

# The Disintegration of America

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For some years now I have almost daily pondered the disintegration of the national community which, as an officer of the United States, I risked my life to protect. Like most young people in the 1960s, I was filled with idealism and optimism. A long life, much of it lived outside the United States and free of institutional constraints, has freed me to develop a perspective on profound historical and structural processes now driving the decay we see. America is reverting to the forms of society and economy extant throughout human history, over the entire face of the globe, from which the Founding Fathers' "new order for the ages" was intended to free us. It worked, but no longer, for easily comprehensible reasons never heard in public discussion.

Why did the experiment work?  
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On the Great Seal of the United States appears America's founding premise, *e pluribus unum*, which enabled for centuries both natives and immigrants, of diverse backgrounds, characters and education, to unify their efforts to accomplish great ends, both personal and national.

Mostly this was effected not through laws but through community norms and peer pressures (which any sociologist you meet on the street will tell you are more effective than coercive state power) aimed at cohesiveness of society and community.

We had norms against debt, promiscuous copulation, what is now termed substance abuse, dissolution of the familial foundation of society, dishonesty and vile and disrespectful language.

We had norms promoting respect for authority (when I was a youth one rose when an adult entered the room), civil and truthful discourse, virtue (the Hollywood Production Code), proper diction and modesty, cleanliness and care in dress.

Overarching all was the norm that actions must have condign consequences.

While their plan was conceived by reason, the Founding Fathers were absolutely clear their experiment would fail without suprarational imperatives dictated, in their time, by religious faith. Since religions' ethical codes are quite similar, it didn't matter what religion Americans held; only necessary to make the new structural mechanism work was the appropriate behavioral program. Without that, the Founding Fathers' invention would fail in its magic and America would revert to the timeless and ubiquitous form of society whose operative rule has always been "the strong eat the weak."

Normative pressures were never completely effective, and the resulting society had ample problems. Everyone had to yield a bit to achieve community and so unity of effort, some more than others. Those holding divergent beliefs or preferences were disadvantaged by the coalescence around a particular core of values, as is true of every community that has ever existed, but the society was functional: it worked well enough to develop a continent, to assimilate millions of immigrants, to elect almost a quarter millenium's high officials, and (at a much lower level of economic production) to defeat simultaneously the Third Reich and the Empire of Japan.

It worked.

Subsequently America has experienced only failed wars, in blood evidencing our decline. Great national projects (education, public civility, public health, economic justice) have now also failed.

#### What Drives Disintegration Part One

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America's guiding goal for its people has switched from achieving excellence to achieving mediocrity, with two momentous consequences.

The first is finance. World history shows through the fates of states and empires that survival and prosperity are lost when finances turn ill, so America's changed attitude to debt is an incandescent augury.

A few steps are required to clarify the linked processes involved.

Peer pressures and the legal system are two mechanisms to nudge behavior toward a goal, in engineering terms called negative (colloquially self-corrective) feedback. The opposite is called positive (or self-reinforcing). If your system lacks negative feedback it's running "open loop" and will move to a limit, in economics colloquially called a crash.

In an earlier era two rules mitigated the severity of crashes: the deprecation of debt (affecting one's personal social standing or his business credit) and the gold standard, bringing severe and unavoidable consequences to inflation of the domestic currency.

A significant development in 1958 eventually shattered both corrective mechanisms. In my youth if one wanted to buy something one saved for it; there was no credit, only "layaway plans." Bank of America's innovation of the universal credit card normalized "living on credit" personally, and within a generation this mental revolution destroyed the earlier norm that the state itself must balance its budget. The United States has since gone from Earth's greatest creditor nation to its greatest debtor in two generations. Nixon's cutting the dollar's link to gold was the decisively fatal step, legitimated in academia by the new idea of continuous inflation instead of currency stability (by economists keen on official positions or consultancies). Lord Keynes had in the 1930s legitimated contra-cyclical credit loosening but smart man that he was he realized this occurs within a cyclical system so one must claw back the invented purchasing power.

In 1961 Otto Eckstein taught me classical Keynesian economics at Harvard. At Princeton in 2014 Alan Blinder taught my youngest daughter Jasmine degenerate Keynesianism: just print and print and print without clawback.

The "income" and "growth" produced by degenerate Keynesianism are actually occult decapitalization because you don't feel it day by day. But all periods of economic stability are followed by economic crises and in the crisis occult becomes manifest as asset values collapse and owners are wiped out. In this way the consumption unearned by the consumers during the inflation period is paid for by those ruined in the collapse.

The "hockey stick" patterns of interest rates and debt demonstrate that the system is running open-loop, but these conceptions form no part of framing of public policy such as you will see in journal papers, reports of the Fed, or articles/op-eds in the financial press by our professors.

The inevitable consequence of exponentially rising debt can be postponed ("I am a rich man as long as I don't pay my creditors"--Plautus ca. 200 BC) but not avoided.

## What Drives Disintegration Part Two

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The above delinking of economic actions from economic consequences was just one piece of the larger movement to sever self-corrective feedback loops. This larger movement aimed and aims to abandon the Founders' heavy focus on *e pluribus unum* (focussing society on a unified view of personal and social excellence) so leading to the other momentous consequence: cultural divisiveness.

### Examples of delinking

- \* Some students are uncomfortable doing poorly on exams so we'll stop teaching subjects like algebra;
- \* Some people don't enjoy being arrested for theft so we'll decriminalize theft;
- \* Some criminals' livelihoods are impacted by arrests for selling lethal illegal drugs so we'll tell the police to stop arresting people. (My daughter Jasmine--a medical doctor--regularly sees the fatal consequences right here in the ER at Cambridge Hospital.)

### Other results of renorming are evidenced by

- \* ripped jeans, thug-like costumes or inartful outfits similar to those worn by homeless people--but worn by the notionally respectable;
- \* declining language usage (I have multiple replies from *New York Times* editors rejecting the rules of grammar and word usage as "stilted");
- \* declining health by ignoring nutrition rules, evident instantly upon stepping off a plane in New York from Singapore, Seoul or Tokyo;
- \* Appearance of increasingly clown-like politicians in America such as earlier appeared in Europe (Berlusconi in Italy, Johnson in the UK);
- \* deceptive "investment analysis" focussing on epiphenomena like stock prices and trends, which are many steps removed from real value-added processes (if any connection at all--often none). The analyses that fill newspaper articles and "investment advice" from so-called experts characteristically refer to "asset values" as though representing real wealth. The "value" will be known only in the future, as real income is transferred from value-added productive processes to the owners. All we "know" today are the prices. Investor behavior is thus driven by memes, momentum and the latest gossip about Fed thoughts on money creation, rather than what's happening in the physical economic of production of added value. This horrendously misallocates resources while causing the "investing" public to misunderstand or ignore the founding derivative relationship, so missing entirely the risks involved in a "stock market" which is substantially a venue for gambling on emotions and fads.

### Conclusions about the processes

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The changes described above contravene the founding principle of *e pluribus unum* and the results are what the Founding Fathers would have predicted--or what they feared.

This is aggravated by the fact that America has been living beyond its means for more than half a century. It would be bad enough at any time but is now aggravated by coinciding with the end of living on capital. Political conflict will rise as the struggle for shrinking economic resources intensifies.

How it stabilizes  
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As neither political party addresses these disintegrative factors, the 2024 election only determined which path America follows to disintegration.

As with previously economically potent or militarily powerful states the process may proceed slowly over a century or centuries all the while supporting a delightful life for those at the top. (Think Austria.)

Seeing what Americans have done, the Founding Fathers are surely looking down upon us with sadness, consoling themselves only that their brilliant creation actually lasted half as long as the Roman Republic.

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