

The Politics of Same

It seems to me that America's difficulty in facing the country's problems is not that we have the problems, but that we can't face them or won't—that the machinery of

government and means of political change have frozen, congealed, clotted. Solutions are often possible, but movement toward them isn't. The optimistic might see this as a challenge, others as *rigor mortis*.

Consider immigration. Depending on one's politics, various solutions are possible: accept the immigrants and try to assimilate them, stop immigration and send the illegals back, or somewhere between. We do none of these things. There is no policy. Apparently we can't have a policy. We just suck our thumbs and wait to see what will happen.

Education. The schools are terrible, we all know it and have known it for decades, but we can't do anything about it. This isn't a case of not knowing what to do—there is nothing mysterious about teaching children to read—but of being unable to do anything at all. A hardened glue of teachers' unions, political correctness, and racial politics makes change impossible. What we have is not policy but resignation. There is a lot of that going around.

The Armed Forces. We have a huge, backbreaking military unsuited to the wars we fight and with no plausible enemy of the kind it is designed to fight. Yet we can neither shrink it nor change its nature. Too many interests are involved, too many big-ticket contracts, and too many towns dependent on bases. If the oceans dried up tomorrow, we would continue building submarines, perhaps pouring water over them with buckets, because building submarines is what we do. This isn't policy. It is lack of policy.

Taxation. The current system is unreasonable—unwieldy, burdensome, extravagantly complex, cluttered with tailored loopholes. You can barely pay your taxes without a computer, yet the IRS is 20 years behind the real world technologically, and the necessary accountancy is atrocious. Everyone knows this. Yet we cannot do anything about it.

Government in general. Washington consists of agencies accreted over generations, largely unexamined, existing because they have existed and unchangeable because they are too boring to think about. Does anyone know what HUD does? Who the secretary is? Whatever it does, it will continue to do, forever, because that is what it does.

Race. The continued existence of much of the black population in urban slums is the worst domestic problem we have: bad for blacks, for whites, for the economy, for the country. It is grave indeed. Some years back, Detroit was found to have a rate of functional illiteracy of 47 percent. The public schools of Washington are a disaster, little more than holding tanks.

This isn't necessary. Many years ago I wrote a piece for *Harper's* on the Catholic schools of Washington. Over 95 percent black, they were orderly, safe, and full of kids who could most assuredly read. I said so and was attacked by liberals. Catholics were in bad odor among intellectuals, and their success illuminated the failure of the public schools. Result: nothing. As always, what is politically possible won't work, and what will work isn't politically possible. Gridlock.

A contributing factor to this paralysis is that we no longer have political debate. Consider the recent presidential election. It was virtually free of content, being instead a popularity contest among candidates who all thought the same things. Matters that people care about, whether for or against, were seldom mentioned: the wars, abortion, affirmative action, race, the schools, gun control, national healthcare. It was the Moose Huntress versus the First Black President.

Weary of Bush, we had a choice of Bush or Bush, and we chose Bush. The country is run by a particular class of people of similar interests, with a few who want to be in that class and are quickly absorbed by it. They call themselves Republicans or Democrats as a matter of convenience, but the Bushes and Kerrys and Clintons have more in common with each other than with the country they dominate. One-party rule promotes static policy.

The Soviet Union suffered mightily from centralized rule, guaranteed to produce inflexibility. I suggest that the United States moves toward the reality of centralized rule without the appearance. Identical parties from the same class, news media owned by people of the same class, and no means of protest by the public.

An interesting question is whether governments do not inevitably harden into locked relations of power, into habits of behavior that cannot adapt to changing conditions. Much suggests so. For example, how is it that the American carmakers, enjoying an enormous domestic market, totter on the brink of extinction? Sclerosis, plain and simple.

How many bananas does it take to make a banana republic? ■

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