

Social Policy

Organizing for Social & Economic Justice

WILL AMERICA BE?¹

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“. . . Stop children, what's that sound? Everybody look what's goin down.”—Stephen Stills

Is it possible to know our past and not know our future?

Having watched a virtual parade of predations on the American democracy—attacks on the institution of the presidency, the desertion of a once-principled Republican party, the growth of corporate criminality, the ballooning of economic inequality and the monied corruption of government, and a deepening erosion of the electoral franchise—can we be shocked by the hollowness of what is left?

Do we, committed to an enlightened future, act in good conscience if we behave as if what we've been doing all along will somehow counter these deadly blows to the republic, or that somehow our organizations will avoid the fallout?

“That sound” we hear is a death rattle. What we are witnessing is nothing less than the death of the American dream at its moral-spiritual core. The soul of America is dying.

We are like the drowning ones, whose whole lives pass before them. The dream—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—one of the promised fruits of our liberal democracy, enabled by rights enshrined in the Constitution, and modulated by a widely envied legal system—passes before our eyes.

For some, of course, that dream never was fulfilled. Our sins, past and present, haunt us—we have oppressed many and enslaved others. There is much to atone for. And yet, no other country rivals the United States of America in the hearts and minds of the victims of poverty, oppression, and injustice. Even now, others come here with that same hope, yearning for freedom.

Will we deny them the dream? Or will we save the institutions which have made the dream possible—institutions which in the past ensured that enlightenment would continue and that, in time, the commonweal would triumph—but which now have become corrupted?

Traitors to that dream, Trump now among them, have exploited the heart of our nation. These undertakers, in the words of Samuel Adams, are “raising themselves up on the ruin of our country.” They are destroying the source of our faith and hope, while affecting bogus claims of patriotism. They are driving nails into America's coffin.

The reasons for our pessimism are not complicated. The free and independent fourth estate has been monetized and weaponized by corporate media empires. Voter suppression and gerrymandering have put entrenched reactionaries in control of the federal government and most state governments. From the top down, both state and federal courts are rapidly becoming reactionary bastions of privilege warring against the commonweal. Withal, our moral-spiritual institutional bedrock is wearing away.

At this point, perhaps we doubt our capacity to save ourselves. Will nostalgia, a sentimental remembrance, be all that remains? Will we no longer act as the children of God, with all that has demanded of us historically, but only as politically and economically manipulated ciphers? This is not a political struggle. It is a struggle for the survival of democracy.

Can we salvage the dream? If so, who or what may intervene?

Let us acknowledge first what won't work. Building grassroots organizations of the sort that already exist, organizing progressive coalitions, registering voters, and electing progressive politicians—by themselves are not enough. Neither is winning the next issue-campaign or the next election cycle, winning majorities in state legislatures and Congress, or even winning the Presidency. All these are necessary, of course, but they are not sufficient. If they were, we would not be in the fix we're in. We would already have saved the dream.

What more is required? What can we do now for the sake of the commonweal?

We can begin to rebuild the *institutions* of democracy at their roots. We can begin by ensuring that every citizen is permanently empowered to act politically, as a fully endowed human being and as a member of a directly democratic assembly with institutionalized public powers. Nothing we have been doing can take the place of institutionalizing directly democratic political roles, rights, and resources for every citizen.

Further, as we have described elsewhere,² the United States has a well-tested, bottom-up, directly democratic political institution, a highly serviceable model for such empowerment: the “open” New England town. With this model, a lower tier of urban social infrastructure can be created to make the full citizenry a permanent partner in the country’s political-economic decision-making.

Directly democratic assemblies provide an effective means for citizens to shape their own laws and policies, and to articulate their demands for collective goods and services. And once this lower tier acquires public powers, they will have opportunities for joining together to direct and counter even much higher levels of authority, public and private, that act contrary to their interests.

Without this institutional empowerment, however, the best of this country, carried in the hearts and minds of most of us, may never again emerge as a commanding moral-spiritual force.

Without this institutional empowerment, all the professionals dedicated to the commonweal—the faith-based, community, and labor organizers; the liberal and progressive lawyers and judges; the selfless public officials; the enlightened clergy; the heroic educators; and the dedicated citizen-activists—will not be able to re-

vive the nation’s soul. Nothing else has the potential to countervail the death-dealing institutional power now arrayed against the soul of America.

If we fail to act on this truth, we will, at best, be revealing a misplaced reverence for something other than the action-organ of America’s embodied moral spirituality. For all practical purposes, the moral-spiritual soul of America ceases to exist in the absence of its effective expression in the body politic.

We ought to remember that in the history of most empires, moral-spiritual decline eventually leads to physical death. At some point, which for us may not be far off, it becomes irreversible.

How long will we weep for the looming death of this nation’s moral-spiritual goodness and the end of its inspiring promise? How long will we wait before responding to the historic challenge of the existential threat we are facing? A window of opportunity is closing.

From the year 1936, American poet Langston Hughes speaks to us with his poem, “Let America Be America Again”:

“America will be,” he tells us.

What it wasn’t then, it could be in its future.

But will it?

His future is our present.

Will we save the dream?

Will America be?

¹ Posted online, September 17, 2018 [http://www.socialpolicy.org/online-only-features/931-will-america-be.html]

² See “Public Powers for the Commonweal: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing,” *Social Policy*, 45(4):21-28 (Winter 2015).

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