Duranty—Esque Buzzclips Advertising The Cleanliness And Late-20th-Century Amenities Of Putin's Moscow? Some Would Argue This Is Merely The Most Recent And Appalling Example Of End-Stage Audience Capture, Where Carlson (Known For An Unquenchable Desire For Relevance) Found Himself Chasing An Increasingly Narrow Audience By Adopting Their Obsessions As His Own. Since The Online Right In Its Despairing Anti-Wokeness Has Warped Putin's Russia Into An Icon Of Traditional Virtue, Perhaps Tucker Is Just Willing To Follow Along. It's A Very Real Phenomenon, As All Those Old Enough To Remember The Long-Term Trajectories Of Online Celebrities Can Attest. (It Was Only Just Recently That Greta Thunberg Graduated From Eco-Doomerism To Antisemitism In Order To Retain The Spotlight.

I Am Not So Sure, However. I Am Well Aware That Carlson Has Forever Been A Somewhat Chameleonic Character On The Media Right — Willing To Conform To Whatever The Tune Of The Times Is In Order To Stay Afloat And In The Mix — But His Change Over The Years Has

Taken On An Aspect Of Something Beyond Mere Condescending Kayfabe. The Bitterness In His Tone Is Real, His Disaffection (Evident Since Before His Termination By Fox, But Now Accelerating) Unfeigned. And His Extended Explanations For His Actions, However Objectively Rotten In Their Logic, Bear The Unfortunate Hallmarks Of A Strange Consistency: The Downward Spiral Of A Genuine Anti-American Self-Radicalization.

In Dubai Early Last Week, Speaking At The Sort Of International Elite Summit That One Immediately Associates With MAGA Authenticity, Carlson Was Straightforward Enough About The Deeply Cynical Underlying Assumptions He Now Holds. Some Of Them Are Quite Recognizable And Easy Enough To Credit (To Wit, His Perfectly Reasonable Disgust At The Media's Its Oppositional Role To Entrenched Power). But So Many Of The Others Reveal A Political Soul Whose Belief In This Nation Has Crumbled To Dust Like The Ashes Of American Flags. Under Questioning From An Egyptian Journalist, Carlson Was Asked Why He "Did Not Talk About Navalny, About Assassinations, About Restrictions On Opposition In The Coming Elections" In His Interview With Putin. Carlson Responded: "I've Spent My Life Talking To People Who Run Countries In Various Countries And Have Concluded The Following: That Every Leader Kills People, Some Kill More Than Others. Leadership Requires Killing People, Sorry." Putin Helpfully Proved The Point A Few Days Later By Having Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny Murdered In Prison.

Understand Carlson's Rhetorical Sleight Of Hand Here: He Later Characterized Navalny's Assassination As "Horrifying, Barbaric And Awful — No Decent Person Would Defend It." In Fact, Carlson's Fans Would Argue That *He* Wasn't Defending It In His Dubai Comments Either, And That His Denunciation Of The Killing Was Logically Consistent With The Position He

Took There. But That's Not the Trick; The Trick Is That By Conflating Vladimir Putin With The Leaders Of Western Nations, Including The President Of The United States, He Is Casually Averring That They Are Functionally Equivalent. ("Some Kill More Than Others" Clearly Indicates That The Difference To Carlson Is One Of Number And Not Kind.)

It Should Not Need To Be Explained How Smug And Solipsistically Moronic This Logic Is, Yet Because It's The Sort Of Glib Moralizing All Too Popular In Influential Quarters Of The Right These Days, It Must Be Done: Western Leaders Have To Make Decisions In War And Peacetime That Result In People Getting Killed. But No, Western Leaders Do Not Personally Imprison Or Execute Their Domestic Political Enemies, And Certainly Not For The *Mere Crime Of Political Opposition*. (I Am Aware That There Are Many Who Will Honestly Insist That Donald Trump Is In Legal Jeopardy Merely For Being "The Opposition," Ignoring The Fact That His Wounds Are Almost Entirely Self-Inflicted. But The Fact That This Irrational Belief Is So Prevalent Among The GOP Base Is Precisely Why Carlson's Cheap Moral Equivalence Is So Destructive.)

That's A Perfectly Fair Conflation As Far As Carlson Is Concerned, However, For He No Longer Thinks America — At Least Not So Long As It Is "Woke" And Run By Democrats — Is Much To Be Particularly Proud Of. It's Just Another Country Whose Leaders Assassinate Their Enemies — You Know, Sort Of Like Russia, Which He Would Also Like You To Know, By The Way, Is Far Nicer, Cleaner, And Safer Than THEY Want You To Realize. In This Nihilistic Sourness He Will No Doubt Be Joined By His Fiercest Fans, Who Share His Spenglerian Pessimism. (And All Of Them Will Sound Ridiculous Mirroring The Language Of The Left From The Late Sixties Onward.)

But By Now His Spiral Of Radicalization Has Also Twisted His Ability To See Clearly Even The Most Obvious Things; Anti-Americanism Has Clouded His Worldview Like A Glaze Of Cataracts Fogging An Aged Man's Sight. For Example, In Dubai, Carlson Said Of Moscow That "It Was So Much Cleaner, And Safer, And Prettier Aesthetically, Its Architecture, Its Food, Its Service, Than Any City In The United States." This, To Put It Bluntly, Is Sheer Nonsensical Cant That Could Be Spoken Only By A Gullible Rube Receiving A Carefully Curated Tour Of The Richest And Most Exclusive Parts Of Moscow Whilst Minded At All Times By The Russian Secret Service. (I Doubt The Same Sorts Of Muggers Who Stripped Charlie Cooke And His Father Of Their Wallets And Passports In The Moscow Metro During Their One Visit Got A Shot At Carlson.)

When Carlson Goes On Like This, Too Many Accuse Him Of Merely Being A Disingenuous Hack, Of Catering To A Preexisting Alt-Right Audience Of People Deranged By Trump/Biden Era Politics For Fame And Money. I Believe The Opposite To Be True: I Think Carlson Actively Seeks To *Cultivate* His View Of America Among His Audience, At The Cost Even Of His Popularity. He Sees Himself Once Again As *Leading* The Discourse Rather Than Being *Led* By It, Which Is Why He Is So Committed To A Bit That Otherwise Seems Grotesque And Inexplicable To Normal People. At This Point, To Do Anything Other Than Take Him At His Word Is To Make Excuses For Him. I Realize That I Myself Have Been Subconsciously Doing That As Well, In Much The Same Way That Jon Stewart Does In His Rather Funny Way Of Skewering Him On The Resuscitated *Daily Show*. Stewart's Analysis Is The Same One I Often Make When Faced With Once-Respectable People Saying Intolerably Stupid Or Wicked Things: *You Know Better. You're Too Smart For This.*

Maybe Not. After A Certain Point, Attempting To Divine The True Motivations Of People One Doesn't Know Is A Fool's Game, Though An Irresistible One. I Prefer To Simply Take Tucker Carlson At His Word (As His Fans Do) And Grant Him The Courage Of His Convictions: He Is Genuinely Anti-American Now, And Willing To Present Propagandistic Lies About An Evil Regime If It Helps In Any Way To Make That Larger Point. Maybe Only Someone So Initially Unmoored, So Protean In His Core Identity, Could be Subject To Such A Radicalization. I Suspect That Plays a Role, But It Is Glibly Insufficient As An Explanation Unto Itself. Rather, I Suspect The Counsel Of Vonnegut May Bear Remembering: We Are What We Pretend To Be, So We Should Be Careful About What We Pretend To Be.

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