

Fixing the Mess

Every pundit, op-ed writer, and even the politicians decry the sorry state of our current lack of civility in this country. Aside from broken down cities, police departments and school districts, we have evolved into a nation that appears to be crumbling at its foundations.

Nostalgists hearken back to the days of the Founders of this nation. Those who were the initiators of the Great American Experiment, were cynical about the ability of the population to control demagogues. The “voters” in 1789 were white Christian men who owned land and did not directly vote either for the President or their Senators. Yet, those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution did not trust their fellow colonists.

It was widely believed during enlightenment times that the shrill voice was most likely to be heard even by hard-working, committed Colonists. It was for that reason that there were no direct elections for the President or the Senate. Rather, the state legislators selected the two Senators from their state and likewise the legislators voted for whom they wanted as President in the rambunctious Electoral College.

The Jacksonian democracy set the United States on the path of electing everyone from dog catcher up to President of the United States. Gone are conventions where politicians nominated candidates for President, and instead we have primaries where the most extreme loud-mouths seem to get the most attention.

Perhaps we should go back to the good old days of voting for our State Representatives and having them decide who sits in the Senate from each State and having those State Representatives select electors who in turn will determine the presidency. I doubt that anyone would support that constitutional throwback to the not-so-good old days. No one would trust politicians in the state legislature to select United States Senators or electors for the Electoral College. That would be considered anti-democratic and even totalitarian.

How then do we insulate the electorate from being swayed by the most vocal and extreme position? In an era where social media and mass communication are quite capable of stirring the pot of discontent, the individual voice of reason seems to be drowned out. It should be noted that even before the days of the internet, the Founders of this country worried greatly about what was then a highly literate population, being swayed by a kook.

When Citizen Genêt came to the United States from France to rally support for the French Revolution, some newly minted citizens of the United States expected to see the guillotine introduced to America. Even Thomas Jefferson had some positive things to say about the French Revolution which resulted in the outright murder of political

opponents. Then again, Jefferson was busy having babies with his mulatto slave, while extolling the virtues of liberty and freedom. Okay, so no one is perfect.

Optimists believe that a firewall can be created between outright demagoguery, incompetence and corruption as opposed to an informed electorate. Perhaps instead of spending billions of dollars on two- and four-year college programs, we should finally institute mandatory public service. After graduation from high school and before college starts, our citizens could be required to perform two years of military or alternative service in order to create a better, safer country. There is a risk in that approach as well. Tyrannical leaders could use such an educated and informed resource to latch onto power or refuse to step aside when others win elections. There is no risk-free solution to our current problems.

Having gone into middle schools and high schools myself, it is shocking how few students know anything about American history, economics, or the financial condition of our nation. Putting aside all political considerations, we seem to equate freedom with the right to know nothing and learn little about what it means to be an effective citizen.

Is the ultimate solution to our fractured and broken political system requiring our young people to serve their country in some useful capacity, or perhaps just enhanced education about what it means to be a useful citizen and to give back? That approach is, of course, much easier said than done. However, mandatory public service would not only be useful to the country but would save us an enormous amount of money in long-term social services which are demanded by those whose functionality is marginal. Responsibility can be taught.

I noticed, one time when I was in Israel, young recruits receiving a lecture from an officer. They were being told about the history of a particular archaeological site that they were visiting, even though they were soldiers in training. I asked my daughter, a former soldier herself, about that, and she said that education concerning the country, its origins and history are part of public service whether one is a soldier or chooses to work in a hospital. We need that approach to keep America strong and cohesive.

We do have AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps recruits need be 17 years of age and older. Those who I have talked to who have served in AmeriCorps have chosen AmeriCorps State and National; AmeriCorps Vista; AmeriCorps NCCC; and there is even AmeriCorps Seniors. AmeriCorps is an outgrowth of international efforts the United States has made to upgrade the living standards of those living in poverty in other countries.

Instead of handing out trillions of dollars of aid to people who do not necessarily need it simply to enrich the business community, perhaps we should vastly expand organizations like AmeriCorps and do our best to keep them non-political and serious about training young people to uplift our decaying cities and towns. AmeriCorps needs to interface with military and National Guard options as well.

Expansion of programs like AmeriCorps have been suggested before, but it would require shifting priorities from unnecessary financial boondoggles to programs that really work. It is easier for lazy politicians to write checks than to work with programs that have a proven track record of success.

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