



First Friday News & Views

Monthly Newsletter of the *First Friday Breakfast Club, Inc.*



December 2020

Volume 25

Issue 12

The next meeting
is Friday,
December 4,
7:00 a.m.



December Meeting
Location:

ZOOM!



December Speaker:

Romen
Borsellino

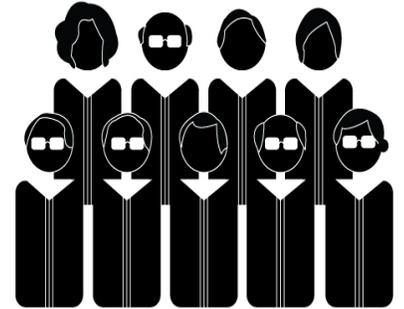


FFBC Website
ffbciowa.org



Supreme Court Packing and Unpacking

by Jonathan Wilson



The United States Constitution establishes the Supreme Court, but does not dictate the number of justices. That number is determined by the Congress and has fluctuated over the course of the Court's history. It's been six, ten, seven, five, and nine. It has been nine since the Judiciary Act of 1869.

I think that "Supreme Court packing" really doesn't have much to do with the *number* of justices but has everything to do with efforts to load the Court up with justices that are or are perceived to be aligned with a particular ideology. It's not an exact science, since justices who are confirmed to this lifetime appointment occasionally make decisions that don't track exactly with their perceived ideology at the time of appointment. Exact science or not, it is believed that, over time, the perceived ideology will be evident in decisions made by the Court, and that motivates the packing effort. Anyone who's paying attention is aware of the ideological leanings of the current members of the Court. The majority is perceived generally to be conservative.

Packing the Court *ideologically* is the relevant definition of the term. Without any change in the *number* of justices, there has already been a lot of Court packing going on. Here's how.



It used to be that confirmation by the Senate required at least sixty votes – a filibuster proof majority. The right to filibuster meant that nominees perceived to be too far to the political left or right couldn't get confirmed, so more centrist nominees were more likely to be nominated and confirmed. Mitch McConnell, with a Republican majority in the Senate, changed the rules and eliminated the right to filibuster Supreme Court nominee confirmations. After changing the rules, only 51 Senators could confirm a nominee. That was the only way he was able to achieve confirmation of justices Gorsuch and Kavanaugh who are perceived to be far right of center and aligned ideologically with Republicans. Court packing, pure and simple.

But there's more. During President Obama's term in office, he nominated D.C. Circuit Judge Merrick Garland, a highly regarded, centrist judge. McConnell, in league with Iowa Senator Charles Grassley, refused for eighteen MONTHS even to give Judge Garland a hearing, let alone a vote on the floor of the Senate. Court packing, pure and simple. This was supposedly justified because there was an up-coming presidential election and McConnell, Grassley, Graham, and other Republicans disingenuously insisted on a new rule that there should be no nominee considered toward the end of a president's term in office.

[continued on page 2]

["Supreme Court" continued from page 1]

That Court packing effort came at a price. It left the Court with eight justices for eight MONTHS. The justices could deadlock 4-4 on whatever case was being considered. Many people are unaware that an evenly divided Supreme Court cannot overrule a lower court decision; overruling an erroneous lower court decision requires a majority of justices. That left the Court helpless to resolve differences among the Circuit Courts' decisions. Eight MONTHS with a significantly weakened Supreme Court was the price that McConnell and Grassley were willing to pay in order the pack the Court, pure and simple. And shameful.

But there's more. Upon the death of Justice Ginsburg and when a presidential election was already underway, McConnell, in league with his Republican Senate majority, hypocritically changed the rules again and expedited the consideration of the president's nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett, a capable jurist, but definitely perceived to be ideologically aligned with the far right politically. Court packing, pure and simple.

In the face of the potential of Biden being elected president and Democrats gaining the majority in both the House and Senate, the prospect exists that Congress could legislate a larger *number* of justices in order to achieve a better ideological balance that has been thrown out of kilter by McConnell's attempts to politicize the Court. That prospect has Republicans crying foul and accusing those who would favor an increased number of justices of favoring Court packing.

One argument has been that, if the Democrats were to increase the number of justices, it would open the door for a future Republican majority to increase the number further, and so forth. Not a valid concern. There is nothing sacred about the number nine. Circuit Courts operate with more than nine. The Eighth Circuit, for example, has eleven active and multiple senior judges. Procedurally, appeals to a Circuit Court are initially decided by a randomly assigned panel of three judges. Litigants have no way of knowing which three will hear an appeal. It depoliticizes the process. There's no reason that legislation increasing the number of Supreme Court justices could not also change the appellate procedure to operate the same way that Circuit Courts do successfully. Overnight, the Supreme Court would be depoliticized and, frankly, that needs to happen.

Increasing the *number* of Supreme Court justices and changing the appellate procedure would immediately "unpack" the Court politically.



Thanks to **Byron Huff** for introducing our November speaker, **Jane Clementi**. Thanks to **David Cotton** and **Ryan Weidner** for their work as our technology gurus. Thanks to **Nicholas Williams** for managing our website. Thanks to **Joe Raetz** for keeping up-to-date the FFBC Resources page on the website. Thanks to **Wade Petersen** for his work as our newsletter editor. *Thanks to all our contributors to the newsletter!*



A special thank-you to those FFBC members and friends who have chosen to designate FFBC through the **Donor Direct** program of **United Way**. The contributions through United Way are tax deductible. Those who have chosen this means of supporting FFBC have gone to the trouble of completing their United Way campaign worksheet by designating FFBC as the beneficiary of their generosity. FFBC is an eligible recipient of such funding designations.



United Way



Thanks also to all those **Amazon shoppers** who designate FFBC as the beneficiary when shopping **smile.amazon.com**. Doing your Amazon shopping using smile.amazon.com means that a small contribution to FFBC will be made with every purchase. Proverbial, found money.

Our fundraising efforts are ongoing to fund our scholarship program. To date we have raised over **\$400,000** for scholarships that are awarded to Iowa high school seniors who have done remarkable, courageous things to reduce homophobia and teach about LGBTQ issues in their schools and communities. Please consider a contribution on-line or by sending a check.

The next copy deadline for the FFBC newsletter will be **December 14, 2020**. If you have something on your mind, put it on paper and get it to me by the copy deadline. It'll be interesting, good therapy, or both.

Consider a tax-deductible contribution to the FFBC scholarship fund, or a tax-exempt testamentary gift, or both. Our first legacy gift to the FFBC scholarship program came from **Cliff Paulsen** who passed away last year, to the tune of over **\$67,000!** Contact Jonathan Wilson for details.





Fascism Averted, For Now

by John Schmacker



Fascism arrives gradually, and then all at once (to paraphrase Mark Twain about bankruptcy, an issue with which he had personal experience).

With this election, Donald Trump has brought us to the precipice of that “all at once” moment. A few executive orders here, minor rule changes there, replacing the competent with sycophants and truth with lies, and suddenly we risk being engulfed by a fascist regime.

The gradual part included starving our public education for several decades and co-opting religious fundamentalists to the cause. It included Ronald Reagan’s move to abolish the Fairness Doctrine, which allowed broadcasters to then lie, cheat, and steal on the public airwaves without risking loss of their broadcast licenses. It included Newt Gingrich’s “Contract on America,” which turned the Republican party into a combative monster that would stop at nothing to obtain and keep power, and will stop at nothing to deprive all others of power. It included a creeping authoritarianism inflicted by conservative politicians upon a lazy and inattentive electorate.

The “all at once” moment would have been a second term for Trump. If ever there was a person whom common decency would keep away from power, it was Donald Trump. And yet, 72 million Americans watched his incompetence, his narcissism, and self-dealing; they saw his four years of large-scale graft and petty grift. They watched him populate his swamp with sycophants and alienate our global allies. They saw him ignore the existential crises of climate change and economic inequality. They ignored the corruption of just about every grifter Trump appointed to his cabinet. They witnessed all that and still decided that four more years of Trump was a good idea. Some of us will never be able to understand that. I certainly don’t.

Joe Biden has been declared the winner in this election; everybody understands that except for Donald Trump himself. Even Rudy knows. Also, the Trumpian protestors, marching with their Trump flags, and even the Republican officeholders who play along with Trump for fear of alienating his base, know that Joe Biden has won. They just don’t like it. They are so far down the fascist rabbit hole, a place where rules don’t matter, that they believe that repeating a lie loudly enough, and often enough, will make it true.

This election shouldn’t even have been close. Not after caging children. Not after selling out our soldiers as “losers” and “suckers.” Not after 230,000 are dead from mismanagement of a pandemic. Not after four years of watching, played out in plain sight, Trump’s corruption, narcissism, self-dealing, and contempt for any American who disagreed with him. We watched him hollow out the departments of the executive branch and politicize the judiciary. He was poised to politicize the entire civil service. In the election’s aftermath, Trump has shown us his contempt for democracy and our constitutional values. Those were nothing when put up against the demands of his boundless ego. He did what he could to destroy Obama’s legacy, and now he works to delegitimize the Biden administration before it is even sworn in. He demands vote recounts, and with every lawsuit, we get to see him lose again. There is some poetry to that, I suppose.

The majority of white Americans did their damndest to reelect Trump. And yet, this was the first election to be won by America’s minority populations. Black America has, once again, saved White America from its worst impulses. The party of White grievance has, for the time being, been tamped down.

But our problems are bigger than Donald Trump. Nobody expects him to disappear or go quietly into the night. We will continue to hear him rant from his encampment at Mar-A-Loco. If he manages to stay alive for another four years, despite his health and habits, he may very well run for a second term. It worked for Grover Cleveland. Our bigger problem is those 72 million Americans. They are not going away, and neither is the hate-spewing right-wing media that comforts them for profit.

Trump has unwittingly exposed much that is wrong with our society: our rapacious capitalist economy, the fragility of our democratic institutions, the cruelty of our healthcare system, and the damage that portends incompetent governance. After Trump, and thanks to Trump, we can understand that we are not, in fact, all in this together.

America is not at all united, *e pluribus unum* notwithstanding. We live in two countries. In one, people are willing to grapple with white supremacy, racism, and bigotry. We acknowledge that women have a right to bodily autonomy, that every American has a right to vote and the right to health care and the right to a fair living wage. To love who they love. We understand that this is a country of abundance and that the only reason economic disparity exists is because of a continued government refusal to tax the wealthy proportionally.

The other United States is committed to defending white supremacy and patriarchy at all costs. Its citizens are the people who believe in QAnon conspiracy theories, or that Trump was anointed by God. They take Trump’s misinformation as gospel. They see America as a country of scarcity, where there will never be enough of anything to go around, so it is every man and woman for themselves, and screw you. These are the people we must reach, ones who are living the wrong gospel.

The message of this election is not that Trump lost and Democrats won. It’s that a weak and untalented politician lost, while the rest of his party has entrenched its power over every other branch of government. This is a perfect setup for a talented right-wing populist to sweep into office in 2024. And make no mistake: They’re all thinking about it. Even Donald, Jr. – especially Donald, Jr. It’s not clear just what the rest of us can do about that. Meanwhile, the stage is set for four more years of Republican obstruction, led by the maleficent Mitch McConnell. Is this a great country, or what?

A Mother's Mission

by Bruce Carr



November Speaker



Our guest speaker on Friday morning, November 6, 2020, was Jane Clementi, co-founder of the Tyler Clementi Foundation, a nationwide organization that combats anti-LGBTQ discrimination and bullying. Over ZOOM, Jane gave us a smart and appealing account of the Foundation's decade of programs dedicated to helping people and institutions fight the prejudice and ignorance that negatively impacts LGBTQ+ children like hers every day.

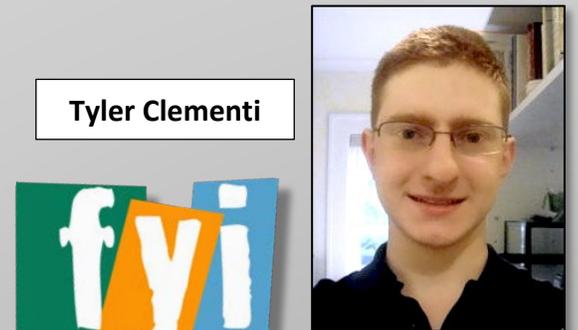
Most of us will have heard the tragic story of the Clementis' youngest son, Tyler. As a new freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey in the fall of 2010, Tyler one night asked his roommate for some privacy because he had a date. Without Tyler's knowledge, the roommate secretly pointed his computer's camera at Tyler's bed, left the room, and invited other students online to watch Tyler's encounter with another man. Many fellow students contributed to this intended humiliation as bystanders, by not interrupting or reporting what was happening to Tyler – who of course quickly learned that he had become a topic of ridicule in his new college environment. He also found out that his roommate was planning a second attempt to broadcast from the webcam. Several days later, feeling alone and without any help or supportive resources, Tyler Clementi ended his life, driving the 40 miles north to the George Washington Bridge in Manhattan and jumping off. He was eighteen years old.

Jane told us that her son's story puts a human face on the harmful effects of cyberbullying on both victims and bystanders and has inspired tens of thousands of youth and adults around the world to become what the Foundation calls Upstanders. Today, she said, Tyler's memory lives on thanks to a growing number of Upstanders with a shared commitment to stand up to bullying, to offer support to those targeted, and to treat every individual with dignity and respect. Upstanders display kindness and respect regardless of a person's age, race, nationality, faith, gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural identity, or any other real or perceived difference. The Foundation's large and detailed Website <tylerclementi.org> includes an interesting Pledge with points detailing how a "bystander" can become an "upstander." [see page 5]

Jane was fulsome in her praise and thanks to people and agencies (like the Trevor Project) who have joined with her campaign, mentioning especially Stephen Schwartz's recent cantata "Tyler's Suite" – which (she was not aware until one of us told her) had in fact been sung right here by the DMGMC under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Gruber in March of 2018. The Q&A session also provided member Wade Petersen the opportunity to mention DMGMC's newly published "Out In The Schools" online curriculum of information and local resources for LGBTQ education. *If you click on the Speakers tab at our Web site, <ffbc Iowa.org>, you can hear a complete audio recording of Jane Clementi's remarks, and all of the Q&A as well.*



November Speaker: Jane Clementi



Tyler Clementi



A native of New Jersey, a registered nurse, and parent of three sons (two of them gay), Jane Clementi co-founded the Tyler Clementi Foundation alongside her husband Joe because she wanted to make sure that our society understand the consequences of discrimination and bullying, as she learned all too personally through the loss of their youngest son. Tireless in her search for financial and volunteer partners – which now include among others AT&T, Barilla, Estee Lauder, Google, Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, Morgan Stanley, the Imperial Court of New York, the Human Rights Campaign, and social-resource agencies like the Trevor Project, the National Suicide Prevention Center, The JED Foundation, Champions Against Bullying, the NoMeanGirls Campaign, and the Anti-Defamation League -- Jane speaks passionately to parents and community leaders about the need to not merely "accept" or "tolerate" children who come out as LGBTQ, but to embrace them. Jane has spoken before the U.S. Congressional HELP Committee, the National Cathedral, and numerous other colleges, universities, high schools, workplaces, and faith communities. One of the Foundation's most recent projects has been their "True Faith Doesn't Bully" project, which includes a letter-writing campaign to educate pastors of the Southern Baptist Church to the pain and harm of teaching young people that they are broken, less than, or separated from God, because of who God created them to be or who God created them to love.

Jane Clementi can be reached professionally at (646) 598-8204 and <tylerclementi.org>.

Upstander Pledge

I pledge to be an Upstander:

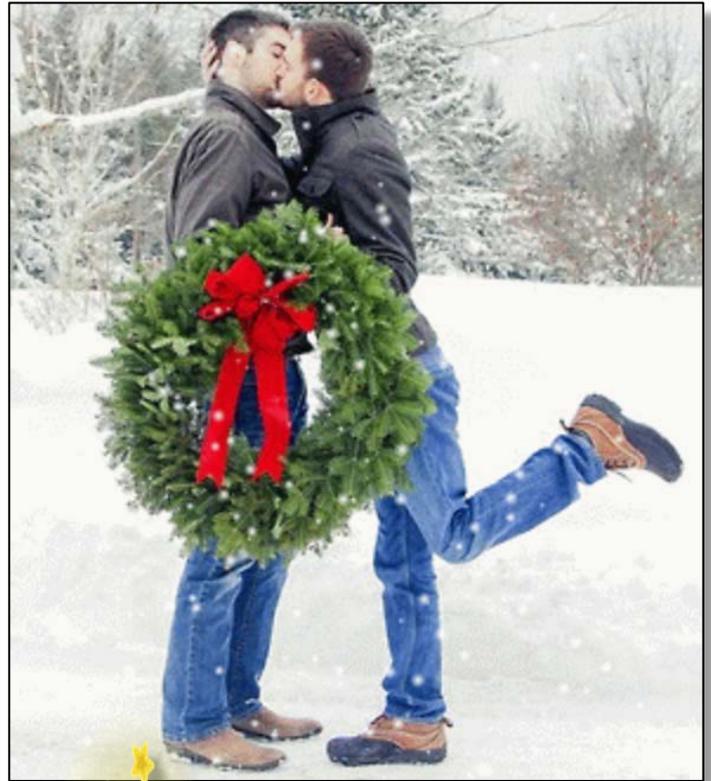
- I will stand up to bullying whether I'm at school, at home, at work, in my house of worship; whether I am speaking in the digital cyber world or out in the real world with friends, family, colleagues or teammates.
- I will work to make others feel safe and included by treating them with kindness, respect, and compassion.
- I will not use insulting or demeaning language, slurs, gestures, facial expressions, or jokes about anyone's sexuality, size, gender, race, any kind of disability, religion, class, politics, or other differences, in person or while using technology.
- If I realize I have hurt someone I will apologize.
- I will remain vigilant and not be a passive audience or "bystander" to abusive actions or words.

If I see or hear behavior that perpetuates prejudice:

- I will speak up! I will let others know that bullying, cruelty, and prejudice are abusive and not acceptable.
- If I do not feel safe or if my intervention does not change the poor behaviors, I will tell a trusted adult or person of authority.
- I will reach out to someone I know who has been the target of abusive actions or words and let this person know that this is not okay with me and ask how I can help.

If I learn in person or online that someone is feeling seriously depressed or potentially suicidal:

- I will reach out and tell this person, "Your life has value and is important, no matter how you feel at the moment, and no matter what others say or think."
- I will strongly encourage this person to get professional help.



January Virtual Meeting

There will be a virtual meeting using ZOOM in January. The announcement with the Zoom login information will be circulated on-line. Make sure we have your current email address so you don't miss out on future announcements. You can contact David Cotton (Davidcotton@me.com) for assistance figuring out how to participate if you need that personal assistance.



What I Learned from the Last Four Years

By Jordan Duesenberg



In 2016 I didn't even bother watching the news coverage regarding the election. I figured Hilary Clinton was obviously going to be president and Donald Trump didn't stand a chance in hell. I watched a movie instead, and when the movie finished and I looked at my phone, I couldn't believe my eyes when it was announced that Trump had won. I stared blankly at my phone for a good hour or two, numb and terrified what the next four years were going to hold.

I also remember the first article I wrote for this newsletter after Trump was announced president. I was optimistic about what we, as a community, could do to fight back at the Trump administration and his followers, inspired by Queer activists from yesteryear. Of course, I underestimated just how taxing the next four years would be -- the countless outrages, the countless protests. I also work in finance (I'm sure you're sick to death of me mentioning this) so I also work closely with and for many Trump supporters (as many of my clients are Republicans), or at least Republicans who put up with Trump because they dislike Democrats and liberal policies. It was incredibly tiring and confusing at times. When you have clients for whose lives you know the ins and the outs, for whom you know their trials and tribulations, eventually you'll know their political views. Even though I had to stay quiet about my own views, I could see where they were coming from. I could shift from seeing a MAGA hat and equating them with Neo Nazis to suddenly thinking liberals were overreacting at times about whatever newest scandal popped up (and boy were there many).

Of course this last year as we've seen the Trump administration grossly mishandle everything from COVID-19, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, and pretty much everything else under the sun, any confusion I may have experienced in the past was completely obliterated. I couldn't see any reason for my indifference, which I recognize was a privilege I had experienced in the first place. At about this time, I also recognized a shift in Trump supporters. As the election approached, Trump supporters became more vocal and angrier than before. I'd walk outside to take my dog on a walk and the police would block off traffic (the same police who, I'd like to add, did not provide the same respect for Black Lives Matter protestors) and a 30-minute Trump parade would roll through downtown where I live. What I saw at these parades was disgusting: "All Lives Matter" and "Trump 2020" flags jointly adorned on massive trucks and SUVs, and the supporters driving while simultaneously hurling insults at those walking by. In one vehicle the children in the back were flicking protesters off that were holding up signs of opposition. The people in the parade either laughed or had eyes filled with anger. This wasn't about showing their support for Trump; this was about invoking negative reactions from anyone who dared view things differently.



When it was announced that Biden had won, another Trump parade occurred. The same as the one before. It was clear to me that even though "we" had won, Trump and his ideologies were not going to go away so easily. His supporters were also likely going to have a presence over the next four years, and someone, if not Trump, was going to take advantage of their anger. I was further reassured by this because just this past Saturday (November 14) while entering Target in West Des Moines, I suddenly heard nothing but incessant honking. I turned around to look at Mills Civic Parkway, and the same large trucks and SUVs adorning their Trump flags were driving by, letting everyone know they weren't going away.

While I'm truly relieved that Biden is going to be our 46th president, I don't have that huge release I imagined I'd eventually have when all this came to an end back in 2016 when I first found out Trump was president. Now is not the time to go back to checking out and not caring about politics. Trump, his ideologies, and even more so his supporters, are going to haunt us these next four years, and it's our job to stay vigilant to make sure we never have to experience another 2016-2020 ever again.



**First Friday Breakfast Club
wishes you peace, love, and joy
during this holiday season!**

**MERRY
CHRISTMAS**

December Speaker



Romen Borsellino



Romen is a film producer,
and the son of Reka Basu and the late Rob Borsellino.

You won't want to miss and, since the meeting is virtual, there's no reason why you should not be able to participate.

You are also encouraged to invite some of your friends to attend virtually – simply share the participation instructions!

oneiowa

One Iowa's work is centered around advancing equality and inclusiveness through education, workplace culture, and increasing access to quality healthcare for LGBTQ Iowans across our state. Here's what we have to amplify that mission in the next few weeks:

**LGBTQ Workplace Culture Summit
Thursday, December 3rd & 10th 2-4 p.m.**

**You can register for the event at:
oneiowa.org/event/wpcs2020**

We have wrapped up our first two sessions of the LGBTQ Workplace Culture Summit and are looking forward to the remaining two in December! The virtual events will provide resources for employers and employees to cultivate safe and inclusive workplaces. Attendees will learn more about the LGBTQ community, how to make more inclusive policies, and retain LGBTQ talent.

If you don't already, make sure to follow us on social media to stay up to date on what we're doing at One Iowa and discover ways you can get involved in the fight for LGBTQ equality in Iowa.

Follow us: [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#).

Litmus Test for Fake News

by Jonathan Wilson

Over the last four years, we have heard lots about supposedly "fake news." It's become a standard allegation made by #45 whenever information was reported/published that reflected upon him unfavorably. The Russians helping influence the 2016 presidential election -- fake news. When #45 disparages members of the military -- fake news. When #45 declined to visit a cemetery in France that is home to Americans who died in World War II, despite other world leaders making that trip the same day -- fake news. Unfavorable polling numbers -- fake news. The arrival of a viral pandemic from wherever -- fake news.

One reason our society has become so polarized is that, while we have myriad *sources* of news available, the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine that required balance in order to maintain broadcast licensure allowed us -- all of us -- to tune in to broadcasters who catered to our prejudices and pre-conceived notions, and played to our fears for profit. That has been a formula for creating a culture of "us" versus "them," creating two realities that have existed side-by-side.

It is inevitable that any information source, purporting to report/publish facts, can and will make mistakes. It is a huge challenge -- sometimes an impossible challenge -- to do the research of news reports in order to confirm accuracy or determine inaccuracy. Some have the time and talent to do that research -- to fact check, but most of us don't. We are left to weigh the totality of news reports on any particular subject, from all available sources, and give credence to news accounts that are consistent across those multiple sources.

[continued on page 8]

COVID Calamity

by Supervisor Matt McCoy, Polk County, 5th District



As Iowans prepare for the holidays, we can't help but feel a sense of anxiety, a sense that things just aren't right given Iowa's ranking as third in the nation for COVID-19 positivity rates per capita. As of this writing on November 16, 95 of Iowa's 99 counties have a positivity rate in excess of 15% on a 14-day average, and nearly 1,400 Iowans are currently hospitalized with the virus.

We had an opportunity to change the trajectory of COVID-19 when numbers of cases fell over the summer and got to manageable levels. Unfortunately, rather than leaning in to strategies that were successful, our governor reopened bars while Iowa continued to surge and experienced unprecedented caseloads each day breaking the record for the day before. Polk County's epidemiologist has laid out a grave forecast if we fail to take corrective actions to mitigate the spread immediately. We could potentially see as many as 10,000 cases per day in Iowa and continue to see positivity rates four times the CDC's standard for uncontrolled community spread. Leadership matters in times of crisis for our state and our nation. During the month of October, Iowans had a front row seat to watch Donald Trump, Mike Pence, Kim Reynolds, and Joni Ernst host super spreader events across our state.

At the time this was occurring, COVID-19 was running rampant through the White House, and Iowans were seeing record hospitalizations. Governor Reynolds did not hold a single press conference for the four weeks leading up to the election. It occurs to me that if more than 10,000 people gathered in Des Moines for the Trump super spreader rally, that event alone had the potential to impact tens of thousands of Iowans with COVID-19.

As we move to small family gatherings for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's and other holidays, we should think about how to celebrate. We should protect our family members by not gathering outside of our immediate families. Grandma and grandpa shouldn't come for turkey this year; however, we should host as many family members as we want virtually by Zoom, FaceTime, or other methods. It's so important that we still maintain social contact with family and loved ones because 2020 has been the most difficult year for many. I hope you all follow these guidelines and stay safe these next few months and consider this a gift to the medical community who are being overwhelmed and hospital and clinics caring for sick COVID-19 and flu patients this winter season.

["Litmus Test for Fake News" continued from page 7]

Beyond that consistency, however, there is also an easy litmus test that we -- that anyone -- can apply in order to sort out what is legitimate and true and what is, in fact, fake. Here's the litmus test: ask yourself whether or not the source of news that I am considering is a news source that broadcasts or publishes corrections when mistakes are made. I'll admit that sometimes those corrections and/or retractions are not broadcast or published as prominently as the erroneous headline. Usually they're not. But a legitimate news source does broadcast or publish corrections or retractions. Only legitimate news sources do that. Truly fake news sources don't broadcast or publish corrections or acknowledge mistakes; they more often double down on the false news accounts.



The departure of #45 from the White House won't stop folks in the public arena from asserting that news they consider unfavorable is "fake." Few among us will have the time, energy, and research skills necessary to fact check everything we hear or read. That's why the litmus test becomes so important. It's a shorthand for identifying truly fake news accounts. It's a litmus test that even the most unsophisticated among us can apply. It doesn't discount completely the news we've heard or read, but it gives birth to a healthy skepticism. If the news source we're considering doesn't have a reputation for self-correction when a mistake is made, we should be suspicious.

That touch of suspicion just might mean that we won't drink the proverbial "Kool-Aid" when it's offered.

Possessor

A Movie Review by Mark Turnage

The trope of being possessed typically resides in the realm of paranormal horror: a person being controlled against their will by a force hostile to those around them, such as a demon or a ghost. With *Possessor*, Brandon Cronenberg, son of director David Cronenberg (*The Fly*, *A History of Violence*) blends sci-fi and corporate saboteurs into this trope, and while its sleek and clever components shock and horrify, the plot's gradual loss of a clear-cut protagonist (however unlikeable) dilutes the strength of its conclusion.

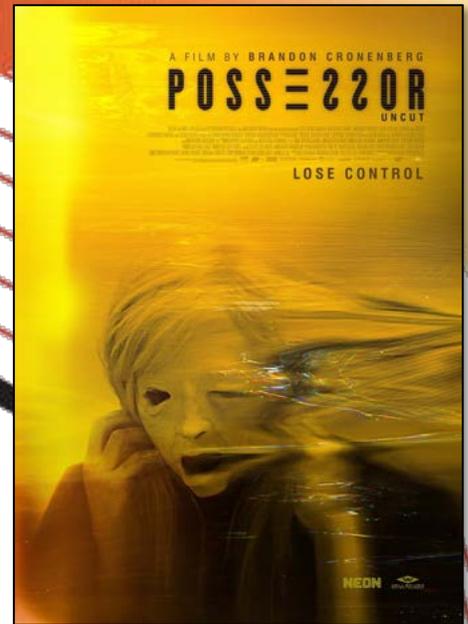
Possessor opens with a woman named Holly (a compelling Gabrielle Graham) steeling herself for an emotionally difficult task. We see her attend a party in uniform, then suddenly grab a knife and murder a prominent lawyer in front of everyone in attendance. Before she can will herself to commit suicide, she is killed by the arriving police. The scene cuts to Tasya Vos (Andrea Riseborough) removing a complex headset in a medical lab—she's a contract killer and corporate saboteur who was "possessing" Holly to commit the assassination through an implanted neural network. This is hardly anything new for Vos—she's a veteran and one of the top clandestine employees of the tech firm where she works. But she's feeling burnt out, has difficulty readjusting to home life with her husband and son, and exhibits an uncomfortable mixture of psychological side effects, including invasive memories of the dead people she's "piloted" to do her company's dirty work. Of course, her company has one more big job before Vos can retire: possess Colin Tate (Christopher Abbott), the ex-addict boyfriend of a rival tech company heiress, and assassinate her and her father to make room for a hostile takeover Vos' company can manipulate. Once Tate is kidnapped and implanted, though, Vos finds her host has much stronger willpower than she anticipated, her cover begins to slip, and assassin and target start to fight internally for bodily control.

Although drugs and addiction are small physical presences in the film, the contrast between Tate and Vos is clear: Tate is in recovery from drugs, and Vos is addicted to her work. Vos is ignorant of the destruction she wreaks on her family (and herself), and her possession of Tate could be seen as an analogue for destructive relapse. Tate's inner circle, including his girlfriend, are all depicted as using and pressuring Tate to hook them up with more drugs. When Tate is not possessed by Vos, he is either passively turning down drugs or distraught at the actions Vos has made him do under her influence. Ultimately, the emotional chaos of both characters "losing control" warps both Tate and Vos into monstrous versions of themselves completely lacking empathy. They may not be fueled by drugs, but the level of social devastation is the same.

But in a story without heroes, who do we root for? According to Cronenberg's tone in *Possessor*, maybe no one deserves our sympathies—which is an unsatisfying take for this reviewer because in a film so dark and aggressive, it's tonally predictable. Even Macbeth had Macduff—a counterbalance of character that illustrated how far the main characters have fallen from grace. Without that counterbalance, the genuinely surprising events in the film's climax seem hollow. Is it a tragedy when bad things happen to bad people? I'd argue not.

However, the trappings of *Possessor* are spectacular set and camera work: washed out colorsapes reminiscent of *Blade Runner 2049*, slow-spiraling cityscapes to illustrate an internal world thrown off-balance, and trippy, sharply angled close-ups. It's a Cronenberg film, so be warned—it doesn't shy away from gore, either, but it's not a central focus. Abbott's characterization of both Vos and Tate are different enough to determine who's in control, but Riseborough's performance is more one-note, and I would have liked to see more from a lead actress.

Possessor is a dark, heavy sci-fi mind-trip that succeeds in ingenuity but less so in plot, but I'm excited to see what the younger Cronenberg has in store for future filmmaking. See it if you're a fan of his father's work and don't mind gore with your science fiction.



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Dutch Girl: Audrey Hepburn And World War II

A Book Review by
Steve Person



I have been a fan of Audrey Hepburn since I was thirteen years old when I asked my parents if I may walk by myself to the Varsity Theater to see *Breakfast at Tiffany's*—on a school night yet! Over the years, I have read many articles and biographies of this phenomenon of the silver screen, but until the publication of *Dutch Girl* her early years during World War II were treated, at best, to what she guardedly told to her biographers and interviewers. She had reason to be careful about what she revealed. In the Foreword to the book, Audrey's second son, Luca Dotti, said, "I really didn't know Audrey Hepburn, but I know more now, and I miss her more than ever."

Audrey Kathleen van Heemstra Hepburn-Ruston was born May 4, 1929, to Ella, Baroness van Heemstra, and her second husband, Englishman Joseph (Hepburn) Ruston. Ruston claimed to be a descendant of James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell and second husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. The parents came under the influence of Sir Oswald Mosley, the British supporter of Hitler and Nazism. Ella actually met Hitler in 1935 because of her status as a baroness and attended the 1935 Nuremburg Rally with the famous and notorious Mitford Sisters, one of whom, Diana, ended up marrying Mosley.

Ella and Joseph enrolled little Audrey in a boarding school in the English county of Kent. Even though not born in England, Audrey was English from birth because her father was a British subject. The young Audrey began ballet instruction in England and loved dancing. When war broke out in 1939, Ella, now divorced from Ruston, brought her daughter to Arnhem, The Netherlands, thinking her family would be safer there than if Audrey were to stay in England. The Netherlands was neutral initially, and Ella foolishly felt Hitler would never invade The Netherlands since that country did not participate in the First World War. Bad decision on her part!

Ella's prominence as a baroness allowed her to enter into the cultured society of Arnhem, and Audrey then became a pupil in the ballet school there. When Hitler invaded Holland in 1940 on his way to the conquests of Belgium and France, Ella was dumbstruck. The Netherlands fell in five days despite the heroics of the Dutch military with the port of Rotterdam completely destroyed by the Luftwaffe. As Audrey continued her dance instruction, Arnhem became increasingly "Natzified," and Ella and her family of Audrey and her two half brothers relocated to the nearby town of Velp. Even here, Audrey continued with her dancing, commuting to Arnhem and the dancing school.

Until 1942, most of Holland escaped the worst of the war after the invasion, but by 1943, privations became the order of the day. The winter of 1944-45 not only brought on the worst weather in decades, people continued to starve and resorted to grinding up tulip bulbs to make broth. The Germans executed her great uncle Otto for not complying with Nazi laws. Audrey, herself, was rounded up on the streets of Velp and shoved into a truck to be deported elsewhere. She managed to escape.

Obviously, Ella's pro-Nazi leanings evaporated by 1942, but even after the war's end, the Dutch government detained her for questioning. Eventually she was allowed to join Audrey in London where her daughter took ballet lessons and won small parts in West End shows.

With Audrey's stardom affirmed for her Oscar-winning performance in 1953's *Roman Holiday*, the bright young star preferred to keep her parents' Nazi connections as benign as possible. She mostly succeeded, but this fascinating book brings truth to the forefront. Audrey, herself, was never pro-German, but she was forced to dance for German soldiers when she was a student.

This fascinating book is a treasure of life in The Netherlands and the horrors of World War II.