

*Slouching toward FUBAR?
Thoughts on Recent Events in the US*

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In its Volume 17, No. 3 (2016) issue, this journal presented my commentary on the 2016 US Presidential election – *From SNAFU to FUBAR?* I got a lot wrong, was dreadfully naïve or ignorant on some points, and too hopeful on others. In some things, I at least edged somewhat close to the truth. The illusion of “running government like a business” – or at least like the Trump Organization (a family-owned enterprise largely subject only to the whims of its owner and his children and associates) – is now fully exposed. I did say at the time that

The US categorically cannot be run like a business, and if it was –presumably a privately-owned rather than a listed business – that would be in clear disregard of the US constitution. Attempting to approach the United States in the same spirit as a business enterprise is likely to be a quickly disconcerting, and unsuccessful as well as politically very costly, way to start.

I suspect a fair argument can be made that manifest personal defects aside, many of President Trump’s problems are due to his trying to run – or wanting to try to run – the US the way he ran his businesses. It is said that Joseph Conrad once spent many hours contemplating the difference between *penniless* and *without a penny*. We now know that

there is a clear difference between “like a business” (at a minimum, a Trump business) and “in a business-like fashion.”

One is tempted to say that the answer is definitely in: FUBAR. But that is not quite true. As both Marx and systems theorists have pointed out, changes in quantity may become changes in quality. Yes, FUBAR (allowing, however, as well for events leading to the Civil War), but much of this is clearly an extension of trends going on for several years, if not decades. How this progression works out – and if it can be turned – will be central questions in US and world politics for the future.

It would be easy to blame everything on the outgoing President; while much lies at his feet, that is short-sighted. It would be easy to blame a lot on the Republican party and its behaviour over the last four years, and again there is much that lies at its feet, but that, too, is short-sighted. The forces that led to President Trump, that led to 6 January 2021, and that could lead to further eruptions, are many and varied; there are many layers to this onion, many roots of varying length and nature. Things like this do not happen for simple, immediate reasons only. Margaret Thatcher supposedly denied the existence of society; well, it exists, and will take its revenge on those who ignore it. The US is one sick puppy, and the path to a cure will be long, hard, and not necessarily successful. Like physics, the coronavirus and melting ice, society does not care what you think: it does what it does in response to the forces acting upon it. Word magic will only take you so far, and then becomes disconnected from that reality. We respond to the world as we see it – but the world responds to us as it is. In that difference lies the possibility of correction (the path of science, reason, and knowledge) or a path to illusion. If the US is to recover domestically and become fit to deal with the challenges of the international sphere – its tarnished reputation with allies and others, the rise of a confident China, Russian scheming, and other challenges – it must address broader issues than merely one person or one party. The commentariat, emerging from its fixation on immediate events, is now starting to grapple with the longer-term implications of immediate events, and in so doing may discover what others have been noticing for a long time.

Illuminati: No longer just a card game!

Social media have a lot to answer for: trolls and bots; infiltration by foreign agents; business models and algorithms that facilitate the spread of disinformation; anonymous, reckless, thoughtless, unfiltered cathartic postings. So much for theories of deliberative democracy – you might as well try to have an intelligent conversation in the middle of a barroom brawl. Conspiracy theories and paranoid appeals, have, of course, a much longer history, but the rise of QAnon and its ilk has certainly been facilitated by social media. A lie could go around the world before the truth put on its boots before now and was given a boost by the degeneration of news into infotainment, scoop-chasing, and the need to fill 24-hour cable, but social media have accelerated this. But this all begs an additional question: what would increase a population's susceptibility to these? To my uninstructed mind, it is too easy simply to point to a lack of good information or to a lack of skill in interpreting information. Beyond all this, it seems to me, there must be a fundamental distrust of the more established sources of information (including expertise, which has been increasingly politicized, weaponized, and thus degraded). There must be a sense of rising pressure, anger, fear, anxiety, and frustration; a sense of a loss of control over one's circumstances; a feeling of forces unknown or dimly known which must be named, understood, acted upon. There must also be an apparatus able to exploit all this, and those – rogues, charlatans, the power-hungry and the sincere – willing to use it. Social media are merely a great new tool.

Responding to this raises issues of access to information and of handling disinformation or poor information, free speech, and responsibility in both old media and new. However, below this is another layer: how has the American population become this vulnerable? The answer to that lies in broader matters of the state of American society and of its political system.

“...but some animals are more equal than others”

The pandemic has revealed various social fissures in the US, as it has in other countries: the threat of a K-shaped recovery, the unique vulnerabilities of workers who cannot work from home and who are now deemed *essential* but who are traditionally among the low-paid, and considerable variation in underlying health conditions (thus

vulnerability to the virus) and in death rates depending on racial and other social factors. But many of these fissures and vulnerabilities are of longer standing, and it is not only the pandemic that has flagged them. It has been observed for some years that income inequality is increasing and social mobility is decreasing. The opioid crisis, the economic distress felt in various parts of the country but especially in the Midwest and rural or small-town America, the rise of *deaths of despair*, the *culture wars* – these are not new. It would not be at all fair to pin all of these on the domination of *conservative* economic and political thought and strategy over the last forty years, but perhaps it is time to suggest that neoliberal economics – for all its success in raising the stock market to new heights – and right-wing political strategies and policy choices – for all their success in winning elections and steering the broader course of policy – have been significant *societal* failures. An attempted shift to right-wing populism is an implicit acknowledgement of what cannot be openly said, while attempting not to alter substantial portions of the causal factors at work.

The Trump/Republican base is not homogenous and responds to differing forces. Attempts to correct the US course and to *heal* require that at least some – the more legitimate – of their grievances be addressed, as well as the legitimate grievances of those who tend to vote Democrat. But some questions beg for answers. Are the American people, in general, truly happy with a health care system that demonstrably restricts accessibility, inflates individual and overall costs, and drives many to bankruptcy and, despite its technical proficiency, has mediocre overall results as compared to other states? Are they truly happy with *stand your ground*, *open carry* and ready access to firearms? For all the difficulties that may honestly be professed in the abortion debate, do they really support the anti-abortion hardliners? Do they really buy into a hyper-individualism that refuses to recognize, much less address, the existence of societal forces and their consequences, or that inflates individual freedom to the point that a sense of a balancing responsibility to others is dwarfed? Why has the US lagged behind other developed, Western states in its approach to social welfare? The reasons behind these phenomena point to difficulties in the political system, noted below, which have inhibited an effective response.

Demographic shifts present other challenges – and the US is not alone in this. Whether for Canada or Western Europe, among others, increasing immigration from

non-European populations and the percentage growth of *ethnic* or *racial* minorities demand a search for an effective answer to a vital question: who are “we”? This requires looking backward as well as forward. Dealing honestly with one’s country’s history can be a trial, as Canadians are discovering too. The solution that presents itself, whatever the cultural anxieties this might generate among the currently dominant and defining groups, must surely be that the *unum* has to be *pluribus*.

“I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

Labelling these as *most-feared words*, the conservative shift that became established under the Reagan presidency heralded, and fed, a rising sense of distrust in government, and a growing challenge to its legitimacy and capacity to act. Inability to address adequately – and often contributing directly and indirectly to – growing social problems feeds back upon this.

The appeals for *unity* especially following 6 January 2021, are notable, but can easily be hollow, especially as emanating from a Right which had done a sterling job of contributing to the fractures in the country. *Unity* requires a degree of moderation on the part of Democrats, yes, but it certainly requires a great degree of sober reflection, contrition and change in behaviour from the Right if necessary things are to be done. Most notably on the Right, the move to drive moderate Republicans – *R(epublicans) I(n) N(ame) O(nly)* – from that party has reduced the possibilities for effective cross-aisle cooperation and effective representation of much of the American population. For their part, the Left-Progressive elements in the Democrats have not yet succeeded in dominating their party (rhetoric on the Right notwithstanding), though such ill-favoured slogans as *defund the police* – catchy, simple, and misleading – are a godsend to the opposition. If the Democrats can shift the centre of gravity of political thinking and action, that in itself will be an accomplishment and open up possibilities for action. But romanticism, slogans and over-eagerness are no substitute for *the slow boring of hard boards*. (One can only hope that the boring is not *too* slow, and that the carpentry is competent.)

Any American revival will require a reform and recovery in the US political system, to enable a response to these and other problems which is at least reasonably

coherent and effective. That is a very tall, if crucial, order. The extent of lack of faith in and distrust of Congress has been notable in polling for some time, and with good reason. The US system presents several features, which have coalesced to reduce coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness in legislation, and in responding to the majority of the population while paradoxically increasing its responsiveness to strong, concentrated groups less associated with that majority. Frustration, distrust of the political system and of politicians as a group, disengagement, and the search for alternative means of action result.

(I acknowledge here that, as someone living in a political system reflecting the Westminster model of responsible government, my biases affect my assessment.)

Some features of the US system are effectively locked by the constitution. The much-vaunted separation of powers may be a reasonably good thing as a check upon government, but not all checks upon government are equally desirable. The issue is not *small* government versus *big* government but *good* government – competent, effective, and reflecting the wishes of (what one hopes is) a well-informed electorate. A powerful bad government is dangerous and a threat to liberty, yes, but if government is hamstrung, what protects us from the excesses of private power? How can a weak and hamstrung government pursue necessary and reasonable goals of policy? While the separation of powers may move policies towards compromise, the separation of powers means it may do so precisely at the cost of coherence and effectiveness and builds in significant tendencies towards gridlock. Accompanied by hyper-partisanship and the development of *disciplined* parties, it becomes a recipe for doing nothing or even for the implementation of policies strongly counter to those of an administration. The Electoral College and the composition of the Senate increasingly skew to opportunities for blockage by smaller segments of the population. Protection of political minorities and smaller states may be desirable but may also become too much of a *good* thing. The frequency of House elections may –or may not – increase responsiveness by Representatives, but contributes of necessity to a constant campaigning mode, vulnerability to campaign financing concerns and, combined with gerrymandering and primaries, a strengthening of ideological extremes.

Constitutional provisions are difficult or likely impossible to change but other, less entrenched features are less so. Arcane rules in the Congress (the filibuster and the

control of the legislative process by Speakers being only the more obvious examples), make the possibilities for gridlock even greater. Too much deference to the sensibilities of individual members of Congress may not be a good thing. Congressional rules could be reformed to reduce tendencies to unreasonable blockage. Beyond merely the rules, increasing attention to gerrymandering and the lack of turnover in House elections point particularly to the need to restore competitive elections that might strengthen the voice of the political centre. The idea of term limits is at best a poor substitute for genuine competition and at worst a red herring offered up by those who wish to continue their favoured position in the legislative process. Reformed campaign financing must break the hold of big donors. The power of lobbyists needs to be curtailed: input by interested elements is perfectly legitimate, but the actual writing of legislation by lobby groups, dependence of legislators on big donors (whether individuals, corporate or groups) and insufficiencies in independent policy-analysis capabilities for Congress (as a whole and for individual members) are not desirable. Too much autonomy for the apparatus of government is not a good thing; neither is too little.

A special word is due regarding the fragmented, overly complex election system, from voter registration through to counting. It is too readily open to local, if not national, manipulation (including but not limited to gerrymandering) for partisan advantage. Rather than those coming to power locally or at the state level simply saying, "it's my turn now," there needs to be agreement on mutual self-denial and resistance to such opportunism. To an outside observer, the claim that 2020 saw the most secure, fairest, and most transparent election ever in the US still leaves one wondering, in terms of its domestic elections, if (to borrow an old phrase and make it more polite) the US could organize a drinks party in a house of ill-repute.

Security and Strategy

That these challenges affect the security and strategic situation of the US cannot be doubted. What can we say of a state that now may have legitimate fears of extremist penetration of its police forces and military, has a proliferation of armed *militias* unregulated and active, if not openly tolerated, demonstrating in capital cities, has periodic massive demonstrations against its law enforcement apparatus, and in which

substantial portions of its population are manifestly adhering to bizarre and palpably false narratives that attempt to delegitimize the duly elected government? What can we say of a state that has trouble writing, much less passing, a budget? Even if we accept a system-dominant approach to explaining policy outcomes – at least the external outcomes – neoclassical realists have successfully argued that it is necessary to open up the state (by which they seem to mean really the state apparatus) to explain what policies are attempted in response to external challenges. But opening up the state means opening up more than simply the state apparatus, and that can of worms cannot easily be closed. The role of social forces in shaping policy – the framing of external and internal challenges, the framing and selection of choices, and the capacities to act – cannot be ignored. Score points for Valery Hudson (*Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*) and Mancur Olson (*The Rise and Decline of Nations*). The ability of the US to respond successfully to the challenges posed by China, Russia, climate change, and others, will be affected profoundly by how it handles its internal challenges.