

2015 05 07

Mike Polioudakis

### **Not All Political Systems Evolve Toward Goodness; We Can Get Stuck in Badness**

This note describes a mistake I made about political change, a mistake that retarded me for decades. The mistake is to believe that all political systems and groups would evolve to be good if they did not face external opposition. In fact, a political system and a group can get stuck in badness on the basis only of its own internal ideas and workings. Once we see beyond the mistake and see the potential for continuing badness, then we have to think about what to do.

Here I need a big prolog: Americans hold a mistaken and hurtful idea about the rise of democracy and continued participation in democracy. Officially, we believe that (1) all people will move quickly toward Western style democracy on their own, without any external help, if only the blocks to democracy are removed. The blocks can be internal such as a bad dictator like Saddam Hussein or bad ideas like religious fundamentalism. The blocks can be external such as the conditions forced on Germany after Versailles or such as having to fight constantly in tribal war with your neighbors. Once the blocks are removed, people will automatically, on their own, without any help or prior education, come up with the ideas and institutions that are needed for democracy. Once a healthy democracy is in place, it only grows stronger and cannot be displaced. (2) All groups within a democracy will learn good citizenship and will participate fully with the greater good in mind. (3) All leaders will be able to overcome partisan divisions for the greater good. (4) A healthy democracy is capable of dealing with any problem.

It is not necessary to argue theory. It is only necessary to point out a few counter-examples: Iraq, Iran, Libya, Afghanistan, Germany after World War One, most of sub-Saharan Africa, likely South Africa soon, any Communist country, much of Latin America, and even Italy.

The real issue in appreciating this mistake is appreciating how much damage gets done at home and abroad as a result. At home, we waste enormous resources "liberating" countries only to see them fall back into even worse oppression. We lose many good people and much money. Abroad, countries kill many of their people and destroy their resources for no gain whatsoever. At home, we foster ridiculous ideas among Americans and ridiculous programs and ideas in Congress. Abroad, this dogma supports the ridiculous fantasies of dictators.

It is important to see the exception to this mistake: the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan succeeded only because Europeans had been prepared by centuries of the right kind of civilization, and about two hundred years of the right kind of economy. They were ready for democracy when Americans set them free and gave them the means to rebuild. The vast majority of the world was not ready.

Here is not the place to go into what is needed.

Now I can get back to my mistake. Here I am most concerned with part (1). I touch on part (2), and omit parts (3) and (4).

As a child during the Cold War, I saw that America and Russia could not move on to better government and economy as long as they were enemies. The problem with Russia becoming more capitalist and free, and with America becoming more humanistic, was that they were at each other's throats. We, including the Russians, could never move on naturally to better forms as long as we had to keep up bad forms to counter external threat. If the external threat were taken away, then, according to American dogma, both America and Russia would automatically, of their own accord, move on to better forms.

I don't think this mistake ever led me to propose that we unilaterally surrender to Russia so that both we and the Russians could get on to the more pressing problem of getting better. My view did support my opposition to the war in Vietnam, tolerance for peasant revolutions, and friendship programs with Russia and China. That is not so bad.

The mistake does have some foundation in fact other than the Marshall Plan. After China removed restrictions to private ownership and capitalism, the Chinese people did, on their own, develop a fairly robust form of real capitalism. Real capitalism is one of the best economic supports for democracy. In the future, as capitalism entrenches, it will help China become more democratic although China will not likely become fully democratic. Most of the world is not like China.

As a child, I read a case that I did not then understand fully but that still contributed to my version of the American mistake. Medieval Japan was cut into a Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom. They were locked in a bitter unending conflict for supremacy. Japan could not progress. It was losing resources and falling backwards. Loving Japan, and seeing the results of the war, the leader of the South made a deal with the North. The South surrendered to the North. Japan would come together under one administration. The North would hold leadership of the country for ten years, then the South for ten years, and they would alternate. What I did not appreciate because I was young, was that the North reneged. Once the North had leadership, it never gave up control, and leadership became hereditary in the North. What I did see was that national unity was important, progress could not happen without stopping internal conflict and without unity, and even the defeat of your particular faction was not too high a price to pay for the unity and betterment of the nation. This was like Jesus willing to die for the sake of everybody else. This was like some people giving up a normal life so that the majority of people can have a normal life. What I did see was that the unification of Japan worked. Unification laid the basis, a few hundred years later, for the leap that Japan took as a whole nation.

The movie "Hero" with Jet Li makes similar points about the unity of China. America learned the same lesson in its own Civil War. Unity is important, almost no matter how you get it.

Even at the time, I knew that my idea was wrong but I clung to it anyway. All I had to do was look at dysfunctional families, and then think of the country as a family writ large, to see why the idea was wrong. Here is why I clung to it anyway:

The idea that “all will turn out well on its own” goes along with how we treat groups inside the United States. If the idea is right, then we don’t have to do anything special with immigrants and with Blacks and other minorities. All we have to do is remove impediments to their freedom and their participation in the economy, and they will by themselves, automatically, learn full-fledged democracy, educate their children, and find good jobs in the capitalist economy. If the idea is wrong, then we have to do a lot more. I don’t go into what all we have to do, but it is a lot more. It involves intruding on the culture and integrity of immigrants and of minorities such as Blacks. Like most Americans, I wanted to avoid that at home and abroad.

Just removing obstacles does not lead immigrants and minorities to quickly learn full-scale democracy, educate children, and find good jobs. Among other failures, the failure of Black Americans has been a big lesson to me that the basic idea is wrong. I do not here go into whose fault it is. The lesson at home was more important than the lessons abroad in seeing that the idea of “all will turn out well on its own” is wrong. Once I could accept that we had a problem here, it was fairly easy to look back at history and see the mistake that we had been constantly repeating.

I wish I could get across how much, as a child, I believed in the automatic rise of good democracy, and how painful it was to let go of this myth. Populist democracy was sacred, and I wanted everybody to participate in the sacred. Populist democracy and human nature were almost the same. Human nature could only be true to itself and develop except under populist democracy. If human nature is thwarted, populist democracy must suffer too. Any assault on one was an assault on the other; and an assault on sanctity as well. Even when I saw the obvious counter-truths, I clung to this myth.

Foreign nations, and all kinds of interest groups within the United States, know that Americans believe this myth. They use the myth to take advantage of Americans in general, often through guilt.

It is worth re-stating the obvious:

-Simply removing obstacles to democracy and economic development is not enough.

-Without the proper background such as in Western Europe, political systems and groups will not, on their own, without further aid, automatically develop robust democracy and a robust economy.

-Political systems and groups easily can evolve bad patterns and get stuck in those patterns.

-To get out of bad patterns, removing obvious obstacles, such as a dictator or poverty, is not enough. To get out requires remaking the nation or group, including culture, social organization, politics, economy, education system, rate of reproduction, and often its family system. In the foreign sphere, Americans call this “nation building”.

-These points are true not only of foreign countries but of groups within the United States.

-We refuse to see these points because “nation building” and domestic reform are hard. It is easier to run on self-delusion and wishful thinking.

-Not seeing the points for foreign nations and not seeing the points for domestic groups reinforce each other. If we see reality for foreign nations, we have to see it for domestic groups, and we don't want that, so we refuse to see it among foreign nations. If we see reality among domestic groups, we have to see it for foreign nations, and we don't want that, so we refuse to see it among domestic groups.

-When Americans act on the myth in the foreign arena, they remove an obvious obstacle such as a bad dictator, pat themselves on the back, and then leave.

-When Americans act on the myth domestically, they “throw money” at a group, pat themselves on the back, and then forget about it until faced with a budget crunch.

Now the true big question is: “So what?” What do we do now?

That is a big question with a lot of answer. I don't try to answer it here.

I do point out a couple of things. We have few answers. Americans don't want to get into the question either for abroad or at home. The State Department has few answers. All advocates of the poor and minorities in America have few answers. Most advocates refuse to see the issue.

To answer, we need to know how groups, including ethnic groups, religious groups, and nations, go bad and stay bad.

To answer that, we need to know how economy, society, and culture work together to form patterns, and how some patterns can go bad and stay bad.

To answer that, we need to type nations etc. according to good, bad, and mixed, and according to how they operate. Nobody wants to do that.

Then we need good theories, based on solid case study, of how to turn bad patterns into good patterns of robust democracy and a robust economy. We have little of that.

Partly in search of answers, I turned to anthropology, economics, and the other social sciences. A few people have taken a shot at answers in economics and political science. But this inquiry is a forbidden taboo in anthropology, and, as far as I can tell, sociology. No non-White non-Western non-male non-Christian group or nation ever does anything bad; democracy and rapid development are sure to arise when nasty Western Christian White male capitalist interference is removed; and no bad patterns can arise and can sustain themselves so well that they resist almost all internal or external reform. Some archeologists used to work with the idea of systems but their ideas cannot meet these issues. Some

evolutionary anthropologists might be able to entertain these issues, but, as far as I can tell, they have not. I grew disappointed with what I did not find in anthropology that might be relevant to these issues. That, however, is another story that I won't go into here.

I had to do my own thinking. That is where the "stances" book, stances essays, citizenship essays, and the work on economics come from.