

America Plays "Cheat the Prophet".

As I have watched the current USA presidential election campaign playing out, all the way from its first beginnings to its end that has surprised (for good or for ill) so many, I have known that there is one person who would not have been at all surprised either by the appearance of a Donald Trump on the American political scene, nor by the election of said Donald Trump.

I am referring to the English humourist, fantasist, novelist and journalist, G K Chesterton.

*And it is this passage, from the opening chapter of his 1904 novel "The Napoleon of Notting Hill", that has been niggling away at the back of my mind, throughout. I told myself that if Trump **was** elected, I would post it here. And he was, and so I am.*

"...The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up.

"And one of the games to which it is most attached, is called "Keep to-morrow dark", and which is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt), "Cheat the Prophet".

"The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation.

"The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely.

"They then go and do something else.

"That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun....

"For human beings, being childish, have the childish wilfulness, and the childish secrecy.

"And they never have from the beginning of the world done what the wise men have seen to be inevitable...

"But in the beginning of the twentieth century (*and we must add to that, now, "in the beginning also of the twenty-first century"* – CM) the game of Cheat the Prophet was made far more difficult than it had ever been before.

"The reason was, that there were so many prophets and so many prophecies , that it was difficult to elude all their ingenuities. When a man did something free and frantic and entirely his own, a horrible thought struck him afterwards: it might have been predicted. Whenever a duke climbed a lamp-post, when a dean got drunk, he could not be really happy, he could not be certain that he was not fulfilling some prophecy.

In the beginning of the twentieth century (*and it has only got worse since, at the beginning of the twenty-first* – CM) you could not see the ground for clever men.

"They were so common that a stupid man was quite exceptional, and when they found him, they followed him in crowds down the street, and treasured him up and gave him some high post in the State.

"And all these clever men were at work giving accounts of what would happen in the next age, all quite clear, all quite keen-sighted and ruthless, and all quite different.

"And it seemed that the good old game of hoodwinking your ancestors could not really be managed this time, because the ancestors neglected meat and sleep and practical politics, so that they might meditate day and night on what their descendants would be likely to do.

“But the way the prophets of the twentieth (*or, indeed, of the twenty-first* – CM) went to work was this. They took something or other that was certainly going on in their time, and then said that it would go on more and more until something extraordinary happened. And very often they added that in some odd place that extraordinary thing *had* happened, and that it showed the signs of the times...

“All these clever men were prophesying with every variety of ingenuity what would happen soon, and they all did it in the same way, by taking something they saw “going strong”, as the saying is, and carrying it as far as ever their imagination could stretch. This, they said, was the true and simple way of anticipating the future...

“Just as,” said Dr Pelkins, in a fine passage, – “Just as, when we see a pig in a litter larger than the other pigs, we know that by an unalterable law of the inscrutable it will some day be larger than an elephant, – just as we know, when we see weeds and dandelions growing more and more thickly in a garden, that they must, in spite of all our efforts, grow taller than the chimney-pots, and swallow the house from sight, so we know and reverently acknowledge, that when any power in human politics has shown for any period of time any considerable activity, it will go on until it reaches to the sky.”

‘And it did certainly appear that the prophets had put the people (engaged in the old game of Cheat the Prophet) in a quite unprecedented difficulty. It seemed really hard to do anything without fulfilling some of their prophecies.

“But there was, nevertheless, in the eyes of labourers in the streets, of peasants in the fields, of sailors and children, and especially women, a strange look that kept the wise men in a perfect fever of doubt.

“They could not fathom the motionless mirth in their eyes.

“They still had something up their sleeve; they were still playing the game of Cheat the Prophet...”.

That was Chesterton, in 1904. And if, as one may certainly hope, Trump undertakes the quite mild and measured steps he has mooted, for dealing with the global Jihad, then one can only say that indeed, in this latest American presidential election, a quite large number of perfectly ordinary Americans have – without even waiting for the current generation of gloomily or eagerly predicting clever men to die off, first – confounded expectations, defied Fate and Destiny and the oft-advised necessity of “being on the right side of History”, and played a truly magnificent game of “Cheat the Prophet”.