

# The Peanut Gallery Is a Blast!

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Auditorium of Loew's Theatre at Gates Avenue and Broadway, Brooklyn, N.Y. Thomas W. Lamb, architect/Unknown photographer/"Architecture and Building," Vol. 54, No. 9, Sept. 1922/Public Domain



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## *Commentary*

Technology has made it impossible to contain the news to once-per-day summaries. It has turned it into an unrelenting stream for the

whole public to watch on demand. This has put people like me in what I've been calling the peanut gallery.

We follow every appointment from rumor to reality and then devour praise and criticism as if every position and every appointee means the difference between the end of America and the beginning of a bright future.

That's how high the stakes are. Somehow the information flow has made us all more anxious, not less. Or perhaps just more aware of the anxiety we should have felt all along.



The phrase “peanut gallery” comes from Vaudeville theater in 19th-century America. These are the people with the cheapest seats in the house, way up high, and they would buy peanuts to eat during the action. It was known for rowdy behavior and constant criticism of what the players were doing on stage.

Eating peanuts is no longer the norm but the galleries still exist.

I've been in the peanut gallery many times in symphonic concerts and operas. It's so easy to criticize. They are taking the third movement too slowly. That soprano sounds tired. The trumpet player missed a note. The tenor is flat and not enunciating the consonants. The conductor is too performative and his trousers don't fit.

I've also been on stage, and know the feeling of the heat you feel from audience judgment. When the applause is merely polite, the result is psychologically devastating. At the same time, there is a sense you feel that if the critics could do it better, why don't they try their skills out on stage?

As a result, I've always resisted being too critical of the people who step up to the job and take the huge risk of performing on stage. Indeed, I find myself wincing at sports bars when the gathered fans boo the receiver for dropping the ball.

Always I think: Dude, you are some guy swilling a beer at a bar, whereas he is working his hiney off in a rough game currently showing on TV. Cut him some slack!

This is now where we all sit as we watch the presidential transition. The expectations for the incoming administration are unbearably high. Clean up the corruption! Make the country healthy! Bring back manufacturing! Give us our schools, lives, and incomes back! Such demands are a precise reflection of the depths of sadness and really despair the country reached over recent years.

Now there is a feeling of great relief in the country as if every dream can come true. There is a strange way in which this Trump landslide—and the apparent determination for change—came way too late in the trajectory of time. The movements that serve as the cultural bulwark for this opportunity have grown and grown and developed tremendous intellectual sophistication.

It's hard to imagine how the players on the stage can possibly live up to the billing!

It's like a tremendous promotion for a movie that starts many months before opening day. A really great ad campaign can be too good: raising audience hopes so high that they tip over toward anger once the actual movie arrives.

Is this where we are headed with POTUS 47? Quite possibly. The stated ambition of the incoming administration is like nothing else we have seen in our lifetimes. Please consider that even the most earnest, non-corrupt, hyper-competent, and super-dedicated reformers face a beast of such immense complexity and size that it is going to defy every attempt to change its ways.

And by the way, changing anything is extremely difficult. You know this if you have ever served on the board of your homeowners association.

I once consulted for a small and failing nonprofit that had a new board member who wanted to change the way the place was managed. He spent every day, gave vast amounts of money to become the chairman, upended employees, rewrote mission statements, forced new protocols, and hired new consultants to create new messaging. There were retraining sessions and retreats.

The change process took fully one year. Finally he was sure it was done, but he made one mistake. He left the actual source of the problem—the person with all the institutional knowledge—in a position of high authority. This happened because he seemed like the most competent person around. He was. He also happened to be the most corrupt and destructive but he hid it well. That person navigated through the upheaval and came out on the other side of it to eventually cause more wreckage than ever.

In the end, all the earnest efforts of my friend failed. The nonprofit is now more broken than ever.

Keep in mind that this was a small nonprofit about which no one cares. In fact, I've seen this a number of times in institutions. They are exceedingly difficult to change no matter the size.

If you want to understand the size and scale of the world's largest and most powerful government, you can give up now. It is beyond human comprehension. Not even the government itself knows how many agencies or employees it has. Every agency that is supposed to be tracking the number of agencies disagrees. Right now, we have the best estimates between 257 and 272.

As for laws, no one even knows how many federal felonies there are. Those who have tried to count them have given up after two years.

To get a sense of the sheer awesomeness of the thicket, I encourage you to read "[Over Ruled](#)" by Justice Neil Gorsuch. Even for someone who imagines myself to be aware of the scale, this book truly shocked me. It's terrifying to think through what it means for elected

politicians to make a difference. The entire system is structured to make this impossible!

The Department of Government Efficiency created by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy is enticing. Elon went into Twitter as CEO and owner and fired 4 out of 5 employees over two weeks. The heroism of such an effort and result is nearly without precedent. I cannot even think of any other example in the history of modern corporate takeovers. Meanwhile, he had every right to do that.

Think of this: It's not even clear that Trump can get his cabinet picks approved. And it is far from clear whether he or they will have any ability even to fire anyone from the civil service. Right now, without changes, they really do not. In the last term, Trump fired the head of the FBI and you would think it was the worst event in the history of the American government.

Meanwhile, the federal government employs some 2.2 million people to say nothing of the contractors. They sit there now with a deep conviction that it simply does not matter who was elected and what they promised. They have jobs for life and no one can change that no matter what they do.

So I would say to the peanut gallery, let's be realistic about this. What's been proposed and promised is very likely to be humanly impossible. I dare to suggest that we should learn to be happy with improvement or even find some joy in the stoppage of decline. That's the only way to get through this.

I'm not suggesting anyone compromise or overlook betrayal, but only absorb the core point. None of us are on stage. They are. We have the luxury of the critic. They must achieve the impossible. Perhaps good efforts are worthy of applause anyway, even perhaps a standing ovation.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

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