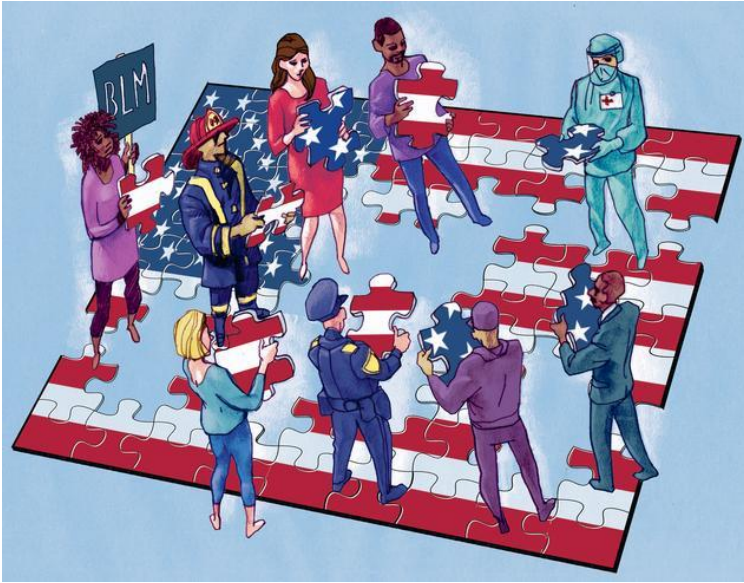


America Doesn't Need a New Revolution



Can the country confront its current problems with its traditional can-do spirit? We have barely four months to figure out how.

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Outrage is the natural response to the brutal killing of George Floyd. Yet outrage and clear, critical thinking seldom go hand in hand. An act of police brutality

became the catalyst for a revolutionary mood. Protests spilled over into violence and looting. Stores were destroyed; policemen and civilians injured and killed. The truism “black lives matter” was joined by a senseless slogan: “Defund the police.”

Democratic politicians—and some Republicans—hastened to appease the protesters. The mayors of Los Angeles and New York pledged to cut their cities’ police budgets. The Minneapolis City Council said it intended to disband the police department. The speaker of the House and other congressional Democrats donned scarves made of Ghanaian Kente cloth and kneeled in the Capitol. Sen. Mitt Romney joined a march.

Corporate executives scrambled to identify their brands with the protests. By the middle of June, according to polls, American public opinion had been transformed from skepticism about the Black Lives Matter movement to widespread support. Politicians, journalists and other public figures who had denounced protests against the pandemic lockdown suddenly lost their concern about infection. One Johns Hopkins epidemiologist [tweeted](#) on June 2: “In this moment the public health risks of not protesting to demand an end to systemic racism greatly exceed the harms of the virus.” Although I am a black African—an immigrant who came to the U.S. freely—I am keenly aware of the hardships and miseries African-Americans have endured for centuries. Slavery, Reconstruction, segregation: I know the history. I know that there is still racial prejudice in America, and that it manifests itself in the aggressive way some police officers handle African-Americans. I know that by measures of wealth, health and education,

African-Americans remain on average closer to the bottom of society than to the top. I know, too, that African-American communities have been disproportionately hurt by both Covid-19 and the economic disruption of lockdowns.

Yet when I hear it said that the U.S. is defined above all by racism, when I see books such as Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility" top the bestseller list, when I read of educators and journalists being fired for daring to question the orthodoxies of Black Lives Matter—then I feel obliged to speak up.

"What the media also do not tell you," I tweeted on June 9, "is that America is the best place on the planet to be black, female, gay, trans or what have you. We have our problems and we need to address those. But our society and our systems are far from racist."

America looks different if you grew up, as I did, in Africa and the Middle East. There I had firsthand experience of three things. First, bloody internecine wars between Africans—with all the combatants dark-skinned, and no white people present. Second, the anarchy that comes when there is no police, no law and order. Third, the severe racism (as well as sexism) of a society such as Saudi Arabia, where de facto slavery still exists.

I came to the U.S. in 2006, having lived in the Netherlands since 1992. Like most immigrants, I came with a confidence that in America I would be judged on my merits rather than on the basis of racial or sexual prejudice.

There's a reason the U.S. remains, as it has long been, the destination of choice for would-be migrants. We know that there is almost no difference in the unemployment rate for foreign-born and native-born workers—[unlike in the European Union](#).

We immigrants see the downsides of American society: the expensive yet inefficient health-care system, the shambolic public schools in poor communities, the poverty that no welfare program can alleviate. But we also see, as Charles Murray and J.D. Vance have shown, that these problems aren't unique to black America. White America is also, in Mr. Murray's phrase, "coming apart" socially. Broken marriages and alienated young men are problems in Appalachia as much as in the inner cities.

If America is a chronically racist society, then why are the "deaths of despair" studied by Anne Case and Angus Deaton so heavily concentrated among middle-aged white Americans? Did the Covid-19 pandemic make us forget the opioid epidemic, which has disproportionately afflicted the white population?

This country is only 244 years old, but it may be showing signs of age. Time was, Americans were renowned for their can-do, problem-solving attitude. Europeans, as Alexis de Tocqueville complained, were inclined to leave problems to central authorities in Paris or Berlin. Americans traditionally solved problems locally, sitting together in town halls and voluntary associations. Some of that spirit still exists, even if we now have to meet on Zoom. But the old question—“How can we figure this out?”—is threatened with replacement by “Why can’t the government figure this out for us?”

The problem is that there are people among us who don’t want to figure it out and who have an interest in avoiding workable solutions. They have an obvious political incentive not to solve social problems, because social problems are the basis of their power. That is why, whenever a scholar like Roland Fryer brings new data to the table—[showing](#) it’s simply not true that the police disproportionately shoot black people dead—the response is not to read the paper but to try to discredit its author.

I have no objection to the statement “black lives matter.” But the movement that uses that name has a sinister hostility to serious, fact-driven discussion of the problem it purports to care about. Even more sinister is the haste with which academic, media and business leaders abase themselves before it. There will be no resolution of America’s many social problems if free thought and free speech are no longer upheld in our public sphere. Without them, honest deliberation, mutual learning and the American problem-solving ethic are dead.

America’s elites have blundered into this mess. There were eight years of hedonistic hubris under Bill Clinton. Then came 9/11 and for eight years the U.S. suffered nemesis in Afghanistan, Iraq and in the financial crash. After that we had eight years of a liberal president, and the hubris returned. Sanctimonious politics coincided with deeply unequal economics.

Through all this, many Americans felt completely left out—of the technology boom, of the enterprise of globalization. I never thought I would agree with Michael Moore. But at an October 2016 event, he predicted that Donald Trump would win: “Trump’s election is going to be the biggest [middle finger] ever recorded in human history.” I still think that analysis was right. Mr. Trump wasn’t elected because of his eloquence. He was elected to convey that middle finger to those who had been smugly in charge for decades.

But you can’t give the middle finger to a pandemic, and 2020 has exposed the limitations of Mr. Trump as a president. Yet when you look at the alternative, you have to wonder

where it would lead us. Back to the elite hubris of the 1990s and 2010s? I can't help thinking that another shattering defeat might force sane center-left liberals into saying: *That wasn't a one-off; we've got a real problem.* They'll be in the same position as the British Labour Party after four years of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and two election defeats, when eventually the moderates had to throw the leftists out. One way or another, the Democratic Party has to find a way of throwing out the socialists who are destroying it. The Republicans, too, have to change their ways. They have to reconnect with young people. They have to address the concerns of Hispanics. And they have to listen to African-Americans, who most certainly do not want to see the police in their neighborhoods replaced by woke community organizers.

We have barely four months to figure this out in the old American way. To figure out how to contain Covid-19, which we haven't yet done, because—I dare to say it—old lives matter, too, and it is old people as well as minorities whom this disease disproportionately kills. To figure out how to reduce violence, because the police wouldn't use guns so often if criminals didn't carry them so often. Perhaps most pressing of all, to figure out how to hold an election in November that isn't marred by procedural problems, allegations of abuse and postelection tumult.

Who knows? Maybe there's even time for the candidates to debate the challenges we confront—not with outrage, but with the kind of critical thinking we Americans were once famous for, which takes self-criticism as the first step toward finding solutions.

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