**A Report Card For America**

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Whether or not schools, colleges and universities still issue report cards, one is desperately needed to grade how well or badly the United States is doing at home and abroad.

Unfortunately, no adults seem to be around to ensure that necessary corrective action will be taken to rectify deficiencies and low or failing grades. Fortunately, one universal standard is around for grading: the Preamble to the US Constitution.

For those who do not have a copy of the constitution handy, the Preamble states: “We the People of the United States, to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Where to start? In 2022, these noble aims seem oxymoronic given today’s bitterly partisan and seemingly intractably divided nation. A more perfect union does not resonate well with two political parties set on winning and maintaining power at virtually any cost rather than on assuring good governing. Similarly, ensuring domestic tranquillity seems as far distant as it was in 1861 before a bloody civil war, the most lethal in American history, was fought to unify north and south.

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About promoting the general welfare, it is self-evident that a strong, healthy and dynamic economy along with fiscal responsibility forms the bedrock for this aspiration. But the highest inflation in decades and exploding national debt and annual budget deficits surely cast a long and ominous shadow on the future. The nation’s debt is around $30 trillion against the 2022 GDP of $23 trillion-about one-third as great.

In FY 2021, US government receipts were $3.581 trillion and outlays, due in large part to Covid spending, $7.249 trillion with a $3.669 trillion deficit. The FY 2022 budget, still not passed by Congress, projects receipts of $4.174 trillion; expenditures of $6.011 trillion; and a $1.837 trillion deficit. What happens when interest rates increase as they must to three, four, five or six per cent?

For this fiscal year, assume government spending of $6 trillion. Five per cent interest rates on the debt come to $1.5 trillion or a quarter of the Federal budget. And even three per cent is close to $1 trillion, or about a quarter of a trillion dollars more than will be spent on defence. What grade should be assigned? Surely not a passing one!

Providing for the common defence is even more shocking. From 1776 until 1947, with the exception of the War of 1812, the US had an enviable record of winning wars. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the Spanish American War (1898) were unfair fights. The US of course won two world wars in concert with allies. In those 171 years, the military was organized into the War and Navy Departments. But after 1947, the National Security Acts (as amended) created the National Security Council, the Department and Secretary of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Since then, the US track record in winning wars has been unimpressive. Korea was at best a draw. Vietnam was an unmitigated disaster. After twenty years in Afghanistan, the US withdrew turning that country back to the Taliban it attempted to defeat with the prospect of tens of millions of Afghans facing some measure of starvation this winter. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and the first Gulf War was a 100-hour exercise in target practice in which during the entire six-month duration, 147 American servicemen died, more than half to friendly fire and an unlucky Iraqi missile strike on a barracks-hardly a war.

What was created however was a dominant military excelling in winning battles and a government incapable of winning wars-all for about $750 billion in this year’s budget.

That said, the US still maintains the largest and most vibrant economy in the world-so far. People from around the world still flock here trying to gain entrance. And technological progress still seems unlimited. Yet, what grades should the US receive using the Preamble as the standard?

Ben Franklin’s advice is crucial. We have a republic for as long as we can keep it. The absence of civility and compromise; growing anger and resentment of the public towards each other; and a breakdown in society over income and wealth may not be subject to grading. But surely, none is evidence of good health.

Will 2022 be any different? Hope springs. But Hope Springs is only a small town in Arkansas.

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