

Political and Social Crisis in America: What Are We to Think?

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A cascade of developments should make us afraid of what seems to be emerging politically in the United States at this time. Although politicians keep telling us how great we were or will be or are. Donald Trump has ridden a wave of populist enthusiasm touting his brand with the slogan 'make America great again' emblazoned. One wonders whether he means ante-bellum America, Reagan America, the America that decimated native Americans, the Indian Nations, or more likely, militia America.

By contrast, Hilary Clinton reassures her rallies that is 'America is great now' but it can be made even better. She foregoes any criticism of the America of drones, regime-changing interventions, hazardous no-fly zones, special forces, and counterterrorist terrorism, views Israeli behavior through the rosiest of rose-colored glasses, promises to do more militarily than Obama in the Middle East, blows hot and cold the trade winds shift from Sanders to Wall Street, and only has hard words for the banker and hedge fund operators when voters are listening.

This is a sad moment for procedural democracy where voting was once seen as the indispensable guaranty of vibrant republican governance. When money and mediocrity controls the process, and we are forced to choose between the lesser of evils, and even the lesser of evils generates nightmares, there is serious trouble brewing in the body politic.



The maladies are not just on the top of the socioeconomic pyramid, although there is plenty

of sickness at the lofty heights of wealth and power. The political culture is sending warning sign after warning sign without giving rise to the slightest sign of restorative energies.

A few of these telltale signs can be mentioned to provide content to an insistence that a condition of societal urgency exists:

-When massacres of innocent persons occur in public places (schools- Sandy Hook; theaters-Aurora; night clubs-Orlando), gun sales surge in the days that follow; we are in the midst of a populist climate that has embraced 'Second Amendment fundamentalism,' so much so that Trump when asked at the third presidential debate what he hoped the Supreme Court would do, responded by declaring his priority to be upholding an unrestricted right to bear arms; Hilary Clinton was deemed brave and an anti-gun militant because she favored background checks and closing of gun show loopholes, hardly prospects that would send the NRA to the trenches except to tighten further their already firm grip on the political process!

-When a group of armed white militia members, led by the Bundy brothers (Ammon and Ryan) take over a Federal wildlife reserve in eastern Oregon in January of this year, using threats of violence prevent its operations for several days, initially vowing to die if necessary to oust the Federal Government from Malheur National Wildlife Refuge before eventually backing down, the jury in a criminal trial with mistaken foregone conclusions, astoundingly and unanimously found them not guilty of any crime, we know that the hour of violent populism is upon us. Simultaneously in Standing Rock North Dakota hundreds of unarmed native Americans and their supporters are being arrested and charged with trespass and riot crimes for protesting an oil pipeline being constructed near to their reservation;

-When it looked like Trump would be defeated in a Clinton landslide, the election was, according to Trump, 'rigged' in favor of the Democrats, and the option of rejecting the outcome was kept wide open by the Republican candidate. Trump supporters were not shy about thinking that even violent resistance would be justifiable to keep 'a criminal' out of the White House. Trump even vowed in their TV debate to put Clinton in prison for corruption and her violation of classification laws shortly after he is sworn in as the next president. He does not object when his revved up crowds chant 'lock her up' or 'jail her.' If nothing else, Trump's campaign reminds us that legitimate political competition presupposes a certain framework of civility and a clear willingness to part company with populist violence. Such minimal civility doesn't have to concede much about the character and record of the opponent, but it does need to avoid language and sentiments that signals extremists to man the barricades. When Trump gives overt permission to his followers to remember their second amendment rights he is encouraging violence to overcome the problems of governance if he should lose the election. With such guidance, the country would mount a train that has only one stop—fascism in some form.

My claim here is not only the tainting of the electoral process, but the violent disposition of the political culture. It is not even necessary to invoke growing nativist hatreds directed at immigrants, Muslims, family planners, adherents of Black Lives Matter, and transgender and native American activists to recoil from this inflamed cultural moment. Underneath, yet integral, are the wider structural issues associated with neoliberalism, inequality among and within states, wage stagnancy, impotent labor movement, collapse of socialist alternatives, and the right-wing overall monopoly of visionary, highly motivated politics. Trump supporters are wildly enthusiastic about their candidate, while Clinton backers are under

motivated and lacking in conviction.

This is not only an American problem. Similar patterns are visible in all parts of the world, although there is everywhere a national coloring that produces significant differences. In this regard, the structural pressures dispose politics in all parts of the world to move in authoritarian directions as conditioned by a wide diversity of national circumstances.

Yet the United States does pose a special threat of its own world wide, and is not only menacing its own future. It controls the dominant arsenal of nuclear weapons, it maintains a network of bases spread around the world, militarizes oceans and space, sends its predator drones and special ops kill squads to find prey wherever on the planet it perceives threats. This militarized and unaccountable global security system is reinforced by preeminent diplomatic and economic leverage, and emboldened by a self-serving ideology of 'American exceptionalism,' What happens in the United States is of great, often decisive, importance to the wellbeing of the many countries, especially in the global South, that lack both voice or exit capabilities (Hirschman), and thus find themselves captive of history's first, and possibly, last 'global state.'

Richard Falk is an international law and international relations scholar who taught at Princeton University for forty years. Since 2002 he has lived in Santa Barbara, California, and taught at the local campus of the University of California in Global and International Studies and since 2005 chaired the Board of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. For six years (2008-2014) he acted as UN Special Rapporteur for Occupied Palestine

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