

Taking Control of the Streets

by Bill Herbst

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A well-known anecdote from American history occurred supposedly right after the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia in 1787. According to the notes of Dr. James McHenry, a delegate from Maryland: As he and his friend, 81-year-old Dr. Benjamin Franklin — already justifiably famous as an inventor, scientist, printer, politician, freemason, diplomat, and bon vivant — were leaving Independence Hall on the final day of deliberation, a woman asked Franklin, *"Well, Doctor, what have we got — a republic or a monarchy?"* Franklin replied, *"A republic... if you can keep it."*

That republic, which is a particular and limited form of representative democracy, has been under assault ever since. The vagaries of human nature in its many contradictions and failings always worked against it, but now we strain under a phalanx of additional obstacles — America's gargantuan size, its bewildering complexity, and the breathtaking acceleration in the pace of our collective activities. I seriously doubt that Ben Franklin or any of the other framers of the Constitution could have entertained even the slightest notion of the modern world we inhabit today.

Representative democracy may never have worked very well, but it's sure as hell not working now. We cannot (and should not) count on any of the people at the top of the pecking order — neither elected officials nor others who wield power in determining policy — to do for us on their own what is even minimally necessary. They will have to be pressured into doing so, confronted and cornered, then dragged kicking and screaming to implement the sweeping and radical changes required to give America and humanity even a shot at having any sort of viable future.

That pressure must come from the ground up. From people in the streets.

We've witnessed over the past two decades the emergence of numerous single-issue social groups fomented by people who were (and presumably still are) crazy — painfully disaffected and aggrieved, to be sure, and passionately committed to their beliefs, but nuttier than fruitcakes. Such groups prattle on about "freedom," but what they really want is more for themselves and revenge against those they believe have harmed them. This phenomenon continues to grow, aided by social media, mainly from the far right of the political and cultural spectrum (even though "official" narratives seek to convince us otherwise...).

What we've seen recently, however, is something different. Astonishingly, critical mass has been reached among a significant percentage of the population. Like the earlier groups, we too are seriously disturbed, and we are far from unified in our beliefs, but we are still in possession of a modicum of sanity. We embody hearts that are alive, engaged, and open to inclusion. To some extent, we actually empathize with the Big Us, not just the Little Us. In itself, that's amazing, given the terrible alienation of modern civilization.

People throughout America and around the world have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers to challenge systemic racism and the routine violence that has always accompanied it. Yes, it's a protest movement, but it's more than that. It's a rebellion, a revolt, an insurrection. This is part of the tenor of our times. The old, passive, comfortable centrism is disintegrating. A new and so far uncertain civic activism is taking shape.

This movement doesn't have "leaders," per se, just active participants. In that, it resembles anarchy — rules without rulers. Those closest to anything resembling leadership of the movement arose from the ranks of cultural "losers" — primarily black people, but also other disenfranchised groups — whose families and communities have suffered a long history of being considered less than human by the "winners." Some of the most thoughtful voices in the movement are from people who climbed out of confinement among the "losers" to become "winners," although many of those putting their bodies on the line are still disenfranchised and looked down upon some of the population. Still, the movement as a whole is increasingly diverse and includes people from every rung up and down the social and economic ladders. It is moving in the direction of a more inclusive empathy in the only way such change can occur, through a universalization of suffering.

The revolt has coalesced and emerged in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic and serious rumblings of economic collapse. Those two factors seem to have been preconditions necessary to propel us past the many false starts we've endured over the past century, sincere efforts that welled up but then died out, for any number of reasons. What caused the arising now goes beyond mere sympathy for the victims. It includes the dawning realization that racism and violence harms us all, as does the economic downturn. Suffering that was formerly either invisible or denied is touching many more of us.

The groundswell of voices and bodies willing to stand up and be seen is still nascent. At this early stage, predicting how the movement might evolve, where it may go, and what it could accomplish is risky at best and foolhardy at worst. So, I won't offer any opinions about that.

What I will say (or, in this case, write) is that this grassroots rebellion must be sustained. If it peters out after the pandemic fades and the economy "recovers," then it will be just another in a long line of failed efforts. The movement must become the new "normal." We must take control of the streets and keep doing so, maintaining that control over time by our continuing presence. Otherwise,

the existing order — the Death Culture of a few winners and mostly losers — will reassert itself, hastening our doom.

The good news is that we don't need the entire population to achieve this. Not by a long shot. A relatively small percentage of Americans, maybe 3-10%, will be more than enough. For all sorts of reasons, many of us won't actually be in the streets. I am too old and damaged to be physically able to do so, as are many of us, and factors such as the Coronavirus pandemic will keep many people away. But that's OK. Those who are younger and more vital will do most of the heavy lifting by actually marching in the streets. The rest of us can cheer from the sidelines (which typically means from our couches, sitting in front of our TVs, desktops, laptops, tablets, and smart phones...).

To succeed in pressuring the elites to implement the kind of real change that is required, we must organize and support each other and the rebellion. In addition, we should remember that the pressure we apply works best when our civil disobedience is non-violent. It's not that I'm so big on peaceful protest for its own sake. In fact, our anger and outrage are among our most important motivations and resources. Also, I don't regard property and ownership as sacrosanct. I understand the destructive impulse all too well, since I feel it in myself.

But violence turns against us those many millions watching their screens, which muddies the message of our protests, distracts from the real issues, reduces our numbers, undercuts sympathy for us, and strengthens the will of authorities against us.

The video revolution spawned by smart phones and social media is critical to our success. More than anything else, this rebellion needs to be visible and seen. The 24/7 daily news cycle of the mainstream media will shift and change in its constant chase after eyeballs, waxing and waning in what it highlights, but YouTube is our friend.

Will the rebellion require sacrifice? Some, but not overwhelmingly, and not much more than we're undergoing now. Will it require suffering? Yes, of course it will. Part of the suffering will be from the cumulative impact of the ways things have been and still are, and part will be from as yet unforeseen developments that arise from the cascade of crises that are now hurtling down the pike toward us and will no doubt wreak serious havoc. Personally, I'd rather see some obvious chaos within the turbulence of change than the kind of veiled, invisible chaos we've lived with for so long in the status quo.

There will be casualties. Some of us will die. How many of us might succumb I do not know. But, given that we're all going to die anyway, martyring oneself for a good cause isn't such a bad way to go. George Floyd will be remembered for how he died, but what's important for most of us is not how we die, but how we live — what we stand for.

Right now, the goals of the movement are actually quite modest. They're focused only on certain limited dimensions of our collective life. That too is OK, since we need a focus here at the start. Over time, however, the goals must broaden if we are to have a chance at succeeding. By "success," I mean overcoming the collective madness that has bled into every nook and cranny of civilization. That's the real pandemic. To heal that disease, we'll need the medicine of sanity to reach all the way into our hearts.

Are politics relevant? Sort of. If, by politics, we mean the sum total of our civic responsibilities as citizens, then yes. But politics as they have devolved in America, into a permanent political class, then not so much. *Does voting matter?* I'd answer with a qualified yes. While it's true that elections have consequences, it's equally true that the choice we're given is often between tweedledum and tweedledee. *Is the election in November important?* Sure it is, but not just for the presidency. What's important is every elected office in every election, from local dog catcher all the way to the U.S. Senate.

The forces arrayed against us are considerable. Those who are insane will be enlisted as mercenary soldiers-of-fortune to fight us (hell, they'll volunteer). Counter-narratives will be created, promoted, and disseminated from every corner of the realm — and in every conceivable form, from the seemingly logical to the certifiably nutty. And many people will believe them. That's happening as I write and will continue. We'll lose many battles.

Despite this, and even against the odds, we can win at least a modest victory if we take and hold control of the streets. Winning may not prove to be enough, but it's worth striving for nonetheless.