

Is the United States a Failing State?

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There is now a common chorus from CNN, the New York Times and the Economist. They ask if government in the United States is broken and needs fixing? But what if government in the US is “beyond repair,” as I argued in a book by that title in 1971, referring to the ecology of capitalism. Is the United States a failing state?

The Fund for Peace identified twelve indicators of a failed state expressed in the annual Failed States Index. But failure is often more a result of perception than any objective measurement. The Index places the US risk of failure as moderate. But can a Superpower be failing? Lets examine the political, economic and social system of the US.

First, the political system refers to the institutions of government, including politics, law, interest groups, etc. The US political system is built on an outdated 18th century view of human nature as brutish, requiring a division of power to prevent minority rule. The result today is both the absence of power to transform the political economy and the excess of power that allows the President an almost unchecked capacity to wage overt or covert war. One stunning example of the former is Ground Zero in New York. Nine years after the attack, construction remains frozen. In one year the mood in the United States has gone from “Change You Can Believe In” to asking if Government is broken. With the notable exception of 2008, the US has one of the lowest voter participation rates in the modern world, lower than India. The US today is far closer to a Plutocracy than a Democracy.

The US now has a debt of about \$66 trillion, five times the GDP and double the national wealth. The Obama budget debt to GDP ratio is projected at 100% for the next three years. This debt is largely a result of the non-sustainable system of 700+ military bases world wide and an annual military budget bigger than all of the other countries of the world combined. In Afghanistan, alone, it costs \$759,000 a year to maintain each soldier. Yet in one year, while President Obama has preached a rhetoric of peace, he has expanded the military budget, theaters and fields of operation. Martin Luther King observed that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Second, an economic system is the organization of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Real economic growth in the US has decreased for five decades in a row. Similarly, stagnation is evident in net non-residential investment and real hourly wages. The degree of economic inequality (it is now comparable to Mexico and greater than Iran), the extent of poverty (twice the rate in Germany) and the comparative lack of benefits for workers, reflect the failure of the US. There exists no direct effort to reduce the largest underclass of any industrial country or racial inequality, some of who have a lower life expectancy than several African countries.

Third, a social system is the condition and organization of people. The American provision of public services such as health care, education, social welfare or public safety, is a failure. Fewer people are covered by health care than in any industrial country (the World Health Organization ranks the US 37th in health care delivery); the infant mortality rate has sunk from 12th in 1960 to 29 in 1990 and 30th in 2005; only half of our children in large cities graduate high school and half of those that graduate are functionally illiterate. The math scores of high school students are lower than thirty other countries. China is poised to soon replace the US in the production of scientific and technical knowledge. The US ranks 35th in the Environmental Performance Index and 96th in the Global Peace Index.

The US contains just 4.6% of the world's people but consumes 33% of global resources and is unrivaled in the production of pollution and carbon gases (when the military is included). The global footprint of the United States, the gap between its capacity and actual consumption, is far greater than any large country. The World Economic Forum recently published Global Risks 2010, identifying thirty-six major global risks. A "major value decline of the dollar" was included. The one risk they did not include was the abrupt collapse of the United States. Yet this could be triggered by a catastrophic economic, political, social or environmental crisis. The consistent failure of Government to anticipate or respond effectively to risks, such as the end of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, global warming, energy vulnerability, Hurricane Katrina, or homeland security, foretells the future. American leaders live in a bubble of denial and delusion, eyes wide shut. They do not represent the People, treat the global community as equals or understand the forces tearing away at the foundations of America's future. America is a failing state.

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