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THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IS NOW OUR VERSION OF THE FRENCH NATIONAL FRONT

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POSTED OCTOBER 29, 2017
FILED UNDER: NEWS+OPINIONS, OP-ED



Demonstration against National Front in Paris after the results of the 2014 election.
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What Are We Going to Do About It?

My wife's family on her mother's side are French Jews who escaped from the Germans who occupied France in 1940. First they moved from their home in Paris to the southern part of the country, which was ruled by the Vichy regime of Marshall Petain. Two years later, when Vichy began to round up Jews for deportation to Nazi concentration camps in Germany and German-occupied Poland, the family managed to book passage on a ship from Marseilles to Casablanca, and then to New York City. My wife's Uncle Jacques was only 17 when he arrived with the others in New York. He had become friendly on the ship with the philosopher-activist, Simone Weil who had worked as a production laborer in French factories, fought alongside the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, and would return from New York to London in order to work with the Free French where she would die at the age of 34. Her writings and personal history of self-sacrifice undoubtedly inspired Jacques. Too young to join De Gaulle's army on his own, he went on a hunger strike until his parents co-signed his enlistment papers. He commanded a Free French Algerian unit that helped liberate French concentration camps, really temporary stop-overs on the way to the ones in Germany and Poland. My Roman Catholic father, who had no idea that Jacques existed, was simultaneously doing the same thing as an engineer with the U.S. 44th Army Division.

With the Allied victory over the Germans in 1944, many French Jews who had managed to survive the Holocaust began returning home. The official newspapers took little notice. The same year, the philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out that the reason for this indifference was the anti-Semitism that was epidemic in France long before the Nazis invaded. Does the Dreyfus Affair ring a bell?

In 1972, Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the National Front, an anti-Semitic, racist, anti-immigrant political party nostalgic for the days of Vichy (the slogan MFGA — Make France Great Again — comes to mind). At his most successful, Le Pen received 16.8 percent of the vote in the presidential race of 2002. His daughter, Marine Le Pen realized her father's openly fascist politics created a glass ceiling he would never break through. She successfully maneuvered to expel him from the party, and made the National Front relatively respectable by prohibiting public expression of beliefs the party members undoubtedly still hold. In May of this year, Marine Le Pen received nearly 34 percent of the vote when she ran for President of France.

Donald Trump's politics are, in French terms, somewhere between those of Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen. If anything, they are closer to those of the father than the daughter. Instead of suppressing racist themes, Trump has embraced them, although sometimes with a purposively transparent effort at plausible deniability. He even permitted his presidential campaign to adopt dog whistle anti-Semitic imagery, for example a Star of David (the campaign claimed it was a sheriff's badge) superimposed on a pile of cash. This in spite of the fact that his daughter converted to Judaism, and his grandchildren are Jews. Was he thinking of them when he remarked about Charlottesville that "many fine people" had marched behind the Nazi and KKK flags?

This week Republican Senator Jeff Flake joined his Senate colleague, Bob Corker in announcing his decision not to run for re-election in 2018. The two are among only three Republican Senators (John McCain is the third) who voiced relatively mild criticisms of the president, at least initially. Like Corker, Flake realized that, because of his distance from Trump, he would be unable to defeat a Trump true-believing challenger in his primary race. Flake's polling numbers are abysmal, while National Front admirer and former Chief Advisor to Trump, Steve Bannon had specifically targeted Flake and Corker for defeat. It is only now, since their announced retirements, that the two are speaking freely and in fact saying what almost all Republican Senators believe.

It's crystal clear that the GOP is Trump's party now. No Trump critic facing a primary in 2018 thinks he or she can win. Not only Flake and Corker, but other "moderate" Republicans in the House as well as the Senate have announced their retirements. John McCain is suffering from a terminal brain cancer.

At this point, the only force holding the Republican Party together is Trump's racist, anti-Semitic, and pseudo-populist politics. He is our Jean-Marine Le Pen. But he has broken through father Le Pen's, and even daughter Le Pen's ceilings. In fact, he is President of the United States. Most corporate, Reaganite Republicans have capitulated to Trump because he promises a trillion dollars in tax cuts for the rich, including abolition of the hated estate tax. Thanks to the limitless greed of their wealthy patrons, and their own craven desire for power, these Senators and Representatives have made the Republican Party's transformation into an American version of the National Front unstoppable.

The unsettled question is what effect this will have on the two-party system. The Flakes, Corkers, McCains, and other Republican "moderates" will be looking for a new home, if they do not leave politics entirely. They have only two options. They and their supporters can form a third party. But because the U.S. has winner-take-all electoral districts, no viable third party is possible that does not quickly replace one of the two major parties. As long as the Republican Party's base is with Trump, that is not going to happen. Short of a Nixon-style denouement where Trump is forced from office in disgrace, the only other option for renegade Republicans is the Democratic Party. In order to be effective there, they would have to ally with the existing establishment, in other words with the Clinton-Obama wing currently represented by House and Senate minority leaders, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer as well as the Democratic National Committee chair, Tom Perez.

The problem with that strategy for erstwhile Republicans is that, while the Clinton-Obama establishment controls the national and state Democratic Party machinery, the young activists, who have been flocking to the Democrats since Trump's election, are overwhelmingly in the opposing camp of the democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders. And they now have a national organization with 400 state and local chapters, Our Revolution, that is already wracking up election victories and beginning to take over some state party organizations. The corporate money will continue to flow into establishment coffers, but the energy, ideas, and grassroots enthusiasm in the party are with the Sanderistas.

The only effective political answer to our version of the National Front is a party of the progressive, populist left. The reason is that a critical part of Trump's base consists in older white workers. He won 40 percent of the votes of union members nationally. Under Clinton and later Obama, the Democratic Party abandoned its New Deal working class base in order to court the affluent professional middle class of the cities and wealthy suburbs. Only a Sanders-style politics can win back the substantial number of white workers who did not vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in 2016, a large majority when we include those who did not vote at all. Whether or not our version of the National Front survives will be decided by the side that prevails in the battle for control of the Democratic Party.

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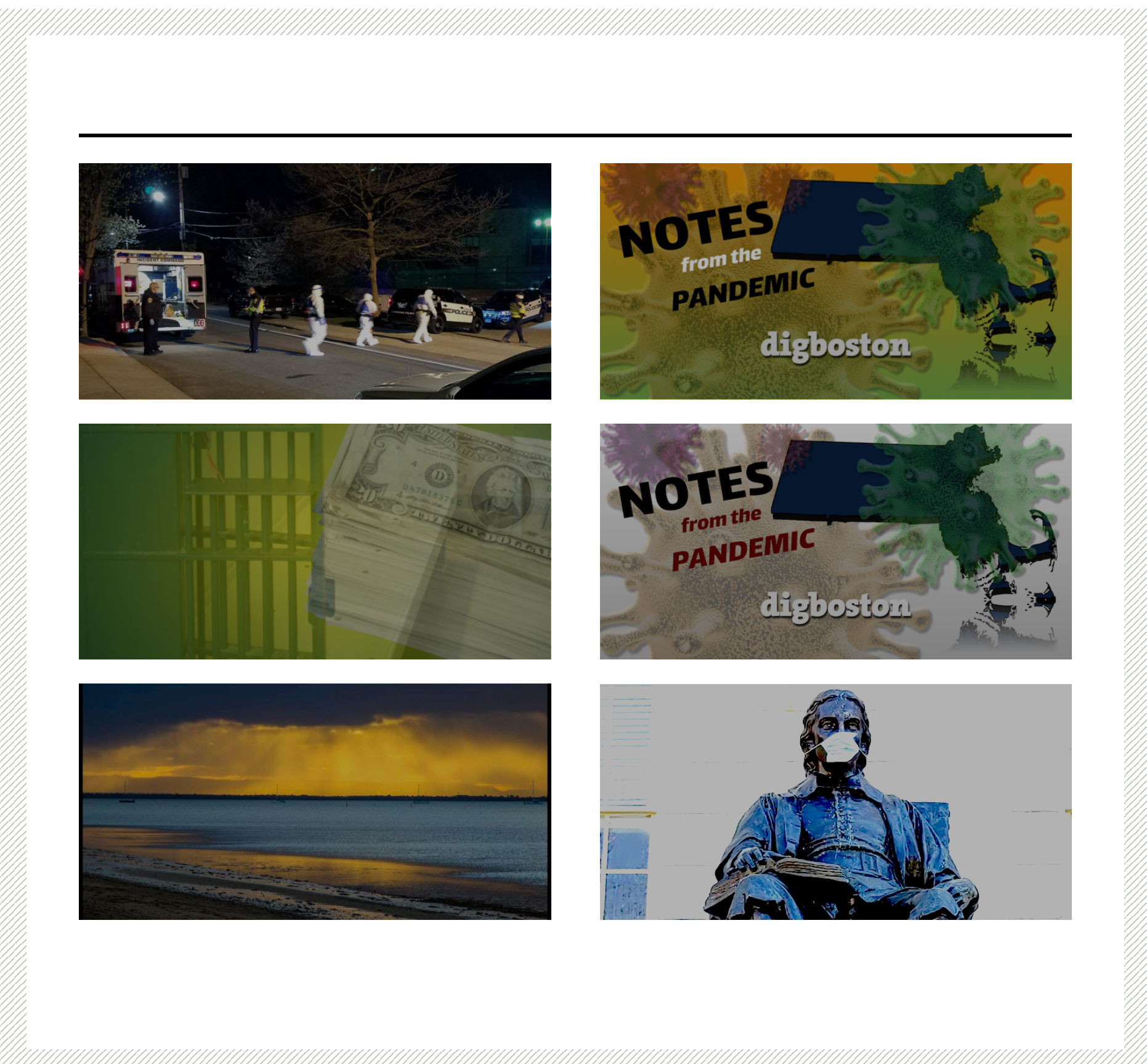
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