

America's Energy Future

WASHINGTON – The good news is that America is now among the top three world fossil fuels producers. The bad news is that increased US fossil fuels production will create a disincentive in exploring and then deploying needed alternatives to fossil fuels.

The real challenge

The energy policy challenge for the US –both the government and the private sector–is to be able to look at current and future reliance on abundant domestic oil and gas both as a providential support for current energy needs but also as a temporary “necessary evil”, as we get busy trying to identify non carbon energy sources that will power America in the long run.

Indeed, these –oil and gas– are the essential energy sources that we badly need right now. However, as we take advantage of the fossil fuels bonanza, at the same time we must be steadfast and relentless in the all out pursuit of economically viable, emissions free energy alternatives, however long this may take. Put it simply, if we do not want to cook up the planet, our long term future –America's future and the world's future– has to be powered by clean, emissions free energy sources.

The fracking revolution

That said, if you did not know anything about the immense threat represented by man-made global warming, and therefore you had no reason to doubt that fossil fuels are the best answer to America's massive energy needs, then you would be reassured and comforted by recent trends. Indeed, thanks to abundant domestic oil and gas, this is a great season for the American economy, and for the US fossil fuels industry.

Thanks to hydraulic fracturing technologies, (better known as “fracking”), and horizontal drilling, scores of US energy companies, large and small, in the last decade managed to tap into vast energy resources, (located mostly in Texas, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania), until recently deemed to be uneconomic because of the technical challenges represented by drilling into shale formations in order to free up the hydrocarbons trapped in shale.

Well, thanks to old-fashioned Yankee ingenuity, the technical challenges were overcome –with spectacular results. Thanks to fracking, US oil and natural gas production jumped to almost unimaginable heights, this way transforming not just the American energy market, but the entire dynamics of global energy markets.

US is ahead

Let’s take stock. America is now the number one world producer of natural gas, and poised to surpass Russia as the biggest oil producer in 2019, having already overtaken Saudi Arabia. (This forecast may change, of course, because both Russia and Saudi Arabia have ample spare capacity that could be easily tapped, this way increasing their production).

A mere decade ago, the idea of a massive scale US fossil fuels renaissance would have been labeled a silly fantasy. Any reliable forecast would have pointed out that the US had already used most of its known fossil fuels reserves.

In 2008 the consensus was that, going forward, America could have powered itself only via massive additional energy imports, (both oil for transportation and natural gas for power generation and heating).

This unpleasant assessment created unease in many quarters, given the enormous cost involved in importing most of the hydrocarbons needed to power America, the second largest energy consumer, (after China), and given the worrisome

negative national security implications of utter dependence on foreign suppliers for such vital commodities.

The impact of fracking

Well, today we have a completely different scenario. While America continues to rely on some oil imports, the percentage has shrunk substantially. Furthermore, today the national security concerns related to imported oil are far less significant, because our oil imports come mostly from our close neighbors: Canada and Mexico, (and some from Venezuela), therefore these supplies are relatively secure. Which is to say that America is now close to achieving what the experts call "*Hemispheric Energy Independence*". Indeed, as most of our additional energy needs come from stable countries located in our immediate neighborhood, we no longer rely on a significant scale on distant and potentially unreliable suppliers.

And it gets better. In fact, while we still import some oil, now we also export oil, and growing amounts of oil products. And the quantities of our energy exports are growing.

The real challenge is to develop emissions free energy sources

That said, this positive short and medium term energy outlook is deceptive. This fossil fuels renaissance is not the end of the story when it comes to America's energy sources and their impact on the environment.

We now know that continued reliance –on a massive scale– on burning fossil fuels will contribute to additional greenhouse gases emissions and therefore to the exacerbation of global warming.

Of course, we know that many companies and scientists are busy trying to find workable –that is technologically viable and cost-effective– alternatives to reliance on hydrocarbons. But this is not easy.

Bad policies will not help

And it seems that policy-makers are approaching the problem in the wrong way. The prevailing policy choice is to “force” the adoption of currently available renewable energy solutions –today– by creating mandates for renewable energy usage, and tax subsidies for wind, solar and electric vehicles. In my view, while these policies of mandates and subsidies may be well intentioned, they will not succeed.

The fact is that new forms of energy production and new types of vehicles will be spontaneously adopted on a massive scale only once they prove to be cost-effective, without the distorting incentives of mandates and tax subsidies.

Fund more R&D

Public policy can help not via subsidies but by providing significantly more funding for additional research in alternative, emissions free, fuels. We simply do not know today what the future ideal new energy mix will be. It is too early to say.

Electric vehicles, EVs, look very promising. And yet manufacturers still need to find ways to make cheaper, more energy-efficient, and lighter batteries. The good news is that the cost of wind and solar has gone down –very significantly. But we still do not have effective ways to store the electricity they produce so that it can be used when the wind is not blowing and the sun is not shining.

In other words, still plenty of work to do before we can reliably move away from hydrocarbons for both power generation and transportation.

Fast track the development of clean energy sources

So, here is the challenge for America. By all means, let’s take advantage of the incredible fossil fuels renaissance,

simply because today there is no reliable alternative technology that could be deployed on a massive scale.

But let's not fool ourselves. Oil and gas are not and should not be looked at as long term energy solutions. The long term solution has to be in emissions free, clean energy sources –whatever they may be. With this goal in mind, let us unleash American ingenuity so that we can get to a reliable, and economically viable post-fossil fuels era as soon as possible.

We all love our planet. Let's do our best to preserve it.

American Health Care Is a True Monstrosity

WASHINGTON – Among wealthy nations, America holds the dubious record as the country with the highest health care spending as a percentage of national wealth, (18% of GDP), extraordinarily high costs of even standard procedures, and mediocre health outcomes.

Big spenders

Think about it, the next big spenders on health average around 10% of GDP. Related to our \$ 20 trillion GDP, American overspending is roughly \$ 1.4 trillion. This waste is almost double the entire defense budget.

If Americans were getting vastly superior quality of care for all this extraordinary amount of money spent on health, then you could say that you pay for what you get. But there is no evidence that, on average, Americans are getting superior care.

No serious debate

And yet, this gigantic cost difference between the US and other wealthy countries is not questioned by health care experts, policy-makers or consumers. It is accepted as a fact of life. *"Well, this is what health care costs in America"*. In the US all the policy debates are not about trying to understand why we have stratospheric costs. They are only about deciding who pays the bill.

Not much effort, it seems, goes to try and find out the causes of this enormous discrepancy between the US and other rich nations. By and large, lower health care costs in other wealthy countries are superficially explained away as due to low quality, socialized medicine. *"In the UK or Canada citizens get lousy service because of low quality, rationed care. No wonder it is cheap"*. This is a generic charge that is mostly untrue.

Economist and management consultants cannot get to the bottom of this?

What is even more extraordinary is that America is the home of thousands of economists and top of the line management consultants who should have the intellectual ability to understand that our high costs are in large measure due to horrible practices and down right perverse economic incentives.

The major flaws

At the cost of oversimplifying the extremely complex, layered US health care system, here are its major flaws. In the US we have an awful mix of private health care providers, without any genuine private sector competition, because services are paid mostly by medical insurance and not by the care recipients. Therefore health care providers do not feel the market pressure that would normally induce all participants in any economic sector to do their very best to offer the highest

quality product or service at the lowest price, so that they can stay ahead of the competition. In US health care there is no real “market”. This lack of competition among private sector providers who are into this business to make a profit leads to abnormally high prices. In other words, providers tend to jack up prices well above cost and overall inflation, without any justification.

Perverse economic incentives

And it gets worse. In the US, self-employed doctors make money only when they can prescribe something to sick people. Therefore, there is absolutely no incentive to teach people “prevention”, that is healthy life style habits, so that they can stay away from the doctors’ office as for as long as possible. Healthy patients bring no money to the providers. this may sound absurd, but in this system doctors want/need many sick people. This is only way they can make a living. From this perspective, the ideal patient is someone with a chronic condition that must be treated but cannot be cured. Patients for life are a wonderful source of guaranteed income.

Well, thanks to extremely bad personal habits when it comes to diet and lack of exercise –just think of the obesity epidemic and all its health consequences– millions of Americans now need to be treated for chronic ailments such as cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes. While this is not good for the patients, from the standpoint of providers millions of sick Americans are an endless windfall amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars.

Prevention would be a game changer

But here is the thing. Any serious health care professional knows very well that with proper education and guidance, many chronic diseases could be prevented and in most cases reversed. But where is the financial incentive to educate the public? It just does not exist. Doctors do not want to lose

their revenue. Ditto for pharmaceutical companies that simply love to have millions of Americans who need their drugs in order to manage (never cure) chronic ailments.

The ugly picture

So, here is the ugly picture. Through their unchecked bad personal habits millions of Americans have developed a host of chronic diseases that require monitoring and treatment at inflated prices. This way causing enormous and but totally preventable expenditures.

Could this trend be reversed? Of course it could be, provided a sustained “wellness education” campaign conducted by the government and all the key providers. can we do this? Of course we can. Think of the sustained efforts carried out for many years aimed at convincing Americans to stop smoking. Millions did so. However, today the medical profession has practically zero incentive in educating the public on ways to stay healthy and prevent disease.

So, there you have it. Tens of millions of Americans in poor health, private sector providers who love this, and a complicated medical insurance system that masks true costs and allows higher and higher prices. And here is a telling illustration of what this perverse system produces.

\$ 50,000 for a new knee

A [WSJ](#) front page story (*What Does Knee Surgery Cost? Few Know, and That's a Problem*, August 22, 2018) tells us how some health care providers almost casually set extravagantly high prices for procedures which are completely disconnected from actual costs.

“For nearly a decade, Gundersen Health System’s hospital in La Crosse, Wis., boosted the price of knee-replacement surgery an average of 3% a year. By 2016, the average list price was more than \$50,000, including the surgeon and anesthesiologist.

Yet even as administrators raised the price, they had no real idea what it cost to perform the surgery—the most common for hospitals in the U.S. outside of those related to childbirth. They set a price using a combination of educated guesswork and a canny assessment of market opportunity.

Prompted by rumblings from Medicare and private insurers over potential changes to payments, Gundersen decided to nail down the numbers. During an 18-month review, an efficiency expert trailed doctors and nurses to record every minute of activity and note instruments, resources and medicines used. The hospital tallied the time nurses spent wheeling around VCR carts, a mismatch of available postsurgery beds, unnecessarily costly bone cement and delays dispatching physical therapists to get patients moving.

The actual cost? \$10,550 at most, including the physicians. The list price was five times that amount. [bold added]

Competitive forces are out of whack in health care. Hospitals are often ignorant about their actual costs. Instead, they often increase prices to meet profit targets. Patients, especially those with insurance, often don't know the price of a procedure and rarely shop around."

Massive overcharging, and nobody cares

Got that? Patients and insurance companies are outrageously overcharged, and almost nobody can figure this out. Uninformed patients are clueless and therefore do not fight this outrage.

But how is this possible? In no other economic sector providers could get away with exorbitant over pricing, because competitors with lower prices would fight to get their business. True, however, as noted above, in the US health care system elementary free market economic principles simply do not apply.

The mix of private health care providers bent on maximizing

profits, a maze of insurance plans, and health care customers who lack even the most elementary means to assess costs and do any comparison shopping without getting lost have created a monster.

Anybody can see this

Again, any intelligent observer who cares to look into this ugly picture can see this abomination and immediately grasp that there is an urgent need to teach wellness education in order to minimize overall health care needs and therefore costs , and transform the entire health care delivery system so that physicians are rewarded for keeping people healthy, not for prescribing expensive therapies for preventable diseases.

To be clear, it is obvious that not all health care is about “wellness education” aimed at eradicating or at least minimizing preventable illnesses. There are and there will be many other ailments, including: genetic conditions, cancer, accidents, injuries, epidemics. And they need to be dealt with.

My point is that when you eliminate life style caused illness and the ridiculous over prescribing affecting almost everything else, we are talking about possible savings in the hundreds of billions of dollars per year.

It will be difficult

Look, I am not totally naive. I realize that reforming medical care in the US would be an enormous, thankless undertaking. There are just too many stakeholders who have a strong interest in keeping things just the way they are, because this is how they make money.

Still, by not touching the status quo, we keep wasting hundreds of billions of dollars every year in unnecessary therapies and procedures whose costs keep getting inflated

beyond any justification, while the average American is trapped in an unhealthy life style.

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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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 descendents 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.

Why Self-Driving Cars? Upgrade Bus Networks Instead

WASHINGTON – The ongoing buzz about the marvel of “driverless cars” soon hitting the roads is a bit too optimistic. A great deal of money and effort is devoted to perfecting this futuristic technology. We know that Google and other high-tech

companies are involved in this research. General Motors has entered a \$ 500 million partnership with Lyft to produce a robot vehicle that will drive itself. Eventually driverless cars will be managed by Uber or similar services and used for ride-sharing.

The advantages

I see the point of getting into a car that can safely take you anywhere. Instead of focusing on driving, while in the car, you are just a passenger. You can read, do work. You can safely make phone calls, or rest.

I can also understand how older or disabled people who can no longer drive but need to go places would find a self-driving vehicle to be the perfect solution to their daily mobility needs.

I can also see how it may possible within a realistic time frame to match car services like Uber and driverless cars. If this formula worked, many people would simply not buy cars anymore. And this would help alleviate traffic congestion. (More on this in a moment).

You are still stuck in traffic

That said, this is not necessarily the best way to invest precious funds. And here is why. Suppose we get there. Suppose that there is some kind of breakthrough. Consumers will soon be able to buy an affordable, safe, intelligent car that they do not need to drive. Or we shall let Uber do the driving, so that some of us will not feel the need to own private cars anymore. Fine.

Now imagine yourself in your new robot-vehicle that drives you. You are in the middle of Los Angeles, or Cairo, or Paris, or Nairobi, at rush hour. Guess what, the car may drive you, but both the futuristic vehicle and you are still stuck in horrible traffic. Sure, you are not as stressed as you used to

be by bumper to bumper congestion, because the car does the driving. But you are still stuck in an endless traffic jam. True enough, if many cars will be owned and operated by Uber or equivalent services, most definitely there will be fewer cars on the road. Still, there will be plenty of cars. Not to mention delivery vehicles, trucks, ambulances, police cars, buses, you name it. Which is to say that your daily commute will continue to be long and unpleasant. Your driverless car will help alleviate congestion. But it will not eliminate it.

So, here is my point. All this focus on making cars smart is a poor allocation of scarce resources. The problem is not that cars are not smart enough. The fact is that in large urban areas the car, private or Uber managed, is a poor choice to address the issues of easy, affordable, dependable personal mobility.

Let me say it again. There are just too many cars on our roads! And too many cars means shared discomfort for all users.

The car is a bad solution to mobility needs

The fact is that we are way past the point of diminishing returns when it comes to the usefulness of the automobile in all large urban areas, anywhere in the world. In most big cities the car is the wrong answer to our need to move around at leisure, in comfort, and reasonably fast. There are just too many people with too many cars sharing limited road surfaces.

The answer to epic traffic jams and slow-moving traffic, often 24/7, is not to make cars more intelligent. ***The answer is to get rid of cars altogether in large urban settings, and opt for smart mass transit solutions.***

(PLEASE NOTE: This general rule applies only to large cities. People living in rural areas, in isolated communities, or remote farms need cars. And, of course, cars may still be

necessary for road trips, long and short).

Bus Rapid Transit systems

While there may be several options available, at the moment the most cost-effective –and proven– solution seems to be **Bus Rapid Transit, BRT**, systems.

“Come again? We are working on high-tech, intelligent cars and you are proposing clunky old buses? “Yes, I recognize that this does not sound terribly sophisticated. And in fact it is not. And, yes, in the roll-out phase this BRT option can be very disruptive.

But let me tell what you get with Bus Rapid Transit. You get all the advantages –in terms of speed and reliability– of an underground subway system, minus the often prohibitive cost of digging tunnels which make subways systems always inadequate from the perspective of the average would-be user. Walking 30 minutes in order to get to the subway station and then another 20 to get from the closest station to your final destination is not appealing. And in some large metropolitan areas there is no subway, because of cost. Period.

Dedicated lanes, fast buses

Here is the issue when it comes to buses operating like subway trains. In most large cities, in order to create a BRT system you would have to ban or at least severely restrict private cars. The new seamless bus network becomes fast and efficient only if buses can have complete right of way via “buses only” dedicated lanes, not shared with other vehicles. And this means large areas within cities where cars cannot travel.

Once we know that buses will be able to move freely without being stuck in traffic created by private vehicles, then BRT planners will be able to create a seamless network, with bus stops that become interchanges working just like subway stations. Passengers will buy their tickets before boarding.

They will ride on a bus, exit at a stop that will also be an interchange, quickly board another bus, if they need to, and get to their final destination within the estimated time.

Just like a subway, minus the construction cost

In other words, you get all the advantages of an underground subway system, in terms of easy access, service reliability, and speed, minus the extravagant cost of digging tunnels and building underground stations.

In most countries, these upfront costs are prohibitive. And this is why most cities do not have subway systems. Or, if they have them, they are not large enough to properly serve the entire population. Hence the continued reliance on private cars.

“So, are you telling us that the old-fashioned, humble bus can take care of all urban transportation needs?” Yes, it can. But this new (in fact not so new, as you will see in a moment) model assumes vision on the part of municipal leaders.

They have to be able to sell to their citizens the unfamiliar notion of people moving around quickly and efficiently using surface public transportation that works exactly like a subway system, minus the cost of construction. They have to convince them that the bus network will be user-friendly, affordable and efficient.

It works

Well, here are the key questions. Does this BRT system work? Has it been tried before? The answer is yes, and yes. It works and there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate this.

It all started back in 1974 in the city of Curitiba, Brazil. The very first BRT system was the result of years of experimentation by urban planners who finally came up with the model of “*bus just like the subway*”. And then the model spread

throughout Latin America. In 2000 Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, launched its own TransMilenio BRT system.

And now you have similar mass transit solutions in Brisbane, Australia; Stockholm, Sweden; Cape Town, South Africa; Ottawa, Canada; and many more cities around the world.

Political impediments

The only reason why BRT systems have not been adopted more widely by other large cities across the world is that municipal leaders are afraid of voters' backlash. Mayors and Municipal Councils do not want to deal with the unavoidable skepticism and probable resistance of millions of voters-drivers who may not believe that the new BRT system will work as advertised.

Oddly enough, faced with abrupt changes, most city dwellers would rather endure the misery they know –monstrous traffic jams– rather than try something new.

So, this is mostly a psychological/political impediment, rather than a technical obstacle. Meanwhile, however, millions of people spend hours and hours in traffic jams created by the shared, but totally mistaken, belief that the private vehicle is still the most cost-effective and most efficient way to address personal mobility needs.

Getting there, fast

So, back to driverless cars. Would you rather have a high-tech car that drives you, but can do nothing to avoid traffic congestion and an endless daily commute; or would you rather get where you need to go by low tech bus that gets you there fast, thanks to a seamless and efficient network?

Think about it.

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 caretaker 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 astronomical 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-impooverished 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.

How The NRA Controls The National Gun Control Debate

WASHINGTON – A new turn in the media narrative of the recent mass killing at a Florida High School may actually provide support to the National Rifle Association (NRA) argument. The NRA maintains that every law-abiding citizen has a constitutional right (deriving from the Second Amendment) to own a weapon. The killings that occur in America are all about bad people who get guns, while they should not be able to get them. In many instances, the NRA claims, the bad people are enabled by incompetent law enforcement agencies. Those who are supposed to enforce the existing law and protect us are negligent. And this is how tragedies happen.

CNN: how the police failed

Well, the outcome of a recent CNN interview with the Sheriff in charge of police operations in that Florida town seems to reinforce the NRA's main argument. It turns out that the police department, in agreement with the High School that was later on attacked, decided to be more lenient in enforcing the law when students commit some types of infractions, including threats.

This being the case, it is quite possible that the young Florida shooter, well known for his erratic behavior, fell through the cracks created by this softer approach to law enforcement. And there is more. What about all the calls made by different people over a period of time alerting the police that this young man was probably up to no good? Why is it that nobody in the Sheriff's office followed up? And, finally, the truly stinging indictment. The police officer assigned to protect the school, carefully avoided getting into the school premises when the tragedy occurred and the shooting began. It seems that he cared for his life a lot more than for the lives

of the kids he was supposed to protect.

Blame the police

So, there you have it. What viewers get from the CNN story is that if the local police had been proactive and if everybody had done their duty, this deranged young man would not have had the opportunity to get a gun and eventually execute his crazy plan.

CNN has a point, here. However, please note that this is exactly the NRA's point. The NRA claims that If only good people get guns and the bad guys are caught before they can act, then nothing bad can possibly happen.

NRA solution

However, if the authorities whose job is to protect us sleep on the job and allow bad people to have access to weapons, then we have a system breakdown and tragedies like this one unfortunately may occur. The NRA "solution"? Very simple. Enforce the law, follow establish protocols, and nothing this bad will happen again.

Of course we know this is a compete self-serving fantasy. In a country –America– in which tens of millions of legally owned guns freely circulate it is almost a miracle that these tragedies do not occur more frequently.

Police negligence in the Florida shooting case

In this particular Florida case, let as readily admit that many officials repeatedly dropped the ball. Tips were ignored. Dangerous behavior exhibited by this young man was either ignored or explained away. Proper protocols were not followed. The police did not act when it had to, and so on. All this is true.

Therefore, we can stipulate that in this particular case the tragedy might have been avoided. Human error, at multiple

stages, was a factor, may be the key factor, in this mass murder episode.

The true issue: too many guns in America

That said, if we look at the larger picture, it is almost impossible to police a country of 320 million people in which tens of millions citizens own guns, while untold numbers of weapons are readily available through illegal channels to those who cannot purchase one legally.

Furthermore, how do we screen everybody for mental issues, in order to make sure that all or most mentally disturbed people will not be allowed to buy or keep a gun? Of course, better screening may help at least in some cases. It is probably true that some future tragedies may be avoided.

But the real and carefully ignored larger issue is the bizarre interpretation now given by the Courts to the meaning of the Second Amendment. In essence, here it is:

“Anybody in America can get as many guns as they wish, because gun ownership is an individual right protected by the U.S. Constitution. End of story”.

No other developed country has a regime of unrestricted gun ownership

America is the only rich, developed democracy in which there are only minimal barriers to gun ownership. This is not an element of distinction which makes this country better. This is a bizarre anomaly. Until we recognize this fact, do not expect much real, as opposed to cosmetic, progress on “gun control”.

And the NRA controls the narrative.

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.