

QUEBEC'S "TÉLÉVISION FANTASTIQUE":
HORROR AND NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN THE TELEVISION SERIES *GRANDE OURSE*

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In the winter of 2004, the French-language service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation—Radio Canada—enjoyed a respectable success with the ten-episode miniseries, *Grande Ourse* (2003, Patrice Sauvé). Every week for two months, approximately one million French Canadians gathered before their television sets to follow the weird adventures of Louis-Bernard Lapointe (Marc Messier), a jaded, alcoholic, heart-broken media personality whose career is in decline and who is unceremoniously dispatched from Montreal to do a story on odd goings-on in the isolated village of Grande Ourse (Cousineau 2004a). Given that the Francophone population of Canada is approximately seven million, the one million figure translates into 15% of the entire pool of potential spectators. Keeping everything in proportion, this means that *Grande Ourse* was significantly more popular with its intended audience than a big Hollywood hit like *American Idol* (2002-2008, Fox Television), also broadcast in the winter of 2004, which never reached more than 10% of the American population.¹ But what makes *Grande Ourse* interesting to me is not simply that it appealed to a large segment of the French-speaking population of Canada. Rather, what fascinates me is that this very popular show was also the first television series produced in Quebec to include strong elements of horror and the supernatural.

¹ For example, in the first week of February 2004, *American Idol* was watched by approximately 29 million Americans, which is just under 10% of the US population. For ratings numbers for early February 2004 see "CBS Scores big with Super Bowl, 'Survivor' Debut", *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2004, p. C07.

The Emergence of Horror in Quebec Cinema and Television

Primetime television and the feature film industry in Francophone Canada are very closely related, with writers, directors and actors moving effortlessly between the two media. This might be common in small nations, where limited cultural resources must be optimised. For instance, Marc Messier, who plays the leading role in *Grande Ourse*, belongs to a small pool of actors who constantly appear on the big screen and on stage as well as on television, and as such make up a diminutive but vibrant star system in the province. Among other shared characteristics, Quebec primetime television and cinema have long been dominated by realism and *auteurism*, and have steered clear of the “fantastique” (Véronneau 2006: 109). The ascendancy of realism and *auteurism* is obviously linked to the fact that these practices are well suited to shoestring-budget productions typical of minor cinemas. But beyond strictly financial reasons, the dominance of realism and *auteurism* in Quebec also results, at least in part, from a historical coincidence. The emergence in the late 1950s/early 1960s of new documentary practices in Quebec, influenced by various international trends especially the French Nouvelle Vague, coincided with the crystallisation of national sentiment in the province. After years of stagnation under the ultra-conservative regime of Maurice Duplessis’s Union Nationale party, Quebec culture enjoyed unprecedented effervescence during what became known as the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. The type of cinema that happened to be in vogue at the time became closely associated with new Québécois nationalism, and remained the trademark of French Canadian cinema for years.

It is only over the last decade or so that there has been a significant diversification in the types of films and television series produced in the province. Crime thrillers, historical epics, and even science fiction, all relatively rare in the canon up to recently, have now become more common. The genre that has most radically increased in recent years is horror. To my knowledge, prior to the beginning of the 21st century, there had been no television series in Quebec that could qualify as “horror” and only one French-language feature-length horror film produced in French Canada: Jean Beaudin’s *Le Diable est parmi nous* from 1972. Beaudin waited exactly thirty years before directing a second horror film, *Le Collectionneur* (2002), a psycho-killer tale of terror based on a novel by Chrystine Brouillet. *Le Collectionneur* is among a growing number of

Quebec films whose main purpose is to scare and disturb their audience.² The emergence of horror, a genre that, unlike comedy, has a relatively limited target audience (some people will never go see a horror film!), is the best sign of a national cinema that has achieved great confidence in its own popularity. The production of speciality genres like horror suggests that Quebec cinema and television believe in their ability to survive the fragmentation of spectatorship.

Recent Quebec horror movies like *Le Collectionneur*, *Sur le seuil* (2003, Éric Tessier) and *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés* (2005, Robin Aubert) clearly borrow conventions from Hollywood, but also retain distinctive characteristics that make them undeniably Québécois. The same can be said of television. *Grand Ourse* and its sequel *L'Héritière de Grande Ourse* (2005, Patrice Sauvé) recycle conventions from other traditions while managing to offer an innovative take on distinct cultural issues. The main cultural issue that Quebec horror explores on both the big screen and the small screen is the dichotomy between urban modernity and rural traditionalism in French Canada. In *Grande Ourse*, as in most of the other horror works produced recently, the central character is an urbanite who is thrown in the middle of an uncanny rural environment, where strange country folk behave in ways that defy the logic of the modern city dweller.

The Urban and the Rural

From the outset, it must be said that the divide between the city and the countryside is more complex than a mere dichotomy between Montreal and rural regions. Suburbia represents a third space that is arguably as different from the big city as it is from rural areas. However, the complex relationship among these three spaces has generally been simplified in Quebec cinema and television, as films and TV shows have tended to assign specific and rather static meanings to each of these three spaces. Urban and rural areas work as a dyad generally embodying two opposite versions of Quebec culture. Suburbia, for its part, stands alone as the incarnation of an Americanised middle-class middle-ground typified by characterless houses on interchangeable streets, peopled by comfortably mediocre nobodies wallowing in their own *kétainerie* (tackiness). Films

² I insist on the horror films' purpose to scare the audience to differentiate them from parodies, such as *Karmina* (1996, Gabriel Pelletier), which use the conventions of horror only to ridicule the genre. Parodies are quite different from horror films that include elements of humour. Many horror films have comedic

ranging from Pierre Falardeau's *Elvis Gratton, le King des Kings* (1985) to Robert Morin's *Que dieu bénisse l'Amérique* (2006) present suburbia as a space of artifice where the adornments of the American way of life hide the vacuous meaninglessness of middle-class existence.

The two other spaces, the urban and the rural, tend to work in heterotopic relation with one other. Heterotopia, says Foucault, is neither a utopia nor a dystopia, for the heterotopia does exist at least at some level: "The heterotopia is simultaneously a mythic and a real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault 1986: 23). Foucault uses the mirror as an example of heterotopia, that is, a real space upon which we project an image of ourselves that is reversed. The analogy of the mirror is relevant here because the heterotopic correlation between the city and the countryside within the cinematic context is very much based on a visual distinction. As sociologist Bruno Jean writes in his book *Territoires d'avenir: Pour une sociologie de la ruralité* (1997), while there may or may not be drastic social or cultural differences between urbanites and country folk, the specific morphology of the rural landscape remains strikingly distinct, visually, from the cityscape (Jean 1997: 17). Unlike suburbia, which looks at once like and unlike the city, the rural offers a visually recognisable heterotopia that can be used to comment on the city.

For decades, the rural space was constructed audio-visually, in films like Gilles Groulx's 1964 *Le Chat dans le sac* and Gilles Carle's 1972 *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, as well as in television series like *Terre Humaine* (1978-1984, Radio-Canada) and *Le Temps d'une paix* (1980-1986, Radio-Canada), as the repository of the fundamental values of Quebec culture; where the real Quebec is situated. When the alienated urbanite goes back to the country it is to rediscover the values—embodied visually in trees and lakes and snow—that she has lost somewhere along the way through overexposure to the busy streets, noisy bars, inhuman office towers and foreign influences of the city. Quebec's only French language horror film of the 1970s conveys a similar message, albeit through the excessive mode typical of the genre. In this film, mysterious exotic *objets d'art* are instrumental in turning a group of Montrealers into devil worshippers. While the film ends on the pessimistic note that the devil walks "among us" (hence the title, *Le Diable est parmi nous*) in the streets of the big city, the film offers a brief escape from this threat when, half way through the narrative, the main character (Daniel Pilon) and his girlfriend (Louise Marleau) drive away from the urban nightmare to a small village where they can enjoy, however briefly, a return to pastoral peacefulness.

This conception of a peaceful rural space as the locus of authentic "French-Canadianness", a sort of nationalist refuge from the cosmopolitan corruption of the metropolis, has not only appeared in Quebec film and television. In very concrete ways, the rural has been constructed as a solid cultural anchor, secured deep under the surface, in staunch resistance against the waves of fickle foreign influences that threaten old stock or "pure laine" Québécois identity. In his book *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (1988) Richard Handler discusses various programmes devised by the Quebec government in the 1960s and 1970s to promote an appreciation of French Canadian heritage or *patrimoine*. One such programme was *Vacances-Familles* initiated in 1971, which arranged for urbanites to spend time with rural families.

Organizations like *Vacances-Familles* direct city dwellers to country folk, middle-class white-collar families to small farmers, intellectuals to "natural" Québécois. It caters to those in search of their roots, or those who want their children to experience country life as they imagine their grandparents had experienced it. (Handler 1971: 52)

Relating his own experiences with *Vacances-Familles*, Handler adds that the host families were

certainly aware that tourists interpret their lives as folkloric manifestations of true Québécois culture, yet they did not generally rearrange their routines in order to demonstrate their authenticity or to treat [tourists] to the folklore [they] had come to see. (Handler 1971: 53)

Such initiatives were thus clearly aimed at situating the Québécois national identity within the context of a rural folk culture that was deemed to have resisted the gravitational pole of the cosmopolitan urban centre.

This belief in the rural as the site of true Québécois identity still exists today and can be seen in more recent films, such as Denys Arcand's *L'Âge des ténèbres* (2007), and television series like *Nos étés* (2005-2008, TVA). In these and other contemporary works, the rural continues to be constructed as either a salutary alternative to the chaos and meaninglessness of the modern city, or as historical evidence of an ontological identity for the *Québécois de souche* (this term, like the more colloquial *Québécois pure laine*, is often used to describe Quebecers whose Canadian roots date back to the 17th century). But while art cinema and quality television preserve the aesthetically-pleasing, impressionistic picture of the countryside as the cradle of French Canadian culture, in recent horror films and TV shows, the rural as a peaceful space of nationalist rejuvenation

has been completely transformed into a *locus horribilis*. In horror, the picturesque local colours disappear behind Satanism, witchcraft and gruesome murders. The depiction of rural areas as terrifying places is certainly not new in horror works from Hollywood and elsewhere—one only needs to think of *The Wicker Man* (1973, Robin Hardy) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, Tobe Hooper). But it is new in Quebec cinema. While still not as extreme as films such as France's *Frontière(s)* (2007, Xavier Gens) or Australia's *Storm Warning* (2007, Jamie Blanks) which utterly vilify rural populations, Quebec horror nevertheless shows an unprecedented demonisation of the French Canadian countryside.

Demonisation of the Rural

The emergence of this negative image of the rural in contemporary horror films is no coincidence. The last decade has seen a reconfiguration and fragmentation of the national identity, which has not yet become the dominant ethos but has found its way into the iconoclastic mode of horror. I would argue, indeed, that contemporary horror cinema and television offer a more accurate view of current problems in Quebec culture than their more “respectable” counterparts. A low genre, drenched in perverse sexuality, blood, gore and all sorts of deviant behaviours, horror is by definition outside the parameters of political correctness and as such can allow itself to speak truths that the well-meaning, mainstream middle-class might not want to hear. One of these truths is that Quebec's impression of itself as a homogeneous nation is on the verge of disintegration.

For the longest time, the urban-rural split was veiled by the myth of the “unified nation”, whereby all old-stock Québécois were deemed to be fundamentally similar, with the urbanites being somewhat more distanced from their true “rural” origins than country folk, having been corrupted by the city's foreign influences. In recent years, however, drastically divergent ideological positions between the city and the countryside have started to erode this idea of a homogeneous nation. Increasingly, the country is perceived by urbanites as conservative, insular and sometimes downright backward. The results of the March 2007 election in Quebec made manifest this cultural divide. The tremendous gains made by Mario Dumont's right-wing, anti-immigration Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) outside Montreal during that election exposed the dialectic between urban liberalism and rural conservatism. In 2006 a small village, Hérouxville, had proposed ultra-conservative bylaws meant to prohibit certain practices associated with Islamic fundamentalism. While most urban politicians criticised this proposal for its blatant racism, Dumont

spoke out in favour of these new rules. The remarkable surge of popularity of ADQ in rural areas in the following months attested that Dumont's assertion of the need to defend Quebec's traditional values struck a chord with a large portion of the population outside the metropolis.³

A 2007 series of public consultations on "reasonable accommodations" for immigrants—known as the (Gérard) Bouchard / (Charles) Taylor Commission—further exposed the division between Montreal and the countryside. While in remote areas such as Saguenay prejudices against ethnic and religious minorities were expressed in no uncertain terms, in Montreal participants to various forums, especially young people, appeared to embrace the ideal of multicultural interaction (Chouinard 2007). The most notorious participant to the consultation was probably Saguenay's mayor Jacques Tremblay, who insisted that Quebec is first and foremost a Catholic nation and that French Canadians are entitled to impose their religious values on others. The response from many Montrealers was one of bewildered disbelief. Representative of this petrified astonishment at Tremblay's statements was an article by François Parenteau in the hip, urban weekly *Voir*. For Parenteau, Jacques Tremblay's presentation before the Bouchard-Taylor Commission was comparable to a "Taliban speech, spoken by a hillbilly priest who wants to drag us back to a pre-Quiet Revolution time of benedictions at the lumberjack camp".⁴ For Parenteau and other urbanites, such as well-known intellectual Denise Bombardier (2007), the Bouchard-Taylor Commission was a useful exercise to reveal the "raw truth" of Quebec culture in all its ugliness, rage and hatred.

The Jacques Tremblay intervention and other such memorable moments from the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, along with the 2007 provincial election, gave the vivid impression of a cleavage between Montreal's lay multiculturalism and the conservatism and religiosity of remote areas. In the report they published in the spring of 2008, Bouchard and Taylor take great pains to downplay popular perceptions of an urban-rural split and present a conciliatory perspective that seeks to assuage

³ See for instance: Hélène Baril, "Élections 2007: Le Choix des Québécois – Montréal sous le choc"; Mario Girard, "Élections 2007: Le Choix des Québécois – Circonscriptions montréalaises, les adéquistes visent la prochaine fois", *La Presse* 27 March 2007, p. A34; Ariane Lacoursière, "Mario Dumont comprend Hérouxville", *La Presse*, February 4, 2007: A8.

⁴ This is a rough translation of Parenteau's original sentence: "C'est un discours de taliban! Ce bleuët curé voudrait nous ramener avant la révolution tranquille, avec les processions de la Fête-Dieu et les bénédictions de chantiers". See Parenteau (2007).

feelings of division and fragmentation within the province.⁵ But there remains a wide-spread impression that there is an ideological clash between Montreal and the rest of Quebec. I would argue that the urbanites' current perception of the countryside as a site of radical religious conservatism has found a most striking expression in recent Quebec horror television and films. Within the horror idiom of *Grande Ourse* and other similar works, this takes the form of a binary between savage, pagan rituals and urban rationalism. It is no coincidence that in their television end-of-year revue, *Bye Bye 2007* (aired on Radio-Canada, 31 December 2007), the urban comic group Rock-et-Belles-Oreilles (RBO) ridiculed the conservatism of rural people through a spoof of *The Amityville Horror* (1979 Stuart Rosenberg, remade in 2005, Andrew Douglas) entitled *Hérouxville*. In this short skit shot in black-and-white and using all the conventions of the horror film, RBO present the inhabitants of Héroux(ty)ville as ignorant, inbred, paranoid hillbillies who are terrified by a couple of friendly Muslims, but refuse to acknowledge their own racism. The point of the skit is more to make spectators laugh than to formulate a profound commentary on the state of Quebec culture. But the fact that RBO chose to ridicule rural racism through a parody of horror attests to the urban population's growing suspicion of country folk.

Of Inbred Hillbillies and Evil Witches

The image of country folk as inbred hillbillies is given an intriguing spin in the film *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés*, as it is through technology that narcissistic self-reproduction is achieved. In this narrative, an urban tabloid journalist, Flavien (François Chénier), goes to the village of Saints-Martyrs to report on strange disappearances. As his investigation unfolds, Flavien has disturbing visions filled with images of evil twins, a ghostly bride, a bloody groom and a sinister man in a sombre suit. It turns out that a mad scientist named Dr. Faustin (Hubert Loiselle) is responsible for the

⁵ Bouchard and Taylor rely on statistics and rigorous studies to counteract the wide-spread *impression* that there is a radical dichotomy between Montreal and the rural areas. While the *facts* probably support Bouchard and Taylor's assertion that the differences between the urban centre and the regions are less significant than people *think*, what matters to me are precisely such *perceptions*, for it is perceptions, rather than rigorous statistics, that appear on the screens of Quebec. See especially Bouchard and Taylor (2008: 204-205). Incidentally, journalist Richard Martineau in his editorial "Une question de perception" for the populist *Journal de Montréal* (23 May 2008) criticised Bouchard and Taylor for dismissing people's seemingly misguided perceptions.

disappearances. He kidnapped and killed people to create babies from the life juices of the dead. The twist is that Faustin used his methods to create male babies in his own image and female ones in the image of his mother. The crux of the drama results from one of his own clones marrying one of his mother's clones. The idea that his creatures' sexual relation amounted to his having intercourse with his own mother pushed him over the edge and made him kill his most beautiful creation—the bride that haunts Flavien's nightmares. When Flavien realises that he too is one of Faustin's creatures he kills his "father" to put an end to the cycle of narcissistic, incestuous self-reproduction.

The significance of this plot as a representation of how Quebec spectators perceive themselves emerges from the overlap of urban technology and a stereotypically rural proclivity for incest. Much of Quebec literature, especially by women, has focused on "hallucinatory tale[s] of jealousy, hatred, mutilation and incest set in [...] rural Quebec", to paraphrase Margaret Atwood's description of Marie-Claire Blais's debut novel, *La Belle Bête* (1959) (Atwood 2000: 260). The new spin on traditional gothic stories of incest set in backward French Canada is that nowadays new technologies have found their way to the deepest recess of rural Quebec but only to reassert traditional practices.

In his study on rurality, Bruno Jean argues that new technologies tend to be acquired at a quicker rate in Quebec's rural areas than in the cities. But according to Bruno's analysis, the phenomenon does not merely reflect the rural population's desire to emulate urbanites. Rather, Bruno argues that the specific rural utilisation of technologies allow people living away from large centres to "mark their difference and their identity" (Jean 1997: 19). Rural populations consciously relate to technology in a way that asserts a distinctive rapport with the urban creation. *Saints-Martyrs* thus mirrors a particular tendency of rural Quebec cultures that appropriate modern technologies to affirm traditional identities. Of course, the technologies that Jean talks about have nothing to do with evil baby-making machines. But within the excessive mode of horror, reality must be exaggerated and distorted to the point of monstrosity in order to convey in manifest terms the implicit potential for a dangerous use of modern technology as a tool of radical conservatism.

The technology that Jean is most interested in is television. He argues that when people from Gaspésie or other remote regions watch shows produced in Montreal, they do not fashion themselves after what they see, but rather apprehend the audiovisual material they witness as a spectacle of otherness (Jean 1997: 19). Interestingly, television as a medium of otherness is at the centre of *Grande Ourse*.

Grande Ourse's narrative is more intricate than that of *Saints-Martyrs*—and in fact certain critics have praised Quebec television spectators for their willingness to meet the challenge presented by the show's convoluted plot (Cousineau 2004b). Of course, the ten one-hour episodes of the series allow for more protagonists and subplots than the 90-minute format of the feature film. For instance, the series spends much time following the peripheral adventures of goofy TV repairmen, who come up with ridiculous schemes to keep the population of Grande Ourse entertained when local broadcast signals mysteriously go awry. But beyond the sheer multitude of parallel plotlines, the core narrative of the series is also more complex, in and of itself, than that of *Saints-Martyrs*. Most importantly, *Grande Ourse* does not entirely explain away the mystery through the figure of the mad scientist. The series begins with the arrival of Louis-Bernard Lapointe in Grande Ourse. Shortly after disembarking in the forlorn mining town, Lapointe meets an enigmatic woman, a local witch called Blanche Von Trieck (Élise Guilbault), who informs him that he is the "messenger" who heralds her death and the beginning of the next generation of witches—the 13th generation of evil witches.

Through the rest of the series, Lapointe investigates the weird appearances of individual villagers on the local television station, as they publicly reveal deeply hidden secrets to their stunned friends and neighbours. For most of the series, we are led to believe that the bizarre televised confessions are generated by Blanche-the-Witch, who uses her supernatural powers to project images of the villagers' tormented souls on to TV screens. As such, the series initially appears to replicate horror films like *Poltergeist* (1982, Tobe Hooper), in which television as a technological medium is transformed into a spiritualist medium. But Lapointe's investigation does not support this hypothesis. As the series reaches its climax we are nowhere closer to an understanding of the witch and her followers than in the first episode. Rather the series' "big reveal" has to do with a classified research project and a female scientist, named Catherine (Anne Dorval), with whom Lapointe is in love. As *Grande Ourse* comes to a close, we discover that Catherine has been using awkwardly antiquated neurological technology to expose, through TV pyrotechnics like fast editing and static effects, the hypocrisy of villagers who use and abuse one another. As such, the series gives radicalised form to Bruno's concept of the rural appropriation of television, which shows the true identity of the villagers through spectacle.

But at the same time as a scientific explanation is provided, the witchcraft narrative is neither negated nor resolved. Although she dies early in the series, Blanche-the-Witch continues to appear throughout the

narrative. Most significantly, she appears as a bear—thus revealing the true meaning of the “big bear” of the title—at the end of the show when her followers ritualistically burn her body. Furthermore, while most strange occurrences are explained in the end, the series both opens and concludes on a gathering of creepy children who, we are led to believe, are the new generation of witches, but whose narrative function is never fully accounted for. The mad-scientist plotline therefore appears as a superficial distraction that veils the much more mysterious and unknowable story of the witches of Grande Ourse. This mystery remains ultimately unresolved at the end of the series. What matters to me in this complicated storyline is that the series depicts the rural population as one that might appear to be modern in its use of technology, but which remains fundamentally anchored in traditional beliefs and primitive practices epitomised by witchcraft and other pagan rituals. It is important to note that witchcraft itself is not necessarily meant to be interpreted negatively. In fact, Blanche might very well be the most positive character of the series. But witchcraft still functions as a symptom of a rural population whose traditions and rituals are *drastically different* from urban culture. It is this vivid impression of a profound difference between the city and the countryside that emerges from *Grande Ourse* and that suggests a significant transformation in Quebec's self image as a nation.

For the sequel of *Grande Ourse*, entitled *L'Héritière de Grande Ourse*, the action unfolding five years after the first series is set in a suburb rather than in an isolated village. While much of the mixture of witchcraft and technology remains central, the narrative becomes less compelling. In fact, weekly viewership declined considerably in the course of the sequel's broadcast. The previous success of *Grande Ourse* attracted 1.1 million people for the first episode of the sequel. But by the final episode, ten weeks later, viewership had dropped by 400,000 (Dumas 2005). While there are probably many reasons for the mitigated success of *L'Héritière*, I would argue that locating the action in the “third space” of suburbia diminished the horror effect of the series and, in the process, made it more a parody than a serious “série fantastique”. While there is nothing wrong with generic hybridity, and the original series already included much humour, the tacky suburban setting emptied the series of its dark, menacing elements and transformed it into a light-hearted mockery of itself. This, I would argue, was a central factor for decreased interest on the part of spectators. As mentioned earlier, suburbia lends itself less to gothic tales of terror than to ironic or parodic reflections on a made-in-Quebec American dream. The rural, on the other hand, is the perfect space to generate horrifying depictions of the French Canadian nightmare,

namely, the ungodly return of repressed superstitions and perverse religiosity in reaction against the normalisation of the multi-ethnic character of the province's main urban centre.

The recent proliferation of horror in Quebec television and cinema coincides with an increased impression amongst the population that the nation is divided between urban cosmopolitan modernity and rural nationalist traditionalism. I would certainly not try to make the universal claim that there always exists a correlation between the disintegration of nationalist homogeneity and the rise of horror. But in the particular circumstances of Quebec in the early 21st century, horror seems to have emerged as an ideal mode to give form to this sense of fracture, for it is a genre that incarnates rupture and dissonance in its very content, form and audience appeal. Quebec's "télévision fantastique" thus speaks of a unique conjuncture in French Canadian culture when a screeching tear in the fabric of the nation finds expression in a popular genre that is wholly dedicated to the radical dismemberment of the unified body. Horror will thrive in Quebec as long as the current situation persists; it will fade away only when, or if, the nation awakes from its collective nightmare.

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