

American Patriots

by Bill Herbst

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Among the many strange disconnects that float like flotsam in the American zeitgeist is the assumption on the part of many centrist, liberal, and progressive Americans that those on the far right — meaning Republicans, Trumpists, and QAnon believers — are, if not crazy, at least abnormal. That presumption reflects an extraordinary bias and almost willful ignorance about our country's history.

The roots of this nation go back to the colonization of the western hemisphere by European empires that began just before the 16th century. In a very real sense, the "New World" — meaning today's North and South American continents — were invaded by Europeans. Contemporary scholars can only estimate how many humans were living in the western hemisphere when Columbus arrived in 1492. Guesstimates vary wildly, from a low of about ten million to a high of roughly 100 million people (which would have been more than the population of Europe at the time). At any rate, the hemisphere was not "unoccupied." Diverse and often interrelated cultures existed, and many flourished.

Over the next 400 years, all of those cultures were either severely disrupted or completely destroyed. The indigenous populations were decimated, nearly wiped out. Diseases imported from the Old World were the primary executioner — epidemics of smallpox, measles, bubonic plague, cholera, typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and whooping cough killed the majority. In addition, wars against native people by the colonizers, dispossession and resettlement, destruction of habitat, outright massacres, and even approved bounty hunting also took a bloody toll.

Basically, what happened in the western hemisphere was a systematic extermination, the largest genocide in human history (although the word "genocide" wasn't even coined until the 19th century). "White" Europeans wanted the land and resources, and they didn't regard the darker-skinned indigenous people as "human." And along with the genocide came the importation of millions of blacks from the Indies and Africa for slave labor. No doubt some "naturalized" European Americans were aghast at all this, but I think it safe to say that the majority weren't. They believed in the innate superiority of their Caucasian biology and culture. If you didn't look like us and live like us, you weren't us. The systematic killing and enslavement were being done not to "people," but to animals, i.e., lower life forms, who were in the way and didn't deserve to live.

By the mid-18th century, most American colonists were loyal English subjects. A small cadre of insurrectionists — some of whom were influenced by the writings from the Age of Reason, but many of whom were wealthy land owners — wanted to end American fealty to the English Crown. And so, a rebellion occurred (the American Revolution). Somewhat surprisingly and almost miraculously, the revolution succeeded. America gained its independence and became a sovereign nation.

The Declaration of Independence and subsequent Constitution are extolled even today for their sophistication, wisdom, and democratic principles. But a careful reading of both documents reveals a great deal about the “Founding Fathers” and their obsessions with property and wealth.

I’ll offer just one example to illustrate — the 2nd Amendment to the Constitution, so dear to the hearts of conservatives and gun owners. Here it is in its brief entirety:

A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

What were the threats that made a “well-regulated militia” necessary? One possible threat, probably the most obvious to modern Americans, might have been defense against military invasion by foreign powers. Citizens would need their “arms” (i.e., guns) to protect the state against foreign conquest. In the late 18th century, however, a much more realistic and predictable threat would have been sporadic Indian uprisings. To protect their homes, families, and land, Americans needed their guns to kill Indians. The Founding Fathers didn’t feel that Indians had any right to take back the land from which they had been dispossessed and driven out. We stole it — now it’s ours, and by God we’ll kill to keep it.

So, the 2nd Amendment is connected to the centuries-long project of genocide. Of course, back in 1787 that meant muzzle-loading, single-shot muskets, not military-style AR-15 and AK-47 assault rifles. But that’s another story...

George Washington, the hallowed “father of our country,” was not only an unabashed slave owner (at his death, he owned 124 slaves) and one of the richest men in America (largely from the acquisition and sale of land taken from Indians), but he’d also earned his highly-regarded military reputation by being an Indian Fighter, putting down native revolts and insurrections. Though there’s no evidence that Washington ever personally killed any Indians, he did order the executions of some.

From colonial times all the way through the Civil War in the 1860s, American governments paid cash to white bounty hunters for the scalps of Native AmerIndians.

My point here is that America was founded on white supremacy, slavery, and genocide. Yes, there is more to America than just that, but those three are foundational pillars. What this means is that all those militant right-wingers — from the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, John Birchers in the 1950s, and QAnon people today — are firmly in the bosom of American history. The passionately held beliefs of such people are not an aberration. Social Darwinism and screwed-up Eugenics are alive and thriving. No, those right-wing Americans are (and consider themselves to be) True Patriots, and the lineage of their beliefs is as American as apple pie. Not only are their assumptions well-supported by history, but they have no doubt at all that their beliefs are correct.

Needless to say, I am not on their side. Clearly, I'm no patriot. In fact, I'm a traitor to the awful history of America and civilization in general.

Of the many problems surrounding the conflicted state of Americans and our country's uncertain future, the one I see as most relevant to this commentary is that the True Patriots cannot be reached by reason. Debate and argument will not sway them from their devotion, whether it is to Donald Trump, white supremacy, the American Empire, or money-as-all-that-matters. As they see it, history is on their side, and it's a strong case. Their passionate and deeply-held beliefs are essentially unshakeable.

A few might be convinced that a more peaceful, economically equal, ethnically diverse, and multicultural America is not such a terrible thing, but most won't. Nope, they won't give an inch. It's their way or the highway. And some of them are willing to do just about anything to push the envelope in their direction. This includes protests and civil disobedience, of course, but the days of peaceful demonstration and non-compliance are pretty much over for them at this point. They want action, and they're willing to create it. More importantly, their strategies too often include public acts of lethal violence that amount to domestic terrorism. The incidence of such violence is already increasing. Disaffected and disturbed True Patriots command headlines with new shootings every week.

They see their country being taken from them, and they're right about that. The demographic changes and ethnic/racial shifts underway in America are inexorable and inevitable, and they hate it. In their minds, the situation is dire. Insurrection and even violence appear to them entirely justified to save what they love, or at least go down fighting in a blaze of suicidal glory. "Live free or die" is more than just a bumper sticker slogan for them.

Interestingly enough, as a member of the other team, I share their sense of urgent crisis, but in a very different direction. Where they see ethnic purity and personal freedom as critical issues, I see climate disruption, social inequality, militarism, and extreme wealth disparity as looming and dire threats to our future, and I believe that these threats will not be effectively addressed by incremental reforms. Tweaking the existing status quo systems won't cut it.

Social institutions and economic structures can change very quickly when it is advantageous to the existing order. Look how quickly American business rose

up to put microwave ovens in every home in America during the 1980s. And consider how little time it took for smart phones and social media to change the landscape of day-to-day American life. And yet, those same social institutions and economic structures staunchly resist any changes we might want to make to restore our sanity, improve the quality of our lives, or safeguard our future.

What are the chances that corporate domination, predatory capitalism, or obsession with short-term profits (meaning money as the only value that matters) will gracefully relinquish their positions at the very beating heart of American society and culture? Zero. What are the odds that we might rethink our current system of socialism for the rich and austerity for everyone else to implement a fairer distribution of wealth? About a zillion to one against. How likely is it that we could effectively reform police brutality or cut back significantly our nearly trillion-dollar annual funding of the military-industrial complex? Not a snowball's chance in hell. Hell, we can't even agree on universal healthcare or a livable minimum wage. Sure, we can pull our troops out of Afghanistan, but we'll still use drones to kill people we don't regard as "us."

Despite endless discussion about the kind of incremental changes so beloved by centrists, only two ways forward appear viable. One is revolution through mass insurrection, some sort of critical-mass, bottom-up rebellion. When the right combination of long-term pressure and unexpected short-term triggers occurs, such movements do arise. But the odds of that happening in America are minimal, given the extreme polarity of our disagreement. Also, revolutions have a lousy track record. Even those few that succeed, such as the American and Russian revolutions, are prone to be co-opted by corruption, so that they end up creating the exact opposite of what was intended.

No, the great likelihood is that only one way forward remains: breakdown and collapse. I'm not a fan of that process, since it produces major league human suffering, often much more than was occurring routinely in the old structures. But this seems to be Mother Nature's chosen approach. It's a nasty solution, but catastrophe works: Destroy the old system, obliterate its structures, and something new will emerge in its place. That new system may or may not be an improvement on what existed before, but at least it will be different. This is actually the methodology of genocide: Kill all the people you don't like, and their social structures will collapse, clearing the way for us to take over.

America's True Patriots will lose, but that doesn't mean that the rest of us will necessarily win. Everyone may go down together, like the citizens of Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted. I hope that what awaits us is gentler than that. Time will tell.

In the meantime, I'd like it if my liberal friends would stop asking why those on the other side are so crazy as to believe what they do. The precedents for their deranged passions are ample and longstanding. Sadly, those precedents are also all too obvious and way too perversely sensible.