

WHERE ARE WE HEADED AS A NATION? - A NEED FOR REFLECTION

Where are we headed as a nation? As activists and reformers, most of us spend our time in the here and now advocating for changes that will bring about a more just and compassionate society. Every so often, however, we need to take a broader and more detached look at the trends shaping our present and future. This crazy and troubling moment in our history appears to be one of those necessary times to do some reflection.

With all the horrors taking place in Washington, D.C., it is tempting to say that all our troubles stem from Donald Trump and his Administration. If we could just replace Trump and his cronies with saner, less polarizing, and more law abiding and competent leadership then all would be well. Although the country's immediate crises call on us to do everything we can to replace Trump and the current Congressional majority, such a change alone won't restore health to our society. Negative social, economic, and political trends were already in place long before Trump's election in 2016.

In fact, Trump's victory, can be viewed as the result of these negative trends. Even the efforts of the Russians to damage our political system through social media were aimed at inflaming already polarized groups in this country. Thus, Trump is a product of negative forces that already existed, and he has manipulated some of these trends and made them worse for his own political ends.

How did we get to this perilous state? One of the triggers that prompted my thinking about long term trends was reading about the decline of the Roman Republic. As an escape from the present, I recently read a trilogy of books about the life of Cicero, the famous Roman Senator and orator who lived in the era that culminated with Rome becoming an empire ruled by an emperor. Written by Robert Harris, the three novels, Imperium, Conspirata, and Dictator, follow Cicero from his time as a young Senator and lawyer to his final year as an aging statesman when he was assassinated after unsuccessfully working to prevent his beloved Republic from ending up as a military dictatorship.

What I found eerie when reading this day to day chronicle of Cicero's life in the ancient Roman Republic was the comparison I could draw in my mind to what is going on in this country. During Cicero's time, the Senate was comprised primarily of members of Rome's aristocracy. Whereas in earlier days of the Republic, Senators worked for the general welfare of this city state, by Cicero's era, too many of the elite only thought about furthering or protecting their wealth and positions. Personal greed and competition for government offices that would solidify family power over shadowed any efforts to grapple with long or short term issues. Meanwhile, military leaders continued to expand the geographic boundaries of what was becoming an extensive empire; creating a whole new range of governance problems.

Obviously, one should not go too far in comparing the last days of the Roman Republic in 43 BC to events in the U.S. in 2018. However, studying history does teach us that civilizations and societies rise and fall due to a variety of

economic, social, and political forces. What haunted me while reading the Harris' trilogy is the fact that we seem to be mired in a culture of greed not unlike Cicero's Rome.

Our corporate and financial elite is fixated on amassing wealth that primarily benefits its members. Meanwhile income inequality continues to grow at a record rate, and poverty remains high in both urban and rural America. Because of the dominance of money in political campaigns, candidates of both major parties cater to big donors and corporations, and the general welfare is often overlooked or ignored by our elected officials. Unlike Rome, the U.S. doesn't rule the world through military conquest, but our economic and military strength make us a dominant player in a global economy badly in need of reform.

Thus, it is important to examine these long term trends that could insure our decline. The historian Arnold Toynbee measured the success and failure of civilizations and nations in terms of how well they responded to major challenges over time. If a country's leadership continues to make inadequate responses to economic, social, or political problems, then that country is probably doomed to decline.

Part II of this essay will examine some of the major trends that are presently receiving inadequate responses in the U.S., and it will also include a laundry list of needed reforms that just might make a difference. Such an exercise could bog us down in such pessimism that we might be tempted to give up. My purpose, however, is to make us more thoughtful about our activism.