

US Wants To Negotiate With The Taliban

WASHINGTON – US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford recently made an unexpected visit to Kabul, Afghanistan in order to meet with Government officials.

Negotiations with the Taliban?

What is surprising is that in the course of this visit Secretary Mattis publicly indicated that now more than ever before there seems to be a concrete possibility to engage the Taliban in serious peace negotiations.

Really? *This is a good moment?* And based on what? Based on the fact that our side is losing, or at the very least manifestly incapable of winning? I assume that Secretary Mattis is aware of the fact that the Afghan government, after years and years of U.S. funded training of its military and police forces, is receiving huge body blows –practically on a daily basis– from a stronger and clearly emboldened Taliban. Surely Mattis can see that the Taliban is now capable of attacking almost anywhere in the country, very often targeting government facilities within highly protected areas in Kabul itself.

In simple language, the Afghan Government is not only manifestly incapable of beating a now stronger Taliban insurgency, it is also suffering a series of humiliating (and demoralizing) setbacks.

Translation: while the fighting continues, and no decisive “battle” has taken place, victory is nowhere in sight for the Afghan Government we have been supporting for over 15 years, while the other side has redoubled its efforts, giving no sign whatsoever that it is losing its motivation to fight –for as long as it takes.

If our goal is the eventual stabilization of the country, any US security expert understands that this is not happening any time soon. Simply by continuing its campaign of almost daily attacks, the Taliban are making it very difficult, if not impossible, for the Afghan Government to stay in control and run a semi-destroyed country that is still in desperate need of basic services, capital investments, jobs and economic development.

Why negotiations when our side is losing?

And yet, while in Kabul, the most senior US Defense Department official argues that this most perilous predicament is a really good moment to negotiate with the Taliban. This makes no sense, if our objective is victory.

Indeed, if we want to negotiate good terms for our side, then we open a dialogue with the enemy when we are winning, not when we can hardly hold on to our positions, while under a barrage of almost daily brazen attacks.

This being the case, and since what I just articulated is pretty obvious to all, there is only one explanation I can think of for this sudden optimism about negotiations with the Taliban expressed by Secretary Mattis.

The war is lost

America has finally realized that the war in Afghanistan has been a long, horribly expensive, and ultimately hopeless endeavor. The "*Vietnamization strategy*" for Afghanistan whereby American forces, while stopping ground combat operations, would still provide critical assistance to the war effort through the training of Afghan forces and by providing significant air support, eventually leading to victory, turned out to be a naive fantasy.

After 17 years it is time to say it: ***"This is not working". I repeat: "This is not working".***

Cut your losses

This being the case, once you have digested this simple (if unpleasant) reality, the time comes when you want to get out of a hopeless situation. And therefore you publicly say that this is a good moment “to negotiate”, knowing full well that the other side will interpret this for what it is: a virtual capitulation. Taliban Internal Memo: *“The Americans are finally leaving. We won”*.

Good bye

Well, if you sit in the Afghan Government, you cannot avoid reading the proverbial writing on the wall: *“Dear Afghan friends, what we really mean by saying that this is the right time for engaging in negotiations with the Taliban is that soon enough you will be on your own in this fight. We are done here. Belatedly, we decided to cut our losses. Good luck to you, and good-bye”*.

Coal Makes India The Super Polluter

WASHINGTON – In case you were wondering, we are not making much progress in our planetary war against global warming. There is cause for serious alarm. However, despite the exaggerated media focus on Washington, the real problem is not President Donald Trump and his denial of the dangers of global warming, illustrated for instance by exiting the Paris Accord, and by his “promises” to support US coal miners in order to make coal great again.

America failing to lead

Sure, the fact that America, the world's number two country (behind China) when it comes to emissions, is failing to lead is not helpful, to say the least. That said, while America's position on this global threat is very disappointing, America is not the main problem.

The problem is India

The monstrous size problem is India. The Subcontinent's economy, (with a population now in excess of 1.2 billion people), is growing, and with growth comes a voracious appetite for energy, specifically for thermal coal, the kind of cheap coal used for electric power generation. A recent long survey in The Economist paints a rather horrible picture. 3/4 of India's electricity is generated by coal, and coal consumption is actually growing.

Too much coal

Sure, India has also launched a large number of important renewable energy projects. But compared with the amount of electric power generated by coal they are not very significant.

And cutting down on coal used for power plants is almost impossible, for economic and political reasons. Coal mining is concentrated in the rather poor East of the country. Which is to say that this industry provides badly needed jobs and income to many low income Indians. By the same token, coal transportation is a major source of revenue for Indian freight railways. And coal is relatively cheap. Hard to see how India's policy-makers can cut down its use without causing major upheavals.

Dependence here to stay

If you take all is this together, unless the cost of renewable energy goes down more rapidly, it is easy to realize that India's heavy dependence on coal is not going to go away any

time soon. And this means that India will continue to lead on global greenhouse gas emissions, because of its super sized fleet of coal-fired plants.

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How We Can Save The Oceans

WASHINGTON – We humans are unfortunately very good at damaging or destroying the world in which we live. Delicate and complex ecosystem which nature built over millennia have been compromised in almost no time by careless and damaging human activities resulting in pollution and often physical destruction.

Recreating coral reefs

Coral reefs are among the notable victims of human actions. However, in this case human ingenuity may help repair some of the damages caused by human carelessness or utter stupidity. *(Unfortunately, this is not a perfect solution. Regarding reefs not everything can be remedied via ad hoc interventions. Larger issues like rising water temperatures which in turn severely damage marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, would require broader, longer term systemic interventions).*

As we know, there have been many initiatives aimed at creating man-made new habitat for marine life, mostly by literally

“throwing” into the oceans all sorts of discarded man-made objects with the hope that they would offer an appropriate habitat for marine life.

“Reef Balls”

But now we have something much better, and much more sophisticated. I am referring to the innovative activities of the Reef Ball Foundation, located in Athens, Georgia, (www.reefball.org). As the name indicates, their work is all about man-made “balls” to be deployed on the sea floor, so that they will help nature by offering “platforms” that will allow coral to attach to its surface, this way allowing the creation of new reefs.

The reef balls are essentially a man-made, eco-friendly structure placed on the sea floor that soon becomes a home for seaweed and coral, this way creating a habitat that attracts fish and other marine life. These “balls”, (in fact, half balls), are simple, and yet very ingenious, objects that provide an opportunity to recreate or strengthen dead or severely damaged coral reefs.

The foundation came up with an easy to make, extremely durable concrete structure –guaranteed to last 500 years– that looks indeed like a hollow ball, (hence the name: “reef ball”), except that it is more like a half ball, so that its large base will allow it to firmly rest on the sea floor. The clever feature is that this structure has several large holes, so that water, nutrients and fish can flow through it, or live inside it, while coral and plants little by little start clinging on its corrugated, uneven surface.

A new reef in just 3 to 5 years

Well, the evidence shows that coral easily attaches itself to this man-made structure securely anchored on the sea floor. Amazingly, in just a few years (3 to 5) an almost complete replica of a natural reef is created, thanks to the reef balls

habitat. You can place as many “reef balls” as you want on the sea floor. Soon enough, they will “come to life”, playing host to coral, algae and fish.

The added bonus of this solution is that it is easy to make the reef balls on site, near the area where they will be deployed. This greatly simplifies all logistical arrangements, considering the bulk and weight of large concrete structures. The reef ball molds can be shipped close to the deployment area, near the water. Making the reef balls “on site” is relatively simple, and a good way to avoid all the complex logistics that would be entailed in making the (heavy) reef balls in one place, shipping them probably far away, with all the associated transportation costs.

Easy to deploy

Once the balls are made and ready, inflatable balloons are placed inside the hollow structures, so that they can easily float until they reach the designated deployment area. At that point, with the help of divers, the balls are guided down, as the balloons are deflated.

Once the reef balls have safely reached the bottom of the sea, that’s it. They are designed to stay there, in perpetuity. They are heavy and stable, and so they will not be displaced by underwater currents, or other forces. The holes allow water to pass through them. Their hollow interior will become a habitat for fish and other creatures. The rugged exterior will allow coral to attach to its surface.

A new reef

Over a relatively short period of time, the reef balls will become the home of new coral and plant life, while creating a new habitat for fish and crustaceans. This almost natural habitat will allow the replenishment of various species, contributing to the healing of many parts of our damaged Oceans.

This may not be perfect. Nothing beats Mother Nature's physiological ways to create and self-perpetuate its own ecosystems. And, as indicated above, in many regions there are serious sustainability issues regarding old reefs –like rising water temperatures– that the reef balls “solution” cannot address. Still, as far as cost-effective, man-made remedies go, this is pretty good.

More than 62 countries have reef balls

Reef balls have already been placed in more than 62 countries. They are relatively inexpensive, and easily deployable. And, just as intended, they create a new habitat for marine life.

Let's hope that more and more people and organizations around the world will become aware of this ingenious way to recreate precious coral reefs.

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The New Immigrants And America's Future Identity

WASHINGTON – We now know that the Australian government is openly concerned that unless it can manage its immigration policies properly, there is a serious risk that Australia may soon lose its political and cultural identity. There is fear that there are now too many new economic immigrants who, while living and working in Australia, do not fully understand and embrace the core values that bind Australia together. If this were indeed the case, the country will soon lose its identity and become something else.

Non assimilated immigrants

On the face of it, this stance does not seem to be motivated by anti-immigrant prejudice, or xenophobic hysteria. Rather, it seems to be driven by a genuine concern that all new comers to Australia, even if initially motivated mostly by economic reasons when they decided to become immigrants, along the way have also embraced Australia's national values.

If this is not so, non assimilated economic immigrants may contribute to the progressive fragmentation of the Australian society. This is valid concern in a country largely composed of recent immigrants.

America is also a country of immigrants

If we switch over to the U.S., the current immigration debates, well-meaning in some aspects, emotional and acrimonious in others, are somewhat similar. America is also a country of immigrants. However, there is a significant qualitative distinction between earlier waves of migration to America, mostly from Europe, and the current wave composed mostly of individuals immigrating to the U.S. from Mexico, Central and South America. *Most of the old immigrants wanted*

to become Americans as soon as possible.

In contrast, the new immigrants are usually happy to be here. But they do not feel the same urgency/pressure to quickly assimilate. given this, just like the Australians, we would like to be reassured that there is a way whereby the new immigrants can and will be successfully assimilated into the main stream of American culture and society, just like millions of others before them.

Is the American core still intact?

In other words, as a society, we should be able to feel confident that new waves of immigration will not weaken America's core values as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. America's core values are relatively simple, yet of fundamental importance. But we cannot assume that every new American truly understands them and will live by them.

Simply stated, America is a country based on popular sovereignty in which the government has been established to preserve individual freedom and serve the People, where accountability is a duty, and the protection of all basic individual freedoms is the main obligation of all public institutions, while a properly functioning system of checks and balances prevents abuses and protects minorities. Sounds really simple.

But it is not at all simple. Understanding the deep meaning and broad implications of these relatively elementary principles requires deep reflection, and in most cases the rejection of other models in which the state is sovereign and the citizen a subject.

No pressure to assimilate

But why can't we be sure that these American principles are properly embraced by the new immigrants? Very simple. Fundamental changes have occurred in the immigration process

in the last 20 to 30 years. Absorbing core values was an integral part of the assimilation process, mostly because new immigrants wanted to be part of the mainstream.

But here is the thing. Assimilation as we understood it until a few decades ago may not be happening anymore. New immigrants are no longer automatically “blended”, this way quickly becoming Americans. The US has already become a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society, with distinctive ethnic enclaves within which people preserve the language, culture and belief systems of their country of origin.

And this happened in large measure because there is no longer any strong incentive nor pressure to assimilate and be assimilated. It is a fact that in the U.S. many states or regions within them now are predominantly Hispanic or Latino, and Spanish-speaking. Other ethnic enclaves also exist; but the communities from south of the border are by far the largest.

No pressure to embrace American core values

Let me be absolutely clear. These relatively new Americans are mostly industrious, good people. Still, if we cannot be sure that these new immigrants, after they came here, fully embraced the American political culture and its underlying values, overtime this will lead to a significant –in fact structural– transformation of the America we know today.

And since America developed and grew in what it is today because its diverse citizens subscribed to a certain set of constitutional principles, it is important to check as to whether most citizens still share those beliefs. And if some do not, we have a real problem.

There is no more a “melting pot”

The main –and probably irreversible– change when it comes to the difference between old and new immigration, is that the

old "melting pot" metaphor used to describe America no longer applies. Up to the 1960s the "melting pot" was a fair representation of the willingness and ability of the American society to receive, absorb and homogenize large waves of diverse immigrants, this way turning them rather quickly into "true Americans" .

All this no longer applies. The US ceased to be this mostly Anglo-Saxon "cultural blender" that overtime absorbed, digested, homogenized and integrated millions of other immigrants coming from different backgrounds.

Old immigrants under pressure to become assimilated

How did this happen? Here is the thing. The reason why the "melting pot " metaphor no longer applies is about the fundamental difference between the immigration experience of the Europeans who came to America a hundred years ago and the experience of the Latinos who come today. The qualitative distinction is that most of the older immigrants –in particular the Europeans– came to the U.S. with a keen awareness, explicit or implicit, that by immigrating into the U.S. they had also permanently severed their ties to their countries of origin.

Sure, in many cases they would retain, at least the immigrant generation, a specific identity within the American ethnic mosaic. But most of them were absolutely bent on "becoming Americans", as soon as possible. Rightly or wrongly, fast assimilation was deemed to be the ticket into the American mainstream. With assimilation came acceptance; and therefore more economic and social opportunities, for the new immigrants and certainly for their children growing up in America.

Superficial differences remained

Looking among newcomers to America a century ago, one could have easily recognized Polish Americans as different from Italian Americans. But, by and large, whatever the different

countries of origin, physical appearance and accents, there was a unifying trait that most new immigrants shared.

Indeed, those who came to the U.S. and stayed here had made a total commitment to becoming Americans, and to place any residual tie or connection with their country of origin: linguistic, cultural or culinary, on a much lower tier.

Old ties soon dissolved

Furthermore, in many if not most cases, the new immigrants were unable or unwilling to preserve their linguistic identity and pass it on to the following generations. Many of them were often semi-literate or illiterate within their own cultures. Thus they did not have the tools to preserve linguistic and cultural complexities that they did not fully master.

Therefore, the kaleidoscope of exotic last names that still today dots the American landscape has value mostly for the ethnographers and historians who can spot and identify Norwegian, Irish, Greek, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, or German origins.

Immigrants intermarried

However, if we fast forward to today, the individuals who bear those last names –the descendants of the original immigrants– with a few exceptions, usually can barely tell you that their great grand parents came from somewhere in Ireland or Germany. Besides, mixed marriages among different immigrants blurred the picture even further. The Italians intermarried with the Irish and their offspring later on with other descendants of other nationals. A third or fourth generation American today can easily be part German, Swedish, Scottish, Russian and Greek. Therefore, for him or her it is almost impossible to determine a meaningful national or cultural origin, let alone have strong feelings of belonging to it.

Immigrants today stay connected

Well, today it is different, very different. And the basic difference between these old waves of immigrants and the Latino waves rests largely on geographic proximity to the countries of origin, and the consequent easy travel back and forth, relatively higher standards of living, and the availability of low cost or zero cost communication tools that keep the old ties alive and relevant. This level of communication between new immigrants and their country of origin was simply unimaginable a century ago.

A hundred years ago, most European immigrants by and large came on a one way third class ticket on overcrowded steamers. ***Once they had landed, and after they had been processed at Ellis Island, they were psychologically and materially committed to a fast track to integration in order to increase their chances of improving their lot vis-a-vis the other Americans. In most cases, going back to the country of origin was out of the question. Immigration to America was final. Thus, embracing this new world, in all its aspects, including its political culture and values, was absolutely necessary in order to have a chance to succeed in it.***

Ties to the country of origin

The Latinos belonging to this new wave of migration instead do not have the same urgency to assimilate. They come by bus, by car or by air, many of them across the Mexican border. For the most part, (even if we take out the many who do not have legal papers who therefore cannot cross the border back and forth for fear of apprehension), except for the very poor, these immigrants have the opportunity to travel at least occasionally to their country of origin. Some do this rather frequently. Back home in Mexico, El Salvador or Colombia there are many relatives and circles of old friends. US-based immigrants send money back to them. At least some of them plan to make enough money in America, so that they can bring their savings back home and live comfortably there.

To think of Polish peasants transplanted in Illinois at the turn of the last century taking an even occasional summer vacation to visit relatives back in the village is preposterous. Except for the extremely successful few who had become really rich in America, hardly anybody ever went back.

Easy to communicate

On top of that, nowadays, even for the relatively poor Latinos, phone and video contact with relatives back home is the norm rather than the exception; while the gigantic remittance flows from the U.S. into Central and South America, indicate continues involvement with families and communities in the countries of origin.

And the retention of the Spanish language as the primary or at least co-equal language is an indication that these immigrants do not have the same urgency to integrate and in some fashion forget about their origins. They see no need for this.

Large immigrant communities retain their identities

The strength of large numbers in most cases may help in shaping attitudes. No need to learn English fast in large communities where the Spanish-speaking Latino population is actually the majority. Indeed, at least in some communities in the U.S. it is possible to have a reasonably "normal" life in terms of semi-decent work opportunity without any need to acquire real English fluency, something that certainly was not the case, even in the most "ethnic" states or regions, at the height of the European immigration waves.

Learning English used to be the ticket to success

Certainly, even in the past there have been many large ethnic islands within the United States. And it is true that many immigrants could get by in America with little or no English. However, the understanding of all was that English was the only official language of the country and that all official

transactions would be conducted in English. No equivalent at that time of the now ubiquitous “press 2 for Spanish”, in any telephone help line, let alone taking driver license tests in languages other than English, or the notion of having officially sanctioned bilingual education.

We know that being an American is not about ethnicity, as demonstrably there is no “American” ethnic group. ***However, becoming an American is both possible and absolutely necessary, if we want the original American ethos, as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, to be preserved.***

And it all boils down to the voluntary and sincere embrace (“without mental reservation, or purpose of evasion”, as the Oath all citizens have to take says), of a set of constitutional principles and the values that sustain them.

Immigrants had to become Americans

Of course, we know that, even in the past, most immigrants coming to the U.S. were primarily economic immigrants, driven by material needs, rather than by lofty political ideals.

However –and this is a crucial distinction between then and now– whether they liked it or not, the old immigrants were “forced” by circumstances to buy into the prevailing Anglo-Saxon political culture and become sooner than later “homogenized Americans”, thus quickly shedding the legacy of their origins and embracing America and its core values, at least in most cases. As indicated above, at that time, America was a genuine melting pot. Today, it is a completely different story. No more a melting pot.

Civics exams do not make citizens

True enough, the rule today is that before being naturalized, that is legally accepted into the American society and polity, all applicants must take and pass a test of basic knowledge of the U.S. Constitution.

This is not a bad idea. But since this is the only test, it is a truly low bar. So low, in fact, that it is insignificant. Demonstrating decent knowledge about how many Justices sit on the U.S. Supreme Court is important, but hardly conclusive evidence that the would-be US citizen understands –and most importantly agrees with– the principles of the American Constitution when it comes to the preservation of individual liberties, popular sovereignty, limited government, or the purpose of effective checks and balances, let alone the values that should sustain these core principles.

No real differences among the descendants of earlier immigrants

When political leaders today affirm that the strength of America lies in the diverse backgrounds of the diverse immigrant population that somehow enriches all of us, they are talking nonsense. They should know that when we talk about Americans of European descent, today this “diversity” is in fact so superficial that its is in fact insignificant. They know that the descendants of those Italian, Swedish, Portuguese, German, Russian and Greek immigrants are now indistinguishable from one another.

Indeed, while some of them may have retained some superficial traces of their distinctiveness, (Italian Americans may have dark hair, Scandinavian Americans have blonde hair), at this is point they are all homogenized Americans. Kohl, Lantos, Giuliani, Voinovich, Kerry, Tenet, Dukakis, Rubio, Pompeo, just to stay within the sphere of people involved in public policy, are all “ethnic” names. Yet, all these are Americans –with a capital A.

Latin immigration is different

However, ten years from now, will we say the same about the Mercado, Martinez, Ortiz, Lopez and Rodriguez who will be the Mayors, Senators, Governors and eventually national leaders of

America? The critical difference between the old and the new immigrants is that many Latinos did not and do not have the same pressure to integrate and quickly become "*homogenized Americans*".

Both old and new immigrants appreciated then and appreciate now the opportunity to have a better life in the USA. However, to the extent that the new immigrants (most of them from Central and Latin America) can easily maintain an active connection with their countries of origin, (something that those who came along with the previous immigration waves simply could not do), they do not seem to have the same urgency to totally and quickly transform themselves into "*Anglo*".

Embracing America and its values

If, while preserving the old family and cultural ties, all or at least most of them would voluntarily choose to truly and fully embrace the values of their adopted country, this would be a genuine achievement of good multiculturalism.

Let me be clear, this is not about "forcing" people to abandon their cultures, their language and their roots. There is absolutely nothing wrong in retaining and cultivating one's culture and language of origin, as long as there is also a genuine embrace of American values up to the point that they become the key reference.

But, here is the thing. The old immigrants willingly or unwillingly were "*sucked into America*".

As for today's immigrants, realistically most of them will not spend sleepless nights poring over the *Federalist Papers* or other tomes on Jefferson or the U.S. Constitution in order to critically understand and fully appreciate America's core values and how they were incorporated into the Constitution.

But here is the thing. Without the perception that in order to

have a normal life in America they need to embrace the values of this society, most new immigrants will simply tend to their own private affairs. And, in the pursuit of their own interests, they will be guided by the principles that they acquired in their formative years.

America is not just the place you found work

If this is so, regarding these new waves of immigrants, we cannot rest assured that their value systems and beliefs are or will be the same as those that are prevalent among other Americans, simply because their backgrounds are different and their learning and socialization took place in a different context, while the urgency to embrace American values is simply not there.

And herein is the challenge. America has worked reasonably well so far because a recognizable political culture has been preserved and passed on to new generations and millions of new immigrants over more than two hundred years through a fairly successful homogenization process that caused total outsiders—millions of immigrants from different countries—to become integrated into the American mainstream rather painlessly and in a relatively short time.

More than just language

The substantial recent inflow of millions of people from nearby Mexico, Central and South America who bring with them not just another language but also different values and who see neither the obligation nor the need to fully understand and subscribe to the American political culture will bring about substantial qualitative changes. These changes will provoke new debates about what is it that we mean by “*being an American*”.

Once again, let me be clear. I am not even remotely suggesting that all these new Latin immigrants are disloyal or suspect people. I am simply suggesting that most of them are

fundamentally economic immigrants who –unlike the European economic immigrants who landed here more than a century ago– are not under any pressure to understand, absorb and fully embrace American values.

Many Americans do not know much about their history and values

True, the notion that all the descendants of the old European waves have an unflinching, clear understanding as to what are the American values that they theoretically subscribe to is highly questionable. Indeed, many do not. But, at least in general, they cannot look at political or cultural alternatives that derive from other perspectives that coexist in their cultural and personal universe.

That said, if anything, the lukewarm appreciation about the distinctiveness of American political culture and values among many descendants of older immigrants complicates the problem, as it does not present to the new immigrants a really clear picture of the value system that they should absorb in order to become “real” Americans.

America is a political society shaped by shared values

We all know that America is a rather unique country, in as much as those who are here today cannot point to a shared ethnic, religious or cultural identity. America is not a Nation-State in the European sense. America is a community of people coming from a variety of countries who freely decided to subscribe to a set of values which became the unifying principles of this republic.

Americans are Americans because they share a political culture. Until not too long ago, the implicit assumption was that all of those who are here genuinely understand it and willfully embrace it.

This political culture has been the intangible yet ultra strong magic glue that kept this complex machinery of the

American society together. Going forward, we have to face the fact that this glue may not be as strong a bonding agent as it used to be.

A new era

And we have to face this fact now. Indeed, for the first time in our complex history, we have a large chunk of new immigrants who may very well live here as law-abiding, productive citizens; but who are under no pressure to truly join in by sincerely embracing our political culture.

Again, let me stress that this does not automatically make these new immigrants disloyal or dangerous citizens. But it makes them different.

Just like the previous waves of immigration into America, these are predominantly economic immigrants. ***However, unlike the immigrants of old, these relatively recent immigrants did not and will not go through the “political and cultural indoctrination”, benign or “forced”, willfully accepted or “suffered” by millions of others before them. The old blender that homogenized everybody and made them into “true Americans” is no longer working.***

The new immigrants are different. Their large and growing numbers will affect the culture and the values of the broader society in which they live, and eventually they will radically transform it –its value systems and core beliefs. How this transformation will change America and us all is impossible to predict.

But America will never be the same.

Does America Need Nuclear Energy?

WASHINGTON – Can nuclear power come back as a cost-effective modality to generate electricity in America? Some scientists and innovators claim that the sector, challenged by prohibitively high costs of construction and fears of accidents may have a future after all, and it is called Small Modular Reactors, or SMRs. According to them, it would appear that the sweet spot for nuclear will not be in the traditional model of large scale, expensive and difficult to build power plants that will serve millions of customers. The future is in Small Modular Reactors, SMRs that can be built quickly and cheaply.

Small nuclear?

If this were indeed so, if we could indeed quickly build several SMRs at a reasonable cost, this would be a true game changer, for the nuclear power industry, for the future of electrical power generation in the U.S., and more broadly for all efforts aimed at devising a mix of electrical power generation sources that will help us drastically reduce carbon emissions, and therefore finally put a stop to global warming.

On the road to extinction

By most account, here in the U.S., nuclear power plants are on the road to a silent and unlamented extinction. A combination of fears of accidents, uncertainties about a reliable way to dispose of all the spent fuel and then huge, in fact prohibitive, upfront construction costs for new plants created almost insurmountable policy, political, psychological and financial barriers that work against the very notion that nuclear is a viable, safe, reliable, non carbon solution to our needs for electricity.

As all this was debated here in America several years ago, the Fukushima Daiichi accident of March 11, 2011, in Japan was an additional and huge body blow to the entire nuclear power sector and the companies and policy-makers that support it.

Leaving aside all the technical analyses about the very specific circumstances that caused that major accident in Japan, (a major tsunami that flooded the plant, disabling the pumps), U.S. public opinion, or at least a big chunk of it, became even more convinced that nuclear power generation is inherently dangerous.

There are other options

Therefore, energy experts argued, as we do indeed have choices, let's discard nuclear power as a means to generate safe and reliable electricity. The Greens of course advocated renewables. Others focused on the emerging and promising shale gas sector. Indeed, with so much new and cheap natural gas coming on line, America could reliably generate all the affordable electricity it needs, for decades.

And so, as a result of all this skepticism regarding nuclear, while other commercially viable alternatives have been developed, we are witnessing the progressive shrinking of the U.S. nuclear power electricity generation sector. The stark reality is that no new nuclear plants are built, while old plants little by little are phased out and decommissioned.

This is a big deal. Nuclear used to provide about 20% of all electrical power generation in America, a huge percentage of the total and a large overall amount for an advanced industrial power like the U.S. that produces and consumes a great deal of electricity.

Nuclear is dangerous and too expensive

As indicated above, for some this transformation may not be so bad. Nuclear –they argue– is dangerous, as we do not have an

effective way to dispose of all the waste produced by the plants. And then there are possible accidents. May be not of the Fukushima kind. But other possible malfunctions may cause the release of harmful radiations in the atmosphere. The consequences of such events would be dire.

On top of that, the fact that nuclear is now so expensive is an additional reason for deciding to move on to other more promising technologies. If you are Green, you want to focus on solar and wind, technologies that have become much more cost-effective in recent years. If solar has become so cheap, why bother with nuclear? If you are not Green but are simply looking at cost-effective ways to generate electricity, you focus on shale gas, not exactly clean, but far better than coal when it comes to emissions.

Renewables are not enough

Well, the advocates of SMRs argue against complete reliance on renewables as the silver bullet that will deliver enough safe and sustainable, non carbon based, power. Unless renewables become dramatically more efficient, they argue, you simply cannot install enough renewable energy sources to meet current and future power needs. As things stand today, it is impossible to build enough wind farms and solar plants to power the entire planet. And if we seriously want to progressively “decarbonize” our power generation mix, they tell us, then shale gas will not do it. Yes, it is better than coal, but it is not clean.

In the end, say the SMRs advocates, if we want green solutions, solar and wind, plus hydro power wherever it may be possible to develop it, will simply not be enough. You also need nuclear.

Small Modular Reactors to the rescue

Here is the strong argument in favor of a new generation of SMRs. If we agree that coal is bad, and natural gas from shale

only somewhat less harmful, we simply cannot focus solely on solar and wind as the means to deliver all the power we need.

Unless we assume tremendous technological breakthroughs that will substantially increase the productivity of all existing renewable technologies, while solving at the same time the huge bottle neck of the lack of energy storage systems – a problem that limits the flexibility and therefore the usefulness of solar and wind power generation– renewables are simply not enough. Without large scale, effective storage solutions, renewables produce electricity; but not 24/7. No sun at night. No power when there is no wind.

And then there is the energy density issue. We simply cannot successfully address our planetary electrical power generation needs by building thousands upon thousands of wind farms, while covering large chunks of the Earth's surface with solar panels. It is just not practical.

That said, if we want to drastically diminish and eventually phase out our dependence on carbon based electrical power generation, we better come up with something else that can be successfully added to the mix.

Are SMRs commercially viable?

Hence the importance of refocusing on nuclear, albeit a different type of nuclear: small, modular, cheap, and effective. Of course, all this is very interesting. Except for one basic fact. SMRs, although the object of serious studies and research, are not commercially viable at this stage. They are much more than concepts, but they are not part of the choices commercially available today to utilities and consumers. At this stage, SMRs are a hope, not a real alternative.

If this SMRs hope does not soon become reality in terms of companies that can offer safe and reliable SMRs to utilities at a competitive price, we are in a real bind. We can generate

all the electricity we need; but we are and we shall be unable to seriously curtail greenhouse gases emissions. And this means that Global Warming will get worse.

This is bad news for Planet Earth.

Italy's Chaos May Endanger The EU

WASHINGTON – Italy is once again the problem country within the European Union (EU) and beyond. And this time it may be a really huge problem. After the recent inconclusive political elections, the most improbable governmental coalition between the anti-system 5 Star party and the nationalist/xenophobic League party in the end could not happen on account of Paolo Savona, the openly anti-euro nominee placed by the two would-be coalition partners as Minister in charge of the Economy.

The president says no

Sergio Mattarella, the Italian president, argued that he could not swear in a cabinet in which this critical portfolio would be handed over to an openly anti-Euro economist. This move by the Italian president is border line unconstitutional. The Italian president usually approves the cabinet choices made by the parties that create a coalition government that has a parliamentary majority.

While taking this odd twist into account, without the president's approval of the proposed cabinet and lacking any new workable coalition, this means that Italy most likely will soon go to new political elections.

A care-taker government

In the meantime, president Mattarella gave the mandate to form a new coalition government to Carlo Cottarelli, a technocrat with IMF experience but zero political experience and backing. Clearly Cottarelli has no political mandate for any long term political solution. Assuming he can stitch something together, he will be the head of a care taker cabinet tasked to deal with day-to-day affairs, as the country prepares to go to new political elections.

This bad scenario: at first an improbable political path for Italy –an openly anti-European, populist, anti-immigrant coalition, without any credible economic or fiscal agenda–and now nothing except for fresh elections which may not yield better political outcomes, is seriously disheartening and potentially very disruptive for both Italy and the European Union. We should remember how just a short while ago the financial/fiscal/political mess in Greece for years kept all of Europe preoccupied.

Another Greece?

At the time, some speculated that the Greek crisis might have caused the collapse of the entire Euro edifice. Well, in the end, with the enormous combined financial back up from EU Headquarters in Brussels, the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, and the IMF in Washington, DC, super indebted and comatose Greece was kept alive –if barely.

Worse than Greece

Well, if the confused Italians really want to pursue the objective of exiting the Euro, this would be a lot worse than the Greek crisis. Unlike tiny Greece, Italy is the third largest economy within the Eurozone. Yet, size notwithstanding, the Italian economy is extremely fragile due to low productivity and lack of innovation on a scale that would produce any real champion that could effectively compete

in the global arena.

Besides, the Italian people have to shoulder an astronomic public debt, (the second worst as a percentage of GDP within the Eurozone, after Greece, and third largest in the developed world after Japan), while the country's economic fundamentals are very weak. Assuming even a small rise in interest rates, debt service alone could become an unmanageable fiscal problem.

Blame game

But the Italians have the bad habit of not taking responsibility for their own mess. They take refuge in convenient conspiratorial theories whereby all their economic and fiscal problems have been caused by others.

The semi-official narrative is that the Germans try to impose their own will on Europe, including unwarranted fiscal discipline, on countries (like Italy) that believe that profligacy and debt are perfectly alright. Besides, many believe that the adoption of the Euro has caused constraints and burdens that the Italians do not like. You see, these days you cannot devalue your currency in the hope of regaining competitiveness for your exports.

The immigration crisis

Last but not least, (and here the Italians do have a valid point) , Italy's European partners have been looking mostly the other way when Rome repeatedly asked for help in dealing with the gigantic problem –in fact an emergency– of multi-year waves of illegal migration, mostly from Africa, into Italy.

Because of its geography, (Southern Italy and Sicily are fairly close to North Africa), Italy is the first port of call for thousands upon thousands of migrants from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa seeking a better life in Europe. For years they kept coming and there is no end to this migration. Semi-

impoverished Italy for a number of years has been dealing all by itself with the massive and seemingly endless problem of welcoming and resettling hundreds of thousands –now several millions– of mostly poor, illiterate and unskilled African and Middle Eastern migrants.

Just imagine the cost of providing shelter, food, medical care and schooling for this helpless and expanding lot. And do not forget the obvious cultural/religious difficulties and consequent frictions caused by the attempt to “assimilate” poor African villagers, many of them Muslim, into the fabric of what is at least nominally a predominantly Catholic society.

Anti-immigrant political parties

In fact, the political rise of the openly anti-immigrant and xenophobic League can be largely ascribed to the emotional reactions of millions of Italians who have seen their country transformed beyond recognition by the impact of millions of African newcomers who cannot possibly blend into the Italian social fabric.

That said, aside from this illegal immigration crisis, it is sadly obvious that most of Italy’s problems are self-inflicted wounds. The real issue is not about having a dispassionate cost-benefit analysis over staying or not staying within the Eurozone.

The real issues

The real issue is a major, supposedly capitalistic, western economy that lost its competitive edge long ago. As *The Wall Street Journal*, put it (May 28, 2018):

“Lost in the debate is the reality that Italy’s economic problems are mostly homegrown, with a 20-year erosion in productivity, a cumbersome bureaucracy and a dominant small-business sector that has stifled productive investment, making

Italy one of Europe's sickest economies. According to Eurobarometer, 80% of Italians judged the state of their economy as "bad," with only Croats and Greeks reporting worse opinions."

So, here is the situation. Confronted with slow but steady economic decline, due to lack of competitiveness, the Italians are incapable or unwilling to do what it takes to take responsibility and change course.

Reforms in order to regain competitiveness

What's to be done? First of all, Italy should reform and seriously upgrade the entire edifice of public education in order to produce better educated new generations that could successfully compete with their counterparts in Northern Europe and across the world. Then labor markets and civil law procedures should be dramatically reformed in order to give employers and foreign investors the confidence they need in order to bet on the Italian economy. Firing workers is too difficult. Settling business disputes in court may take years.

Last but not least, there is the enormous challenge created by the twin and often intermingled cancers of endemic corruption and organized crime. It is hard to do business in a country in which kickbacks are the norm, while vast sectors of the economy and local politics are controlled by the Mafia, and its siblings: Camorra and 'Ndrangheta.

Fighting about the Euro and excessive German influence may be politically expedient, but it is just like charging the windmills. It will get Italy nowhere.

That said, I doubt that there is any appetite to see this serious political impasse as an opportunity to change course and start behaving in an adult way, that is: take responsibility and undertake serious reforms. The tendency to look for and find scapegoats abroad, while hoping on simple political fixes for gigantic economic problems, is deeply

ingrained.

Stop right at the edge of the abyss

Still, if the past can offer any guidance, the Italians while messy and litigious, usually stop when they get right at the edge of the abyss. Confronted with the real possibility of a complete collapse, generally they retreat and agree to pay a huge economic price in order to steady the economy. However, once the emergency is gone and sheer survival is no longer in question, then the usual game of blame takes over again, with a vengeance.

Italy could choose to undertake serious reforms, this way regaining economic competitiveness and credibility, becoming once again the destination of precious foreign investments.

But I would not count on wisdom and sobriety suddenly springing in this country of myopic leaders perennially fractured by parochial interests.

North Korea Will Never Give

Up Its Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON – The sudden White House announcement about a May Summit meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has taken Washington and the world by surprise. It is not clear what the American game plan is. Until not too long ago the U.S. policy regarding North Korea seemed to be sanctions, and more sanctions. No talks. In fact, Trump himself, a while ago publicly declared that negotiations would lead nowhere.

Trump “forced” Kim to negotiate?

Now, the improvised White House narrative is that Mr. Trump’s tough actions –the new round of sanctions, plus threats to destroy North Korea– have “forced” Kim to ask for direct talks which could entail “denuclearization”. If you believe all this, then it follows that Trump managed to bend North Korea.

Do not count on denuclearization

Still, beyond the surprise announcement of this May Summit, my assessment is that this opening, however startling and significant it may be, (it would be the very first such encounter between the leaders of these two nations, technically still at war with each other), it cannot possibly mean that the North Koreans are truly willing to negotiate the end of their nuclear program.

And for a very simple reason. North Korea is a semi-failed state in which most people are close to starvation. It has no real economy, and no prospect of creating a viable one under this medieval, cruel and bizarre dictatorship.

Korea has nuclear weapons –and nothing else

The only real asset that North Korea has is its nuclear

weapons, now combined with an increasingly more modern panoply of ballistic missiles which may be capable within a short period of time to enable the rogue state to deliver nuclear weapons as far as the East Coast of the United States. America must take notice of North Korea for this very reason. Because it represents a potentially serious national security threat.

Well, precisely for this very reason, nuclear weapons being all that North Korea has to be taken seriously by the rest of the world, I cannot see any scenario under which Kim will give this huge –in fact only– real asset away. He will not, even if promised in return American technologies, food aid, substantial financial aid and all sorts of political reassurances that the US will sign a peace treaty, that America will never attack them, and what not.

Simply stated, North Korea's standing in the world, such as it is, is due only to its ability to threaten other countries with incredible destruction, including the United States. Without nuclear weapons, North Korea is like Sudan, or the Central African Republic: an inconsequential, impoverished state with no real future and no prospects.

What is the point of this May Summit?

I have no idea as to what Kim may have in mind by offering these talks with President Trump. Of course, if we just focus on the optics, to be face to face with the leader of the U.S. will be a huge public relations coup for Kim. He will be able to say that finally he is recognized as the supreme leader of a world power. However, when it comes to what a bilateral negotiation may bring, I am not too optimistic.

Kim will not give up his nuclear arsenal

America (and the world) wants North Korea to ultimately give up its nuclear weapons, its missiles and all its nuclear facilities. But this is all they got. Even if promised a lot, the North Koreans will not give up their membership in the

nuclear club.

Farewell to Africa?

WASHINGTON – Jacob Zuma is finally gone. It was a painful process. It took years; but he is now out of power. At last, he was forced to resign as South Africa's president. That said, the very fact that he was elected and that he managed to stay there so long is a disgrace.

Zuma is bad governance

Zuma is glaring, if sad, illustration of Africa's widespread bad governance record. He rose to power through backroom deals. He had no clue about governing. He relied on nepotism and cronies to stay on top. He was stupendously corrupt. Now that he has been forced out, his legacy is an exhausted and impoverished South Africa

Water crisis in Cape Town

Cape Town, jewel of South Africa, is literally running out of water. An awful combination of a historic drought and an almost criminal lack of planning by local and national administrators led to this impending urban catastrophe. Lacking water in reservoirs on account of an unprecedented lack of rain, nobody thought that there should be a "Plan B". There are no alternatives, other than praying for substantial rain. No new aqueducts have been planned. No nothing.

There you have it. By all accounts, South Africa is still in the lead when it comes to economic development and higher standards of living in the African Continent. And yet this is a country in which chronic mismanagement, combined with

endemic corruption and incompetence, dashed even modest most hopes and expectations for a better future. Sadly, Nelson Mandela, himself a truly exceptional human being, left no legacy.

No end to Congo's violence

"No conflict since the 1940s has been bloodier, yet few have been more completely ignored. Estimates of the death toll in Congo between 1998 and 2003 range from roughly 1m to more than 5m—no one counted the corpses. Taking the midpoint, the cost in lives was higher than that in Syria, Iraq, Vietnam or Korea. Yet scarcely any outsider has a clue what the fighting was about or who was killing whom. Which is a tragedy, because the great war at the heart of Africa might be about to start again." —*The Economist*

Well, it seems that the Congo is once again reaching a boiling point. A vast, unmanageable country, with large mineral resources, is becoming a failed state. More violence and more deaths to be expected.

Major troubles in Ethiopia

"On Thursday, Hailemariam Desalegn abruptly announced he would step down as Prime Minister and head of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. He cited ongoing "unrest and a political crisis" in the country as major factors in his resignation, which he described as "vital in the bid to carry out reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy".

"Hailemariam, who has sat at the helm of the Ethiopian government since 2012, said he will stay on as prime minister in a caretaker capacity until the EPRDF and the parliament accept his resignation and appoint his successor. This is the second state of emergency to be declared in Ethiopia in the last two years."

“In August 2017, Ethiopia lifted a 10-month state of emergency imposed after hundreds of people were killed in anti-government protests demanding wider political freedoms.”

“The country’s Oromo and Amhara people – who make up about 61 percent of the population – have staged mass demonstrations since 2015 demanding greater political inclusion and an end to human rights abuses. The protests have continued this month, with many people expressing frustration over a perceived slow government release of political prisoners.” –*Aljazeera*

Ethiopia’s leaders liked the Chinese model. They believed that they could be both total autocrats and smart technocrats capable of delivering economic development and higher standards of living. Instead their way of governing generated wide unrest. Can they retain control? If so, at what price?

Bad governance

What am I driving at with these stories? very simple. These snapshots unfortunately illustrate that Africa is not yet delivering on its promise to be the next bright chapter in human development.

The common thread here is that bad to awful governance, treating political power as a personal or factional perk to be abused to the extreme, is the cause of most of Africa’s problems.

Syria Is Not A Strategic Priority For Washington

WASHINGTON – It is clear that Russia, as the key ally of president Assad of Syria, has taken a lead role in trying to set the stage for a final peace settlement regarding this tragically battered country. The recent Sochi meeting in which president Putin hosted president Rouhani of Iran and president Erdogan of Turkey seems to illustrate a resurgent Russia once again playing a key role in the Middle East.

America in retreat?

In Washington, the defenders of the (frankly defunct) myth of Pax Americana sounded alarm bells. *“America is in full retreat –they admonish us– and the bad guys are filling the void. We are losing ground, while they are gaining”.*

Indeed. But here is the question. Is the American national interest really profoundly impacted by who is in control in Syria? What’s so important about Syria from Washington’s standpoint? Well, very little. Sure enough, if we look at a map of the Middle East, we can see that a firm Russian foothold into Syria, plus continuing Iranian influence there, changes the geopolitical picture.

Russia and Iran in the lead

True. Still, this being the case, in what way does this geopolitical realignment affect America’s vital interests? Syria is now a semi-destroyed and completely impoverished country. Whoever will exercise influence on Damascus does not gain that much. In fact, to the extent that the Russians need to prove that they are real friends of Assad, they would have to support Damascus financially, for many years. And this may prove to be quite a burden for a Russian state not exactly swimming in wealth.

Iran's influence in Syria is a concern. However, there are several counterweights within the region to Tehran's hegemonic ambitions. From this perspective, it would be prudent for Washington to continue supporting its traditional Sunni Arab allies who are actively opposing Tehran's expansionism.

Middle East no longer of critical importance

That said, even taking all this into account, the idea that Washington *"must"* regain its historic role as a key powerful player in the Middle East has no longer any strong rational justification.

Of course, until a few years ago, one could have argued that the Middle East indeed had extraordinary strategic value for Washington, because it sits on most of the oil the rest of the world desperately needs.

Well, this argument is far less compelling today, in this new era of abundant oil supplies in large measure caused by America's newly discovered technologies (fracking and horizontal drilling) that allowed US energy companies to exploit massive domestic shale oil reserves. Indeed, thanks to fracking, in just a few years America doubled its oil production. This is a real game changer.

Besides, if you add to this dramatic domestic oil production boom increased oil supplies from Canada, plus imports from Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, the U.S. has, or will soon have, *"hemispheric energy independence"*. This means that most of the oil America will need will come from domestic sources or from imports from reliable neighboring countries, and not from the Persian Gulf.

Middle Eastern oil not so important

Now, this is a major and completely benign geopolitical change! In simple language, as the U.S. no longer relies on Middle Eastern oil for its very economic viability,

controlling events in the region is no longer such a key priority.

Besides, going forward, the slow but steady emergence of electric vehicles as commercially plausible alternatives to gasoline powered cars makes the strategic importance of oil, and therefore of Middle Eastern oil and whoever owns it or controls it, progressively far less significant.

Down the line, if you take oil out of the equation, or at least if you downgrade its strategic value as the (no longer so) essential fuel for all modern industrial countries, the Middle East becomes far less important. Absent oil and the power and wealth that it brings, Taiwan is a far more significant player in the global economy than Saudi Arabia.

Let Syria go

Bottom line, let's not fret about who will be in charge in Damascus. After years of civil war that caused destruction and millions of refugees, Syria is a disaster, a true basket case. Even assuming wildly optimistic scenarios, it will take years and astronomic investments to bring it back to semi normality. Let Russia worry about all this.

Palace Coup In Zimbabwe Will Not Bring Along Genuine Democracy

WASHINGTON – Despite some last minute confusion regarding the timing of his exit, Robert “Mad Bob” Mugabe is finally gone. He is a despot, a cruel dictator, and the undisputed author of

Zimbabwe's economic ruin. After 37 years of autocracy, is this finally good riddance? Well, I would not bet on a good outcome. A happy ending is highly unlikely. Indeed, this sudden change at the top of the government in Zimbabwe is certainly not about an injured nation that finally rebels against its tormentor, forcing him out of power while creating genuine foundations for democratic rule and true accountability.

Just a palace coup

Sadly, this is just a garden variety palace coup. One faction against another, with the military finally deciding that it was time for the old man (now 93) to go. In particular, the army chiefs did not like the prospect of Grace Mugabe, the President's much younger and equally rapacious wife, replacing him this way creating a dynastic rule.

For this reason the generals took over and rearranged the palace furniture, so that their favorite "leader", Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's Vice President, (who had just been sacked by Mugabe), will become the next president. Now 75, Mnangagwa, is not exactly part of the next generation. At home, he is affectionately known as the "Crocodile". This nickname alone may give you an idea of what kind of man will become the future president of a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe.

New handpicked leader not a champion of democracy

The poor citizens of this unlucky country are rejoicing –for the moment. They chant in the streets of Harare, proclaiming that now they are finally "free". Well, I would not be so sure.

Their new leader is also a cruel despot, while perhaps endowed with a bit more pragmatic attitude, at least if compared to Mugabe. It is a well known fact that as a senior cabinet official, for years Mnangagwa (cheerfully?) implemented the most awful violations of human rights directed by his boss,

“Mad Bob” Mugabe.

Economic disaster

So, here is the grim picture. After 37 long years of Mugabe’s systematic looting and monstrous mismanagement, the economy of Zimbabwe is virtually destroyed. It will take a miracle to create a genuine pro-growth, business friendly environment that will entice desperately needed foreign investors.

The “regime change” that just took place, while welcome, won’t mean much when it comes to hopes of economic development; unless it is accompanied by genuine democratic reforms. And this is highly unlikely. Indeed, we can rest assured that the authors of this palace coup acted in their own self-interest; most certainly not in the interest of the people.

Silence across Africa

But this is not the entire story about poor Zimbabwe. The real story is that for decades all the African leaders stood silent, as Mugabe imposed his cruel dictatorship on the citizens of Zimbabwe who back in 1980 applauded him as their liberator.

Indeed, it is absolutely true that Robert Mugabe led the fight against white minority rule. And he deserves credit for that. Because of his role in the struggle against oppression, after this troubled former British colony finally obtained independence from the UK, (this way formally ending the white minority regime), Mugabe became the legitimate leader of Zimbabwe back in 1980.

This happened after Ian Smith, the self-appointed leader of a new Rhodesia led by a white minority government, was forced to give up power, and abandon his crazy dream of a sustainable white minority government. Because of his critical role in the long struggle against the white minority government, Mugabe the Freedom Fighter entered the Olympus of Africa’s Great Men.

That said, it became obvious almost from day one that the poor people of Zimbabwe had traded one white dictator (Ian Smith) for another (Robert Mugabe). The difference being that Mugabe was a resistance hero and therefore politically untouchable, within Zimbabwe and across Africa.

South Africa did nothing

And yet much could have been done to stop him. Especially after the end of white minority rule in South Africa in 1994, it would have been quite possible for the new African National Congress (ANC) leadership now in power in Pretoria to force Mugabe to stop or at least tone down his crazy autocratic rule. By African standards, South Africa's economy is a giant compared to that of neighboring Zimbabwe. Had it wanted to, South Africa could have easily imposed its will on Harare.

But no, absolutely nothing was done. South Africa did nothing. Zimbabwe's other neighbors also did nothing. The African Union did nothing. Ostensibly this silence about Mugabe's gross violations of human rights was out of deferential respect for a "Freedom Fighter" who got rid of white oppression, this way gaining a special place in the hearts of all Africans.

Yes, Mugabe did good things in his years as a Freedom Fighter. But he will be remembered as one of the worst (and most incompetent when it comes to economic management) dictators of this century. And every African head of state knew all this. And they did absolutely nothing to stop him.

Disingenuous western media

Let me add a sad foot note to this tragic story. A recent BBC retrospective analysis of Mugabe's 37 rule is titled: "*Robert Mugabe - revolutionary hero or the man who wrecked Zimbabwe?*". This headline is at best disingenuous, at worst horrible journalism.

After 37 years of dictatorship which led to economic ruin,

fantastic inflation, political persecutions against ethnic opponents and millions of Zimbabweans in exile, is the BBC still in doubt about who Mugabe really is? Does this matter really require further scrutiny and analysis before reaching a conclusion?

Come on, BBC!