**Desperate but not serious America today**

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Not since 1861 has America faced so many simultaneous, daunting challenges and dangers: a raging pandemic; a nation intractably split over almost every issue including a gross disregard for the legitimacy of the past presidential election; the second impeachment trial of an ex-president with death threats directed at senators who would vote to convict; two political parties riven by extreme animosity towards the other; profound divisions within each party; a stumbling economy; growing debt; the threat of domestic right wing white nationalist and extremist violence and terror; and a great power competition against a hostile China and Russia.

When war clouds shrouded the continent prior to World War I, officials in Paris and Berlin had drastically different perceptions about conditions in Europe. In Paris’ Quai D’Orsay, the situation was viewed as serious but not yet desperate. In Berlin’s Reichstag, the perspective was entirely opposite: desperate but not (fully) serious. Both fit the state of affairs in America.

How America got here is important in relieving and mitigating the array of crises confronting the nation. Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler wrote about the rise and fall of nations. Perhaps America is falling victim to the iron grip of history. But other explanations are more relevant.

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Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, America’s past four presidents played major and often inadvertent roles in determining America’s future. Bill Clinton came into office with the best hand dealt to any modern president. The Soviet Union had collapsed. George H.W. Bush smashed Saddam Hussein and put the economy back on track.

In foreign policy, the decision to expand NATO would ultimately contribute to creating a hostile Russia. That did not excuse Russian behavior or assume its intentions were benign. But, today, a quarter of a century later, relations with Russia were never more combative. NATO expansion was not the sole cause but was a contributor to this precarious situation.

George W. Bush’s interventions into Afghanistan to bring Osama bin Laden to justice and then the invasion of Iraq over weapons of mass destruction that did not exist wrought chaos in the region inflaming extremism. Ironically, the method for radicalizing and recruiting hundreds of thousands of coverts to Islamist extremism migrated to this country much as the Corona virus did. Right wing white nationalists and extremists coalesced in large numbers, in part due to the forty-fifth president’s incendiary tweets and actions using terror and violence to disrupt the old order. How widespread and entrenched these American converts to extremism are is unknown. But with law enforcement’s declaration that these groups constitute the most dangerous domestic terrorist threat should be taken with the utmost seriousness.

Barack Obama’s policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan extended those conflicts. The “strategic pivot” to Asia provoked China and did nothing to correct the mistaken assumption that as China’s economy flourished, it would become a more pluralistic society. The failure to act once having set “red lines” over Syria’s use of chemical weapons hurt American credibility.

Last, Donald Trump exacerbated and exploded these fault lines. “America First” policies largely abandoned America’s allies, greatly damaging American credibility and eroding its commitments. At home, Trump’s disruptive nature, character and conduct played to the worst instincts and flaws in politics and society neutering fact and truth. That nearly three quarters of Republicans believe the election of Joe Biden was stolen and Trump won is not a healthy sign. And the Trump Covid Covid vaccination plan was practically non-existent.

Trump incited and abetted the January 6th uprising on Capitol Hill widening the already vast divisions in America. Next week’s impeachment trial will only deepen these divides as almost equal numbers of Americans will be outraged or pleased over the verdict. Under these circumstances, what can be done?

In a perfect world in which civility and compromise exist, both parties would seek to resolve the multi-crises endangering the nation. A rational Republican Party would come to its senses and reject the falsehoods and myths invented by Donald Trump and his followers. A rational Democratic Party would agree to a truce with Republicans; end the incendiary rhetoric; and seek genuine bipartisan steps to counter the pandemic, revive the economy and eliminate the threat of domestic terror.

None of this will happen. Worse, not all international actors will cease and desist actions inimical to American interests. The attack on Pearl Harbour unified America. The current crises had opposite effects.

As Adam Smith opined after the British were defeated at the Battle of Saratoga in 1778 and one of his students lamented, “We are ruined,” the great economist responded, “There is a lot of ruin in a nation.” Let us hope so.

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