

NEWS

OPINION



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These Aren't the 'Zucks' you're Looking For - Move Along

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Politics
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Who would have thought the 'Jedi Mind Trick' performed by Obi-Wan Ben Kenobi in 'Star Wars' (Episode IV); that time when Ben and Luke and C-3PO and R2-D2 got stopped by a squad of Imperial Stormtroopers in search of the droids carrying detailed plans of the Death Star; would have been copied by none other than the commander of what could well pass for this galaxy's own 'Death Star': Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of FACEBOOK.

The 'facebook' of old now preferring to brand themselves in capital letters, or "all caps" as it's known in the brand graphics trade, to show how really, really, really BIG and IMPORTANT they are. As in: "Don't even think of messing with us!"

Both events more than enough to cause a disturbance in 'The Force' if you're 'woke' to such things.

But as in so many things that might turn out to be earth shattering, Zuck's rendition of the 'Jedi Mind Trick' began innocently enough. On this particular occasion: the carefully stage-managed interview Zuck recently made on 'CBS This Morning', here in the US, with media personality and preeminent morning-show TV anchor, Gayle King. The whole charade made even more must-see TV as Zuck also had on stage with him his 'adorable' wife, Priscilla Chan, as well as their two 'adorable' little girls.

The interview filmed in Zuck and Priscilla's very own 'adorable' home in Silicon Valley. His 'adorable', yet not too overly grand house, but a leisurely two mile drive away from FACEBOOK global operations home base: 1 Hacker Way (think about that for a moment) or MPK20 as it's known by all who serve within the Imperium.

Why, you may well ask, would such a notoriously "shy" and private individual as Mark Zuckerberg open himself up to the public gaze? It's not as if, as with several previous occasions, he'd been subpoenaed to appear before the US Congress or the UK Parliament to answer questions about the misuse and/or misdeeds of the world's largest social media platform. So why on earth would he also subject his wife and kids to such a public spectacle? And why now?' Why, indeed.

It is, after all, a well-trodden PR path by politicians and celebrities alike, both here and in the UK, in any and all matters where public opinion can hopefully be swayed to benefit the about to be injured or subpoenaed party. The clever ploy or "cunning plan" always entered into with the very best of hopes, even if it's not always guaranteed to produce the best of results. (And, yes, dear Alice, Prince Andrew's recent dreadfully ill-conceived TV interview springs all too readily to mind.)

The one, all-important caveat for the inexperienced or unwary: that if things have already gone pear-shaped or are about to get really, really, really ugly, it's high time to produce the smiling wife and kids. Not

forgetting to also include some 'everyday' window dressing, such as the loving, happy family baking bread or an apple pie or cookies or whatever. As, with minor variations, this much lauded PR wheeze has worked a treat for almost every politician since the beginning of the political 'TV-age', post the Nixon-Kennedy TV debates, and even more so, since the rise and rise of the multi-screen, social media age.

And thus did the true politician emerge from his previously self-imposed chrysalis in all his new 'everyday' finery on 'CBS This Morning' early morning prime time. Early, enough, certainly, for it to be rescreened on FACEBOOK Live throughout the day and, again, on the evening news shows. And more than enough screen time to show the world that Mr Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of FACEBOOK and global philanthropist to as yet unnamed millions is not at all the needy, vindictive nerd as portrayed by Jesse Eisenberg in Aaron Sorkin's really rather brilliant film 'The Social Contract'. Perish the thought. No. Our Zuck's really just a normal, 'everyday' guy, at heart; who just happens to be the 4th richest man on the planet.

But, hey, who's counting? It's time for Zuck to: Avoid. Evade. Attenuate. Obfuscate. Deflect. Not to even think of answering any searching questions; but to answer, instead, with platitudes that speak of noble things and irrefutable truths. To pledge to be committed to and to champion; and, indeed, if pressed further to be actively for that which no one could possibly be against: Freedom. The flag. Families. Mom. Apple Pie. Babies. The Muppets. Whatever idealistic notions and/or 'adorable' beliefs will keep the ever-rapacious crocodile jaws of the world's media and/or the world's many governments, most especially the current US House of Representatives, from fully clamping down on you and/or your business. The time-honoured tactic used by 'everyday' politicians the world over.

Zuck's real reason in agreeing to do the 'CBS This Morning' television special: the opportunity for the newly perceived 'everyday' Zuck to insist;

hand on heart, voice cracking; that, in a democracy, it's important for the public to be able to "make their own judgments."

"I don't think that a private company should be censoring politicians or news. I think people should be able to judge for themselves the character of politicians."

Zuck's soaring rhetoric flying in the face of critics who contend that if social media platforms don't ban or fact-check political ads, politicians can and will intentionally spread falsehoods, even outright lies, so as to affect elections in their favour.

FACEBOOK's decision not to remove political ads that contain knowingly false and erroneous information widely criticized. And giving rise to all but universal assertions that the company's only real desire was to make ever more profit, even if at the expense of democracy, itself.

An accusation Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, made all the more credible when, citing concerns that the impact of misinformation on the all too delicate institution of democracy could be all too dire, he announced that all political ads would be banned from its social media platform in the run up to the coming US 2020 elections. Shortly, after which, both Google and YouTube, reportedly, removed political ads for US President Donald Trump for "spreading false information."

All of which of course meant that FACEBOOK became subject to even greater critical scrutiny from both politicians and the public alike. Yet the company still resolutely refused all requests to remove any and all dubious and/or questionable political ads. Which in turn led to two hundred or so of FACEBOOK's own employees signing a petition that argued that: "Free speech and political speech don't deserve the same protections."

But all, seemingly, to little or no avail, as Zuck and FACEBOOK, resolutely, continued to ignore their own people, as well as just about everyone else.

Then, last month, all but out of the blue, came British actor and comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's blistering speech at an Anti-Defamation League event, in New York, when he slammed tech companies as twenty-first century propaganda machines; specifically calling Zuckerberg and FACEBOOK to account. (An event I wrote about a few weeks back).

"Had Facebook been around in the 1930s," Baron Cohen said, "it would have allowed Hitler to post 30-second ads on his 'solution' to the 'Jewish problem.'"

Heavy stuff: even if all too manifestly true. Little wonder then that The Zuck had to act, precipitously, to do something, anything, in an effort to protect his company's name and his own. Even go on TV with his 'adorable' family.

Yet 'everyday' Zuck will defend to the hilt any invasion into his own privacy. If, as, and when someone or something appears to threaten close to home. Case in point. When one of his neighbours submitted plans to build a house that would overlook his own, Zuck fought long and hard to have it rejected, then bought every neighbouring property surrounding his house, so as to leave him and his wife and kids to live and be free from prying eyes.

The 'wellbeing' of one's family and oneself: all very commendable goals. If only Zuck's social conscience was as advanced or his emotional intelligence as evolved, so it also embraced the wellbeing of his fellow US citizens and the wellbeing of the billion or so FACEBOOK subscribers around the world.

The Zuck we've all been looking for since day one; indeed, hoping, one day, to see become as flesh and blood: with beating heart and conscience intact. The Zuck who might one day become truly 'woke' and 'do the right thing'.

Oh, Frack and Frag! Kriff and Krong! Did I read it all wrong? Was it Zuck, all along, who was playing the 'Jedi Mind Trick' on all of us? Dissembling. Deflecting. Disarming. Deceiving. As has long been his wont.

Mark Zuckerberg as Obi-Wan Ben Kenobi. His wife cast as 'Skywalker'; his kids as 'R2-D2' and 'C-3PO'; all of them sitting beside him in the land speeder. The rest of us reduced to admiring, covetous Jawas. Who'd have thunk it? As they most certainly weren't the Zucks we were looking for.

Foolish me. Foolish us.

But then as old Ben Kenobi reputedly once said: "Who's the more foolish: The fool or the fools who follow him?"

Ouch. That hurts. Move along.

All of which is to say that if, as it now appears, dear Sacha Baron Cohen's urgent plea for Mark Zuckerberg and FACEBOOK to come to their collective senses and do the right thing to enable open, free, and fair elections; without interference from shadowy micro-targeted social media posts by unseen enemies of the people, both foreign and domestic; has already been relegated to yesterday's news and destined to live on by virtue of 'word of mouth'; perhaps, the only way forward for any of us, now, is to echo the urgent plea of the People's Princess Leia:

"Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're our only hope."

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