

THE UNITED STATES HAS MANY PROBLEMS BUT LACKS SOLUTIONS

By

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There is a widespread recognition that the United States is experiencing a myriad of problems which are jeopardizing the American dream. These problems are well known and well documented.

Increasing racial violence, a widespread illegal drug culture, insidious gang warfare, military like law enforcement, inhuman incarceration, inequitable gerrymandering of electoral boundaries, voter suppression, permanent electioneering, political gridlock, the overwhelming political clout of Political Action Committees (PAC's), income inequality, crony capitalism, eroding social consciousness, erosion of workers' rights, eroding international respect are some of the most talked about.

I contend that these examples are only the symptoms. They only categorize the problems in behavioural terms and this descriptive terminology does not identify or address any underlying causes which I prefer to label root causes. It's like a doctor who tries to address an illness with pain killers without trying to understand the cause of the pain. Unless steps are taken to deal with root causes, it is going to be practically impossible to treat the symptoms.

I have identified five root causes which I believe collectively or individually underlie many of the symptoms which I listed earlier. These are a mix of cultural behaviour and structural shortcomings.

A Frontier Mindset Still Dominates

It can be said that the United States was born with a gun in its hand. Moreover, ever since, guns have played a central role in the domestic history of the country. Not just in the Revolution but in the Civil War, in the war of 1812, in the taming of the wild west, in the war on drugs, in fueling criminal activity and in the conduct of law enforcement. And, oh yes, occasionally for recreational hunting and recreational target practice. Given this background, is it any wonder that the National Rifle Association is the largest, best funded, most powerful and most effective lobbying organization in the nation?

The wild west and its frontier mindset still exists in the minds of many Americans.

Unfortunately, given all the evidence, there can be no argument that the right to own and use guns has become ingrained as part of the culture of the United States.

This has given rise to a number of well documented consequences which in my view underlie several behavioural problems in the United States. Perhaps most concerning, not only is the gun culture fostering domestic violence but the gun culture is also feeding the nation's militaristic approach to law enforcement and to international affairs.

Worse, despite the overwhelming evidence of the detrimental effects this culture is having on so many aspects of American life, the culture has become so strong and so imbedded in the fabric of American society that it is going to be virtually impossible to dislodge it from the nation's psyche. Obviously, there is little political will to address the issue. Therefore, I fear that the American population will have to endure this culture and its terrible impact on the American dream for a long time to come.

Continuing Racism

In my view, racism in its various forms is alive and well and is enjoying a dangerous resurgence in the United States.

As we all know, much of the history of the United States, particularly in the south, encompassed extreme racial discrimination primarily based on colour. Despite the many well intentioned efforts to eliminate it, it still thrives and in many guises. There has been an alarming increase in ugly racial incidents as reported almost daily in the media. The recent episode involving the confederate flag is

a case in point. While common sense prevailed to some extent, and the confederate flag has been taken down in some places, this incident exposed the reality that there are and will continue to be many, many Americans who still fervently support the confederate cause including its rallying cry of extreme racism.

I do not define racism as simply colour discrimination although that is what everybody usually thinks of when hearing the word.

In my view, racism takes many forms and in its most basic form it can broadly be defined as an unjustified domination and dehumanization, or attempted domination and dehumanization, by some members of society aimed at others in society to their detriment. Based on this view of racism, the treatment of undocumented immigrants in the United States, for example, is definitely racist. Indeed, some analysts are characterizing Donald Trump's widely supported assault on Mexicans as not just colour racism but, more accurately, anti-foreign racism or country of origin racism.

In any event, racism is definitely at play in America's ambivalent attitude to all immigration issues.

It is true that undocumented immigration is currently getting the most focus in the political circus taking place these days and Donald Trump's rants and his threats to build a wall between the United States and Mexico are, regrettably, striking a chord with many, many Americans. One can argue that many of the people who are taking this bait have a superficial view of these issues but the fact is there are lots of them and they are speaking from their hearts and in the process showing their bias.

But, surprisingly, legalized immigration is also increasingly under attack in a number of quarters and it is hard to believe this is happening in a country which was built on immigration. Here, the critics' argue that any immigration, even legal immigration, is taking jobs from American citizens and must be curtailed. I have no doubt in my mind that once again racism is a major factor behind the thinking of these critics.

Also, the unjustifiable treatment of many minorities by law enforcement and by the legal system smacks of racism. The oppressive treatment of the poor and the homeless certainly has many of the characteristics of racism

I believe that since all these oppressive behaviours have racist overtones, they can be just as insidious as outright colour racism. At the very least, they reflect an unhealthy mindset which fuels very negative societal consequences and leads to many of the problems I have identified.

Regrettably, I believe that given the resilience of racism and its resurgence, racism in its variety of guises has become ingrained in the cultural fabric of the United States. Worse, given its status as part of the culture, all efforts by well-intentioned citizens to eliminate it will probably fail. This being the case, sad to say, racism and racial violence will likely plague the United States for a very long time to come.

An Emerging Siege Mentality

There are two facets to this concern, namely the issue of trade barriers and the issue of security.

Throughout the 19th century and up to the first world war, isolation and protectionism were two hallmarks of American policy. Following the second world war Americans changed course and became active participants in such organizations as the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the World Trade Organization and NAFTA to name a few and have continued to lead the way in many other initiatives to normalize trade relations.

Nevertheless, during this period a number of trade barriers remained in place. This was and is particularly true inside the United States itself where a number of buy local or buy American policies were enacted and remain trade barriers today especially with respect to interstate dealings.

Now that the world is again facing uncertain times, the somewhat latent attitudes toward trade barriers are resurfacing.

The shining example once more is Donald Trump and his rants that America is no longer great and Americans must show the world America is boss by, for instance, slapping 30% tariffs on Mexico and China. His views are getting a lot of publicity but also, apparently, a lot of support. More worrisome it is disturbing to see that some other Republican candidates are falling in line with this thinking and also in line with his approach to immigration issues.

There is also a vocal but growing minority group of Americans who feel strongly that the United States should turn its back completely on the troubled parts of the world and let those nations sort out their own problems.

Perhaps even more significantly, there are signs that the United States itself is taking a firmer stand in its trade negotiations with other countries or other trading blocs. Let's hope that it does not slide back to a more isolationist or protectionist mindset if there is a change in government. In this regard, let's hope that the people in power remember that isolationism and protectionism did not work historically and are even less likely to work in today's complex and interdependent world.

Security is another issue which is in the forefront of America's concerns. Americans are being fed a steady diet of fear....fear of terrorism, fear of nuclear war, fear of weather catastrophes', fear of criminal incursions, fear of data theft, and on and on.

These phobias, real or perceived, are certainly having a huge impact on Americans' mindset. It boggles the mind to see the explosive growth in security devices and security services. Firms who supply armaments, security cameras, electronic screening devices, motion detection monitors, etc. or supply encryption services or scanning software or who train or supply armed guards to sit on airplanes, for schools, for border patrol, or for banks and munitions factories, have suddenly found themselves in a growth industry.

It is being said, more and more, that Americans have become prisoners in their own country.

This mindset of fear is contributing to many other problems and unfortunately there is no sign it will be abating any time soon. Indeed, there are worrying signs that the politicians will continue to ratchet up the fear factor simply for political gain.

The Role of the Dollar

In the United States, a very few people have way too much money and, more often than not, want more. They also frequently want power and influence.

Also, in the United States, there are many, many people who do not have enough money and whose prospects for earning more are very faint. They are also struggling to achieve a decent standard of living.

Unfortunately, the gap between these two extremes is huge and getting worse.

Fortunately, a growing number of Americans have come to realize that if 1% of the population controls 70% of the wealth, this is unconscionable and a recipe for disaster.

This being the case, more and more experts and scholars support a redistribution of wealth so that the wealth of the country is shared more equitably. This can be achieved relatively easily by making changes in the tax code and using other policy instruments. Some experts are even recommending a guaranteed annual income for everybody. Recently, the Canadian Medical Association at its meeting in Halifax passed a resolution supporting a basic income for everybody. This may be too extreme but at least it could be done without the need to amend the Constitution. In any event, the need to address this problem seems to be picking up steam and maybe, unlike some of the other problems I've discussed, something will be done.

In the meantime however, the problem of wealth inequality will continue to be the root cause of many other problems.

Many people will continue to struggle because they can't achieve a decent standard of living which leads to many other problems. There could be lower standards of education. More people could resort to crime, to drugs and alcohol which would lead to even more incarceration and more demand on social services and on law enforcement. People's health will undoubtedly suffer and there will probably be more mental health issues. This will put more pressure on the health care system and increase costs. There would, in all probability, be more racial unrest.

Let's hope that in the very near future there will be the political will to address this extremely important issue which has such a significant impact on the American dream.

In my view, the current political environment is extremely dysfunctional and this is the underlying cause of many, many of America's problems. In many ways it is the over arching issue which is giving Americans the most headaches.

This concern comes in many flavours and is a mix of cultural concerns and structural concerns, mostly structural concerns.

Culturally, in the last several years there has been a major polarization of political ideologies. Today, they span the full gauntlet from the views of the Tea Party, to the beliefs of the libertarians, to the thinking of the communists. As well, the polarization within the major parties has become very alarming.

Admittedly, in years gone by, polarization has frequently been a problem poisoning the American political environment. However, I contend that polarization in the past has never been as intense or as intrusive as it is now and I believe there are a number of reasons for this.

First, education is an important factor in the mix not only because more people are educated but, often, because there is still a lack of education among some voters. Second, today's communication technologies allow the instantaneous and widespread dissemination of everyone's points of view, including propaganda of any kind. Finally, the explosion in social media not only lets everyone have a point of view but, again, makes it very easy for anyone to broadcast these views far and wide.

There are also increasing signs that more and more people enjoy the drama surrounding polarized positions for its entertainment value and some pundits claim this a factor in Donald Trump's sudden popularity.

A Dysfunctional Political Environment

In my view, extreme polarization of the country's political thinking is now part of the culture and is here to stay for a long time to come.

Apart from the cultural issue, there are several structural problems which feed into the dysfunctional political environment.

First, the checks and balances that the authors of Independence wrote into the Constitution are no longer functioning in the manner intended. To the contrary, the separation of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary as presently structured is resulting in many, many obstacles to the proper functioning of government and virtually guaranteeing there will be no semblance of long term thinking or any hope of bipartisan thinking. This is understandable, if for no other reason, than the world and the complexities of governing are vastly different than when these provisions were crafted.

However, there are no signs or, indeed, any hope that the structure of government will be changed to better deal with the complexities of governing in today's world. The steps that need to be taken to reform the system in any meaningful way are very intimidating and filled with political mine fields, and this makes it even less likely that there will be any reform.

Next, voter manipulation is another cancer eating away at America's democratic values. This is largely a structural issue. Voter suppression which involves manipulating the eligibility criteria governing the right to vote for the purpose of disenfranchising certain voters is becoming more widespread. Gerrymandering, which is the practice of manipulating the electoral boundaries of ridings to favour the party in power, is another technique being widely used to stack the deck. There have been some attempts by the courts to better level the playing field but these efforts have been sporadic and not particularly effective.

The problem is that, for the most part, voters' rights by virtue of the Constitution are under the jurisdiction of each State. As a result, the status of voters' rights varies widely from State to State and each State guards this right zealously. Under the circumstances, it's highly unlikely that all 50 States would ever agree to a common set of rules which would apply nationally and in all the States.

Finally, spending on political campaigning has reached scandalous proportions. Ever since the Supreme Court of the United States decreed there could be no limit on political spending if done outside the constraints of a formal campaign, the sky has become the new limit. The explosion in Political Action Committees, particularly those created by spectacularly wealthy individuals such as the Koch Brothers is extremely worrisome. Nobody in their right mind buys into the fairy tale that

these millionaires are contributing mega dollars to these PACs for altruistic reasons and do not expect to be able to wield significant political clout in return. Nor, does anybody believe the politicians who protest that they are in no way beholden to these benefactors. And, let's face it, the imprint of special interest groups on the affairs of government is very plain to see.

For many politicians, the primary business of a politician today is not necessarily to do what's best for his country. Rather, his primary business objective is to get re-elected. Financial support and lots of it, is key to this objective and this unfettered greasing of the palms is making this much easier for many politicians and, moreover, is mostly to the benefit of the incumbents and this perpetuates the old guard syndrome.

There is another downside to this lavish spending on political campaigns. In today's environment the cost of conducting even a minimal campaign is very expensive. When virtually unlimited funds are available, candidates will naturally spend more money e.g. more television advertising, more and bigger rallies, bigger campaign buses, more use of aircraft to travel the constituencies, etc., etc. Therefore, the costs of campaigning overall will rise and it becomes a vicious circle.

Costs are already so prohibitive that many highly qualified candidates cannot afford to run especially if they cannot tap into the pools of money more readily available to candidates who already hold office and have an inside track to these funds. Those politicians often have a track record of supporting their benefactors' interests.

In my opinion, the bottom line to all this is that the political environment, both culturally and structurally, is desperately in need of substantial reform otherwise the United States will continue to decline as a properly functioning nation and as a world power. The trouble is that most of the needed reforms require constitutional amendments. The campaign spending reforms require finding a way around the reasoning of the Supreme Court. Neither solution is likely to happen.

As a Canadian, I would like to close this essay with another concern. I see many of the problems I have discussed finding their way across the border into our country and this is very disconcerting. I very much wish to see us retain our unique Canadian values and our moral compass. This being said, I think we all need to keep in mind the words of our national anthem. Canada, we stand on guard for thee.