

The American Experiment

by Bill Herbst

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The American Experiment was never a sure thing. It was never guaranteed to succeed, and the long-term odds against it were formidable, right from the beginning. It has always been a dream more than a reality. From its inception, it was an aspiration, a set of unrealized ideals, concocted by fallible human beings who — as a collective, but also as individuals — had never fully lived up to its principles. Not even remotely so. They wanted to try, though, at least within certain limits.

And so the Revolution came, although it was supported by less than half the population. Many colonists didn't want to break with England, and even more were neutral or uncommitted either way. The success of the Revolution was improbable and wouldn't have occurred without timely help from the French and bungling by the British. Once the surprising result was achieved, however, the founders were emboldened to go further than mere independence and autonomous self-rule toward a new kind of society, one that had never before existed anywhere and didn't yet exist here.

Over the ensuing centuries, America has attempted to move forward toward realization of equality, justice, and prosperity for all. That struggle has been immensely difficult, in many ways and for many reasons. A central obstacle has been the entire evolutionary genetics of human nature, which — among so many other failings — inclines us very powerfully toward concern with some things but not all (so that, for instance, we overlook the nasty repercussions of plundering and fouling the natural environment), and to care in our hearts about some of us but not others (the Us-versus-Them dynamic). Racism is a categorical example of the latter trait.

I need not detail the whole sorry history of violent racism in the Old World, the New World, and particularly in America. Well, maybe I do, but that's beyond the scope of this commentary. If you haven't educated yourself in that history, please do. It's not pretty, but necessary to understand who we have been and who we are still.

These last twenty years have seen America gallop backwards with abandon — fighting endless wars abroad, letting our institutions devolve and decay, responding to serious financial crises with “recoveries” that stoked unimaginable wealth inequality, doing nothing about the impending collapse of the environment caused by human foolishness (while in fact accelerating the onset), and dismantling many of the hardest-won gains of the previous century. The rise of Trumpism, with its lurch toward authoritarianism, dismantling of the government and social safety nets, and complete abandonment of truth, should surprise no one. We’ve been headed down that road for quite awhile now, and Trump is simply the culmination of the journey. It has been painful to watch, depressing to endure, and more than a few of us have felt an increasing sense of despair.

And yet, lo and behold, a public response has finally been provoked, largely because of the pandemic and more frequent display via cell phone videos of the continuing saga of lethal, racist violence by increasingly militarized and bellicose police. The sight of tens of thousands of Americans marching in the streets to protest is long overdue and undeniably heartwarming.

Look, I don’t want to get all gushy with optimism about this. My actual feeling is more like, *“Well, maybe our goose isn’t fully cooked quite yet...”* I still have serious doubts about whether humanity can elevate ourselves above the quagmire of our own worst impulses. But if we can heal the fundamental human curse of racism — even modestly — damn near anything might be possible. Dismantling the threat of nuclear war is a walk in the park compared to ending racism. And while we’re tackling racism, we’ll also have to take on gender weirdness, the consumer culture, greed, wealth inequality, and infinite-growth economics, among numerous other issues.

Yes, Black Lives Matter. I’m all in for that. And right now, that’s the cutting edge. But for those who think that the problem is just some bad cops, a few rotten apples in the barrel, and that the solution can be achieved by legislation and statutory reforms of law enforcement practices and procedures, think again. It’ll take way, way more than that. Getting police to stop killing black people is a good start, but it won’t be even close to enough. We need to stop incarcerating ethnic and racial minorities by the millions. We need to restore at least some possibility of upward class mobility in America. And beyond changing the system, we need to grapple with the deeper problems of human nature, the terrible reality of our Us-versus-Them inner programming. So far in human history, we’ve not made even a dent in that.

We’re going to need millions of people in the streets to get on with these challenges, and not just for a month or two, but continually for decades to come. So let’s not get self-congratulatory too soon. Trump is still in the White House,

Republicans still have their heads up their asses, and Democrats are still big money corporate sell-outs. Hypocrisy and empty platitudes are still rampant. Humanity's arrogant posturing continues. Our species' seeming dominance on this planet is tenuous at best and downright lethal at worst. In short, the odds are still stacked heavily against us.

Is the American Experiment just a dream, a mere fantasy that's always been destined to fail? I don't know. But it's high time we see if there's any chance at all of making its ideals at least a little bit more real.

[End Note: I wrote three separate and somewhat different commentaries this past week. The first was about the police; the second was a defense of riots, arson, and looting; and the third was this one. I thought about trying to cobble them together into one essay, but that didn't work, so I'm going with this one. The other two will probably never get posted, since everything's moving so fast, and the focus changes week to week. They'll end up in the discarded essays resource folder. But that's OK.]

Reactions to what's happening are all over the map — I swear, if I see one more idiotic official stand at a podium and say (with a straight face, no less), "This is not who we are...", I'm going to scream at the TV. Some of the commentary is quite brilliant, though — thoughtful, nuanced, and powerful. I'm glad to know that there are still many living, breathing humans among us, and that the pod people haven't taken over yet.

Good luck to us all.]