

# Changing America

by Bill Herbst

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Money and power are America's twin aphrodisiacs. The people who own and run America — the elites, the 1%, the corporate boards and execs, the managerial class, and most elected officials in government, from local and state to Congress and the White House — are besotted with both. They are the winners who serve (and benefit from) the status quo. They like the way things are and have no intention of sharing their wealth, giving up their power, or allowing change (except through the corruption that makes things even worse...).

Are there exceptions? Sure. There are selected people everywhere — in business, government, and every institution — who recognize what a mess we've made and would like to see that changed. But they're exceptional. And even most of those people who toil as honorably as they can within the corridors of power believe in working within the system through incremental reform.

The vast majority of people who hold and wield power in America regard those of us who see the urgent need for fundamental change as radical extremists. Whether or not we march in the streets, they have us pegged as revolutionaries and terrorists. They're partially correct. *We are* revolutionaries. Our existence is indeed a threat to them, and they will resist us to their dying breaths. They do this mostly by ignoring us, although as life gets worse in America, they're forced to actively marginalize us by creating narratives aimed at convincing "regular" Americans that we are real danger, not them. So far, that works pretty well.

The problem for the elites is that narrative control is losing its grip on the public. Americans of every stripe (from community organizers to QAnon adherents) are losing faith in all the institutions that comprise the social order in this country. Public trust in institutions and the legitimacy of authorities is necessary for the rulers to maintain their positions of power. That trust has been eroding in America for the past half-century, and the pace of Americans' growing mistrust has accelerated from gradual to rampant. The erosion is most obvious on the political and cultural wings — the far right and far left — but now it's eating its way into the center as well.

American society has always been ambivalent about authority. That's reflected in our contradictory ideals: freedom *and* equality, independent opportunity *and* social justice. Those contrary pairs are difficult to reconcile. Over our two and

half centuries, America has generally chosen freedom and opportunity more often than equality and social justice in policies, judicial decisions, and social norms. That tendency — to lean one direction more than the other — is part of the reason why we're in the mess we're in now. Would things would be better if we'd leaned in the other direction (away from individual freedom and toward equality and justice)? Maybe, but maybe not. My best guess is that America would still probably be mired in a mess, but it'd be a different mess than we have now. That's inevitable with ideals that are so starkly contradictory.

As I've written before, I'm not a big fan of revolutions. As far as outcomes, revolutions have a bad track record throughout history. But when the rulers are so utterly resistant to changes through even moderate course corrections, our options narrow dramatically. If changing the system isn't allowed (other than in whatever directions the elites choose), then we're forced into the necessity of civil disobedience through rebellion.

If you think that winning the November election and thus getting rid of Trump and the many Republicans — Bill Barr, Mike Pompeo, Steven Miller, Republican state governors, and U.S. Senators, all of whom comprise the most visible of the enablers in the Trump cult — and replacing them with Joe Biden and a Democratic-controlled Senate will save us, think again. The Dems have given us no evidence that they are any less attached than the Repugs to the status quo of how America works.

Do you hope or imagine that the Democrats will provide Americans with universal health care? Or implement policies to counter the egregious wealth inequality in this country? Reduce the military budget to support social programs and infrastructure repair? Propose meaningful reforms to law enforcement? Reduce our carbon footprint and protect the environment? Do away with the antidemocratic Electoral College or the archaic misrepresentation of the Senate? Yeah, well, dream on.

Another term for those who serve the existing status quo is "institutionalists." Such people are found in corporations, organizations, and the bureaucracy. They work within group settings that contain all the complexities and problems that come with power hierarchies and social dynamics. I'm not suggesting that such people are robotic or obeisant. No, they have quirks and eccentricities as do we all, but they know how to mask these traits, keeping them more private or in the background. Their personal beliefs and philosophies might be very different from their public stances. Most of them take their work responsibilities quite seriously.

As individuals, they may be principled or pragmatic, but getting along is likely to be a higher priority than for some of us. In their jobs, they put duty and compliance near the top of the list. They may or may not be competent, and they might or might not embrace fundamental change personally, but they tend

to not like disruption and are usually shocked by discontinuity. They prefer and expect predictability — steady as she goes.

There may be 40 million such people in America. They are the foot soldiers, the worker bees who tend the maintenance of the hive. The elites above them are generally confident that these people will carry out their decisions and implement their policies without question. Resistance among the elites to any public demand for substantive change is bolstered by the many layers of buffering such people provide. The rich and powerful simply don't live in the same world as the rest of us. Not even close.

The old adage that power corrupts is true, but so is the understanding that power begets power: The more power one has, the easier it becomes to get even more. Conversely, having no power makes it very difficult to obtain any. For those with power, the main threat is probably overreach. Going too far can be dangerous. But that miscalculation is relatively rare. Mostly, the elites get their way, time and again. They serve themselves and other elites in the ruling club.

So, if the elites will never relinquish, share, or distribute their power, what can "We the People" do? The answer isn't easy, but it might work if we could do it. The remedy is millions of people in the streets, demanding change, acting up in civil disobedience as necessary, and continuing to do so for years, maybe decades.

That's never happened in this country for all sorts of reasons, including the fact that sustained mass activism flies in the face of human nature. Still, we're closer to it now than ever before. As the American Empire declines and life in this country worsens significantly for the bottom 80% of us (which I believe to be baked in and inevitable at this point), it just might happen. Sure, the odds are against it, but these are extraordinary times, with much more on the way.

Americans in huge numbers could actually say no to same-old-same-old and demand something better. This would be a country I could love.