

After Another Tragedy, A Chance For Gun Control In The U.S.? Don't Count On It

WASHINGTON – After the most recent mass shooting in Florida, many believe that “*this time*” it is different. This time something will change. I disagree. Meaningful gun control in America is a fantasy, a mirage. After many decades observing the political process in Washington DC, I have concluded that unless both political parties will agree on a far more restrictive interpretation of the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, (“the right to bear arms”), and unless the Courts will support this new course, NOTHING –repeat NOTHING– will happen, when it comes to serious (as opposed to merely cosmetic) proposed gun control legislation. And, given the sharp political divide separating the two parties, the chances of such a new bipartisan agreement being forged are practically zero.

Tired script

After every new tragic mass shooting there a predictable, totally scripted, ritualised kabuki dance featuring prominent Democrats posturing and grandstanding against the gun lobby and their agents in Congress. With the appropriate gravitas, they accuse the Republicans of being in the pockets of the National Rifle Association, NRA, the powerful association of gun owners and pro-gun people in general. And then, what? Well, then nothing. After a few days, the whole thing goes away. EVERY SINGLE TIME.

The sacred Second Amendment

Sadly, over many decades, tens of millions of Americans have acquired a distorted (in my view) notion of what “*the right to bear arms*” granted by the U.S. Constitution means. If we go

back in history, it seems that what the Founders meant was the right of local communities to raise armed militias, so that they could defend themselves against a government that had turned tyrannical.

However, overtime, the current interpretation of the Second Amendment to the Constitution –unrestricted gun ownership, including large collections of military hardware– developed and then acquired the status of a theological mandate. It is bizarre; but it is so.

Nothing moves the needle

Extremely powerful opponents of this state of affairs, including former NYC Mayor and multi billionaire Michael Bloomberg, have poured rivers of money into the noble effort of trying to change the national conversation on gun ownership rights in the USA. Results? ZERO.

Daunting task

May be someone else will come up with a better idea. However, looking at the entrenched positions, and in particular at the semi religious attitude about gun ownership shared by millions of Americans, combined with the tens of millions of guns legally purchased and legally owned in this country, I am not optimistic about any chances for REAL change.

Sadly, the horror caused by yet another avoidable tragedy quickly subsides; and it is back to business as usual.

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.

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 twitted 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 retread 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?

Wanted: Credible Centrist Political Leaders

WASHINGTON – Recently, a Democratic party elected leader of national renown argued in a public forum that in order to regain lost momentum and credibility with the American voters the Democrats have to redefine themselves as the party of economic growth and inclusiveness.

Common sense messages

At a national event focused on the future of U.S. small businesses, a Republican national leader claimed that America’s greatness rests on its foundations as an opportunity society in which people can advance because of a rules based system that recognizes and rewards merit.

John Hickenlooper, the Governor of Colorado, a successful state chief executive, stated that through collaboration between Republican and Democrats we can find workable compromises on the future of the US health care system, and other national priorities.

Well, what do I make of all this? Very simple. These statements made by credible centrists in both parties raise the hope that it may be possible, even in this incredibly poisoned political climate, to rally millions of Americans, hopefully a majority, around the basic ideas of an optimistic country in which policy-makers promote economic growth, while upward mobility is based on genuine merit; and nobody is excluded or kept from advancing because of social class, gender, race, or anything else. In fact, the opposite –equal opportunity for all- is embraced by all.

And this must include quality education, the best foundation of future success in life, available to everyone; while bridges are built across every divide, and doors are wide open to all who are willing to make an effort.

It is an old idea

This idea of America as a level playing field and fair rules used to be a shared vision embraced by most. Indeed, it was the belief that America offered genuine opportunity that attracted millions of immigrants who wanted to create in America a better life for themselves. It is about time to re-propose this vision in a manner that can be shared by today's Americans –Democrats and Republicans.

Indeed, who could object to public policies that promote economic growth, social advancement based on merit, while all citizens have genuine access to quality education, careers and consequently a good seat at the table?

Lost hope

Of course, the last few years have told us an entirely different story. It is a story of lost hope, deep disappointment, and resentment. A story of popular distrust in the honesty and abilities of most elected leaders. A story of exaggerated promises not kept.

This has created an emotional anti-government rebellion on the right, (*"Washington is a rotten place"*), and the triumph of policy agendas on the left which advocate economic and social re-balancing achieved through redistribution by taking (ill-gotten gains) from the few ultra rich and giving to the rest of society. All this will be wisely designed and orchestrated by government, through taxation and subsidies.

Despondent America

The outcome of all this is not pretty. The unexpected outcome of the November 2016 presidential elections is evidence of the widespread feeling of deep despair. Indeed, according to millions who voted for Donald Trump, "the system" failed—period. Its failure is so deep that it is not worth salvaging. In fact, it should be dismantled. In fact, millions of Americans voted for Trump mostly because he is not a professional politician. Therefore he is untarnished by Washington's rot and well equipped to "*clean the stables*", "*drain the swamp*" and all by himself—with his power and superior intelligence—transform America.

Paradoxically, notwithstanding continuous economic growth and much lower unemployment since the end of the Great Recession in 2010, rightly or wrongly millions of Americans who used to be part of a self-confident middle class now are and feel poorer, left behind and alienated. At the same time, millions of young people feel hopeless facing a world of diminished opportunities, while laboring under the crushing weight of absurdly large student debts.

There is a way out

That said, I sense that there is a way out of this. Difficult, yes; but not impossible. Yes, America needs house cleaning. It needs fresh faces not tainted by the old ways of doing business.

The unimaginative political elites still populating Washington, DC have survived by over promising everything to everybody, while pretending to pay for all the goodies they offered to various (of course deserving) constituencies, knowing full well that the only way to finance all this public largess (unaffordable entitlements) was and is to borrow more and more, this way getting the country deeper and deeper into debt.

Sadly, the Washington elites have no real economic growth strategy, while their policies aimed at buying votes through entitlements funded by public money and more and more borrowing are driving America towards the abyss of insolvency.

Credible people who will tell the truth

Most Americans have common sense. However, they need credible new leaders who will tell the unvarnished truth about the dangers of systemic and growing fiscal imbalances, (i.e we have to agree on a sensible plan to reform all major federal entitlement programs, by far our biggest fiscal problem), while pointing the only way to get out of this ditch: economic policies (think tax reform and smart deregulation affecting business activities) that will promote a more robust economic growth in a genuinely open and inclusive society. An inclusive society in which elected leaders are committed to destroying all artificial barriers to entry, while opening new avenues of opportunity to all.

(President Donald Trump, a new leader who is not carrying the baggage of the distrusted establishment politicians, could lead the way in shaping a new American political conversation. As his presidency is just getting started, it is impossible to

say whether he will engage in this effort or not. We should all hope that he will. This would benefit the country and him).

Impossible?

Well, in the end all this “back to basics” idea founded on the values of openness, fairness and merit sounds too lofty, in fact unrealistic. Yes, this is an appeal to an admittedly mythologized idea of an America “*where anything is possible as long as you work hard and play by the rules*” which (truth be told) never fully existed in the way many refer to it.

And then there is the huge problem of yanking benefits away from millions (deserving or undeserving, it does not matter) who got used to getting them. “*Come on...get real. Nobody gets elected by promising less, let alone by promising to cut existing benefits. And we in Washington just do not know how to deliver stronger economic growth. We only know how to distribute subsidies*”.

The way ahead

And yet, if we do not want to see America follow Europe on the path leading to historic decline, it is imperative to make real progress on these two related fronts:

- 1) restore fiscal sanity by reforming all the major entitlement programs***
- 2) genuinely and forcefully promote economic growth and real opportunity for all***

The alternative is political chaos, the de-legitimization of our institutions, and rapid economic decline.

Some elected leaders of both parties know this. I just hope that their common sense message will be heard, understood and embraced.

First Comes Growth Then New Jobs

WASHINGTON – Every day I walk by a giant banner hanging from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce imposing building in Washington, DC., located near the White House. The banner says: “*Jobs & Growth*”. On the face of it, nothing wrong with this statement. Of course we all want to have more jobs and more growth. if both things happen, we shall all be better off as a nation.

Jobs and Growth

So, we all agree. Still, the way in which the proposition is phrased reveals a profound error which, I believe has been purposely introduced in this “Jobs & Growth” slogan purely for political reasons.

Let me explain. Of course we want “Jobs and Growth”. But in the real world the two elements are sequenced exactly in reverse order. First you have economic growth, and then, because of additional demand and additional capital becoming available thanks to higher growth, companies can create more jobs.

First growth and then Jobs

In the real economy, real jobs do not just happen because someone wants to. In the real economy new jobs are justified by new demand usually tied to an expanding economy, i.e. *the new jobs come along because of higher growth.*

But the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, (whose motto is, by the way, “The Spirit of Enterprise” and not “The Spirit of Jobs Creation”), chose to put “Jobs” first on its gigantic banner,

even though this is illogical and untrue. And why did they do this? Because this is the politically correct phrasing.

In our distorted world the social benefits of higher growth –new jobs– have to come first, before growth itself. And so, “jobs creation” becomes a political imperative, somehow disconnected from the economic fundamentals –new growth– that should instead be at the foundation of new jobs.

Politically correct

And so the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, this bastion of free market capitalism and rugged enterprise, has now joined the herd of the politically correct who have to tell you that their primary policy goal is of course to have better social outcomes –more jobs– irrespective of the economic fundamentals.

In the USSR everybody had a job

Well, unless we all forgot, in the good old Soviet Union there was full employment. Everybody had a job. Officially in the old Workers’ Paradise there was zero unemployment. And yet, as we all know, things did not go so well under Communist Party mandated full employment. And this was because most jobs were fake, unproductive jobs. Yes, you can create jobs. But, unless they are tied to real demand for more high quality products and services, they will add nothing to the economy, while salaries paid to unproductive workers will waste scarce resources.

Government jobs in Saudi Arabia

In our time, we have the example of Saudi Arabia, an oil rich country in which almost the entire population has a government job or subsidy. Most of these “workers” do practically nothing. But it is politically expedient for the Saudi government to burn cash (derived from its gigantic oil revenue) paying salaries for fake jobs. This is viewed as a

way to keep the population reasonably happy, and therefore quiet.

Governments create fake jobs

Despite the gigantic failures of all socialist systems, in western societies politicians and interest groups routinely try to get on the good side of voters by proclaiming that before anything else they are committed to better social outcomes: i.e more jobs, whatever the underlying economic fundamentals.

And, in many cases, if the private sector fails to deliver this socially desirable outcome, the government will step in, creating fake (subsidized government) jobs that will make at least some people happy. Needless to say, unproductive jobs are a drain on society's resources. But who cares anyway? the goal is to create more employment, making more people happy.

Much to my surprise, a quick internet search proved that this U.S. Chamber political correctness about jobs first, growth later is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Variations on the "Jobs & Growth", with "Jobs" always placed first, are common place.

Deliberate efforts to place jobs ahead of growth

Interestingly enough, a major EU Commission initiative was promoted under the banner of "*Jobs, Growth and Investment*". Think of that: *Jobs* come first, while *Investments* come last. Really? Is this how things happen in the real world?

However, the second line of the title reversed the sequencing to its proper order. Indeed, the second line, said "*Stimulating investments for the purpose of jobs creation*". So, the first line (in big, bold letters) is the crowd pleaser: "*Jobs for everybody, folks! That's what we are going to deliver*". So jobs first then growth and then investments.

Mercifully, the language in the smaller print of the second line recreates the proper sequencing: first you need investments, investments lead to higher growth, and, yes, higher growth leads to more jobs. So, in the same headline two mutually exclusive propositions. This is the EU way to make everybody happy, I guess.

Interestingly enough, the World Bank convened a high level meeting to determine which comes first, jobs or growth. And I thought that the place was run by sophisticated economists. Well, in that meeting it was observed that, especially in emerging countries, quite often more growth does not create more jobs. And this is true.

Sometimes growth does not create jobs

Indeed, when I was working in Mozambique, many years ago, there was the case of a brand new large investment that led to the construction of Mozal, a state of the art aluminum smelter. For poor Mozambique this seemed a big deal. A new large smelter. Except that this large investment created practically no new jobs for a horribly poor country with massive unemployment. Which is to say that higher growth does not necessarily lead to more jobs, especially in poorer countries.

Still, while this is true, in most cases new “real” jobs are the result of higher growth. I fail to see how it can be possible to create more sustainable jobs without new growth. Who will create these new jobs not tied to increased demand? Where will the money necessary to pay salaries come from? How would a for profit private enterprise justify paying for new jobs divorced from real demand? jobs that cost money without producing any real value?

Political jobs

It cannot be that hard to come to the conclusion that jobs untied to objective economic circumstances are essentially

political jobs. Therefore they are a gimmick. And if we want this gimmick to be the economic new policy, I cannot see how this can be a good thing.

Still, the large interest groups, including bastions of capitalism such as the US Chamber of Commerce, have to say the “right political thing”, even though it is both false and misleading. However, in so doing, they help perpetuate a state of intellectual confusion among the general public.

Give me a job, now

Of course, if you are not an economist and you are told by supposedly smart people that it is perfectly possible to have jobs first and growth later, then you will demand that politicians will make jobs happen, now.

And if they don't, they will be punished at the next election. And this is how populism undermines capitalism, the only system that –with all its shortcomings– over time can deliver both: growth and jobs.

Can Clinton Unify Left And Center Against Trump?

WASHINGTON – Hillary Clinton's performance at the Democratic National convention in Philadelphia was “mission impossible”. Now the anointed presidential candidate of a Democratic Party that has once more moved decidedly to the left, Clinton needs to patch together the centrist base and the noisy far left Sanders' crowds.

A progressive and a centrist

Clinton's objective was to reintroduce herself to America as a progressive, (wink to Sanders' people), but also as a reliable, pragmatic unifier (wink to the center, and hopefully some Republicans), who can get things done.

Still, too many conflicting messages were packed in her speech: continuity with the Obama policies which she called very successful; and at the same time a strong indictment of injustice, enduring racism, and widening inequality in America, all of which apparently did not diminish during the 8 long Obama years.

So, her speech gave good marks to Obama's progressive agenda, and at the same time bad marks to Obama's America for being so far behind in implementing a true progressive agenda, this way causing misery and suffering among the under privileged. A clear contradiction here. Is she proposing continuity or disruption?

Appeal to the middle

At the same time, Clinton wanted to appeal to middle of the road Republicans truly worried about the possibility of a Trump victory. However, she also had to shore up her now left leaning Democratic Party base by endorsing the essence, if not the details, of the Bernie Sanders far left economic agenda.

Something for everybody

So here are the ingredients of this political and policy stew: Clinton is the candidate who stands for continuity and disruption. She is with both the far left and the center, and may be some conservatives. And, mind you, this convoluted message is coming from an aged, quintessentially establishment, professional politician with extremely high negatives. Many voters will simply not buy this catch all "agenda".

Stronger Together?

Supposedly, the magic glue that would unite all these diverse and in fact mutually exclusive themes is the “Stronger Together” slogan adopted by the Clinton campaign. In her acceptance speech Clinton tried to paint a picture of how her administration would operate. She would get everybody to work together—congressional Democrats and Republicans, disgruntled Republicans longing for centrist policies, and Bernie Sanders’ “revolutionaries” who want radical economic and societal transformation.

Nice idea, may be inspiring for some; but hardly the articulation of a clear and compelling policy program.

A leftist agenda

In fact, her speech was rich in anecdotes and vignettes but thin on policy details. To the extent that there were any, they show a Democratic Party that has moved to the left, in fact the far left. Indeed, Hillary Clinton now looks very much like a female George McGovern leading a leftists party that may have lost its connection with America’s more centrist middle.

In her speech, there was absolutely nothing about reducing the national debt, the need to have common sense entitlement reform, or enacting pro-business tax reform. So, nothing on fiscal responsibility and measures leading to the promotion of higher economic growth.

On the contrary, plenty on more money for an expanded Social Security system, free college for everybody, and higher taxes for the rich to pay for all this. Lace that with full legalization of illegal immigrants and syrupy stuff about “Love Trumps Hate” and you get a Europe-style Socialist-lite agenda big on income redistribution, economic equality, fiscally irresponsible and instinctively pacifist.

This is quite frankly the Sanders agenda.

Just tactics?

Was Clinton just paying lip service to the themes loved by the party left in her speech simply because she had no choice? The truth may be that she had to endorse the Sanders agenda, because she did not want to be heckled by his supporters who filled the convention venue, and because she fully realizes that she is now the presidential candidate of a Democratic Party where socialist leaning ideas have become core beliefs.

Tough road ahead

While Clinton will get the usual “post-convention bump” in the upcoming polls, for the moment Trump, notwithstanding his boisterous style and open disunity within his own party, is doing quite well in the polls.

Unpredictable Trump

No matter what he said about dumping NATO allies who do not spend enough on defense and inviting Russia to disclose hacked Clinton e-mails, Trump is surprisingly competitive in all the critical swing states. Is this a reflection of his strength, or a clear sign that Clinton is even more unpopular than we thought? Probably the latter.

Will Tim Kaine Help Hillary Clinton Get Elected?

WASHINGTON – Hillary Clinton, about to be nominated presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, just veered back to the political center. By picking moderate Tim Kaine, Senator from Virginia and former Governor of the State, as her choice for Vice President Hillary Clinton wants to reassure middle America –independent voters in particular. No, a Hillary Clinton administration will not be hostage to the far left of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Senator Kaine, her pick for VP, is a solid centrist.

Experience

But there is more. Kaine is also an experienced public servant. He served as Mayor of Richmond, later on Lieutenant Governor, then Governor of Virginia, and now Senator from the state. (By the way, Virginia is a very important state that the Democrats *must win* in order to get Clinton into the White House).

When it comes to policy positions, Kaine could not be more different from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the self-declared Socialist who turned out to be a formidable challenger for Clinton during the primaries.

Most fundamentally, based on this resume, Kaine knows a great deal about government. Therefore, here is the larger, reassuring message to America coming from the Clinton campaign: the Clinton-Kaine ticket will be about experience, reliability, good judgement, and proven ability to govern: *“Don’t be crazy, America. Do not allow a mercurial and totally inexperienced Trump into the White House. The Clinton-Kaine ticket offers you a far better choice: steady hands on the wheel”*.

Kaine will speak in Spanish to Latino voters

Besides, Kaine speaks fluent Spanish, a significant asset. (As a young man he served as a volunteer in Honduras). It will be a huge advantage for Clinton to have a running mate who can speak in Spanish to increasingly important Latino voters. Indeed, given the changed U.S. demographics, it is clear that it is almost impossible to get elected president of the United States without getting a majority, or at least a significant minority of the Latino population.

(With his harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and promises to build a wall on the southern border with Mexico, Donald Trump has managed to burn all the bridges with this significant and growing Latino constituency).

Sanders endorsed Clinton

We know that Senator Bernie Sanders recently endorsed Hillary Clinton. This gesture from Clinton's feisty (and surprisingly popular) primaries opponent, albeit a little late, was expected. But will this endorsement from the chief representative of the party left recreate real, as opposed to cosmetic, party unity? Many Sanders supporters clearly do not like Clinton, and they will like even less her choice of (boring?) centrist Kaine as her running mate.

Problems on the left

Down the line this may be a serious problem when it comes to real party unity and the ability to get all Democrats, whatever their ideological leanings, to really show up and vote for Clinton on election day in November. The problem for Clinton is that at least some hard-core Sanders supporters –those who really believed the old Vermont Senator when he was calling himself leader of a revolutionary movement aimed at radically transforming American politics– will not follow their leader's endorsement of Hillary Clinton, the quintessential establishment politician who in their eyes

symbolizes corruption and collusion with Wall Street.

Sanders' supporters will not like Kaine as VP

And now, with Clinton signaling a move back to the center with the selection of Kaine as VP candidate, it is possible that many of these leftists Democratic voters who wanted Sanders to be the party nominee may stay home, come November. Indeed, various polls indicate that may be up to 1/3 of those enthusiasts for radical change who voted for Sanders in the primaries will not vote for Clinton in the general election. These polls of course are only indicative. Election Day is still a few months away. A lot can change between now and November.

Still, for the moment, Sanders' endorsement is a plus for Clinton. It formally ended the political rift that had become quite bitter during the Democratic primaries. It unifies the party, creating a perception of strength in numbers. However, now that she pocketed Sanders' endorsement, and hopefully the support of many of his leftist followers, Clinton is moving back to the center, as the Kaine choice for VP indicates. How will this Clinton center-to-left-and-back-to-center dance look to the Sanders people? Probably not very appealing.

Trump's unity problems

That said, while the recent Sanders-Clinton unity announcement may look very uninspiring to some hard-core Sanders supporters, (they truly believed they had joined an anti-system political revolution that they know will never be carried on by Clinton), Republican nominee Donald Trump does not even have fake unity behind him, as the GOP Convention in Cleveland demonstrated.

Party notables did not show up

Indeed, many Republican Party national leaders did not even attend. That includes John McCain, and Mitt Romney, the party

nominees in 2008 and 2012. Most notably, Ohio Governor John Kasich, a Trump opponent during the GOP primaries, did not show up. Imagine that. The Republican Governor of Ohio not showing up for the event, held in his own state of Ohio, that led to the nomination of the Republican presidential contender. And forget about the Bush Clan and many other notables.

The only one who showed up is arch-enemy Ted Cruz. But Cruz had no intention to be conciliatory. In his speech at the Convention he failed to endorse Trump, thus telling everybody that the political rift is still wide open.

No real unity

Trump is now the candidate. However, as the Cleveland “non shows” indicate, he is not leading a unified party. Which is to say that, if the authenticity of the Democrats unity is questionable, the Republicans show deep, wide open rifts.

Combine this with the lack of a real Trump campaign field organization, especially in critical swing states, and it becomes clear how Clinton may indeed prevail in November.

Clinton is a weak candidate, but stronger than Trump

While Clinton is a weak candidate, (just like Trump's, her negatives are also very high), all told she is in a much better position to win in November than Trump is.

She will probably lose some disaffected young and leftist Democrats in November. However, she can count on the powerful support of all the labor unions and of their significant grass-roots organizations. She will have women, Blacks, Latinos and more young voters in her camp.

On the other side of the divide, Trump is also likely to lose many Republicans. And there are more Democrats than Republicans.

In order to win the general election, Trump would have to surprise everybody by getting most of his GOP base behind him and most of the independents, the unaffiliated American voters whose support is generally decisive in presidential contests.

To get elected you need a broad base

Clinton's decision to pick Tim Kaine as VP is a clear move aimed at increasing the ticket's appeal among moderates (this may include some centrist Republicans who really detest Trump) and independents. If Kaine proves to be an effective campaigner, especially with critical Latino voters, really hard to see a path to victory for Trump.

Trump's support is really strong among older, white, mostly male voters without a college education. The trouble is that this group is no longer the majority in America. Great to have their enthusiastic backing. But it is simply not enough to get elected president.

Orlando Shooting Strengthens Trump's Position On Muslims

WASHINGTON – In a U.S. presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by emotional slogans and over simplified narratives, the horrible Orlando shooting (50 people killed, 53 injured) by the son of Afghan immigrants will be used by Donald Trump as clear evidence that his tough anti-Muslim and anti-immigrants positions are the only way to protect American lives from the supreme existential threat of Islamic terrorism.

Muslim killer?

This killing rampage (the worst in U.S. history) planned and executed by Omar Mateen, 29, will be used as a powerful argument to severely restrict immigration, ban refugees from the Middle East, place a hold on all would be visitors/immigrants of Muslim faith, and redouble U.S. military efforts against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

This sounds absurd. However horrible, this is only one episode, orchestrated it seems by just one person. No, America is not facing armies of domestic Islamic terrorists. But in this political climate, for almost half of America, this is not over reaction. This sounds logical and rational. And you can bet that this is the argument that will be made. And you can also bet that Donald Trump will lead this charge, with the clear expectation that his anti-Muslim policies will help him get to the White House.

We are at war

Here is the "truth" according to the Trump/anti-immigrant camp. As we all know, a large part of the Muslim world is at war with us. We are the innocent targets and victims. The violent acts perpetrated on U.S. soil against Americans by Muslims, including Muslims born in the U.S. who became radicals as young adults, is evidence that we are facing a mortal danger and that the U.S. Government (led as we know by weak and incompetent Democrats who simply do not want to acknowledge that Islamic Terrorism declared war on us) is not doing enough to protect the American people against a mounting terror threat.

To those who argue that these scattered violent episodes –however gruesome– do not constitute evidence of a massive, ongoing campaign to kill Americans, the anti-immigrants reply forcefully that this is just the beginning. They "know" that there are hundreds, possibly thousands of would-be terrorists

warming up and getting ready to unleash their vicious attacks against innocent Americans.

We need to protect ourselves

As I said, this is a presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by over simplifications and raw emotions. Forget about balanced and nuanced positions. If most Americans buy the idea that "the terrorists are already among us and are ready to kill us all" and that for this very reason we need drastic measures to protect our lives, then Donald Trump gains a powerful edge in this unfolding race for the White House.

He is the Tough Guy who will have the courage to take the drastic steps that will finally get us protection from this looming terror threat. He will do his very best to paint Hillary Clinton and the entire Democratic establishment as weak on terrorism and national defense and therefore unfit to govern America.

We need a determined leader

And the Tough Guy will propose tough responses. If this includes undertaking measures that may infringe on the civil rights of law-abiding, innocent Muslims who have nothing to do with terror plots, so be it. Better safe than sorry. They are Muslims, and therefore by definition suspects. The priority here is to protect Americans.

Voice of reason?

Hillary Clinton will try to be the balanced voice of reason. But this presidential campaign has nothing to do with reason. And fear of terrorism is the quintessential emotional issue. It is mostly about fear of unknown dangers that are easily magnified by those who want you to believe that this is the number one existential threat confronting all of us.

Those who support Donald Trump believe that in this hour of

supreme danger only a New Leader, not tainted by the corrupt ways of Washington, DC, will create a new era of security, self-confidence, prosperity and eventually regained national prestige.

Are these the feelings of the majority of Americans? In a few months we shall find out.

Regulations Kill Enterprise

WASHINGTON – Jim Tankersley reports in The Washington Post, (May 23, 2016), that *“The recovery from the Great Recession has seen a nationwide slowdown in the creation of new businesses, or start-ups. What growth has occurred has been largely confined to a handful of large and innovative areas, including Silicon Valley in California, New York City and parts of Texas, according to a new analysis of Census Bureau data by the Economic Innovation Group, a bipartisan research and advocacy organization.”*

Death of the U.S. small company

Holman W. Jenkins writes in The Wall Street Journal (*Trump for Blow-Upper in Chief?*, May 21-22, 2016) that the Kauffman Foundation noted that there is a marked *“decline in small business entrepreneurship”* in America. Jenkins also cites a Brookings Institution report pointing out that business closures now exceed business starts in the U.S.

Well, what could be the reasons behind this rather ominous trend in what used to be the land of private enterprise? May be the cause of all this is in another fact cited by Jenkins in his WSJ piece. According to the Competitive Enterprise Institute, last year Congress passed 114 laws. But it issued

3,410 new regulations. These amounted to 80,260 pages in the Federal Registry, close to a historic record.

Regulations suffocate small enterprises

So, here is my simple theory. Whatever its intentions, the Obama administration in its effort to regulate and restrict almost every economic or commercial activity is slowly strangling U.S. enterprises, especially small and medium-sized companies that simply lack the resources to ensure compliance with this myriad of confusing federal rules. Please, do keep in mind that these companies are the true engines of the U.S. economy. These are the innovators and the jobs creators.

Killing capitalism

So, here is the thing. You do not need a proletarian or a social-democratic (Bernie Sanders-style) revolution to kill capitalism. A death by a thousands cuts inflicted by federal regulators will do just fine. It seems that government bureaucrats are quite capable of destroying capitalism on their own.

And so the most successful economic system ever devised in human history will wither and die not because of a popular uprising staged by the angry masses, but because of the suffocation caused by an avalanche of regulations that make it almost impossible for small businesses to stay viable and grow.