Anxiety and the 2016 Presidential Election

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*I offer this as a “venue for discussion” rather than as a full analysis of the current situation. The election has been a form of national political trauma. Trauma is often painful, but also offers the opportunity to see things in new ways, break old patterns that had become dysfunctional and re-think who we want to be and what we want to do in the future. As such it can be an exceptionally valuable time if used wisely. The following are some thoughts about that. They’re a little disjointed in spots, but hey, I’m working through the trauma of this myself.*

**Political trauma**

When something powerful and unexpected happens that pushes us beyond what we thought were our limits that constitutes trauma. The recent election qualifies. Even the majority of those voting for Donald Trump recognize that he has many less than sterling attributes and has no political record to use to give us reliable guidance as to what he will actually do when President. He is essentially a wild card, and that inherently carries higher risk. Those voting for him obviously hope for the higher reward that may come from this gamble. We may get either outcome or neither – all we know is that the stakes are much higher and the outcome is not certain.

The net result is increased anxiety for anyone who does not assume that his election guarantees the results they desire.

The deepest trauma however goes to those who did not vote for Mr, Trump, because up until the actual vote count there was almost universal belief that he would not and could not win. Pundits are now calling this a “black swan event” and have some justification for doing so; the nature of a black swan event is that an extremely intense negative choice or outcome is perceived as impossible when it is in fact only unlikely. When it occurs it seems impossible for it to have done so. As a result, most of those opposing Mr. Trump felt blindsided and somewhat baffled: reality is not aligning with our (mis)perception of it.

**Definition of American Values**

The deepest concern (other than the uncertainty as to the actual behavior Mr. Trump will display when in office) is that of feeling like there no longer is a sharing of core American values between the opposing sides in this election.

Mr. Trump appeared to display values that those voting against him regarded as not simply bad behavior, but fundamentally un-American – or not American as it has evolved up to today. Most of these violations of values were regarded as “deal-breakers” in and of themselves, overriding any partisan considerations. This belief was widely shared even among Republican leaders.

So do those who voted for Mr.Trump not believe in these values? Do they believe in a fundamentally different America?

To answer that question it is necessary to list what values have been linked to America. There are surprisingly many of these and some of them are contradictory or act to limit each other.

For example, two core American values are freedom and equality. Unrestricted freedom, however, creates inequality. And rigidly enforcing strict equality comes at the cost of restricting freedom. The trick is finding the right balance, and that balance ebbs and flows over time. Currently the freedom to amass or control enormous amounts of money is seriously damaging the financial equality in this country. Imposing restrictions is seen, correctly, as anti-freedom. What is less directly recognized is that all efforts to increase the economic freedom are in fact anti-equality, and BOTH values are necessary to our society maintaining its integrity.

We are familiar with structures designed to provide checks and balances, but less familiar with how some of our basic beliefs act as checks and balances on each other.

(SIDEBAR: The risk of a complete outsider to the political system such as Mr. Trump is whether he will understand and respect the checks and balances as necessary impediments or seek to bypass them. This is comparable to Adolf Hitler [not that Trump is Hitler, but the situation is remarkably similar] in that Hitler was democratically elected in one of the most advanced and respected countries of its day, but used an apparent terrorist attack to declare martial law and thus remove the legislative and judicial checks and balances that hindered him doing as he desired. Not that I want to ADD to the existing anxiety, only to recognize that this also is an unlikely BUT POSSIBLE risk and one that should be considered, not ignored as “impossible.”)

Returning to American values… many of these are not actually constitutional, but are ones we have augmented or distorted along the way, reinterpreting them into larger contexts. The intent of the 2nd amendment was likely not that everyone had a right to own a gun, but it now has taken on that quality, There is no constitutional right to privacy, but that has become incorporated into law. Our legal system, in fact, allows us to evolve the original concepts of the Constitution and Bill of Rights into forms the meet the demands of changes that happen over time. It is unlikely that what we mean when we say “liberty” is the exact same meaning it had during the American Revolution. (We wonder how the founders could speak of equality and continue to allow slavery; perhaps there are parallels there as we wonder how those voting for Trump can ignore his lies, contradictions, and exaggerations.)

So again, what are the American values? Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly – of these there is little argument. What of the freedom of the press and the right to have transparency in government? Not constitutional, but some of that ensconced in our laws.

What of the right to not live out old age in poverty? That came only in the 1940s, and even today exists in a form much less secure than that of the Scandinavian countries. But again, this is still generally accepted in concept now if not always in form.

**Here is a list of what I might call the Democratic Party’s top American values. Many of these are equally shared by Republicans, but may be given a different priority.**

* Americans honor and value diversity.
* Americans welcome in those who share our values and are willing to do the hard work necessary to succeed. We are a country of immigrants.
* Americans treat other people with respect, even those we dislike.
* Americans do not believe in discrimination based on race, age, sexual orientation, mental capacity, or religious/spiritual beliefs.
* Americans value the wisdom of separating church and state.
* Americans believe in people being treated as equals, especially in regards to law.
* Americans believe that people should have equal opportunities to succeed, and that success should not be dependent on the circumstances of your birth.
* Americans believe that the highest levels of success should be accessible by anyone, not just those born to wealth, power, or powerful associations.
* Americans believe in fair play.
* Americans ensure that those in the minority are heard and considered in making decisions, and that the best decisions are not one-sided.
* Americans believe we are a better country because we choose to act that way, and because of our power can do powerfully good things that others cannot. Conversely, we must guard against making bad choices because our power can make those worse than others can do as well.
* Americans believe we should strive to be the example to the world of a just, fair, and free way of governing and living.
* America is a country governed by reason and justice, not emotion and intimidation.

**There are other American beliefs as well, some of which have historically been more Republican.**

* Americans believe we are the best country in the world.
* Americans believe we will always find a way to win if the game is fair.
* Americans strive to always have the best and always come out on top.
* Americans believe in freedom.
* Americans are a moral, God-fearing people.
* Americans strive to be in control of their circumstances and destiny.
* Americans are individualists.
* Americans and American businesses are, with very few exceptions, inherently good and do not need regulations in order to do the right thing.
* The business of America is business.
* The true spirit of America is found in its working class.
* Americans are patriots.
* America is the best place in the world to live.

As mentioned earlier, some of the above beliefs act in opposition or limitation on the others, But they are perhaps a starting point for discovering where there is, or needs to be, common ground.

**Disenfranchisement, crisis, and opportunity**

Given the lack of Congress’s ability to truly represent the people, most people in the country feel disenfranchised and have felt so for some time. Whereas Democrats have blamed Republicans for much of the inability to address crucial questions, and not without some justification, the truth is that a political system that is often close to equally split between the two parties means that with the way Congress is currently choosing to operate half the population often has no representation whatsoever, with its views being disregarded and its concerns not addressed.

Even as the political parties have devolved into “brands” so has the concept of governance been lost to a win-lose mentality, with the majority actively suppressing the rights of the majority – on both sides. This approaches a form of tyranny – it is useful to remember that tyrants rarely see themselves so, believing instead that they are doing “the right thing” for themselves and others.

Like any crisis, the current political climate affords the opportunity to change or discard patterns that once were useful but over time have become dysfunctional. Given that the extremism that is currently continuing to play out in Congress most likely does not reflect the majority of the population, there is hope that the “middle class” of political views can become rejuvenated and take back governance from the unstable extremes that now hold sway, even as the financial middle class needs to become revitalized.

In this regard Clinton being perceived as in the pocket of vested big-money interests places her in the extreme politics of corporate and insider control – seen by Republicans as the extreme to be eliminated. Democrats see Trump as being in the opposite extreme – also needing to be eliminated. Remarkably, neither candidate actually truly represented the extreme they became symbols for, but that was seen as irrelevant.

So where do we go next? Act to prevent the black swan of totalitarian control. Look to the opportunities the crisis presents to make changes to a system that had become highly dysfunctional (Mr. Trump and Ms Clinton really were neither of them the candidates a healthy political system should have produced), and allow unusual or new ways to develop to return politics to health.

***Do you have thoughts about joy that this paper didn’t go into, didn’t explain well, or are “riffs on this theme”? I’d love to hear them. You can reach me at*** ***uncommon.alaska@gmail.com******.***

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