

How Did We Get Where We Are And Where Do We Seem To Be Headed? An Attempt To Make Sense Out Of Current Events In The U.S.

by Bill Woods for StreerVibes) 8.10.21

Where does this country seem to be headed? Normally journalists face enough of a job just sorting out the facts and telling a coherent story about current events. Sometimes, however, it seems important to analyze past and present trends in order to see where they appear to be taking us. The current situation in the U.S. is a time that seems to call for this approach.

As this article is written, the initial sessions of the Congressional Special Committee established to examine what happened at the Capitol on January 6th are taking place. The Capital Police officers who experienced firsthand the violent acts of the mob testified at the Committee's first meeting. Their descriptions of events of that afternoon leave little doubt that the participants were there to both raise havoc and to stop Congress at any cost from ratifying the Electoral College votes that would make Joe Biden the new President. Beyond the physical violence they described, the implications of these acts in terms our democratic process require a thorough and public investigation of how this insurrection came about.

Some basic facts are already known. Donald Trump refused to accept the fact that he lost to Joe Biden, and in the months after the November election helped set in motion a number of court cases based on bogus claims of voter fraud. All the while, he was firing up his base that the election was stolen. Finally, at the well-publicized rally preceding the assault on the Capitol,



Trump urged the crowd to march there in order to stop Congress from accepting the Electoral Votes of the states.

This direct link between the former President and the January 6th insurrectionists should lead us to the next question. How did the country reach a point where a "Reality-TV star known for his huge ego and his extreme and untruthful rhetoric become our President? Further, how did Trump transform the Republican Party into an advocate for white supremacy and policies that make immigrants and non-white people into scapegoats? In just a few years, one of the two major political parties is promoting policies that are endangering representative democracy.

One response to the problems prompting these questions is to blame Trump for them, and to expect a return to normalcy now that he is out of office.

However, too many major social, economic, and political issues remain to accept such a simple answer. The questions seem to require a longer term review of trends and a bit of historical analysis.

Two trends that this writer has been focusing on for years are the growing influence of "big money" in our politics and public policy decisions and the growing economic inequities in this country. Both trends are complex, and one has an unfortunate



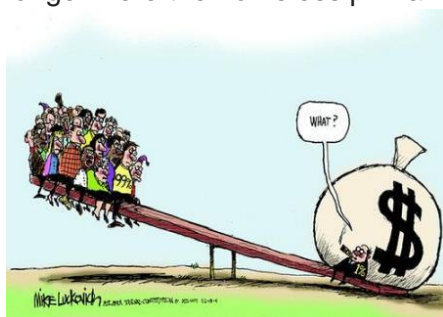
impact on the other. They both seem to have played major roles in bringing about the ill health of the democratic process.

Political and economic analysts began to notice these trends in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Starting with politics, when candidates and parties began relying more and more on TV-ads for messaging, the amassing lots of dollars for campaign budgets became a top priority. Corporations and moneyed interests had always possessed major influence through their lobbyists on public policy, but they now loomed even larger because of this new dependency of candidates on donations. Reform efforts in the 1970s included contribution limits, donation disclosure regulations, and a limited adoption of the public financing of campaigns in several states and cities.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court became a roadblock to major change with a ruling in 1977 that equated campaign spending with freedom of speech. Governments could not impose a lid on campaign spending, and candidates could spend as much of their personal wealth as they wanted. Even faced with this legal obstacle, reformers kept up their activities at all levels. "Big money," however, continued to be a dominant factor in our elections.

Then the 2010 Citizens United Case greatly extended the Supreme Court's decision concerning free speech and campaign spending by ruling that corporations possessed the same rights as individuals in terms of making donations. That case opened up a floodgate of new spending by organizations specifically created to take advantage of this decision. It has also made it much more difficult for activists to find effective reforms that will help lessen the impact of "dark money" on our political and government institutions.

Urban researchers began to be aware of growing economic inequities in this country in the late 1980s. This was the period when homelessness emerged as a major problem in U.S. cities. No longer were the homeless primarily comprised of men with alcohol or drug addictions, but individuals and families with little or no incomes were swelling the ranks. This crisis required a lot of new shelters for women, women with children, and families.



The primary issues creating "the new homeless" were a lack of available affordable housing and jobs that payed living wages. Although valiant efforts were made to serve the immediate homeless in these cities with shelters and services, too little was done both nationally and locally to address the long term causes of this growing poverty. As a result, homelessness, the shortage of affordable housing, and families with children in poverty have simply grown worse in the last thirty-plus years. Finally, although urban homelessness was the most dramatic evidence of this trend, poverty has also overwhelmed thousands of rural communities across the country.

This overly simplistic review of these two trends bring us back to this essay's initial questions. How did we get to the events of January 6th, and where are we headed as a nation? Furthermore, the reader may ask what do economic inequities and "big money" in politics have to do with Trump and the January 6th insurrection?

One answer is that both these trends have diminished the confidence of many Americans in our system of government. The public is aware that candidates are more attuned to big donors than to their average constituents. More importantly, many people who are struggling financially see little government response to their problems and issues, while they witness deregulation and legislation that assists corporations or caters to the wealthy. The long term impact is a growing belief that the economic and political establishment controls politics and government and it has little interest in helping both the poor and a shrinking middle class.

The 2016 election and beyond can in part be explained by this public disillusionment in the establishment and our institutions. Remember Trump defeated the Republican establishment candidates such as Jeb Bush, and Bernie Sanders came close to upsetting Insider Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries that year. In the fall campaign, Trump won over a lot of disillusioned economically struggling white voters with simple answers and by creating scapegoats. He promised to make America great again and that he would build a wall to keep immigrants from coming in and stealing our jobs.

While in office, he nurtured this rural white base by promoting white racism, but he did little to actually improve the economic lives of rural America. Trump's effective use of scapegoating reminds historians of how Hitler blamed the Jews for the economic disparities in Germany. His base, including folks who marched on the Capitol on January 6th, reveal how Trump has won their loyalty over a system that they no longer trust.

The initial question ("Where does the country appear to be heading?") has several answers. None of us has a crystal ball, but many analysts stress the importance of this country's responses to major problems at this juncture in our history. Both the widening economic inequities and the factor of "big money" in politics still must be effectively addressed. President Biden shows a knack for talking to and responding to the issues of average people. However, with a Trump obsessed GOP hell bent on blocking his major initiatives, his success is far from assured.

This is a time when citizen activists and reform groups must stay active on many fronts. Somehow, the democratic process must be restored to health and shown to still be effective in responding to the needs of "we the people." Such an agenda seems huge, but it certainly beats some ugly alternatives.