



Short Communication

America Reeling in the Covid Era

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1. Introduction

In his autobiography Break Shot [1], singer and songwriter James Taylor tells of his experiences as a youngster growing up in the midst of the civil rights era movement of the 1960s, a movement which he called “the last battle of the Civil War”. While I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment, I have a certain chagrin and disappointment over what he must have intuited was but a hope for the future. For as current events demonstrate, the battles of the civil war rage on, and although I am under no illusion that Black Lives Matter movement will be the definitive conclusion to what has evolved into a Cold War with flash points, I too am hopeful that the end might finally be in sight. In this sense the Civil War is truly America's longest war. What's a bit different now is that it's playing out in the midst of arguably the greatest hit to the world economy since the Great

Depression. It is a time of potentially great societal upheaval that catches our nation not at the apogee of power and influence, but reeling in a state of disarray, one that Princeton professor Harold James aptly calls the ‘Late Soviet America’ [2]. The pandemic (which shows little sign of abating let alone not occurring again) and its associated economic collapse, is also against the backdrop of pent up resentment, simmering racial tensions and erosion of public trust that dates back at least a decade or more.

Thus for the Black Lives Matter movement to durably succeed, it is critical that leaders emerge not just in the African American community but throughout society who have a clear understanding of the dynamics of the movement and how it must play out to achieve enduring racial justice and equality. Not being of Black descent myself, I cannot presume to be able to write convincingly on BLM except to

offer my observations as an outsider wanting to support it. First of all, the history of oppression discrimination and brutality against Black Americans has had a longevity and continuity that no other group in the US has endured. In this regard the black American experience stands alone. I say this not to perpetuate a mentality of victimhood but as a call to BLM to stand up and with a singular focus commit to asserting its one cause. Black Lives Matter's day in the spotlight is today. The black community has often in recent times, by virtue of various events, allowed its purpose to fade away from the attention it deserves, leaving to another day reforms that could have already been accomplished. BLM must not allow this to happen anymore. There are those in society of all races who advocate violence as a solution to this inertia, but the memory of MLK casts a long shadow in the hearts and minds of those who remember as well as many of those who desire to complete his vision of full racial equality. To me MLK was the most charismatic, gifted and inspiring orator in the last 100 years and perhaps in the nation's entire history.

He accomplished greater enduring equality for Black Americans at the podium than any other group who espoused violent means. Scholars like to point out that the specter of violence³ lurking in the background was an essential component of his success. It's unclear whether MLK ever consciously framed the movement this way but what is clear to me is that BLM must follow his path and eschew violence in pursuit of its aims. If violence per chance is to occur it must not be from BLM as this is all an aspect of casting off the yoke, of not allowing the

movement to be hijacked and drawn into violence by other people's violent acts.

I understand that some of what I have said and am about to say might be viewed as controversial and politically incorrect, but I feel an urgent need to challenge the conventional progressive thinking since I believe vibrant debate is an essential component of the Founding Fathers' checks and balances. Of course, anyone is free to disagree with me since ideally the marketplace of ideas allows all reasonable and constructive arguments their proper consideration; I only ask that mine receive the same.

In this vein, here are some lessons from 2016 that in post election year 2021 the Democratic party should not ignore. In the wake Donald Trump's victory, a debate reemerged about abolishing the Electoral College as was the case in 2000. But these were not the only times in our modern history that this action was contemplated. In a 2016 post-election broadcast [4], commentator and journalist Fareed Zakaria asks you to rewind to another era, circa 1969 when Richard Nixon proposed exactly the same thing and was filibustered by Democrats in the Congress. Things have certainly changed since then. Many changes of course occur due to globalization, shifting demographics and outsourcing of manufacturing and it was these issues that proved to be the difference in the rust belt and upper Midwestern states in 2016.

But stable career-spanning jobs with health and retirement benefits are foundational to the Democratic Party platform, at least they were, so what happened? Democrats up to recently have seemingly lost their appeal to their historical base of

voters on these traditionally democratic core issues by appearing to neglect them in favor of what many would say are fringe issues and identity politics of the far left. This allowed Donald Trump to run away with these states by doing what? Promising to fight for working class jobs by slapping tariffs on China, securing the border and encouraging repatriation of manufacturing. Hmm, did we just enter a parallel universe? Whether he was able to pull off all of this in four years is almost beside the point. He spoke to these issues, the Democrats did not. How could the Democrats have missed the boat so badly here? The base has drifted so far to the left that its lack of appeal and relevance to most of its historical voters has become troublesome even to a lot of Democrats [5]. Trump has demonstrated that a candidate with coarse rhetoric and a raw personality can, unless he's a walking cadaver or really hard on the eyes, by and large compensate for these off-putting qualities by the excitement he generates from the party base.

Now I'm not saying Joe Biden should emulate Trump's street-fighting-man style of governance but these are clearly unusual times in politics which bespeak of the importance of the party's base. Trump's own imperious, made for TV theatrics complete with an offer to buy Greenland obscure how the Republican Party painted the Democratic party as the party of globalization, bad trade deals, higher taxation and outsourcing, a mantra that President Biden has yet to fully rebut.

Here also, I cannot help but be reminded of economist Milton Friedman whom I paraphrase as follows: 'If you're going to have a welfare state then it must have secure borders' [6]. You might disagree

with this statement but its logic appears sound. In the magazine Reason, Free Minds and Free Markets [7], progressive writer Kerry Howley calls out Friedman for neglecting to consider an alternative scenario in which immigrants arrive but are excluded from government programs. She goes on to state that a number of studies support the idea that immigration undermines citizenry's support for government transfers, arguing that those wanting to cut transfers, conservatives in particular, should therefore want "much, much more" immigration, not less. Are you joking? This type of cynical doublespeak with its impresses no one with an appreciation of the droll (or familiarity with George Orwell). Shikha Dalmia in a different issue insists Friedman's remarks have been misinterpreted. She insists he was always a *laissez faire* immigrationist and quotes his son, economist David Friedman in support: "immigrants may get things they don't pay for but they also pay for things they don't get" [8] meaning, Dalmia goes on to say, that "another society *invests* (italics added) in them while America reaps the dividends....without having had to pay for their schools, health care and other public services" [9].

At least Dalmia acknowledges these are investments not transfers even though both she and David Friedman miss the boat by characterizing them as the latter. The question is are we getting enough of a return locally in our investment in our schools, child health care and other public services for our citizens? The bottom line: If Milton Friedman were alive today he would agree that investing at home is better than investing by proxy elsewhere.

It is my belief that the most cherished, fundamental yet difficult to implement policies of the Democratic Party are likely to remain unrealized without comprehensive immigration reforms securing the border. For example, comprehensive health care reform beyond Obamacare is unlikely without such an agreement. Furthermore, once the pandemic is over any new social programs or expansion of existing ones are also likely to encounter formidable resistance. But in the current climate it is difficult to have a meaningful conversation of this topic without it invariably devolving into a conversation about racism and like non-sequiturs.

Fear of this kind of conversational undermining is perhaps why few Democrats, President Biden included, have addressed this issue in a functionally meaningful way and by that I mean in a manner that would maximize the success of what Democrats claim are among their most fundamental of policies; providing a social safety net, increasing income equality, and renewing public and social trust. Perhaps the party believes that they can achieve these goals despite or even because of open borders. That is a slippery slope that threatens to transform the discussion from diversity into who should be in the majority; a recipe for Balkanization. It is difficult to take seriously secession ballot measures such as proposed recently in California but the very fact that secession is being bandied about ought to be cause for alarm.

Some journalists suggest that immigration is a back burner issue. I believe this is inaccurate and I am hardly the first to say so. Just before the pandemic, Farid Zakaria called the border migration issue the

Democratic Party's major weakness [10]. Even if the pandemic has changed things and I am wrong the dynamics outlined above have an evidentiary basis.

What happens in a general sense after the covid pandemic of course sets the tone of civil and economic discourse moving forward. Life has changed, business is not as usual and won't be for a long time to come. From a broader perspective, a relevant question for the electorate is whether the Democratic party is willing to move in a sustained way on the issues mentioned above, or does it stay the course. Even with Trump's loss in 2020, his 'cult of personality' is such that without a successor nonetheless committed to addressing all these issues, we may remain mired in internal preoccupations, which combined with pointless wars in the Middle East, continue to provide grist for the rise of adversaries in the global competition between democratic principles and authoritarianism.

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