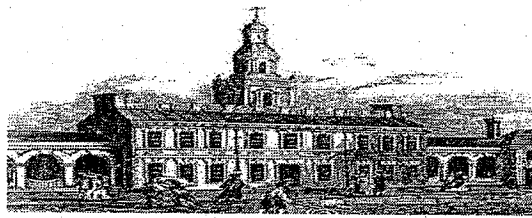


# Are Americans on a Path Leading to a Breakdown of the Nation?

by Edward J. Dodson / February 2017



Independence Hall, Philadelphia, 18th Century

IT IS A SEASON OF GREAT DISCONTENT FOR MANY OF US AROUND THE GLOBE. Here in the United States of America we are experiencing a troubling and challenging period characterized by a deep ideological division and a broad distrust of our elected representatives. Corporate lobbyists have taken control over legislation and regulation at the state and federal levels of government. Conservatives battle Progressives over the limits to freedoms guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. In a very real sense, we have come to the culmination of the process begun by President Ronald Reagan to re-establish a *New Federalism*. If we are honest with ourselves, however, the idea that the U.S.A. is one country, its citizens one people, has always been something of a myth. Given his own experiences following the end of the American Revolution, I suspect that Thomas Paine would agree.

For much of the twentieth century, the attitude that directed domestic and foreign policies in the United States was the willingness to compromise in order to gain consensus. This was the essence of *liberalism*. There existed an unspoken respect for change described by political scientists as *disjointed incrementalism*. Principle took a back seat to practical political necessities. Those who rose to positions of leadership in government, business, labor, education, grant-making foundations and even in citizen activism accepted the confines of *liberalism*. No one wanted to *throw the baby out with the bath water*. Some of the lessons of history seemed to have been well learned.

From the moment the first Europeans arrived on the shores of North America, there arose one conflict after another between the Non-Europeans and the strange but powerfully-armed peoples who arrived from beyond the horizon in huge wooden ships. As soon as enough of these Europeans established themselves in coastal settlements and explored inland, the conflicts over control of territory and resources began. As the numbers of Spanish, Dutch, French, English and other European groups increased, they largely thought of the Non-European peoples as irritants to be removed. And, more often than not, each European group thought of the other Europeans in the same way.

Despite almost continuous warfare in North America, people from around the world kept coming. Some were adventurers. Some sought escape from religious, racial or ethnic oppression. All hoped for a better quality of life. Thanks to the encouragement of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine joined those who made the journey. Until the year 1924, the laws of the United States of America imposed few restrictions on those who came, so long as they were of European origin. Only the Chinese were specifically prohibited by laws enacted beginning in 1882 from entering the country.

Those who arrived from the land of their forefathers tended to congregate in enclaves where cultural norms and language were familiar. Assimilation into the dominant Anglo-American community often took generations. During the early decades of the 19th century, the one ethnic group to hold fast to their Old World culture were those who came from Germany. As historian Marcus Lee Hansen observed:

*Resistance to Americanization proved strongest in the*

*old congregations on the plains between the Delaware and the Susquehanna. The bulk of their members were German-born and German-trained, knowing little of their adopted country apart from the rural parishes in which they lived...<sup>1</sup>*

Before the frontier closed at the dawn of the twentieth century, the pattern of settlement across the continent was dominated by nearly self-sufficient communities, with most of the residents still engaged in agriculture. Henry George described how the arrival of railroads both tied these communities together and accelerated the concentration of income and wealth in the growing towns and cities. During the decades following the defeat of the Southern Confederacy, African-Americans in large numbers also joined the migration. The America to which the next wave of immigrants came was changing rapidly:

*Along the city's unyielding asphalt streets, beside the rutted roads of mill or mining towns, amidst the exciting prairie acres, they established the homes of the New World. But wherever the immigrants went, there was one common experience they shared: nowhere could they transplant the European village.<sup>ii</sup>*

The mixture of the races, of peoples of different Old World heritage, language, culture and religion seriously challenged the picture of apparent equality painted by Alexis de Tocqueville following his visit earlier in the 19th century. The nation's major cities were overcrowded, unsanitary and dismal places. Many immigrants came to wish they had never left the land of their birth:

*As the passing years widened the distance, the land the immigrants had left acquired charm and beauty. Present problems blurred those they had left unsolved behind; and in the haze of memory it seemed to these people they had formerly been free of present dissatisfactions. It was as if the Old World became a great mirror into which they looked to see right all that was wrong with the New.<sup>iii</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Lee Hansen. *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), p.74.

<sup>ii</sup> Oscar Handlin. *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951), p.144.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.260-261.

Continued on page 6, *Breakdown of the Nation?*

Leading figures in the nation concluded that the most effective way to bring this diverse population together as *Americans* was to establish in every community systems of publicly-funded and publicly-administered schools. The children of immigrants would be taught to read and write in English. They were also taught what it meant to be an *American*. The rationale for universal public education arose as early as the late 1830s, led by Horace Mann, the secretary of education of Massachusetts. By 1900, thirty-four states required compulsory education for children up to age 14 or even higher. Eighteen years later, every state required all children to complete school through grade six.

Americans have often been described as *a restless people*, relocating from one state to another in search of better economic opportunities or just for a less extreme climate. One result is that in every large city and even in smaller towns there are distinct ethnic neighborhoods, where generations of families continue to hold fast to at least some of the Old World values of their immigrant forefathers. This pattern of migration changed only after the end of the Second World War. The rapid expansion of the interstate highway system spawned the development of new housing subdivisions surrounding every city. The adult children of many immigrants moved to the new suburbs, where the process of assimilation accelerated, even as economic and racial segregation remained. America was not quite a melting pot but its institutions were forced to adjust to the changing reality of where people lived and worked.

Responding to the emergencies, in the 1930s and -40s, of a nationwide economic depression and a global war dramatically increased the presence of government in the everyday lives of citizens. The wartime sacrifices made by African-Americans emboldened returning servicemen and others to demand their rightful civil liberties. Women called into the workforce during the war were also emboldened to demand greater opportunities and status besides that of homemaker and mother. Young men and women who postponed marriage and starting families began to make up for lost time, and military veterans were assisted by government programs that provided affordable housing and access to college education or technical training. For millions of U.S. households the prospects for an improving standard of living were set in motion.

Economists now held positions at the highest levels of government. In 1946, President Harry S. Truman signed the Employment Act, one provision of which was the formation of the first Council of Economic Advisers. By 1949 the Council became dominated by economists who asserted the economy could support both rising spending on "defense" as well as on social welfare entitlements, even if this meant there would be large budget deficits. U.S. political leaders were also soon committed to whatever spending was required to stop the expansion of communism around the world.

President Dwight Eisenhower had warned the country against the growing influence of what he described as the "military-industrial complex". Yet, it was Eisenhower who provided the French with funds to try to hold onto their colonial interests in Indo-China. When the French army was defeated, the Americans stepped in, hoping to prevent yet another communist regime from being established. President Lyndon Johnson spent the

nation into an inflationary spiral trying to win the war on poverty and defeat the Viet Cong at the same time. President Richard Nixon, although a Republican and nominally a fiscal conservative, announced to the U.S. public that he had become a Keynesian. To win a second term as President, Nixon demanded cheap money and even more government spending. The U.S. (and most of the world) drifted into the economic and social morass of stagflation. By 1980, inflation had risen to 14% in the U.S., and the country was ready to try something different. Enter Ronald Reagan.

Reaganomics embraced deregulation, a reduction of marginal tax rates on individuals and businesses and a commitment to break the power of labor unions. At the Federal Reserve, Chairman Paul Volcker used the tools at his disposal to halt inflation. He let interest rates climb. Demand for credit fell, business activity stalled, unemployment rose and the U.S. slid into recession. President Reagan's tentative gamble of *supply-side* economics failed to achieve the promised outcomes of a robust investment in production and an increase in federal revenue. Nonetheless, the years of public acceptance (or acquiescence) over an expanded role of government to regulate and manage the nation's economy was from this point on to be vigorously challenged.

In 1982, President Reagan attempted to transfer responsibility for many Federal programs to individual states under his strategy to promote *new federalism*. His proposals proved to be far too ambitious, even for most Republicans then in the U.S. Congress. He was also opposed by the National Governors Association. Fast forward to today, and the final phases of *new federalism* are being carried out by the Republican-dominated government.

The willingness to compromise that characterized American liberalism has disappeared. We remain a citizenry deeply divided by our fundamental value systems, by political ideology, by racial and ethnic prejudices, by conflicting views of what constitutes human rights, by our views on the role religious doctrine ought to play in the operation of public institutions and by the extent to which our laws reflect justice and are justly enforced. And, of course, there is an almost total ignorance of the injustice associated with the private appropriation of the rents derived from nature.

What I foresee as a reasonable possibility is the eventual break-up of the United States into confederacies of states joined together by shared cultural norms, values and ideological belief systems. Perhaps at least one such confederacy would find guidance from *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*. This may be precipitated by the migration of tens of millions of people to regions of the United States where they feel their own values are most strongly embraced. For a very long time now, decisions to relocate have been made for non-political reasons. That could change. We have already experienced changes in the laws of states that are attractive or repulsive to some segments of the nation's population. It is possible that some states would merge and others divide into two or more new, sovereign nations.

While the details of this story are unique to the United States of America, a broad survey of emerging trends around the globe suggests a future in which many changes in territorial boundaries are on the horizon.

---Ed Dodson