

A Carney Kid and the Con Man (20 January 2025)

Until this morning, I'd never heard or seen more than quick clips of Trump live. At first I was, as usual, sort of appalled at the rounds of applause from the assembled audiences for the so-obviously self-congratulatory rhetoric and empty promises -- maybe a little more dismayed than usual because, though the cheering was appropriate enough in the Capital One arena, it felt out of place in the Capitol Rotunda, a structure that even for this cynical old man continues to hold some aura of patriotic awe.

But then, remembering how I felt on visiting the Capitol as a kid with my mother long before I got involved in environmental politics, I also remembered a few years earlier when I was lucky enough to spend a couple of years working in carnivals where my dad owned some games and rides.

As an apprentice carney, one of the first things I was taught was how to work a crowd, one of the main lessons of which also came in handy a few years later when I was working in door-to-door sales to help put myself through college, namely: people like to be conned. Not everyone, and not always, but when done the right way, whether they're country hicks or city hipsters, people like to get into the game.

I found a similar version of that old carney and huckster truth in my last years of college hanging out with the theater majors while courting my first wife, a talented actress: the age-old commedia and vaudeville rule, Give the people hoke.

Trump, as everyone knows, however much some like to tell themselves otherwise, is a con man. A grifter. His pitch -- phoney smile, know-it-all braggart attitude, puffed-up product descriptions, over-the-top promises and hand-in-your-pocket (or panties) hug -- is as obvious as that of any carney, vaudeville showman or snakeoil salesman come-on. As American midway as salted mine shares, Brooklyn Bridge stocks and pie-in-the-sky tv-evangelism.

Step right up, folks. The Used-car Salesman, Bonzo Cowboy and Foot-in-mouth Clown were nothing in comparison. This way to the shitshow main attraction. Slapstick with a vengeance. Laugh your heart out.