

# The Inevitability of Institutional Corruption

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This week I want to revisit a topic I've written about on numerous occasions in the past, namely, the inevitability of institutional corruption. I think the viewpoint on this subject that I've put forward and will here again is worthy of considering as we stumble through a precarious present toward an even more uncertain and dangerous future. My thesis here — that our social institutions will inevitably suffer worsening corruption over time — is not intended as an all-encompassing cause of what ails us. Instead, while a significant factor, I consider it only one among many interlocking elements of failure in an entropic matrix that leads to social breakdown.

The definition of an institution is an established custom or practice, or a social organization that brings together people who work toward a shared goal.

In the broadest, most generic terms, social institutions form the structure of our society. Law enforcement and the criminal justice system, education from kindergarten through college and more specialized teachings, marriage and family, economics, the military, government, media, politics, and science are all part of the institutional realm in society. In more specific terms, various formal organizations are institutional: a town council, the IRS, and the CIA are institutions within government. The NCAA, NFL, and NASCAR are institutions within sports. Congress is an institution within the federal government. Some institutional organizations are corporate in their structure, while others are chartered differently. Some are large, others small. Some are national, others local.

The formal organizations that give structure to our institutions are explicitly tasked with some specific social purpose. They are designed or chartered to serve a human constituency. Sometimes that constituency includes the entire population — i.e., the public. Other times, the constituents tasked to be served are a particular subset of the public — i.e., only certain people.

Despite what the Supreme Court may have ruled on numerous occasions over the past 150 years, institutions are not living. They may function as entities, but they are not alive. They are not people. They have no inherent consciousness or

will of their own. But they are chartered, funded, run, and maintained by people. And they have what we might call a natural life-span. Institutions are born, they grow, they mature, they age, and eventually they die.

When they are young, most institutions strive to fulfill their charters. That is to say, they are vital and usually helmed by people who have a clear sense of mission. As a result, these young institutions function energetically to serve their intended constituents. This is true even of criminal organizations, such as the Mafia. Although those might be judged from outside as corrupt from the get-go, when viewed from within the organizations, they strive to do what they were created for, which is to serve certain people. As they grow and mature, institutions tend to improve at that task, becoming more efficient and effective.

But here's the rub: As they age, institutions begin to change. They devolve, becoming corrupted. Gradually, they shift away from serving their constituencies as their sole purpose and mission. Instead, they begin to operate by protecting their own existences, which muddies the waters and dilutes their charters. Over time throughout their life-spans, institutions become more and more self-serving.

In the early stages of this corrupt transformation, the people who run the institution may not realize that it's happening, even though they're the ones making it happen. In other words, the institutions themselves don't become corrupted, because they have no sentience and no will of their own. Whatever they do occurs because of the people who run them, set policy, and maintain their day-to-day operations. In other words, human beings within the institution or connected to it from outside are the corrupting influence, because the pursuit of personal advantage (i.e., selfish gain rather than common good) is a real seduction — a built-in failing of our all-too-human nature. To be generous, we might call it entropy rather than corruption.

Take the example of an environmental institution, such as the Sierra Club. Early on in its existence, it strived to do good work in protecting the environment, largely by educating toward greater awareness in business and society about the need to safeguard the natural environment and promotion of governmental legislation to achieve that. As the Sierra Club grew in size and power, however, it became bureaucratic, with a power hierarchy that was corporate in style and content. The executives at the top were rewarded with higher salaries, increased privileges, and more status. Subtly at first, but more obviously as time went on, those individuals became vulnerable to a personal stake in maximizing their continued job security. The corrupting influence of their own careerism and success began to affect their decision-making. More and more often, deals were made that compromised the mission, but were rationalized as reasonable and necessary. The institution became part of the established power hierarchy of the cultural status quo, and thus those who ran it were more and more concerned with the maintenance of their privileged positions. As this happened, the Sierra

Club devolved, growing less and less effective at protecting the environment, and more and more committed to protecting itself. The continued existence of the institution gradually overtook and nullified the charter of its mission.

I don't wish to single out only the Sierra Club, however. The same is true of every institution and every organization. The extent of corruption may vary from one organization to another, as well as the time it takes for corruption to set in, but no institution is exempt from eventual decay.

Of course, this corruption is never admitted openly. The people within the organization tell themselves that they're still faithful to their mission, but that's less true over time. Meanwhile, the institution officially puts out what amounts to propaganda about continued service to its chartered constituency.

What we have now in America is an institutional landscape of general sectors and specific organizations that have moved through youth, middle age, and into their elder hoods. To put it bluntly, far too many of our institutions no longer serve the public. They serve mainly themselves, and sometimes only themselves.

I know I'm painting with an awfully broad brush here, and some readers might be offended at my throwing all institutions into single pot, but — even though some organizations are less corrupt than others — I think the overall critique remains valid and warranted. An accurate investigation of institutional decision-making within damn near any organization these days is unlikely to come up squeaky clean.

On the one hand, this is a tragedy. On the other hand, it is both natural and inevitable. What's the solution? Well, the only solution I have to offer is harsh and probably unworkable. That is to build into the initial charter a limited time-frame for the organization's existence, after which it will be disbanded and cease to exist. That means that everyone directly associated with the institution must be retired or fired. Then a new institution (to replace the old one) can be initiated and configured, perhaps not quite from scratch, but close.

In the case of the U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS), that would mean an end to "lifetime appointments" for judges through the legislative imposition of term limits. Similar term limits should apply to members of Congress and other elective offices.

The trade-off here would be less effectiveness and efficiency in the institution in exchange for the potential benefit of fresh blood and less corruption. Some people would assert that the loss of experience and wisdom makes that a bad bet, and they have an argument. I accept that any wholesale termination of institutions runs the risk of incompetence and chaos in administering society's

operations. And finally, there is no guaranteed protection against corruption as a human failing. While that tends to worsen over time, it can occur at any stage of life, from youth to old age.

How not to throw out the baby with the bathwater is a knotty problem. It's serious, and even terrifying. But something needs to be done. In the event that we cannot come up with any viable remedy, then America is likely to die, and with it, quite possibly, modern civilization itself.

As things are in the world, that's what we're facing — the end of civilization as we've known it, and along with that, quite possibly, the decimation of the human species. Basically, almost nothing is being done at the institutional level to correct our trajectory toward a healthier balance of living with each other and with nature herself. Since we don't seem to be able to awaken from the toxic mass formation now overtaking society, and with that the extreme polarization of lethal Us-versus-Them threats, the only alternative we have toward motivating us to change is to suffer one disaster after another, with increasingly dire repercussions. And even that awful scenario provides no certainty that we will respond positively. A feature of hypnotic totalitarian ideological assumptions is that every challenge produces a hardening of belief, a kind of doubling down in denial.

I wish this were not so, but, given that it is, our current prospects for collective sanity look very dim. The madness is structural and systemic. It's everyone's fault more than anyone's fault, even though it's seductive to want to blame it on the easy and obvious villains. Yeah, they suck, all right, big time, but they didn't do this alone. We let them do it. Too many of us helped them to do it. But even that is finally too simple, because we had no effective way to stop them. Theoretically, we did, but practically, no. The odds were against us and the deck was already stacked in the house's favor. So, the downfall of our society always was, and is, inevitable, like the corruption of our institutions.