Let's Make America Rational Again

What a proud time to be an American. The absurdity of the moment is the one thing that seems real; I keep pinching myself, but the nightmare drones on and on. As a political scientist, I have always worked to avoid political discussions: they generally are steeped in emotive rhetoric emphasizing the distances that divide us and dismissing the commonalities that bind us together. As a societal-systems analyst, I know how easy it can be for a modern society to get trapped in a downward emotional spiral. Yet, I also recognize how important it is for knowledgeable people to step into the fray at crucial moments when contentious social relations are tearing the body politik into shreds. I am a well-respected expert in the contrasting political behaviors that distinguish democratic from autocratic authority in modern societal-systems as Director of the Polity Project. I am also an expert in dynamics of political conflict and violence, serving as a core member of the US Government's Political Instability Task Force (PITF) for over twenty years. The PITF has been systematically studying, and testing, the empirics of instability processes using all available data covering 167 countries in the world over the contemporary period (since 1946). It was originally tasked with developing a forecasting model for instability anywhere in the world; however, in order to forecast instability, it first had to develop an understanding of how societal-systems manage stability more generally. There actually IS a science of political behavior and relations that can provide critical insight to help us, all of us, to dampen what has now become an emotional cyclone before it consumes us all. It is not just this country that is caught up in the whirlwind; the entire global system is being drawn into the vortex; the outcome may be catastrophic.

First, we must remind ourselves that, despite our penchant for romantic notions of the "past," our world has changed dramatically, particularly over the last two hundred years and, especially, since the advent of the Internet. Global population has increased exponentially since the discovery of science; science has both triggered this growth and provided us the capability to manage that growth and, for some, even prosper. However, the expanding complexity of our modern systems increasingly challenges our ability to manage those systems, seducing us to provide for the present by borrowing against our childrens' future. System breakdown and "state failure" occur when we lose our ability to manage the growing tensions of the "present" and begin to cannibalize the system itself.

Democracy is not an abstract notion; it is a management technique that provides educated humans the ability to manage complexity. Modern societal-systems are complex cooperation schemes governed by the rule of law, that is, the codification of those essential cooperation schemes so that individual citizens can act (by compliance) to augment and, so, ensure the common good. Democracy is not a voting system, although voting has become prominent as a decision-making method. All forms of governance employ voting procedures to some extent. Democracy happens naturally in well-developed systems when most citizens accept a vow of non-violence and recognize the legitimacy of enforcement through judicial law. Cooperation schemes create value and wealth and distribute those goods more-or-less equitably throughout the system. However, once created, value and wealth are vulnerable to "defection" by individuals and groups who ignore or "bend" the rules to pirate both value and wealth and, thus, cannibalize society (creating "class" divisions and polarization). As a result of our thorough study of the problem of societal polarization, we found that this societal pathology has affected all societies at critical moments in their ongoing development; it is easily recognized by a dramatic shift in political

behaviors away from rational discourse to embrace highly emotive rhetoric that stimulates contentious political action, often escalating in association with electoral processes. In advanced cases of polarization, irrational alliances converge toward two "poles": rational dialogue and policy compromise are rejected by the "anti-regime" polar faction and the "state-led" polar faction is viewed as the symbol, and cause, of growing societal malaise. Polarization is symptomatic of societal-system disintegration, a process characterized by increasing lies and deception, as well as, threats and uses of coercion, force, and violence (the main tools of autocratic authority). The PITF research has singled out "polarization" as, by far, the leading indicator of impending political instability, almost invariably resulting in autocratic backsliding and/or civil warfare. More hopefully, we also found that, since the end of the Cold War, the recognition of the dangers of polarization can lead to a third possible outcome: further democratic consolidation and a return to rational discourse. Autocratic authority systems, historically the predominant form of state control, have proven themselves incapable of managing modern complexity; they inevitably fail and eventually transition to more democratic authority systems. The well-respected *Polity* data project has identified three periods of polarization, and resulting political factionalism, in the United States since its inception: 1854-1872, 1967-1974, and 2016 to present. The condition of factionalism increases the risks of political instability in a country by a factor of about thirty-five times, according to the PITF forecasting model. The lack of institutional constraints on executive authority (consider "presidential immunity") has been found as a principal factor in undermining democratic authority, turning democratic regimes into "anocratic" systems, which are inherently volatile and fragile societal-systems; *Polity* codes the US as anocratic from independence in 1776 to 1801 and, again, in late 2020 through the January 6, 2021, coup attempt.

Complex (democratic) systems are necessarily managed by "super-cooperators," that is, individuals who prioritize the common good and work to build and maintain system cooperation. Political parties are groups charged with identifying and presenting for leadership approval (national elections) only those persons who demonstrate the ability and capacity to maintain (and repair or adapt) the system into the future. Leadership selection is not a personal popularity contest but, rather, a whole-of-society testament of faith and trust in leadership candidacy and responsibility to the future of the nation. We must recognize and accept that complex systems are not only superior in performance but, also, prone to pathologies, the worst among which are political anomie, violence, and chaos. These can only be resolved through enhanced cooperation and our mutual embrace of our common predicament.

Unfortunately, the Republican Party has abdicated its responsibilities and succumbed to a hostile takeover; it can no longer be considered a party to democracy. The Trumpist Party has become, rather, a Cult of Personality determined to further polarize and cannibalize the system and its future for the benefit of a small cadre of system pirates. Ironically, this cult has been inflated through clever manipulation of our judicial processes and the perverse priorities of the "fake media" driven to "entertain" an audience, regardless of the potential for adverse outcomes: fiddling while the system burns. Trump's face is everywhere all the time; "there is no bad publicity!" His lack of competence as a world leader was neatly summed up by his CIA briefer's frustrated lament, "he doesn't know anything, and he doesn't want to know anything!" Our responsibility as citizens demands that we stop for a moment and think rationally about what we're doing, and where we are headed. We have no right to punish our children in this cruel way. We have given them life and owe

them a secure and hopeful future in which they, other nations, and further generations, can live peaceably and prosper responsibly.

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