

Opinion: California needs a great villain

By Joe Mathews

It's hard to find a villain who can bring Californians together.

That's one reason why Charlie Manson's death produced so many media remembrances. Manson represented the time, a half-century ago, when Californians shared more experiences—even fear of the Manson family.



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Today, we're too polarized to agree on who is the bad guy. Academically, we prefer to blame wrongdoing on systems, not individuals. Culturally, we're so diverse that we don't share the same references—never mind the same enemies.

Which is too bad. Villains may be evildoers, but they can also be galvanizing, energizing societies to protect the innocent, defend democracy, or address wrongdoing. And villains allow us to recognize the evil within ourselves. "There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us," wrote Martin Luther King Jr. "When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

Traditional sources of villainy aren't producing the distinctive characters they once did. Mass murder, for

example, is now so routine that we've become desensitized to it. Is it just me, or do you find it hard to keep all the mass shootings and truck rampages straight?

The oversupply of villains is paralyzing. The mortgage mess and the never-ending fraud at Wells Fargo both involved so many thousands of low-level scammers and so many hundreds of higher-ups that it's hard to figure out who the biggest villain is, much less whom to prosecute.

California's power brokers of the past—from the lobbyist Artie Samish to Assembly Speaker Willie Brown—once played the villain with panache. But governance here has become so complicated that it's impossible to assign responsibility when things go bad.

And just when it appeared that Hollywood finally had given us a singular uber-villain with the revelations about Harvey Weinstein's predations, dozens of actresses came forward to tell us that such villains are as common as casting calls.

While we once could depend on the rich to live lives worthy of our contempt, today's Californians have come to treat the rich as saints—since, in this time of vast fortunes and a declining middle, our companies and our causes have come to depend on a few billionaires. It's worth noting that while California's Democratic politicians and labor union chiefs like to talk about their commitment to the poor, the person they seem to spend the most time thinking about is the billionaire political donor Tom Steyer.

Now at this point, I can hear 70-plus percent of Californians yelling at me: Haven't you forgotten Trump? I have not. And, yes, he's a bad guy, waging rhetorical and policy war against Californians. But he is an unsatisfying villain, for reasons both personal (his lies and offenses are too obvious and dumb to make him worthy of our opposition) and practical (we have to root for him not to start a nuclear war and kill us all).

No, if we're going to find a villain big and ambitious enough to fit California, we need to look in Silicon Valley, where the object of the game is not merely to dominate the world but to transform it. And if lives are disrupted in the process, so much the better.

When I asked people on a recent trip to the Bay Area if there was one figure whose villainy might be universally acknowledged, one name kept coming up: Peter Thiel.

The billionaire Silicon Valley investor in start-ups co-founded PayPal and was famously Facebook's first outside investor. These California companies have made him rich and famous. And how has he thanked us?

By attacking our institutions.

Thiel is a graduate of San Mateo High and Stanford who rails against government-backed schools and has encouraged people not to go to college. He's an immigrant who supported the anti-immigrant provocateur Ann Coulter and President Trump. While backing nationalist politicians, he bought himself citizenship in New Zealand.

Worse still, he has railed against democracy, called women's suffrage harmful to democracy, and argued that we should be ruled by our techie superiors. "The broader education of the body politic has become a fool's errand," he wrote.

This is monumentally villainous. A man who has the power and technology to reach deeply into our personal lives betrays utter contempt for most humans. Like so many villains, he's a false prophet, claiming to liberate people with technology while actually holding authoritarian views that would enslave us.

Thiel also writes that he "stands against ... the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual." The notion of eternal life for some is tyrannical, but also

useful. When it's so hard to find a durable villain, aren't we Californians lucky to have one who intends to live forever?

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