Twitter Thread by Hyon S Chu



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I want to tell you a short story about a man named Joshua Abraham Norton. Born in 1818 and a resident of the city of San Francisco, CA. Joshua Norton in 1859, declared himself "Norton I, Emperor of the United States.

In 1819 he sent out a letter to many newspapers, which several of them printed. It read:

> At the peremptory request and desire of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton... declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these United States.

He held no formally recognized powers, he decreed that elected officials assemble at a music hall to "remedy the evil." He wanted to clear Congress and abolish it as it stood for "fraud and corruption prevent a fair and proper expression of the public voice."

He spent time inspecting the streets of San Francisco in an elaborate uniform, given to him by officers of the United States Army. He doted the city, examining the condition of the sidewalks and cable cars and the state of public affairs.

When a man sent his private security guards to arrest him, the citizens were outraged. Scaring editorials were written in the newspapers defending him, proposing he was more defensible than the other men of his time.

The official police issued a formal apology.

From then on, he was lauded as if he were a real politician. The people accepted him the emperor. Police officers saluted him as he walked on the street. He issued his own money, which local restaurants accepted in exchange for food.

He sent letters in attempts to establish global diplomatic leaders and even met with Emperor Pedro II of Brazil. King Kamehameha V officially recognized him.

When his uniform began to wear, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors bought him a very nice replacement.

> Local newspapers printed a number of decrees that were probably not issued by Norton; it is believed that newspaper editors themselves drafted fictitious edicts to suit their own agendas. The local Museum and Historical Society maintains a list of the decrees believed genuine.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of him, he "was a gentle and kindly man, and fortunately found himself in the friendliest and most sentimental city in the world, the idea being 'let him be emperor if he wants to.' San Francisco played the game with him."

He had no formal powers granted him by any laws, local or national. But merely by his own declaration and the willingness of the people, including kings, to play along. Norton believed himself to be Emperor, and the people loved and recognized him as such.

He died, collapsing in the streets of the city he loved and loved him back just as much.

It became apparent that he was not rich and lived in complete poverty. He owned nothing, but made nearly all of his money from the generosity of others.

His funeral was large and mournful.

Two hundred years later, there have been efforts to commemorate his reign, with plaques being installed at various places around the city. A movement to name the Bay Bridge as the Emperor Norton bridge partly succeeded.

There are two morals of the story:

1. Merely a shared recognition of someone's authority is sufficient to change the public's opinions dramatically.

2. Once accepted, the shared game can go on forever.

The photo of Joe Biden up top is unrelated.