

"Drawing Larger Circles"
David R. Weissbard
All Souls UU Church
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THE READING

Trump Proves Hate & Violence Is Not the Fascist's Final, Last-Gasp Option: It's Their First

THOM HARTMANN

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[I have edited Hartmann's column for time, and I have followed the practice of many liberal commentators by replacing the last President's name with the letters TFG - "The Former Guy."]

On CNN [this week] TFG doubled down on his lies in support of the white supremacist haters convicted of violently killing one police officer and sending 140 others to the hospital on January 6th.

This shouldn't surprise us. He's . . . encouraging more hate crimes and violence against Americans whose skin isn't white, are queer, or simply support the basic values this nation has claimed and worked toward since its founding.

A new report from the Leadership Conference Education Fund documents how hate crimes have more than doubled in the United States since TFG entered politics in 2015. . . .

Hate and violence have become the main political tools used by today's Republican Party, which has reinvented itself in the mold of TFG and his political mentor and benefactor, the fascist leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin.

Recruitment, fundraising, and electoral victories all turn — for today's GOP — more on defining enemies and focusing hate and threats of violence at them, than on putting forth policy goals or a vision for America's future beyond simple "Christian" white male supremacy.

"Owning the libs" is the highest value in the Republican Party now, and its biggest stars are those willing to lay down the most outrageous lies about supposed evils perpetrated by Democrats like "abortion right up to the moment of birth" or calling gays "groomers." All to justify intimidation and threats of violence.

In the past two years more than 350 "anti-critical race theory" legislative proposals banning [inclusive] American History have been put forward in Republican-controlled states, with 33 passed into law. There is to be no discussion of the racial and gender violence that has echoed through years of conservative movements from the era of the Confederacy and the Klan to this day.

Just last year Republicans introduced over 315 anti-queer pieces of legislation, with 29 having passed into law. The violence that has characterized assaults against the LGBTQ community for centuries is essentially being ratified in law by the GOP. . . .

Today's Republican hero is an accused rapist who's ridiculed the disabled, told cops to beat up people, separated parents from their children at the border, and launched a violent coup attempt against America. His language is drenched in violence. . . .

As long as TFG — or someone who shares his fascistic worldview — is at the head of the Republican Party, this country will continue to be in crisis. And since TFG’s arrival on the scene, this cancer has spread.

There are now over 160 groups philosophically aligned with TFG’s worldview openly pushing to strip Civics, Sex Education, and American History out of our classrooms, many supported by fascist-leaning rightwing billionaires.

This is how fascism takes over nations.

School boards and election workers are under siege while naked expressions of white supremacy like the “Great Replacement Theory” have moved from Nazi sites on the dark web into mainstream venues including the Murdoch family’s Fox “News” . . .

The FBI began tracking hate crimes in 1991, although reporting by local police agencies is voluntary and [reporting] has seen a steady decline in participation since TFG’s entry into politics. Nonetheless, the FBI’s admittedly under-reported statistics showed that the month of November, 2016 — the month TFG was elected — “saw the highest number of hate crimes reported in more than a decade.” . . .

As we emerged from the pandemic, 2022 saw a 31 percent increase in overall reported hate crimes over 2020, the highest number ever reported in America. On average, a hate crime is today committed every two minutes in America — and those are just the ones identified and then reported to the FBI.

We need to discuss the violence and threats of violence now endemic within the GOP, because they signal a hopefully reversible — but possibly terminal — slide into fascism.

Fascism is violence. Its philosophy is rooted in violence: the domination of the many by a few, whether the main instrument of that domination is personal physical violence, the violence of great wealth, the violence of political power being used to destroy one’s political “enemies,” or unjustified violence inflicted by the state under color of law. . . .

Violence like this has its own power and its own attraction. The media is drawn to it, making it the most powerful recruiting tool a fascist movement has. Insecure, frightened men (and the occasional woman) participating in fascist violence find a sense of agency, of individual power and meaning, a sort of orgasmic release from a life of ordinariness and political impotence. They view their use of violence as heroic, and try to frame it in the context of historic violence like the American Revolution and Civil War. . . .

Democrats watch threats of violence against school board members, against nurses and hospitals treating Covid, against abortion providers, against racial minorities and queer people who Republican legislators declare — and then put into law — are to be treated as less than human or “aberrations” that must not be tolerated in a “free society.” . . .

Republicans running for office feature guns or imply threats to kill people in their television and online advertising. . . . Hitler rose to power on the wings of violence, first in the Beer Hall Putsch and later, when he became Chancellor, through his volunteer militia, the Brownshirts, terrorizing gays, Jews, and union members. Paul von Hindenburg thought Hitler would set aside the violence, as promised, if he was given the power he demanded. Hindenburg didn’t understand fascism.

Violence is the cardinal characteristic, the logo, the brand identity of fascism. Every fascist movement in history has lifted itself to power on the scaffold of violence. And then continues to rule with violence until it is overthrown, typically also with violence . . .

To justify the violence at the heart of their movement, Republicans squeal a phony claim to victimhood. They say Democrats are trying to take their tax dollars. They claim to fear gays are trying to “groom” their children. They profess to believe teachers are “indoctrinating” their youth . . .

Fascists justify their violence as necessary to protect their faith, their families, and the “identity” of their homeland. They will tell you it’s the unfortunate last-ditch “necessity” provoked by the “others” who “threaten our way of life.”

In reality, violence is not the fascist’s final, last-gasp option: it’s their first.

- It’s their most powerful recruiting tool, showing, as it does, their dominance of society and society’s institutions.
- It creates chaos, and fascism needs chaos to tear down the existing structures of governance and law they intend to replace with strongman rule. . . .

Every murderous act is designed intentionally to bring society closer to breakdown, so the fascists can openly kill their enemies — particularly people of color, queer people, and “liberals” — in the streets of the nation. It has happened over and over, in country after country, in each nation that has adopted 21st-century fascism. Every single time. . . .

The only way to stop a fascist takeover is to defeat them totally and irrevocably. To wipe them out at the polls, to expose their financial and intellectual backers, and to reveal the rot and violence in their hearts and at the core of their philosophy.

And that starts with you and me getting politically active, spreading the word of what’s really happening today in this country, and making sure every American we know of good will is registered to vote.

Tag, you’re it.

THE SERMON

[family circles]

As infants, we discover soon after birth that there are other beings with whom we must interact. Most often, a mother is Primary. and then, if we are fortunate, there is also another parent, and then, perhaps, siblings. This is what we call a nuclear family. Traditionally many families included, under one roof - or very nearby – grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins; a larger circle which we call an “extended family.” Then our personal circle grows to include our family’s friends, and neighbors, and other children, classmates in school, and then the circle grows further to include others who live in our village or town who expand our circle of inclusion.

Eventually, we become aware that there are people who speak languages different from the one spoken in our home, and there are people whose physical characteristics appear different from those of our family, and people whose view of the world differs from our family’s views. At some level, those different views involve what we call religion and politics. Our awareness of differences grows as we grow and our experiences expand the world in which we live.

[religion’s circles]

History tells us that religion has often been engaged in drawing metaphorical circles – some people are inside those circles and some are outside. The insiders know and revere "The Truth" as they know it, and the outsiders are often called barbarians, heathens, or pagans for being blind to the insiders' truth, whatever it is, or heretics who have known that truth but rejected it in favor of some error.

There is a lot of history regarding what religious people do to people who do not believe as they believe. The Bible tells of Moses ordering the slaughter of 3,000 men, women and children who worshiped the golden calf, and the Maccabees slaughtering those Jews who had adapted themselves to the Hellenistic culture. And there was the killing of the Canaanites who occupied the land that the Hebrews believed their god had promised them. There were the Crusades in which thousands of Muslims and Jews were killed by Christians because of fervor to convert or destroy the heathens. There was the Inquisition. There were the pogroms against the Jews. There have been many so-called "holy wars" (in which differences in religion have been, at least, the excuse) which have continued to this very day. There are some who argue persuasively that religion has caused more harm than it has done good: all in the name of what their adherents have deemed as the Holy.

In a sermon on the First Commandment, I suggested that, contrary to what we were taught in school, the theory of monotheism [the belief in the existence of only one god] may not have truly been an ethical advance. Monotheists look down on polytheists [those who believe in the existence of many gods] by emphasizing all the negative things some polytheists have done, forgetting that some monotheists have done the same things.

The virtue of polytheism is that the belief that there is more than one holy power in the universe frees one up to accept, although others may worship differently, it is possible that their gods may coexist with your god. Since monotheism denies the genuine existence of any other deities, its adherents are almost compelled to hold those who worship differently in

disdain or contempt. The others must be stupid, not seeing “the truth,” or they must be captives of an evil force - why else would they not agree with our beliefs? And often, faithfulness to one’s god is seen as demanding that something must be done about those who believe differently!

[on the other hand]

There is an alternative view arrived at independently by sages in virtually every tradition, usually through experience rather than by study. Great mystics have reported experiencing a sense of a larger circle: the oneness of humanity that transcends any one tradition's beliefs. That experience has led many mystics to a kind of peace and centeredness that has never been a common possession. It has led those mystics to an uncommon acceptance of human differences as being unimportant.

It is unfortunate that one of the characteristics of mystical experiences is that they are ineffable - that is, they are inherently difficult to communicate -- they are so far beyond common experience that it has always been hard for those who have had mystical experiences to effectively share them with those who have not. They are certainly not the stuff on which religious organizations are built.

Dean Kelley, in his classic study of **Why Conservative Churches are Growing**, found that many people prefer to affiliate with religious groups that draw circles around themselves with clear boundaries. Many, if not most, people want to belong to a group that is certain about what it believes, that tolerates little deviance or dissent, and that is so certain that it has the truth that it communicates only in an outward direction - it is clear that no other view is of interest to it.

[what if you were certain?]

Try, please, to put yourself in the shoes of someone who is certain that he or she has “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” If you were certain of that, what would you do? Well, of course, you would celebrate that truth -- you might even try to share it with others, but you'd have little interest in what they wanted to share with you. Just try sometime to have a conversation about religion with a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon. I would suggest that most of us, if we were as certain as they are about how the world works, would be likely to do just as they do. Groups like that draw clear circles around themselves. The circles are intended to be only semipermeable membranes -- they are designed to let others in -- when they accept the truths agreed upon within the circle -- and they are intended to keep in the circle all those who are presently inside - defections raise doubts.

[Dr. Kerr's sermon]

A hundred and fifty-three years ago, Dr. Thomas Kerr, then minister of the First Baptist Church in Rockford, Illinois, stepped into his pulpit to deliver a sermon which he called “Developing Discrimination” - he used the term discrimination in the sense of discernment - not prejudice. In that sermon, Dr. Kerr said:

I have companied with Jews, Jesuits, Mohammedans, men of the Greek Church, and very many of the members of what we Protestants represent by our different sects as the Christian Church; I have found in each, the one, identical love, supreme toward God and unselfish toward men! ...

Many an evening upon the sea, and many an hour upon the land, friends and home left far behind toward the setting sun; amid what we call "alien and outcast faiths" where, as we have been educated, there can be only unbelief, fanaticism and

superstitious forms; 'twas under such circumstances that I was taught that external names and forms in the religious are but local and fortuitous. For, I met those who, as Monks, Jews, Jesuits, Musselmen, [an old term for Muslims] [and] Greeks, could lay aside the artificial, the ecclesiastical conformity, rejecting them in every sense of essentiality, and meeting them on the same ground, my religion and theirs . . . And in the impromptu, fraternal fellowship, we were greatly blessed; 'twas friendship and home, strangely but surely restored, as we found that the external, imposed conformities each of us lived under could be laid aside as matters indifferent . . .

[in contrast]

Let me contrast Dr. Kerr's words with this warning from Douglas Groothuis in his book, **Unmasking the New Age:**

New Age spirituality feels the pulse of the One at the spiritual heart of all religions, after the differing external trappings are peeled away . . . Paul Weiss has said that the "very stress on some common truth to be found in all [the religions] involves a dismissal of the distinctive affirmations of each. Actual religions are given up, then, for a philosophic category, an idle universal." [Groothuis goes on to say] Reconciliation between Christ and the One is impossible. ...While a niche has always been offered to Christ in 'the world's pantheon' ...he claims the Throne." Yet Christ's exclusiveness issues forth a call to all people to come to him for life. Christ warned of a wide road that leads to destruction and spoke of a narrow road leading to life.

What Thomas Kerr preached a hundred and fifty-three years ago is what Groothuis and others today view as the threat of "New Age" thinking. The majority in Dr. Kerr's Baptist congregation shared the view that openness to other religions was a threat. Dr. Kerr resigned his pulpit the night he delivered that sermon and with 40 renegade Baptists joined with the members of Rockford's then shaky Unitarian Universalist Church, to create a new church they called "The Church of the Christian Union." The members of that congregation, which is the congregation I served for 27 years, believed that no creed should bind them, that they should not worry over the particulars of religious forms, but should instead focus on the larger, deeper, truer religious beliefs.

. That is what Robert Frost was talking about in his poem about walls - " . . . Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out . . . "

[diversity of beliefs]

The members of this congregation hold a variety of religious beliefs. There are among you, many different understandings of what is ultimate and holy in life. The word which we probably use too lightly is the word "quest." Unitarian Universalists view religion as a search for truth, not as a celebration of having arrived at it. I say we use may use it too lightly because a quest is a serious pilgrimage and there are times when we use the "quest" as a cover for intellectual laziness or concern for lesser things. But what we affirm is that we will not let the differences in the particulars of our beliefs obscure our awareness of our fundamental unity with those who may believe differently: the oneness of our search for truth. We call it "The inherent worth and dignity of all persons."

[absolutes]

In a wonderful little book called **Why Do People Do Bad things in the Name of Religion**, Richard Wentz, a university professor of religious studies suggests most people believe "It is essential to have absolutes or the world will collapse." He affirms, however:

Most absolutes are forms of the self projected onto a very large screen . . . If I cry out for absolute values I am usually seeking to justify my shaky self-image . . . The one absolute is that no one's understanding of the truth is the whole truth . . . What we suggest to be absolute is always what is seen and thought by our limited perception. . . . People frequently do bad things in the name of religion because they have taken a phantom of reason and fashioned it into an absolute. . . . For me to know that there are no absolutes, I must become increasingly aware of the manner in which my own person is involved in the discovery of . . . truth. Religious tradition helps me to develop that awareness through its sense of gratitude and humility...

I recall the words of Edwin Markham:

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.*

[hate crimes]

The FBI reported that in 2021:

63.1% of single-bias incidents were motivated by the offenders' bias toward race/ethnicity/ancestry, which continues to be the largest bias motivation category. Anti-Black or African American hate crimes continue to be the largest bias incident category, with them representing 31.1% of all single-bias incidents in 2021.

Additionally, anti-Asian incidents represented 7.1% of incidents reported in 2021. The other largest categories of hate crimes include anti-Hispanic or Latino incidents with 6.6% of incidents, and anti-White incidents with 10.5% of incidents.

Together, incidents related to sexual orientation, gender and gender identity represented 20.4% of all single-bias incidents reported in 2022. Also, incidents related to religion were 15.1% of the total, and those related to disability were 1.4%.

A total of 1,590 incidents related to religion were reported to the FBI.

The ADL, the Anti-Defamation League which, independent of the FBI, measures antisemitic acts, reported 2,717 incidents in the US in 2021, which was a 34% increase from the year before. Of those, 1776 were cases of harassment while 853 were reports of vandalism and 88 incidents of assault.

[other circles]

The realm of religious beliefs is only one dimension of the circles people draw. The issue with clinging to the limited circles in which we were raised often involves distrust and fear of those who are outside our circles drawn around race, religion, ethnicity, language, economic status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. People in those circles are, too often, deemed not only different, but inferior, and dangerous.

Too often, politicians use fear of others to manipulate the populous. They pass laws that discriminate against LGBT people, and people of foreign origin, and poor people who are forced to pay far more than their share of taxes. Fascists like Nazi's have effectively used fear of those who are outside their circles. Gun manufacturers have encouraged great fear of those outside common circles in order to market their products to the point where there are more

guns than people in America. Some members of one political party are now wearing lapel pins resembling AR-15's: weapons of war that destroy, maim, their targets. Manufacturers are producing junior models of those weapons of war for kids. Some political leaders send cards of their families holding weapons of war to celebrate the birth of one known as the Prince of Peace.

The media and the internet are used to spread messages of hate. Statistics show that hate and fear of “the other” has increased since the election of TFG. He did not create that fear, but he contributed to its spread.

The so-called “Replacement Theory, is popular among those in the right wing political circle. Do you remember the right wing gathering in Charlottesville in which the demonstrators were chanting “Jews will not replace us.” The Congressional opponents to immigration deeply believe that Democrats who welcome immigrants, do so because they believe that Democrats want to squeeze out the “genuine Americans” by replacing them with immigrants, thereby diluting the voting pool. Those who have been encouraged to react violently to the “strangers” act from that fear.

[psychology of the offenders]

Factors involving the psychology of the offender have been the subject of research. In one study widely used by law enforcement, sociologists Jack McDevitt and Jack Levin classified hate offenders as having four main motivations: thrill-seeking, defensive, retaliatory, and mission.

“Thrill-seeking” motivates 66% of hate crimes. These offenders are simply looking for excitement; over 90% don’t know their victims.

“Defensive” hate crimes (25%) are committed by perpetrators who rationalize their attacks by identifying some sort of threat to themselves, their identities, or their community.

In “retaliatory” attacks (8%), culprits are acting in response to a real or perceived hate crime either to themselves or to their country. That includes those who have been persuaded that Black Lives Matter hordes are seeking to kill Whites.

“Mission” hate crimes (1%) are committed by offenders who make a career out of hate. They often write online at length about their hate and have elaborate, pre-meditated plans of attack.

[Hate Speech]

Hateful speech – often intended to degrade, intimidate, or incite violence or discrimination against certain groups – is protected by the First Amendment and so is not punishable under criminal law. However, the First Amendment does not protect violence, nor does it prevent the government from imposing criminal penalties for violent discriminatory conduct directed against victims on the basis of their personal characteristics. Americans are free to think, preach, and believe whatever they want. It is only when an individual commits a crime based on those biased beliefs and intentionally targets another for violence or vandalism that a hate crime statute can be triggered.

Unlike the nursery rhyme, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” the author, Joyce Schneider points out “We have been taught through the ages that

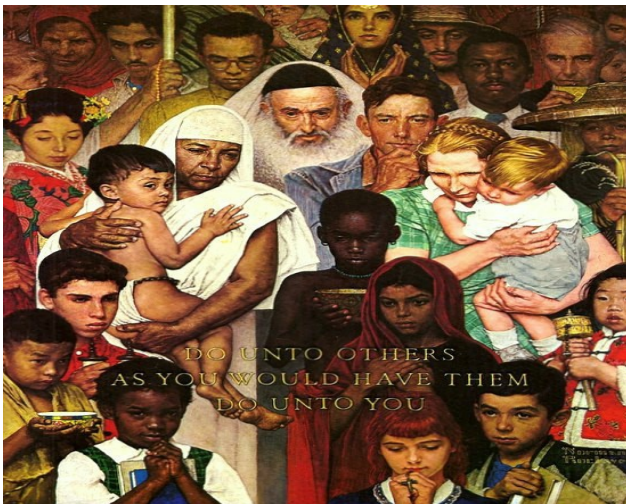
words cannot hurt us, but that is a lie. Words do hurt. They take root inside of us and change our perception of ourselves and others.”

[living with diversity]

There is always the danger that we will draw our own circles to exclude rather than include. It is true that many people are comfortable in the smaller circles they have drawn. Such people find little solace or meaning in religious communities as amorphous and ambiguous as ours. There is a danger that we will draw a circle about ourselves and create an intellectual elite which forgets about our commonality with the people in the circles we may have only theoretically included in our larger circle. They may know things we do not know, or have forgotten. We need to be as open to them as we would have them be to us.

As I have said before, I believe that one of the *raison d'être* for religion, a central teaching of the great prophets, is the expansion of our circles: the realization that when you come down to the facts, we often have more in common with those outside our circles than what separates us from them. It is fear that builds walls. And religious and autocratic leaders and marketers have often used that fear to build our loyalty to them.

The Norman Rockwell painting, *Do Unto Others*, which was on the cover of our Order of Celebration, is a visual expression of the kind of awareness in which I believe, and to which the United Nations is committed: people from many nations, many colors, many ages all included in the great circle of humanity.



Rockwell, who famously created historic covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* for nearly five decades, decided he could no longer work there when the management demanded that he remove an African American from a cover he produced because their policy was to allow African Americans to be shown only in menial situations. His circle of acceptance differed from management's and he could not accept theirs.

[conflicting circles]

A contemporary conflict over circles was illustrated by the March testimony of Rep. Kerri Seekins-Crowe's to the Montana Legislature on the subject of a new law banning gender affirming care for minors. The Representative's circle of acceptance clearly had no room for her daughter's struggle with her gender identity.

Doug Muder, in the May 1, 2023 issue of his blog, **The Weekly Sift**, in a portion he called "Laboratories of Autocracy," quoted the mother as saying she had lived for three years with a suicidal daughter, and so she "knows" that some things are more important than saving your child's life. She reported:

Someone once asked me, "Wouldn't I just do anything to help save her?" And I really had to think. And the answer was, "No." I was not going to give in to her emotional manipulation, because she was incapable of making those decisions and I had to make those decisions for her. I was not going to let her tear apart my family and I was not going to let her tear apart me, because I had to be strong for her. I had to have a vision for her life when she had none, when she was incapable of having [one].

I was lost. I was scared. I spent hours on the floor in prayer. Because I didn't know that when I woke up if my daughter was going to be alive or not. But I knew that I had to make those right decisions for her so that she would have a precious, successful adulthood.

Doug, who is a member of the First Parish in Bedford, the first congregation I served, compared the Representative's position with that of the Biblical Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac to please his deity.

In that same issue, Doug points out that there are now several states which have decided to prohibit the use of any book that includes quotations like this in their classrooms:

"Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a ... mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn."

Is that "CRT"? No, it's Martin Luther King Jr. in **Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?** No state statute should make teachers think twice before including King quotes in a course.

[TOPS Market slaughter]

Today we note the one year anniversary of the slaughter at the TOPS Market in Buffalo when a young man whose circle does not include people of color, drove from the Southern Tier of New York State with the intention of massacring Black folks. He succeeded in killing 10!

[TFG's Town Hall]

This week, CNN famously offered a free hour to TFG to spew his hateful and dishonest rhetoric, and he did. There are debates among the pundits as to whether this was a benefit or a detriment to TFG's presidential aspirations. One of the sources of disgust to many commentators was the way the carefully selected town hall audience lapped up, laughed, and applauded TFG's outrageous comments. All of the audience members apparently had circles that accepted comments that would not be accepted in our circles.

The thing is television can be deceptive. "The floor manager came out ahead of time and instructed the audience, 'Please do not boo, please be respectful.' Republican political consultant Matthew Bartlett reported, 'there were also people that sat there quietly disgusted or bewildered. TFG actually lost the audience during [many] segments.'"

In a subsequent newscast, I saw a whole row of men laughing at TFG's attack on E. Jean Carroll, but the row of women in front of the men did not make a move. They certainly appeared disgusted. The point of that is that you should not exclude people from your circle of acceptance for what you think they may be thinking.

[my larger circle]

The larger circle I draw is based firmly on the belief that our journeys through life are enhanced by having good and diverse companions on the quest - those who can challenge what we think we know, and whom we are responsible for challenging in return. It is not always a comfortable journey, but it is a more productive one. We all gain from the freedom and interchange of a diverse community. We need to strive to build the largest circles possible. How wide is **YOUR** circle?

I had chosen and printed my title for this sermon before I heard the brilliant, moving, presentation by the choir of the Eastminster United Church of the theme of the sermon: "Draw the Circle Wide" (Gordon Light, Mark Miller) I concluded the sermon with it. The Youtube link is: <https://youtu.be/PclQrWOYug8> I urge you to hear it! [There are many versions available but, in my judgement, the Eastminster Choir's is by far the best. You may have to skip a Youtube commercial before and after!]