

Opinion – COVID-19 and the Coming Crisis in America

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, SEP 7 2020

The creeping authoritarianism that has come to define the Trump presidency has crept to the point of embeddedness. It has arrived under the guise of public safety and law and order, demanding complete control and compliance in the process. The summer of 2020 has witnessed American cities under assault from multiple fronts, including the rise in COVID-19 cases, race relations and civil unrest, and the threat of military force on peaceful protesters in the run-up to the November election. The pandemic is global but the crisis in America is homegrown and profoundly local. It is a reactionary and vindictive struggle for the identity and character of America, with an overwhelming burden placed on its frayed and fallible citizens and institutions.

The metrics by which the upcoming election will be judged are those normally reserved for developing and authoritarian states with limited democratic consolidation and perhaps even emerging from civil war. The U.S. is used to monitoring elections and providing the guarantee of free and fair elections overseas. It is used to making 'the world safe for democracy', while often simultaneously clawing back on its democratic values and virtues at home. This moment is unique to America's constitutional history, but it also exists on a long spectrum of intolerance that has spread from Brazil to Poland, Hungary, and the Philippines. Law and order in the name of upholding traditional, often conservative values, protecting public safety, and consolidating power has been a dominant theme of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the rationale for and the legitimation required for the usurpation of these rights in order to provide stability in a time of crisis.

It is a gift to the many burgeoning autocrats who struggle to lead in times of comfort and require emergencies to enhance their rule. In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has been worsened by autocratic and reckless mismanagement and the disavowal of science and expertise. It is just one emergency amongst many, but also a catalytic one that seeks to expose the multitude of society's ills.

2020 has been a year defined by violence in America and the use and legitimation of violence as a political and social weapon. It has been violent in Minneapolis with the murder of George Floyd and violent in front of the White House with the forceful removal of peaceful protesters using tear gas in order to make way for a presidential photo-op. It has been violent in the assault that COVID-19 has left on so many bodies and livelihoods, often affecting the least fortunate among us and highlighting pre-existing racial disparities.

The next phase of violence may well be the unpeaceful transition of power should Joe Biden win the election and President Trump refuse to leave. President Trump has often fanned the flames of this violence and refused to condemn violent acts should they have the chance to boost his electoral prospects. In a campaign and presidency built on demonization and division, it is unlikely that Trump will have a sudden change of heart and attempt to reunify the nation at this late stage. The widening rifts and politicization of key institutions, from the U.S. military to the U.S. Postal Service, will continue to deny voters the ability to have trust in their government and their fellow citizens. Even in the midst of a pandemic, there is no shared experience in America in 2020 and no common ideals to cling to that have not been tainted by partisan vitriol.

America has existed as an ideal for a long time, as a shining city upon a hill that has guided the vulnerable and the persecuted to its shores. In the Trump presidency, with very few refugee resettlements and immigration severely restricted, the reckoning on America's moral and ideological underpinnings has come from within. The moment when

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states will be able to look past America and find a new harbour for their dreams and ambitions is fast approaching. The competition cannot claim those same values that have defined America. But the practice of those values is sacrosanct, and the power vacuum that has been unleashed by the Trump presidency has lasted long enough to form permanent alliances. Many states will no longer look to America as a partner. Instead, they will see a withering shell of a state struggling to confront the demons of its past while lacking the moral fortitude required of a great power seeking to claim the future.

There are reasons for hope and optimism to ensure that 2020 is not America's year of decline and irrelevance. But it will require hard work and effort at a time when many people are suffering from COVID-19, are unemployed, struggling to pay healthcare bills, and suffering from police brutality and the mass protests that have caused countless other injuries in the process. Complacency is an option, but it assumes a position of comfort that requires little to no engagement in society's long arc of development. Coordinated activism, increased voter turnout and registration, and fundamental changes to American democracy are warranted. They have in fact been demanded by a wide stratum of society since the death of George Floyd and the countless other acts of violence that have occurred since then.

A Biden presidency will not automatically erase the tragedy and hardship of the last four years, even if he wins by a large margin as is currently predicted. It will not automatically signal to America's longstanding allies that America is back. Whether the transition of power is peaceful or not this fall will be the greatest harbinger of where America's place will be at the table of nations. For America's place in the world is not assumed as a byproduct of its own exceptionalism. It is driven by those common notions of power, sovereignty, and survival that are critical to the destiny of nations but also to their downfall if applied improperly.

America's recovery from COVID-19 will be much longer than its peers given the toll it has taken on the economy and loss of life. A full recovery will be worth it, but it must account for the pre-existing conditions that existed well before COVID-19 and which have led to so much despair and destruction. This profound tragedy should also serve as a catalyst for the reinvigoration of public trust in institutions, and a societal shift in the way citizens are included in the democratic process. America has never been a full democracy but rather a flawed one that has often failed to fully address its imperfections. 2020 will determine whether American democracy has the capacity for profound renewal or whether it will remain mired in a state of complacency and strife.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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