

## IS AMERICA ON A PATH TO THE BREAKDOWN OF THEIR NATION?

It is a season of great discontent for many of us around the globe. Here in the United States of America we are experiencing a troubling and challenging period characterized by a deep ideological division and a broad distrust of our elected representatives. Corporate lobbyists exert what many believe is a destructive influence on legislation and regulation at the state and federal levels of government. Conservatives battle Progressives over the limits to freedoms guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. In a very real sense, we have come to the culmination of the process begun by Ronald Reagan to re-establish a *New Federalism*. If we are honest with ourselves, however, the idea that the U.S.A. is one country, its citizens one people, has always been something of a myth. I suspect that Thomas Paine would agree.

For much of the twentieth century, the process that directed domestic and foreign policies in the United States was the willingness to compromise in order to gain consensus. This was the essence of *liberalism*. There existed an unspoken acceptance of the need for change described by political scientists as *disjointed incrementalism*. Principle took a back seat to practical political necessities. Those who rose to positions of leadership in government, business, labor, education, grant-making foundations and even citizen activists accepted the confines of *liberalism*. No one wanted to throw the baby out with the bath water. Some of the lessons of history seemed to have been well learned.

From the moment the first Europeans arrived on the shores of North America, there arose one conflict after another between the Non-Europeans and the strange but powerfully-armed peoples who arrived from beyond the horizon in huge wooden ships. As soon as enough of these Europeans established themselves in coastal settlements and explored inland, the conflicts over control of territory and resources began. As the numbers of Spanish, Dutch, French, English and other European groups increased, they largely thought of the Non-European peoples as irritants to be removed<sup>1</sup>. And, more often than not, each European group thought of each other in the same way.

Despite almost continuous warfare in North America, people from around the world kept coming. Some were adventurers. Some sought escape from religious, racial or ethnic oppression. All hoped for a better quality of life. Thanks to the encouragement of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine was among those who made the journey. Until the year 1924, the laws of the United States of America imposed few restrictions on those who came, so long as they were of European origin. Only the Chinese and other Asians were specifically prohibited by law<sup>2</sup> from entering the country.



Those who arrived from the land of their forefathers tended to congregate in enclaves where cultural norms and language were familiar. Assimilation into the dominant, Anglo-American community often took generations. During the early decades of the 19th century, one ethnic group that held fast to their Old World culture were those who came from Germany. As historian Marcus Lee Hansen observed:

*"Resistance to Americanization proved strongest in the old congregations on the plains between the Delaware and the Susquehanna. The bulk of their members were German-born and German-trained, knowing little of their adopted country apart from the rural parishes in which they lived..."*<sup>3</sup>

Before the frontier was declared *closed*<sup>4</sup> by historian Frederick Jackson Turner at the dawn of the twentieth century, the pattern of European-American settlement across the continent was dominated by small communities with most of the residents still engaged in agriculture. Henry George described how the arrival of railroads both tied these communities together and accelerated the concentration of income and wealth in the growing towns and cities. During the decades following the defeat of the Southern Confederacy, African-Americans in large numbers also joined the migration. The America to which the next wave of immigrants came was changing rapidly:

*"Along the city's unyielding asphalt streets, beside the rutted roads of mill or mining towns, amidst the exciting prairie acres, they established the homes of the New World. But wherever the immigrants went, there was one common experience they shared: nowhere could they transplant the European village..."*<sup>5</sup>

The mixture of the races, of peoples of different Old World heritage, language, culture and religion seriously challenged the appearance of apparent equality painted by Alexis de Tocqueville following his visit earlier in the 19th century. The nation's major cities were increasingly overcrowded, unsanitary and dismal places. Many immigrants came to wish they had never left the land of their birth:

*"As the passing years widened the distance, the land the immigrants had left acquired charm and beauty. Present problems blurred those they had left unsolved behind; and in the haze of memory it seemed to these people they had formerly been free of present dissatisfactions. It was as if the Old World became a great mirror into which they looked to see right all that was wrong with the New..."*<sup>6</sup>

Leading figures in the nation concluded that the most effective way to bring this diverse population together as *Americans* was to establish in every community systems of publicly-funded and publicly-administered schools. The children of immigrants would be taught to read and write in English. They were also taught what it meant to be an *American*. The rationale for universal public education arose as early as the late 1830s, led by Horace Mann, the secretary of education of Massachusetts. By 1900, thirty-four states required compulsory education for children up to age 14 or even higher. Eighteen years later, every state required all children to complete school through grade six.

Americans have often been described as *a restless people*, relocating from one state to another in search of better economic

opportunities or just for a less extreme climate. One result is that in every large city and even in smaller towns there are distinct ethnic neighborhoods, where generations of families continue to hold fast to at least some of the Old World values of their immigrant forefathers. This pattern of internal migration changed only after the end of the Second World War. The rapid expansion of the interstate highway system spawned the development of new housing subdivisions surrounding every city. The adult children of many immigrants moved to the new suburbs, where the process of assimilation accelerated, even as economic and racial segregation remained. America was not quite a melting pot but its institutions were forced to adjust to the changing reality of where people lived and worked.

Our early history as a nation was characterized by a build-up of sectional tensions that could not be reduced by compromise, and the result was civil war. How do we explain the form *the American system* took until power shifted to the federal government during the years of the Great Depression? The territory of the United States might be separated from the Old World by two wide oceans, but the nation was still very much affected by world events. In his book *The Conservatives*, historian Patrick Allitt provides an interesting insight:

*"The Russian Revolution was a turning point in the history of American conservatism. Throughout the nineteenth century the United States had been in many ways the world's revolutionary leader. After 1917, by contrast, it became, in the eyes of supporters and detractors alike, the world's counterrevolutionary leader, trying to forestall the triumph of a newer and more radical political and economic system. Another characteristic of American conservatism from then on was that it would receive a steady succession of new recruits from former communists, in revolt against the horrible reality behind an ideology that had at first attracted them..."*<sup>7</sup>

Responding to the emergencies of a nationwide economic depression and a global war dramatically increased the presence of the federal government in the everyday lives of citizens. The wartime sacrifices made by African-Americans emboldened returning servicemen and others to demand their rightful civil liberties. Women called into the workforce during the war were emboldened to demand greater opportunities and status beyond that of homemaker and mother. Young men and women who postponed marriage and starting families began to make up for lost time, and military veterans were assisted by government programs that provided affordable housing and access to college education or technical training. For millions of U.S. households the prospects for an improving standard of living was set in motion.

Economists, such as Rexford Tugwell<sup>8</sup>, played significant advisory and administrative roles during the Presidency of Franklin Roosevelt. By the end of the Second World War, economists held positions at the highest levels of government. In 1946, President Harry S. Truman signed the Employment Act, one provision of which was the formation of the first Council of Economic Advisers. By 1949 the Council became dominated by economists who asserted the economy could support both rising spending on defense as well as on social welfare entitlements, even if this meant there would be large budget deficits. The idea that public revenue ought to come from location and natural resource rents

was never seriously considered. U.S. political leaders were also soon committed to whatever spending was required to stop the expansion of communism around the world.

Dwight Eisenhower had warned the country against the growing influence of what he described as the “military-industrial complex”. Yet, it was Eisenhower who provided the French with funds to try to hold onto their colonial interests in Indo-China. When the French army was defeated, the Americans stepped in, hoping to prevent yet another communist regime from being established. Lyndon Johnson spent the nation into an inflationary spiral trying to win the war on poverty and defeat the Viet Cong at the same time. Richard Nixon, although a Republican and nominally a fiscal conservative, announced to the U.S. public that he had become a Keynesian. To win a second term as President, Nixon demanded cheap money and even more government spending. The U.S. (and most of the world) drifted into the economic and social morass of stagflation. By 1980, inflation had risen to 14% in the U.S., and the country was ready to try something different. Enter Ronald Reagan.

Reaganomics embraced deregulation, a reduction of marginal tax rates on individuals and businesses and a commitment to break the power of labor unions. At the Federal Reserve, Chairman Paul Volcker used the tools at his disposal to halt inflation. He let interest rates climb. Demand for credit fell, business activity stalled, unemployment rose and the U.S. slid into recession. Reagan's tentative gamble of *supply-side economics* failed to achieve the promised outcomes of a robust investment in production and an increase in federal revenue. Conservatives of the 18th century would have recognized the theoretical arguments as presented by Reagan economics adviser Arthur Laffer<sup>9</sup>. The historical pendulum was swinging back toward a more *laissez-faire* relationship between government and business, as those who had guided economic policy for three decades struggled to explain why the economy was simultaneously plagued by high unemployment and high inflation<sup>10</sup>.

In 1982, Ronald Reagan attempted to transfer responsibility for many Federal programs to individual states. His proposals proved to be far too ambitious, even for most Republicans then in the U.S. Congress. He was also opposed by the National Governors Association. Fast forward to today, and the final phases of *new federalism* are being carried out by Republican-dominated governments many states as well as the federal level,

The willingness to compromise that characterized the decades of American liberalism began to dissolve as the responsibilities of global leadership brought on serious challenges to domestic tranquility. In 1963, William F. Buckley, Jr. responded with a description of the situation that was soon to unravel:

*“Every year, whether the Republican or the Democratic Party is in office, more and more power drains away from the individual to feed vast reservoirs in far-off places; and we have less and less say about the shape of events which shape our future. From this alienation of personal power comes the sense of resignation with which we accept the political dispensations of a powerful government whose hold upon us continues to increase.”*<sup>11</sup>

*“When our voices are finally mute, when we have finally suppressed the natural instinct to complain, whether the vexation is trivial or grave, we shall have become automats, incapable of feeling.”*<sup>12</sup>

Buckley would not have to wait very long for Americans to raise their voices in reaction to a world changing in ways not to their liking. We remain a citizenry deeply divided by our fundamental value systems, by political ideology, by racial and ethnic prejudices, by conflicting views of what constitutes human rights, by our views on the role religious doctrine ought to play in the operation of public institutions and by extent to which our laws reflect justice and are justly enforced. And, of course, there is an almost total disregard for the injustice associated with the private appropriation of the rents derived from nature.

What I foresee as a reasonable possibility is the eventual break-up of the United States into confederacies of states joined together by shared cultural norms, values and ideological belief systems. Perhaps at least one such confederacy would find guidance from Paine's *The Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice* or from George's *Progress and Poverty*. This may be precipitated by the migration of tens of millions of people to regions of the United States where they feel their own values are most strongly embraced. Some have already chosen another country. For a very long time now, decisions to relocate have been made for non-political reasons. That could change. We have already experienced changes in the laws of states that are attractive or repulsive to some segments of the nation's population. It is possible that some states would merge and others divide into two or more new, sovereign nations.

While the details of this story are unique to the United States of America, a broad survey of emerging trends around the globe suggests a future in which many changes in territorial boundaries are on the horizon. As Thomas Paine would observe, the times that try men's souls continue. ■

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#### References:

- 1) The Spanish Conquistadors sought to find the sources of gold and other precious metals they assumed the tribal peoples were mining. Priests and other missionaries sought to convert these Non-Europeans to the Christianity of their particular religious sect.
- 2) Asians were excluded under the Burlingame and Angell treaties. The Chinese Exclusion Act was followed by the Geary Act of 1892, made permanent in 1902.
- 3) Marcus Lee Hansen. *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), p.74.
- 4) It must be noted that most historians do not accept the definition put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner. The continent was, in fact, occupied by millions of Non-European peoples and never actually “open” as implied by Turner.
- 5) Oscar Handlin. *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951), p.144.
- 6) *Ibid.*, pp.260-261.
- 7) Patrick Allitt. *The Conservatives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p.129.
- 8) Rexford Tugwell was one of three Columbia University professors invited in 1932 to join President Roosevelt's team of advisers known as the “Brain Trust.” He served in the administration as Assistant Secretary, then Undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The other members were Raymond Moley and Adolph A. Berle, Jr.
- 9) Arthur Laffer, a professor at the USC Marshall School of Business, played a key role in the drafting of California's Proposition 13, which imposed a cap on property taxation in the state. In 1981 he became a member of Ronald Reagan's Economic Policy Advisory Board.
- 10) In 1958, a New Zealand economist named William Phillips, postulated an inverse relationship between money wages and changes in unemployment. Many economists subsequently came to believe this was a permanently stable relationship. During the 1970s the so-called “Phillips Curve” had disappeared under the stress of stagflation.
- 11) William F. Buckley, Jr. “Why Don't We Complain? Rumbles Left and Right” (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p.250.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p.251