

Trump's Dilemma, and Ours

Part Two

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[In Part One of this commentary pair, I opined about President Trump's dilemma. Now, in Part Two, I'll consider our dilemma.]

The years 1968 and 2018 are separated by exactly half a century, but they are connected. The eras are different, the issues are different, and the dynamics are definitely different, but the two years share a similar subtext. Both are critical mass periods of two connected astrological events of profound importance, each an activation of the Uranus-Pluto cycle. Over the past decade, I've written a great deal about that outer-planet cycle and its meanings in the 1960s and 2010s — more than 100 essays. This is yet another in that series. In some ways, it's a distillation of my thoughts about the cycle and its current implications for America and the world.

In 1965-1966, Uranus and Pluto came together and conjoined three times in Virgo, opposite Saturn in Pisces. This was the beginning of the current Uranus-Pluto cycle, with its basic meaning of individual rebellion against collective power that has become despotic. The entire effective period of the birthing phase of the cycle was from JFK's assassination in 1962 to Watergate and Nixon's resignation in 1973. While that decade encompassed many diverse facets, 1968 represented a pivotal year where American culture was being torn apart from within, largely because of the war in Vietnam.

In 2012-2015, Uranus and Pluto made their next major alignment in the cycle, called the first-quarter square. Seven different times over that three years, Uranus in Aries was exactly perpendicular to Pluto in Capricorn. The entire effective period of the Uranus-Pluto square is from 2007 to 2020. In a seasonal gardening metaphor, the beginning of the cycle in the 1960s was analogous to spring planting, where seeds germinate. The first-quarter square corresponds to the transition from spring planting to summer tending. Summer is the season of full manifestation in the physical of the potentials contained in the seeds. The second quarter of every astrological cycle is the most dynamic of the four quarters, and usually the most aggressively tangible.

The Vietnam War ended, but the schism in American culture didn't. The terrible divide among Americans continued, going underground to some extent, partially obscured over the intervening decades, but meanwhile putting down deep roots, biding time, invisibly gathering strength to explode again into fuller manifestation. When would that happen? In the 2010s.

Just as 1968 was a pivotal year in the conjunction of Uranus-Pluto, so 2018 is a pivotal year in the Uranus-Pluto waxing square. While momentous events occur in every year of the effective period (about a decade) of each phase change activation within the Uranus-Pluto cycle, certain years stand out. Such pivotal years usually occur after the alignment is technically past exact, since a time lag exists between the symbolic potentials and the actual experiences in our collective awareness. The case could be made that 2016 was that year in the current transit, because of the Presidential campaign that culminated in Donald Trump's unexpected victory and ascension to the White House. I would argue that we are only now experiencing the full meanings of that shock, and that the next two years (2018-2019) may more truly reflect America's coming to grips with our dilemma.

The stark divisions now existing among and between Americans — differences of opinion and belief about race, politics, culture, and what America has been, is, and should be — have once again erupted into open conflict in a kind of tribal warfare, basically "Us" polarized against "Them". In the 1960s, the archetypal form of the tribes was simpler in a generational chasm: young versus old. Now, in the 2010s, the resurgence of tribalism is no longer age-related. Instead, it's economic, cultural, and political. In both decades, however, the rebellion beneath the inter-tribal conflicts was based on mistrust and rejection of traditional authority and those in power. The hoi polloi rose up against the rulers. The hierarchy of the status quo was under assault by different factions of the population that felt oppressed, marginalized, or disregarded.

In both decades, the elites in power sought (unsuccessfully) to unify Americans against a common external enemy. In the Cold War 1960s, through the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the putative enemy was communism, mainly in the Soviet Union, but also anywhere else it gained a foothold. The war in Vietnam was classic Domino Theory anti-communism. In the 2010s, during the Obama and Trump administrations, the enemy is tagged as Islamic terrorists and immigrants, especially from Mexico and Latin America.

The real enemy in both decades, however, was our own government, and, in a deeper, more subtle way, our country itself and what Americans feared it had become or was becoming. In the 1960s, one form this took was the beginnings of mass concern about the effects of an extractive economy on the environment. The science of ecology and the popular environmental movement were born in the 1960s. Now, in the 2010s, the target is partly cultural, but more directly

financial, provoked by disdain for the people by the ruling elites and the ever-widening gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

Hatred of out-groups is common in the Us-Them dynamic so deeply embedded in human nature. “They” are not only wrong, but evil. That was certainly the case in the 1960s tribalism. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was a rallying cry for the youth movement, and, on the opposite side among many older or more traditionally-aligned Americans, lack of “patriotism” and disrespect for authority on the part of young people was equally damning.

In the 2010s, however, the dynamic has shifted. Out-and-out hatred of “Them” still exists in pockets of confrontation, but in general it’s been supplanted by a more dismissive attitude. “They” are misinformed, mere dupes and fools who gullibly accept or believe what “We” feel certain are falsehoods or propaganda. The opposite of Love is not Hate, but indifference, and that’s what we have now among large swaths of the American public. Rather than hating those with whom we disagree, we regard them as beneath contempt — essentially deluded and perhaps too stupid to hate. This means that “They” are undeserving of consideration and not worth engaging in dialogue or debate.

Any consensus in America about what is true has been fractured into a thousand shards. Conflicting and contradictory narratives now fill the airwaves and the internet, and we are increasingly retreating into private echo chambers. More and more, Americans tend to read, watch, and hear only what we already believe. The problem is not merely that Americans don’t trust their leaders and government (which has ample historical precedent), but that we no longer trust each other either — not that we ever did, but our mistrust is much deeper and more widespread now than at any time since the Civil War. And that is a serious impasse.

This condition of pervasive mistrust makes the resolution of practical conflicts in our society all the more difficult. Such pragmatic issues include whether America is still a representative democracy. If not (as I believe), how do we recover our country from the inverted totalitarianism of oligarchic, plutocratic rule? How can we address the problems of wealth inequality, where the 1% own and run nearly everything? If “white” America will soon be a minority, is the myth of the “melting pot” no longer viable? What are we to do about race and immigration? Should we remove governmental regulations to allow business unfettered pursuit of profit, or might we create a more sustainable, sane economy with cleaner energy sources that could head off (or at least alleviate) catastrophic climate change? Do we need a huge and now essentially mercenary military to beat back the threat of terrorism, or might we find a better solution for ourselves and the world? Can we avoid nuclear war? Will technology change what it means to be human, whether through virtual connections that erode actual community, mass surveillance that mocks the very notion of privacy, or advertising algorithms that reduce us to mere consumers?

These and other issues are more daunting than ever, because — having retreated into our various tribal bunkers — we can't agree even about the terms of debate. Reality itself is in dispute. At this point, viable solutions seem impossible to achieve, and I realize what a steep, uphill climb this will be. These changes are not ideals, however. They are necessities, especially now, with civilization at the crossroads. We simply can't screw around much longer.

If America is truly exceptional — in reality rather than mere fantasy — then the coming decades are our chance to reveal “the better angels of our nature,” not through charismatic leaders, but by ordinary Americans trusting each other and working together. This doesn't require that we all agree. We won't. We will fight between ourselves, often bitterly. Different factions within the population will win some contests and lose others. But trust means accepting that even our opponents are honorable and want the same goals we want (so that they're still part of “Us” and not the dreaded “Them”), even if we disagree about the methods, means, and policies to achieve those common goals. Such trust hardly exists at all in America today.

In cultures with small populations, unity of belief is essential. In a mass culture such as ours, however, democracy flourishes through differing coalitions within an active citizenry — a collective but diverse polity. The prerequisite for an active citizenry is that we balance the wish to be left alone to pursue our personal self-interest with at least some civic participation to achieve shared concerns. And that begins most naturally at the local level, where the actual experience of our daily lives is most direct and palpable.

Reclaiming our politics, reanimating our government, and creating a culture worth having will require more of Us and fewer of Them, more inclusion and less exclusion. In other words, a wider expression of Love to guide the effective use of Power. That's a very tall order, of course, and we're a long way from it at this point, but more shocks of awakening will no doubt be coming down the pike in the 2020s to help open our eyes and hearts and strengthen our resolve.

Astrologically, the next phase shift of Uranus-Pluto represents the culmination of the current cycle (begun in the 1960s), the half-way point of summer tending giving way to autumn harvest, where we reap what we sowed. That shift occurs in the 2040s, which is a long ways off, but, from another perspective, right around the corner. Given the dizzying and accelerating pace of change and the probability of major developments that could alter the landscape (both figuratively and literally), life may appear very different in three decades.

Between now and then, our work is cut out for us. Open minds are more likely with open hearts. We'll find out if our hearts are up to the challenge.