

Oprah For President?

WASHINGTON – Oprah for President? Yes, after her recent Hollywood speech this is now a distinctly possible scenario for the 2020 presidential contest. Well, are we to conclude that America has gone mad? Are we going to see a presidential contest between highly polarizing former developer and reality TV star Donald Trump and Oprah, the much loved queen of inspiring TV talk shows? Is this what Americans want? To be led by entertainers with only vague knowledge about public policy issues and the complicated art of government?

Systemic failure

The answer is: may be so. Well, how did we get to this point? Very simple. *“The Establishment”*, both Democrats and Republicans, pounded and demonized during the 2016 presidential campaign, was and still is completely discredited. And rightfully so, since it has failed. Miserably.

Far from being the expression of a self-confident, forward looking Republic, America’s political leadership –the elected Senators and Congressmen– is composed mostly of small minded, often ignorant and risk averse, pros who long ago lost sight of the purpose of government: preserve liberty, protect the Nation, ensure the administration of justice, and deliver critical services in a fair manner, and at a reasonable cost to the American taxpayers.

Government is not working

Just a few examples. Washington can no longer perform even basic, fundamental operations. The Congress cannot create and pass sensible federal budgets within the established time lines. We limp along from stop-gap to stop-gap through “continuing resolutions”, gimmicks that secure funding for government agencies, without however any serious debates about

strategies, priorities and goals.

The elected leaders in Congress reflexively focus on their own narrow parochial issues –in order to please their constituents, this way paving the way to their own reelection– while disregarding the progressive deterioration of America's public finances.

Colossal fiscal mismanagement

Indeed, lacking any serious policy debate about a proper and fair rebalancing of revenue and public expenditures, especially on vast and growing entitlement programs, (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid), the federal government spends all it gets from taxes and mindlessly borrows the rest. The net outcome of this systemic and now colossal fiscal mismanagement is a gigantic and growing U.S. federal debt: \$ 20 trillion and counting. At some point this monster will eat us up. And yet, this impending public debt calamity is hardly mentioned at all in current Washington policy debates.

No serious discussion about critical issues

Indeed serious issues with a huge impact on federal spending, such as the need for a serious reformulation of major entitlement programs, so that the elderly and the truly needy are covered, while the federal government secures the necessary revenue to finance these current and projected outlays, are left untouched.

Grotesque realities such as our astronomic health care costs –the highest among all rich countries– and our bad and declining health statistics, are not part of the national conversation.

Last but not least, our chronically under performing public education system is only occasionally mentioned. Apparently the fact that almost half of all young Americans –especially the poor and minorities– grow up and get into the world

without a modicum of knowledge and skills that would give them a fair chance to get good jobs and move up in our society is of no importance for our elected leaders sent to Washington to serve the Republic.

Inept leaders

Simply stated, the professional politicians who are supposedly in charge, are mostly mediocre people, if not completely inept. They lack vision, intelligence, and the courage to deal with complicated problems. They simply do not know how to mind the store.

When the pros fail, Americans looks at outsiders

Well, no wonder then that millions of unhappy Americans turned somewhere else for help. In 2016 they tried Donald Trump. In 2020 they may want to try Oprah. Will she run? Can she be elected? Who knows.

But if these –Donald or Oprah– are the possible leaders that America wants to choose from, as opposed to the pros that supposedly know how to run a modern Republic, it is because the pros have proven that they cannot do it. As simple as that.

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!

Tax Cuts Will Increase The U.S. National Debt To Unsustainable Levels

WASHINGTON – It is really hard to properly assess the Republican tax reform proposal now discussed in Congress. Many details have yet to be ironed out. Sure, in principle we can agree that a basic reform leading to a simplification of the almost incomprehensible U.S. Tax Code would be much better than the confusing morass we have now.

Lower corporate tax rates

We can also agree that a lower corporate tax rate would be good for American firms, in as much as lower rates would simply realign the U.S. with corporate tax rates prevailing now in most advanced countries. And, finally, limiting the interest deduction on home mortgages in excess of a certain

amount is good. This deduction in practice is only a subsidy to wealthy home owners who get a nice “rebate” –a huge deduction based on the amount of interest they paid on their mortgages– when they borrow large sums of money to finance their mansions.

That said, in all the back and forth about potential winners and losers and possible –just possible– incentives that may be created by this new legislation that may end up boosting investments, economic activities and therefore overall growth, one major consequence of this new tax law is barely mentioned.

This is mostly a tax cut

Whichever way you look at it, this “tax reform” plan is mostly a tax cut that will end up cutting national revenue –by trillions of dollar, over several years. In turn, lower revenue caused by lower tax rates will force America, an already highly indebted country, to go much deeper into debt in order to meet current and projected spending obligations. This is a horrible, totally undesirable outcome.

America is in deep fiscal trouble

In case you did not know, America is already in deep fiscal trouble. Lower revenues would simply make a bad situation much worse. Indeed, absent sorely needed federal spending reforms aimed at slimming down (read: reduce size, scope and cost) our gigantic, and financially unsustainable entitlement programs –Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid– this Republican tax reform plan will further deteriorate our horrible fiscal outlook, simply because an even greater revenue shortfall –without significant spending cuts to go along with it– will amount to larger deficits, year after year.

Absent spending reductions, it is obvious that future larger annual deficits can be financed only through additional public borrowing.

So, here is the net impact of these ill-advised tax cuts. When all is said and done, some Americans will see their federal tax bill cut, in small or large measure. And this will be good for them.

A much larger national debt

But, as a result of this “reform”, America will have a much bigger national debt. And this is a disaster, not in the shape of a sudden catastrophe; but in the shape of a sliding slope that will amount to diminished federal resources down the line, and consequently much more limited options for the Federal Government in domestic as well as international affairs.

Simply stated, a country with an enormous, and growing, debt burden will no longer be able to afford a large defense budget. Therefore, with a shrinking military at its command, the U.S. President will have to “redefine down” the national interest.

Indeed, trying to cope with mountains of red ink, America will be no longer able to afford meaningful amounts of federal spending on international affairs, foreign aid, health research, sorely needed new infrastructure, space exploration, energy, and what not.

You get the picture. No money means scaled down domestic and global ambitions.

If we look at history, all Great Powers that went deeply into debt simply ceased to be Great Powers. (Check Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain, the Russian Empire, and more).

No longer a Great Power

This should be obvious to all. But let me restate it anyway. America cannot be a debt ridden country concerned about the mounting financial cost of extravagant debt service

obligations and still remain a Great Power. This is just impossible.

Great Powers are rich.

The foundation of any Great Power is the flexibility provided by huge economic resources that the Government can use to pursue its objectives. Sure enough, resources are often squandered in the pursuit of ill-advised enterprises.

However, in the case of highly indebted countries, with no real money to spend, the national leadership has few or no options. No option among other things means fewer and fewer power projection means, (read: reduced military spending), and reduced leverage in international negotiations. Simply stated, the World does not give much thought about a country that used to be rich and powerful but is no longer.

When will the world stop taking America seriously?

Since Uncle Sam's debt already topped the astronomic figure of \$ 20 trillion, how much farther can we go before the World stops taking America seriously? Nobody really knows. It is a matter of changing perceptions about the speed and the likely impact of America's fiscal deterioration.

Why do we hear almost nothing about this fiscal crisis?

Well, if the fiscal consequences of this impending tax cut are so dire, why do we hear only vague and somewhat muted comments about the fiscal impact of this tax "reform"? Very simple. Elected leaders do not like to be the bearers of bad news.

And the added complication is that it is really hard to explain in layman's terms the damaging effects of an impossibly large national debt. Voters cannot "touch" the national debt and realize that it is really bad for them. These enormous figures –\$ 20 trillion dollars of red ink, and climbing– seem to be abstractions.

The sky is not falling

Besides, if the sky has not fallen until now, why should it fall tomorrow if just added a little bit more to the debt? Can't we just muddle through, just as before? Whereas a tax cut is a tangible benefit. This is something that can be sold to the voters.

The bigger the cut, the better. If cutting taxes means reducing already insufficient revenue, therefore worsening an already dire fiscal outlook, so be it. Tax cuts that directly benefit your constituents may get you reelected. Whereas increasing taxes and/or reducing spending on unsustainable entitlement programs in the name of fiscal sanity, will not get you any votes.

The Real Benefits of Healthy Motherhood

WASHINGTON – Mothers should spend a great of time with their new-born babies in the first 3 years of the baby's life, and especially during the first year. This is not about reasserting traditional societal norms and old-fashioned cultural values regarding the role of women as mothers. This is medical advice to new mothers and fathers regarding the best way to raise healthy children, based on empirical scientific findings.

Why babies need their mothers

The evidence shows, and much research conducted over many

years clearly illustrates this, that babies come into the world without a developed central nervous system. A great deal of data demonstrates that close contact with the mother supports a healthy development of the baby's neurological system.

How so? Because women transmit through their milk the hormone *oxytocin*, a critically important neurotransmitter produced by women and not by men. In addition, the oxytocin produced by the mother, (oxytocin is also known as the "love hormone"), contributes to the creation of a special bond between baby and mother. This bond helps the healthy neurological development of the baby.

And no, the day care center, assuming that working mothers have access to one, is not a good substitute for baby-mother bonding during the child's critically important early years.

This is not about "traditional values"

So, here is the thing. The old-fashioned notion, in fact antiquated according to most, that women should be primarily good mothers and should spend a great of time with their babies, while embraced by those who support the "restoration" of traditional values and traditional families, has in fact true scientific backing.

Of course, depending on the slant you put on this new medical research, this scientific finding could lead to very counterproductive advice to women:

"Based on science, it is clear that, if you want to have healthy children, you should devote yourself entirely to them. This means that you should give up any plans to have a full-time job and a real career. You cannot have both".

How do we reconcile work and motherhood?

Well, it does not have to be this way.

Still, it will be difficult to reconcile the need to have mothers spend a great of time with their new-born babies, (a lot of time in the first 9 months to a year, and then still quite a bit of time, until they reach age three), and the legitimate desire (in many cases it is a basic financial need) shared by millions of women all over the world to work and have fulfilling careers.

it is very clear, especially here in America, that working women who have children are already penalized by a system that in most cases does not even recognize the need for a few weeks of maternal leave for new mothers. If employers are not even willing to give a few weeks of leave, how can you possibly expect that they will give an entire year, possibly three?

The employers will argue that they could not possibly sustain the cost of keeping on payroll women who stay at home taking care of their babies, not just for a few months, but up to three years.

It is a societal issue

Well, this is where a public education campaign has to come into play. It is complicated to convey the right message; but it is possible. Here is the thing. As a society, do we care about the proper neurological and psychological development of the new generations? Yes or no?

The sensible answer should be a resounding "Yes". Well, if so, as responsible members of our society, we must be willing to help cover the costs of extended maternal leave while babies are still in their infancy, and later on flex time for young mothers until the little children reach age three. (This is the age in which according to the findings mentioned above their central nervous system has been formed through the close bonding with their mothers. After age three the need to spend so much time with their mothers is no longer essential for their healthy neurological development).

The price of inaction

Will we ever get there? I hope so. New York psychoanalyst Erica Komisar in a long interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, (October 28-29, 2017), explains the consequences of inaction. She recounts stories described in the medical literature which list the damages that often occur when babies grow up without the precious bond with their mothers in the critical beginnings of their lives.

According to many studies, there is a plethora of psychological pathologies affecting small children who could not benefit from close bonding with their mothers in the early years of their lives, ranging from autism to attention deficit disorder to “social disorders”, and difficulties relating to other children and adults.

According to the science Komisar cites in the interview, all these dysfunctions, sometimes severe, can and should be avoided. We only have to make sure that mothers and new-born babies can develop the special bond described above, thanks to the “love hormone”.

The burden cannot be placed on mothers

Again, given all this, it would be horribly unfair to place the entire burden of this new and apparently much healthier approach to motherhood on women and their spouses. In most instances, working women simply cannot afford to quit work, not to mention the huge penalty of getting out of the work force, this way missing opportunities for career advancement, salary increases and what not. We should not place women in front of the horrible dilemma of having jobs or children, but not both.

A child centric society

Therefore, it is up to all of us to embrace the concept of a “*child centric society*”, as Ms. Komisar puts it. This is our

society. it should be our shared goal to have mostly psychologically healthy babies who will hopefully develop into healthy children, and later on healthy adults.

Think about it. It is not just about the babies and their parents. In fact, it is about all of us. Let's think about a proper way in which we can allow babies to bond with their mothers, without in any way penalizing women who want and need to work. In the end it is about sharing the cost of extended maternal leave for new mothers. Through a shared social policy effort –let's not hide from the fact paying women who will stay at home with their babies will cost money– we may be able to find a good solution that will allow working mothers to be away from work, without imposing an unsustainable burden on their employers.

Will Washington Give Arms To Ukraine?

WASHINGTON – Back in February 2014, right after a popular rebellion ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanucovich, this way taking over political control in Kiev, the then Obama administration was long on promises of aid and support; but very short on delivering almost anything of real value to the new supposedly pro-American and pro-European Ukrainian government.

Economic basket case

On the economic front, Ukraine was then (and still is today, by the way) a virtual basket case: an impoverished, non competitive, underperforming economy, poisoned by systemic corruption. On the military side, whatever your political

preference on who is to blame for the ongoing fighting between government forces and pro-Moscow ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine, back in 2015 it became obvious that Washington was not going to support the new anti-Russian Kiev government in any meaningful way.

Non lethal military aid

President Obama offered some non lethal equipment, (such as radar, night vision goggles), MREs, (military food rations), blankets, uniforms, and socks, (yes, socks), to the Ukrainian army –but no real weapons.

New Trump approach?

Now, with Trump in the White House, most recently the noises have been changing. It is no accident that U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis recently made a high-profile visit to Kiev on that country's Independence Day. During public celebrations which included a military parade, Mattis stood at the side of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Mattis trip to Kiev followed another important visit to Ukraine by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in July.

In public remarks in Kiev Mattis stated that the Pentagon is reviewing options that could include supplying real weapons to Ukraine; including anti-tank Javelin missiles, and possibly anti-aircraft missiles.

Of course, Mattis insisted that this American hardware –assuming a US Government decision to send it to Kiev– falls under the category of defensive weapons. America's stated goal –again, assuming a green light on this– would be to give Ukraine the tools to defend itself from Russian attempts to unilaterally change borders in the East.

Mattis justified any possible U.S. policy shift regarding weapons sales to Ukraine by pointing out that Russia is not living up to its commitments under the Minsk agreements aimed

at solving through peaceful means all issues related to the future of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine.

Policy shift

Well, should these supplies of U.S. weapons to Ukraine actually take place, this would indicate a major policy shift from the “do nothing” Obama years. For several years, Obama’s deeds (forget his speeches in support of Ukraine) indicated that America would not get involved, even indirectly, in any conflict involving Russia in Eastern Ukraine, a region with deep historic, ethnic and religious ties to the Russian state. With Obama in the White House, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko realized that he was on his own.

Now Donald Trump is President. So, a new more muscular approach to Ukraine in Washington vis-a-vis Russia? We shall see. Despite what Secretary Mattis just said in Kiev, I am inclined to believe that the Trump administration does not want America enmeshed, even if indirectly, in yet another, almost impossible and probably endless conflict, far from home.

A crowded national security agenda

Let’s look at the long “to do” list for the U.S. military, when it comes to hot spots. Washington is and will be engaged in the Middle East, (Iraq and to a lesser extent Syria) for quite some time. The President just announced a more muscular and open-ended policy towards Afghanistan, with the stated goals of defeating the Taliban insurrection. And then you have creeping and potentially explosive crises with North Korea, Iran, and may be with China on the South China Sea. Based on recent Washington moves and public pronouncements, we may also have to add Venezuela to this already long and challenging national security agenda.

Does Washington want to add an insoluble conflict in Eastern Ukraine to the headaches list, while cash strapped America has

a hard time keeping up with existing and potential commitments? I do not think so.

Is There A Democratic Party Policy Agenda?

WASHINGTON – If you watch most of the cable news channels these days you get a steady diet of endless, in fact almost obsessive, commentary on what President Donald Trump said or tweeted today, and what the seasoned analysts around the table think about it.

Endless coverage

As President Trump relishes being unconventional and breaking all the established “Washington rules”, plenty for the experts to talk about. Fine. Except that this –Trump– is all they talk about. Which is to say that if you watch CNN or MSNBC what passes as “the news” is the endless effort to score the latest Trump outrageous tweet. And as different talk shows follow each other on the same cable news channel, the new anchor picks up exactly where his/her colleague left it and repeats the very same tweet of the day, and asks a different panel of supposedly savvy experts what we should make of it. The variations in all this are limited to the degree of (feigned I believe) amazement and/or outrage.

Again, this is not happening on occasion. This is now the standard offering throughout the 24/7 news cycle. Look, I do understand that the media has a duty to report on what the President of the United States says or tweets. And certainly, since Mr. Trump enjoys being unconventional and controversial, his statements give fodder for talk shows.

Is there a Democratic Party agenda?

Still, my point here is that there is practically nothing else in the news. The one thing that is missing, probably because it does not really exist, is a thoughtful alternative policy agenda coming from the Democratic Party. Cable news shows do not report on it because most likely there is nothing to report.

And this is truly astonishing. We have an entire news media apparatus supported by scores of pundits who keep telling us that we have a strange President sitting in the White House who says and occasionally does unpredictable things, while the Republican majority in Congress is in (terminal?) disarray. And yet no alternative vision to this (apparently) unsatisfactory state of affairs is presented by the Democrats and discussed by the media.

Sit back and watch the Republican Party implosion

Are we to conclude that the Democratic Party strategy is just to sit back and watch the hoped for Trump implosion and the eventual dissolution of a Republican Party torn apart by incurable internal ideological battles? This may be a clever tactical approach.

But this is not a strategy for a national political force aspiring to govern the United States of America. Let us not forget that the Democratic Party in 2016 lost its momentum and ability to connect with millions of voters. It lost the White House to a complete outsider with zero political or campaign experience, and it failed to regain control of the Senate even though the odds favored it. Some party!

No compelling message in 2016

In 2016 the Democrats best hope was Hillary Clinton, a shop worn, uninspiring candidate who represented a retreat of the tired Clinton Brand. And, notwithstanding the Clinton machine

open effort to game the system via the guaranteed support of the super delegates at the Democratic Party Convention, Clinton had to fight until the end against Bernie Sanders, a feisty old socialist whose astonishingly outdated policy agenda was all about redistributing (ill gotten) wealth accumulated by the demonized 1% in a more equitable way. That's all the Democrats had to offer: Clinton and Sanders.

What's the alternative?

Today, precisely because the Republican Party policy program seems confused and confusing, the American voters need to hear about a credible and thoughtful Democratic Party alternative agenda. It is OK for the late night comedy shows to use the latest Trump outrage as material for their jokes. This is fine. Political satire is healthy in a vibrant democracy.

Show America how the Democrats will govern

But the news media should stop this obsessive Donald Trump saturation coverage, while the Democratic opposition, instead of relishing the Republicans' self-inflicted wounds, should rise to the occasion and offer a new and inspiring vision on how they intend to govern America.

As of now, I have seen none of that. And the reason for this, I suspect, is that the Democrats do not have anything new to say. And this is sad. A healthy republic needs a healthy debate on policy alternatives. Right now we have mostly noise.

America's Delicate Democracy

WASHINGTON – Democracy, anyone? But, yes, of course. We all want democracy. In principle we all agree as to the advantages of living in a democratic country, where there are constitutional guarantees which uphold and protect freedom of expression and enterprise, free elections, rule of law, transparent and fully accountable government, respect for minority rights, and a lot more.

Preserving and passing on key values

In reality, though, it seems that many societies –including an old democracy like the United States– are no longer able to preserve, nurture and pass on to the next generation the essential shared values that make it possible to have a well-functioning democratic republic.

Let's get this straight. A vibrant democracy needs a lot more than political pluralism and free elections held at regular intervals, as prescribed by the constitution.

Yes, these are essential preconditions. But, although absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient to guarantee an effective democracy. You can have (reasonably) free elections, and still give life to a polarized or just confused political system which produces dysfunction, or even chaos.

Basic preconditions

Here are some implicit, yet basic, preconditions without which democracy becomes a flawed mess. Any vibrant democracy is premised on a reasonably well-educated population in which most citizens/voters agree at least in broad terms as to what rule of law means. This is all about justice, fairness, protection of minority rights, unfettered openness, real access to education, to all economic activities and to the unimpeded pursuit of public office.

The citizens also agree about the goals of public policy. And this includes agreement as to where the boundaries between the private and the public spheres should be. This means that the people share a genuine understanding about the proper role of the state in providing for the truly needy and in creating appropriate and fair systems that would enhance, in fact guarantee unfettered access to economic and other opportunity to all, without at the same time creating politically inspired and justified entitlements and/or set asides for any group or social class.

Paralysis

Well, here in the United States we still have all our republican institutions protected by our Constitution. But we also have political and policy paralysis. And this prolonged paralysis tells us that, unfortunately, as a society we no longer agree on critical fundamental values.

And this did not start with the November 2016 elections. During the eight years of the Obama presidency the Republicans did their best to block or delay anything that the White House wanted to undertake. The widespread perception among conservatives and also many independent voters was that Obama was in fact not the President of the United States trying to promote policies that would benefit most Americans but an ideological leftist who wanted to remake America into a quasi-socialist state. Hence the reflexive opposition to practically anything President Obama proposed. The outcome was paralysis. Almost nothing done when the Republicans gained the majority in the House of Representatives after the 2010 mid-term elections.

Today, after the significant Republican victory of 2016, we have a populist President Trump who at least until now seems to act on changeable instincts rather than on the basis of a well laid-out, properly articulated and widely embraced strategy. The impression is that, beyond broad goals delivered

through appealing slogans, this Chief Executive is uncertain as to which are the policy tools that would take America to higher ground.

Ideological warfare

The legislative branch, in turn, is torn by deep ideological warfare, and most of all by the astounding inability of both Democrats and Republicans to elaborate and articulate in a compelling fashion their own strategic visions for America. The outcome of this is more policy paralysis. If this were only a temporary aberration, a glitch, America could survive and move on. But, as noted above, this paralysis did not start in 2016, it has been going on for a number of years, irrespective of who is in power.

Now that the (rather fragmented) Republican Party is in charge, we have the flip side of the Obama years scenario. Now we have the Democrats as almost statutory obstructionists. They will not get behind this President on anything at all, as a matter of principle. Battling them we have a disunited, in fact disjointed, Republican Party ostensibly in the majority. The Republican Party is clearly incapable, not only of attracting members of the opposition in order to form bipartisan coalitions on key policies, but also of maintaining even a modicum of unity and cohesion among its Senators and Congressmen.

This is serious. Indeed so serious that, if we cannot repair the ideological rifts and the deep divisions that make it now impossible to create viable (bipartisan) coalitions which can identify and successfully tackle policy priorities that will benefit America and its people, the very future of this old republic is in question.

Checks and balances

The fact is that, a long time ago, the Founding Fathers devised a complicated and delicate –I underscore “delicate”–

system of government that was primarily aimed at preserving Liberty.

America was not and is not about creating a strong government that “*would get things done*”. It is mostly about creating institutions aimed at protecting free people against the threat of tyranny. And for this reason the Founders came up with a complex alchemy of “*checks and balances*” : equally strong centers of power that will keep an eye on one another, this way preventing any one of them from becoming too strong, and therefore a threat to liberty.

Easy to block anything

But here is the thing. While this system of equal forces balancing one another is an effective instrument when it comes to preventing any dangerous power grab, it is also ideally suited for launching successful obstructionist efforts at multiple levels.

Simply put, preventing almost anything from getting done is relatively simple within the U.S. constitutional framework. A small group of legislators, in some instances even a single law-maker, can delay or prevent major pieces of legislation and/or critical presidential appointments from moving forward.

“Getting things done” requires a relatively high degree of political agreement within the parties and often between the parties and among various factions and interest groups within the broader American society.

Lacking such an agreement, the system becomes easily dysfunctional. And this is the way it has been for a number of years, regardless as to who is in charge in the White House or in Congress.

Delicate system

That said, Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong, as a

matter of principle, with the U.S. Constitution. What is deeply wrong is that nobody really cares very much about the fact that this American system of government is actually premised on a fairly broad consensus about the mission and the scope of government, sincerely and openly shared by both major parties and other interest groups. In other words, this American constitutional system, while old and tested, is in fact very delicate. It needs consensus.

Recreating the consensus

Indeed, the system is so delicate that it cannot properly function without a fairly high level of “upstream” consensus about shared values and consequently about what should be the appropriate functions of the federal government. These shared values should be the ideological and cultural glue that should unite most if not all citizens and their elected representatives.

Given all this, it is obvious that given this constitutional setup it is next to impossible to have a reasonably well-functioning U.S. government when vocal extreme factions vociferously advocating mutually exclusive visions are in control of the political agenda. They have created a charged environment in which “compromise” is synonym with “betrayal”. The outcome is policy paralysis. (Remember what I noted above about how easy it is to engage in obstructionist efforts while ostensibly operating within the rules of the U.S. Constitution).

Anybody out there?

It should be fairly clear by now that we have a major problem. Accepting a perennially dysfunctional federal government is not an appealing prospect.

So, here is the question. Who is actively engaged in any meaningful, non partisan effort aimed at recreating the fundamental consensus about values and basic principles that

made America possible in the first place? Anybody out there?

Trump Takes U.S. Out of Paris Accord on Climate

WASHINGTON – U.S. coal miners and out of work factory workers: this is for you! President Donald Trump publicly announced that the U.S. will withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord that his Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama, promoted and warmly endorsed. Trump's argument against the Paris deal is that it will penalize the American coal mining industry, and the overall American economy in the short term, with only vague hopes of somewhat lower world temperatures, way down the line.

Bad deal for America

As Trump sees it, this is a bad deal for America; and so the right thing is to get out of it. Sticking to the obligations created by the Accord would amount to enacting the equivalent of a huge energy tax on the US economy, because compliance with new, strict emission controls (in order to limit the amounts of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere) will be very expensive.

As a candidate, Trump promised that he would withdraw from this climate deal, and now that he is President he is doing it. We know that his close advisers are divided on this issue. His daughter Ivanka and son in law Jared Kushner, along with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, recommended not withdrawing. Still, in the end Trump sides with the opponents.

What does this mean?

That said, from a practical standpoint, America's exit, at least in the short term, will not amount to any worsening of the global climate. Indeed, the Paris Accord, if all goes well, promises only modest progress on lowering the temperature of the world, and only after many years. And this will happen only if we assume that all the other participants will actually do what they promised to do in terms of enacting new policies aimed at lowering their consumption of fossil fuels, this way reducing greenhouse gases emissions. Do keep in mind that the Paris Accord has no enforcement mechanism. The commitments made by the signatories are purely voluntary. In the case of China, the world's biggest polluter, Beijing is theoretically bound to implement new policies several years from now.

Political consequences

Still, Trump's decision on this rather emotional issue has had immediate political consequences. From the stand point of other nations, particularly the leaders of the G 7 Trump just met in Taormina, Italy, this amounts to America choosing to go it alone, openly dissenting from a global consensus on the global threats to the earth created by the unrestrained consumption of fossil fuels.

U.S. no longer leading

In the short and medium term, this means that America is no longer leading the world on a critical policy issue, As most world leaders see it, America has now retreated in its narrow universe characterized by a bizarre anti-science fixation pursued by a strange president who is "anti everything".

Anti-everything Trump

Indeed, Trump is so anti-immigrant and xenophobic that he wants to build a wall along the entire border with Mexico.

Furthermore, according to the now widely accepted narrative,

this is a president who is openly against free trade, against the EU, against NATO, and against Muslims, (sort of). Given all this, Trump being also against joint international efforts aimed at stopping and hopefully reversing climate change is disappointing; but not surprising. This new development fits the now accepted narrative.

America is no longer leading. Trump's America has retreated behind a myopic worldview of narrow self-interest.

From the standpoint of old friends and allies, Trump's announcement on exiting the Paris Accord is yet another (sad) sign that America is no longer the "Leader of the free World".

In fact, even before this new development on the Paris Accord, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had already publicly argued that it is time for Europe to think of and plan for a future without close ties to the U.S., since Trump's America is no longer a reliable friend.

Political symbolism

Again, keep in mind that all this is mostly about political symbolism. It will take four years for America to fully extricate itself from the obligations contracted under the Paris Accord. This is fairly long time. And again, keep in mind that under the terms of this Paris deal, major polluters like China and India have modest obligations when it comes to reducing their own emissions that will kick in much later. Which is to say that you should not expect world temperatures to start rising tomorrow, simply because today President Trump announced that America will pull out in four years.

No gain

However, as indicated above, this decision is not without political consequences. In the end, all this is will amount to an additional loss of international prestige for Trump's America.

With all this in mind, whatever you may think about the intrinsic policy value of the Paris Accord, it would have been better for Washington to be part of it, as opposed to becoming now a big pariah in the eyes of the world.

Trump is talking to his base

Well, then why did he do it? Very simple.

Trump's narrow concern here is to reassure his domestic political base –the millions of Americans who voted for him last November. This base includes out of work coal miners and people displaced by the closure of old manufacturing plants.

Trump's message to them is that his job is to revive the American economy. If this means heavy reliance on dirty energy, so be it. Out of work factory workers want money to pay their bills. They do not care about the fate of polar bears or about extreme weather phenomena in Africa. And they do not care about rising sea levels.

Finally, dire scenarios of New York City and Miami under water in just a few years (because of the rapid melting of the Polar Caps) are definitely a hoax –at least according to Trump and his supporters.

No Serious Discussion About Entitlement Reform In The

U.S.

WASHINGTON – Much has been said about the first Trump budget recently released. The expected partisan critiques –in fact outcry– focus on proposed cuts in Medicaid and disability benefits. Therefore, this becomes a “cruel budget”, an open attack against weak, low income Americans, and so forth.

No discussion about Entitlement Reform

Well, this may be true. However, the biggest problem with this proposed federal budget, (and with many budgets that preceded it, coming from both Democratic and Republican Presidents), is that –leaving aside symbolic fights– it is a reflection of an unchanged (unchangeable?) *fiscal status quo* that will stay pretty much the same until the American political leadership –Democrats and Republicans acting together– will finally address its ***Number One Policy Priority: Entitlement Reform.***

Symbolic cuts

The Trump Budget, even assuming that it will be passed by Congress as is, (it will not), will never “solve” the structural fiscal imbalance –namely: permanent high deficits– that has regrettably become the norm in America. You may indeed cut spending for the State Department, the Education and Energy Departments, and more. You may reduce Medicaid and the Food Stamps Programs. But none of this would really “bend” the overall spending curve. Hence the deficits and a growing national debt, soon to be out of control.

How so? Very simple. Anybody who has given even a mildly serious look at U.S. Federal Budgets notices a trend. The main drivers of (over) spending are large and growing federal entitlement programs that are not even voted on. They are on automatic pilot.

Social Security and Medicare bigger than ever

The fact is that these programs (first and foremost Social Security and Medicare, accompanied by many other smaller federal assistance program), have become so large that now they comprise almost 2/3 of total federal spending. If you add to this colossal total another 16% of overall federal spending devoted to national defense (sounds like a lot; but in relation to GDP defense spending is historically quite low), plus about 6% of total outlays that have to be set aside for debt service, (this is about paying interest on all the debt we have accumulated until now), and you realize that there is almost nothing left to squabble about.

Indeed, “the rest” –what the budget professionals call “non defense discretionary spending”– is less than 15% of the total. Since the bulk of all spending (with the exception of defense) is essentially off-limits, all the budget battles are fought on this residual 15%.

Which is to say that, unless we want to entirely abolish most of the U.S. Government, (Agriculture, Justice, Transportation, money for NIH and medical research, NASA, and more), we cannot possibly change the present pattern of spending without seriously looking at entitlement reform, with the goal of reducing future outlays. Since most of the real money goes to these programs, they should be reformed so that there will still be benefits for seniors in the future, but sustainable benefits. Simply stated, for social programs to work in a sustainable way, in the future most Americans will get less.

Everybody knows this

Again, every student of US public policy, beginning with House Speaker Paul Ryan, (He used to be Chairman of both the Budget and later on the Ways and Means Committees), knows all this.

And yet, for fear of causing massive social unrest, nobody –Republicans and Democrats– want to go even near the entitlement reform issue. The topic is worse than a non

starter. It is almost unanimously viewed as political suicide.

Not straying from the conventional wisdom, as a candidate, Donald Trump promised that he would leave all key federal entitlements untouched, claiming that these benefits have been earned by individual Americans, and therefore they should not be messed with. A very conventional approach.

“The Moment of Truth”

A few years back, (2010), President Barack Obama convened a special bipartisan commission (it became known as the “Debt Commission”) that was chaired by Erskine Bowles (Democrat) and Alan Simpson (Republican) in order to give a serious look at the issues of taxation and spending.

These two elder statesmen took the lead and eventually issued a powerful report in December 2010 aptly titled “*The Moment of Truth*”. They, and most of the members of their Debt Commission, argued convincingly about the need to seek and find broad bipartisan support for a thoughtful plan aimed at reforming entitlement programs that had been designed in another era with different demographics (starting with life expectancy, much shorter at that time), and much lower health care costs. They pointed out that, if we change nothing, we are headed towards financial ruin.

They argued intelligently and convincingly. But nothing, absolutely nothing happened.

No action

As it turned out, President Obama (even though he created the Commission) did not want to tinker with issues viewed by most political insiders as “radioactive”.

The Tea Party Movement, at that time growing in national popularity, was led by amateurs who understood practically nothing about the real dynamics of public spending. Their home

spun wisdom was that America's run away public spending and ensuing annual deficits, were all due to "fraud, waste and abuse". As simple as that. Their remedy? Eliminate silly programs and politically motivated earmarks, tighten the system, punish a few offenders who get benefits via false claims, and all would be fine.

Well, it would not be.

Given the overwhelming and growing weight of federal entitlements benefiting mostly senior Americans, you could abolish the entire Defense Department and you would still not be able to alter the overall pattern characterized by over spending and perennial budget deficits.

Spending favors senior citizens

Simply stated, in America, just like in most other rich democratic countries, there is now an unwritten social contract whereby large and increasing amounts of national resources are devoted to assistance to the sick and to the elderly.

The problem is not that the priorities are wrong. The problem is that this level of assistance has become unaffordable, because it is no longer matched by revenue. Hence our annual deficits that add to the already exploded national debt. Of course, we could raise taxes in order to rebalance the federal deficit. But this would mean significantly "higher taxes", another radioactive issue that no mainstream politician wants to address.

More debt is the path of least resistance

So, here is the thing. Politicians want to keep doling out large entitlement benefits. But they do not want to tell the country that there is not enough money to pay for them. Instead, they have chosen the path of least resistance: use most of the federal revenue to pay for the entitlements, this

way starving the rest, and borrow the balance.

This may look clever in the short run. But this approach means that we are well on our way to becoming Europe or Japan: societies with enormous public spending and huge national debts that simply do not have any resources to invest in their own future.

Let me say this clearly: these are societies headed towards decline. In fact, some of them are already beyond repair, mostly due to the impossible fiscal burdens represented by gigantic national debts.

Where are we headed?

Well, unless we want to become the next Italy or Japan, we need a serious conversation about the level of future federal benefits. This does mean *“throwing sick grandma in the snow, in the middle of winter”*. But it surely means readjusting benefits so that, going forward, we take care of the neediest first, while all the others will get smaller benefits, and later in life.

Anyway, all this is purely theoretical. The current budget debate, with all its theater of partisan acrimony, posturing and grand standing, does not even begin to address entitlement reform. And this means that what we are having is not a serious, adult debate. This is mostly rubbish.

We need a serious debate

The American people deserve national leaders –in both parties– who will tell them the truth about what we can afford going forward, and how we can and must share sacrifice, (fewer benefits, higher taxes, at least for some), in a fair and equitable manner.

This is what mature political discourse in a republic should be about. But nobody wants to even think about it.

The Dream Of New U.S. Manufacturing Jobs

WASHINGTON – We know that President Donald Trump pledged to renegotiate (supposedly unfair) trade agreements worldwide with the goal of re-balancing the U.S. trade accounts, while forcing companies to move lost U.S. jobs back to America.

Millions of jobs

His narrative –accepted as truthful by millions of U.S. voters– is that America lost millions of jobs in the last couple of decades, while buying from China and Japan (among others) goods worth hundreds of billions, with no reciprocity, because incompetent U.S. trade negotiators (Democrats and Republicans) were so ineffective (in fact so stupid) that they allowed this disaster to happen.

Brand new trade deals

According to the White House, the remedy is quite simple. You reopen old deals, get better terms through tough negotiations, and you force the offending countries (Mexico, Japan, China, South Korea, among others) to sell less to America, buy more from America, and spit back all the U.S. jobs that moved to their countries on account of badly conceived trade negotiations led by incompetent and unpatriotic Washington trade representatives.

Not that simple

If it were indeed so simple. The problem is that jobs are not akin to cash that can indeed be moved from one country to another in a matter of minutes. Regarding the loss of U.S.

jobs, the fact is that in the last 20 to 30 years millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs moved to China because of China's extremely low labor costs. At the time, this was a most compelling reason.

Cheap labor

American and other Western companies, always seeking new ways to keep costs and therefore prices down, chose China as their base of manufacturing operations because China's labor costs at the time were very low. Therefore, making industrial products in China –especially goods that required labor intensive operations– was comparatively quite cheap.

In a fiercely competitive global economy, all companies seek and want to take advantage of low production costs which allow them to sell at lower prices, this way undercutting their competitors.

All this happened in large measure because (after China joined the World Trade Organization, WTO, in 2001) the rest of the world accepted China as a member in good standing of the international economic and trading system.

No one seriously wanted to penalize made in China products because of the harsh working conditions in Chinese factories and China's rock bottom wages. Was that a bad decision? Possibly. Still, be that as it may, the long term consequences of that decision, for all practical purposes, are irreversible.

Trade war and no new jobs

A trade war with China, while the notion seems appealing to many, would cause a huge global crisis (you can expect retaliations and counter retaliations). And it would not produce the effect that President Trump would like to obtain: millions of jobs, now held by Chinese workers, "returning" to America, while America enjoys enhanced prosperity, and a

positive trade balance.

And why is this impossible? In large measure this is due to the cumulative impact of China's role as a global manufacturing hub. This enviable position led to the creation, over time, of complex supply chains that link Chinese factories, (and therefore Chinese workers), with a web of suppliers and vendors, within China and/or other countries in the region (Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, and others). These sophisticated supply chains provide the components and semi-finished products that are finally assembled and completed in China. The finished goods are eventually shipped to the United States and other countries.

This being the case, it is simply impossible, even if we assumed the unanimous will to do so, to yank the jobs now with any Chinese factory which performs the final assembly of industrial products and move them to America.

You cannot recreate complex supply chains at will

And here is why. For this "operation" to be successful, one would have to move and/or recreate –from scratch– in America the entire supply chain that now supports that particular Chinese factory. And this would require the creation, here in America –again, from scratch– of fine tuned business relationships between the lead manufacturer and a brand new network of U.S. suppliers and vendors based on their proven ability to perform at the level required (quality, standards, specifications, delivery time) and at costs low enough to guarantee the competitiveness of the made in America finished product.

No U.S. companies operating in many sectors

If this were not enough, given the lack of meaningful industrial activity in many of the manufacturing sectors that moved to China or elsewhere decades ago, many of the needed suppliers that would be part of the brand new U.S. based

supply chain simply do not exist anymore. They went out of business. How about that. No companies making the necessary components, no supply chain.

Impossible

From all of the above, you can see that the idea of transplanting complex networks of companies, working in harmony with one another, from China to the U.S. is an impossibility.

Again, let me stress that those supply chains were not improvised in China a couple of weeks ago. They were created over decades of tests, trials and error. The notion that the entire web of complex business relationships now at the core of Chinese manufacturing can simply be dismantled and transported to the U.S. is a childish fantasy.

An additional problem: automation

And if this were not enough, you have to consider automation, a relatively recent development which did not play a significant role at the time of the jobs migration incentivised by low Chinese labor costs.

Keep in mind that automation has nothing to do with unfair trade practices. But it has the practical effect of killing U.S. factory jobs that used to be performed by humans. This is an unstoppable trend. Yes, the robots do many and in the future most of the jobs that factory workers used to do.

In a relatively short time, tomorrow's modern factory will probably be completely automated, with only a few highly specialized IT experts and engineers in charge of supervising the robots, and the overall production schedule.

Which is to say that, even if we assume that some manufacturing activities would "return" to America and/or new ones are created on U.S. soil, not much will change in terms

of net new employment in manufacturing. In a best case scenario, maybe some factories will come back. But most of the workers who used to be employed in that sector will be replaced by automation.

We are in a new era

Keep in mind that now we are in a new era; an era in which humans will do less and less factory work. As robots now and in the future will do most of the work, labor costs will become less and less of an issue in determining the location of new industrial plants. Still, as tomorrow's factories will be even more automated, it is hard to see net gains in manufacturing jobs in America, or in the rest of the high cost western world, for that matter.

No jobs coming back

In conclusion, here is the thing. The creation of complex supply chains created by Chinese companies to support China-based production over many decades cannot be dismantled and quickly reassembled at will here in America.

Furthermore, from now on automation is and will be the new manufacturing jobs killer. While automation, at least in some areas, may result in creating new forms of employment in new sectors that we cannot even think about today, the old factory jobs we used to know at some point will become extinct.

Can we do anything to reduce the trade deficit with China?

That, said, what about the chronic trade imbalance with China? Very hard to do this. And this is in large measure due to the fact that millions of American consumers love to buy cheap consumer goods. And China, for the moment at least, is still the low-cost producer.

However, what can and should change in this enormously large bilateral trade relationship is the unfair treatment of

foreign companies trying to establish themselves in China, or trying to sell their products and services to China.

Unfair treatment

There is plenty of evidence indicating that U.S. exporters are penalized in a variety of ways. For instance, the Chinese use their own competition laws as an effective non tariff barrier against foreign companies. Chinese authorities selectively target U.S. and foreign companies accusing them of anti-competitive behavior, forcing them to pay fines and to license their technologies to Chinese entities, this way undermining their ability to work in China and their overall competitiveness.

Demand better terms

This is an area where the Trump administration has legitimate ground to complain and demand better terms from China. Still, even if successful, this effort would lead at best to the narrowing of the trade imbalance gap, not to its disappearance.

As for the millions of new manufacturing jobs coming back to America on account of broad new trade agreements, well, dream on. This is just not going to happen.