



Thinkstock photo

Chance and Change

Robin V. Sears

How could America transform from the country that elected Barack Obama president twice to the cauldron of resentment and enmity that produced Donald Trump's implausible success in November? Veteran political strategist Robin Sears weighs the events in question and attributes this American moment, at least in part, to the role of chance in history.

Like most Canadians, I grew up fascinated by America: its music, its movies, its wars, its politics. But overarching all that was our bemusement at its loud patriotism. As students, we would giggle at the idea of a Pledge of Allegiance every morning. The 40-foot Stars and Stripes on used car dealership flagpoles we'd see on road trips were similarly a source of teenage Canadian sneers.

Our sanctimony was always mixed with not a little envy. The existential crises that we grew up on in the 1970s, 80s and 90s in Canada were not something Americans would ever experience. We would blush at their inquiries about our ongoing constitutional navel-gazing.

They knew who they were; they were Americans.

How the world has changed.

Canadians now feel a collective pride in our achievements in the arts, tech, sports and on a global stage. We brag about our social tolerance. We are proud and nationalistic to a degree never seen before – even if still more quietly, and deferentially, than our American cousins.

We now watch with increasing anxiety as the nation closest to us, emotionally as well as geographically, appear to be ripping its society apart. First came the rage that followed 9/11, the ill-starred wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then the thinly veiled racism that Barack Obama's elections opened up. This year was capped by a massive increase in attention to police killing young black men, and assassins killing ambushed cops.

All this was taken to scary new levels by the peak of the 2016 US election cycle. The rhetoric and the rage may have been a return to the American political nativism and isolationism of generations ago. To most Canadians, it was unheard of and unacceptable. "What were Americans doing to themselves?" was the theme of many conversations on Canadian summer docks and fall campuses. Then the unthinkable happened and Donald Trump was elected president.

It is human nature to forget previous dark chapters as a way of keeping a positive gaze on future horizons. But, American optimism notwithstanding, human experience is neither a virtuous spiral upwards, nor as entirely circular as some religious zealots would claim. It is, frustratingly, too often merely a journey whose path is determined by mere chance.

If Joe Biden had been his opponent would Trump be president? If Hillary Clinton could have understood earlier and better the power of white working-class anger, could she have found the less than 200,000 votes in the right places she needed to win? The counterfactuals of alternative

“ If Joe Biden had been his opponent would Trump be president? If Hillary Clinton could have understood earlier and better the power of white working-class anger, could she have found the less than 200,000 votes in the right places she needed to win? ”

histories are sneered at by academics. They prefer the more determinist analysis of events, however improbable their claims of causality.

Legendary Cambridge scholar Aileen Kelly chose *The Discovery of Chance* as the title of her marvellous recently published book on the too-little respected Russian revolutionary and philosopher Alexander Herzen. Almost alone among thinkers of his era, Herzen rejected the teleological theory of history, the conviction that the human story had a goal, a driving narrative. He also rejected the upward advance of progress propounded most famously by Marx. For this, he was excoriated by former allies on both the right and left.

As Kelly observes, if only the world had not been so obsessed by such arrogant views of our place in the universe and our ability to manipulate events as we saw fit, we might have avoided much of the tragedy and bloodshed of the 20th century. At the same time, though, it would have consoled us more at times such as these, days of the election of foul-mouthed fools to high office. Donald Trump was neither inevitable nor is he predictive of a grim future. He is merely one more unfortunate proof of chance.

But as Herzen also wisely observes, chance has thousands of possible paths. There is no excuse for fatalism in accepting the reality of chance, therefore. There is, indeed, every reason to try to nudge history onto a higher and better path. Of course, every successful leader needs a strategic vision and an agenda but it is their ability to ride the changes that chance throws at them that determines their success.

By chance, equipment failure killed a helicopter on a dangerous mission and nearly killed the Carter presidency as a result. By chance, pilot error killed a helicopter on a later dangerous mission, but partly due to lessons learned a generation earlier, the mission resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden and boosting Obama's presidency as a result.

The greatest leaders are always the best opportunists, not merely the greatest strategic thinkers.

In 1941, Winston Churchill knew he needed to change the American military's strategic conception and sense of urgency about the war ahead. He judged correctly that there was lingering doubt among the generals about FDR's secret war agenda. So, in response to a casual suggestion from FDR that they should meet soon; in defiance of his wife, his cabinet, and his own military leaders, he sailed across the Atlantic, inviting himself to spend nearly three weeks at the White House for Christmas. All were terrified he might get killed by a U-boat crossing the wintry North Atlantic.

He inveigled his way into every high-level meeting, irritating the U.S. brass repeatedly with his insistent interventions. He kept FDR up late drinking and plotting. He drove Eleanor Roosevelt to distraction roaming the White House halls in the middle of the night in his pajamas, in search of another nightcap.

Churchill's war strategy had one central pillar: get the U.S. committed early, heavily and irreversibly. He leapt on a chance to move it forward decisively, seized it, and single-handedly transformed the U.S./U.K. strategic relationship that very dark Christmas of 1940.

Now, this new insurgent president, unthinkable a year ago, is famous for bragging about his deal-making, his skill at seizing chance and opportunity. He is meanwhile being challenged by all the institutions of the American republic not to undo generations of work in foreign policy, economic policy and the building of a socially tolerant American society. They are all seized of the importance of nudging their new president away from some of his more astonishing promised follies, with some early signs of success. Few put the chance of complete success in avoiding pratfalls very high. Others doubt his real skill at negotiations when the deck isn't loaded. We shall see.

Marx was right in his analysis of the political consequences of poverty and political despair. They are inevitably destabilizing of every society, especially in the face of rising and flagrantly displayed wealth on the part of the few—and in a state whose muscle seems devoted to protecting the one per cent. He misjudged how identity politics and ethnic nationalism could be used to take that desperation to the right, however. Trump did not.

So, now what?

A healing process is urgent and essential, as further division may generate more violence and scars that would take a generation to heal. Sadly, it is hard to see any credible leaders deeply committed to the reconciliation process that healing requires. Harder still to see what their hook as a motivational message might be.

The curse of race that has afflicted American history since its creation seems to be on one of its cyclical rises to more violence and more heartbreak. The will to walk the dangerously narrow path to sanity on immigration reform seems astonishingly absent. Perhaps the only policy avenue that might throw a line across the cultural chasm is direct economic assistance to those hardest hit by the near-stagnation in American wages in the last two decades.

The \$15 minimum wage is an essential—it would have an instant impact on the lives of millions of Americans, and pump significant spending power into the entire economy. A second high-impact political signal would be to wipe out tax scams like 'carried interest.' It is a hard fiddle to understand, except when you explain that it costs billions in lost tax revenue and it means that hedge fund managers can pay lower taxes on the bulk of their income than Walmart employees do on their overtime pay.

In the short term, before the next U.S. mid-term elections in 2018, real improvement in the public services that make a difference in working families' lives will need to be visible: transit, road and bridge renewal; school, hospital and Veterans' Affairs facilities and services. The crisis in community safety and relations between African Americans and the police will need to have seen progress as well.

None of this is rocket science in policy or political terms.

As Michael Adams and others have amply demonstrated in recent years, Canada is a country whose values are becoming more broadly and deeply shared, across all communities and generations. America however, appears to be moving in the opposite direction. With the benefit of strong national standards in law, health and education, the diversity in Canadian values is narrowing, while, paradoxically, Canadians have never been more ethnically diverse. It is a triumph of the host culture's power in integrating newcomers—but it is a success, perhaps, that it is not infinitely elastic.

Trump's America must now struggle with how to regenerate and raise the level of shared respect for differing values, and how to lower the temperature of political rhetoric while raising the expected standards for that dialogue. It will not be easy because it will require a suspension of disbelief on the part of wounded partisans on all sides, an unwavering leadership

discipline that enforces those expectations, and some early proofs that it can deliver benefits—on both sides of the divide.

“Canada is a country whose values are becoming more broadly and deeply shared, across all communities and generations. America however, appears to be moving in the opposite direction.”

Americans need a leader to help them to recapture that unconditional patriotism about which Canadians were a little envious a generation ago. A shared conviction that did not come in blue or in red, one that was indivisible. A leader like Obama, ironically, would be ideal for the task.

Here he is in conversation with *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, recounting what he said to his daughters about the Trump upheaval: “What I say to them is that people are complicated...This is not mathematics, this is chemistry and biology...and it's messy...And you should anticipate that at any given moment there may be flare-ups of bigotry that you may have to confront or [they] may be inside you and [you] have to vanquish [them]...You don't get into a fetal position. You don't start worrying about the apocalypse. You say, okay, where are the places where I can push to keep it moving forward.”

In other words, perhaps, there will be change—and some of it may be unpleasant—but despair is not an answer. **P**

Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears, a former national director of the NDP, is a principal of Earncliffe Strategy Group. robin@earncliffe.ca