



President Donald Trump with Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly at the White House in January. Trump leads a deeply divided America. Official DHS photo

## The Mood of America: Seldom So Divided

Robin V. Sears

*Before America and the world had time to adequately process the events of the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump had turned the U.S. presidency into a perpetual distraction machine of unprecedented clips, headlines and tweets. Veteran political strategist Robin Sears ponders what America is living through and what may come, from the cocktail crowd of Trump's New York to the beaches of the Florida Panhandle.*

An update to the most iconic bumper sticker of the past 50 years has already been spotted on American freeways: "Don't Blame Me. You Voted For for Him." Donald Trump's dystopian administration challenges comedy's sharpest satirists at SNL and elsewhere. We have an American administration that, given the stakes, should defy parody but simply generates too much prize material on a daily basis not to lampoon.

As Americans and the world tried to understand what happened last November 8, and why, as the post-election smoke cleared on the most divisive campaign in fifty years, some explanations for the stunning result did emerge. Perhaps, not

surprisingly, if you were a high school dropout you were highly likely to be a Trump supporter. After all, he had declared on several occasions that he loved “the poorly educated.” Equally, understandable was that if you were also a poor, white, retiree from a rural county, you were more than 80 per cent likely to see him as your man.

But many affluent, college-educated men and women were also Trumpies, as were a surprising number of Hispanics and young people. What did they not understand about the bizarre promises that Trump made, and has now begun to implement in a stunningly incompetent manner? Were they not listening? Likely not. Did they not care about his misogyny, racism and ethnic slurs? Perhaps not.

A month after election day, at a large private business event in New York, it was hard to tell whether the wealthy and powerful guests—many of whom had known Trump for years—were more offended that the nation was about to be governed by a vulgar buffoon or by what he might do with the levers of power. They collectively confirmed the suspicions of the conservative poor about the snobbery of rich liberal New Yorkers.

But two weeks’ vacation in deepest Trumpland—the Florida panhandle—in February offered additional insight that we have not given sufficient weight to. Yes, this was a change election, but not a leap for aspirational, hopeful change. It was a “throw the bums out” tidal wave. Hillary Clinton never successfully branded herself as anything other than “one of the boys.” She became an icon for working and middle-class anger. She and her husband had also been on the national stage for a quarter century, and many Americans had seen quite enough of them.

After some days of conversation with, and eavesdropping on, older, richer, white Floridians, it became clear that it was this revulsion with the corruption of the American electoral process, the appearance of politicians enriching themselves while doing little to help

“Some experts point to the increasingly rigid stovepipes of information that most of us now consume—social media and digital sources tailored to our prejudices. Others cite the impact of race and class, and the slide in the living standards among previously secure middle class Americans.”

those crushed by this past painful decade was the far more powerful driver of Trump’s rise. They were looking for a vehicle to punish, not one to deliver positive change.

Their spitting anger at these elites, even if some of the angry were ironically members of the club themselves, was deep and vehement. I saw several shiny Mercedes with a chilling bumper sticker that read: “Hillary Clinton in 2016—*To Prison Now!*” Their contempt for her was not greatly different than their disdain for many Republican politicians locally and nationally. It was not merely that she was a “woman, bossy, been around too long.” She was the symbol of the elites’ foul play and Trump would “Lock her up!”

America is a nation of nearly infinite contradiction, a collection of contending communities that somehow manage not to lose the values of shared citizenship. Deeply distrustful of politics, government and increasingly, all institutions, from banks to Bible school. Yet there remains a profound sense of national pride, vested principally today in the military. The famous Tea Party-era placard that read, “Keep your dirty government hands off my Medicare!,” not only aptly frames the contradictions, it is also a sad insight into how Trump managed to pull the wool over the eyes of so many of his desperate supporters, those looking for a tough guy to punish the rich and to lead them out of the desert of the past decade. His cabinet of billionaires may not be the most likely crew for such a revolutionary task.

It is a noteworthy phenomenon that while Canadians’ values and politics become less regional, and less parochial, America’s divisions appear to

be constantly widening. Researchers, political scientists and sociologists offer a variety of explanations. So far, none has demonstrable proof as to why our neighbouring societies are reacting so differently to accelerating 21st century change.

Some experts point to the increasingly rigid stovepipes of information that most of us now consume—social media and digital sources tailored to our prejudices. Others cite the impact of race and class, and the slide in the living standards among previously secure middle class Americans. And some point to the still raw wounds of 9/11 and the too many years of too pointless foreign wars. Whichever combination of roots one prefers, this election offered devastating evidence of how far apart are the values and convictions of conservative and progressive Americans.

“As the drip by drip revelation of Trump’s relations with the Russians continues to unfold, it does beg the question, “What happens next?” If we are heading into another Watergate moment, can Mike Pence successfully play Jerry Ford?”

These divisions do have a long tradition, however. From William Jennings “Cross of Gold” Bryan, to Teddy Roosevelt, to Joe McCarthy, Ross Perot, Ralph Nader and even Barack Obama, perhaps a third



The Womens March on Washington, the day after Trump's inauguration. He insisted he drew bigger crowds, nope. Wikimedia image

of American voters are always available to a charismatic insurgent from left or right, as a result of this deep skepticism of many Americans about their government.

As the drip by drip revelation of Trump's relations with the Russians continues to unfold, it does beg the question, "What happens next?" If we are heading into another Watergate moment, can Mike Pence successfully play Jerry Ford? That is, can he be seen as a source of calm and restoration of normalcy, after what will have been months of increasingly bitter recrimination, leading to a final showdown?

It will be hard. Unlike Nixon, who finally accepted his end, Trump will continue to shriek his innocence and his fury at being framed, long and loud. Even if he is able to fend off the stench of collusion with Moscow successfully in the short term, the list of potential clashes involving conflict, dubious business partners, and the values of some of his closest advisers continues to grow. If Trump survives a full term, it is likely to be as disputatious and ugly a presidency as anyone has seen since the Nixon era.

Some evidence of buyers' remorse among those voters who chose a Hillary killer, rather than a Trump agenda, is beginning to emerge. A "@Trump\_Regrets" Twitter account has amassed more than 220,000 followers according to the *New York Times*. Typical of many of the contributions

is that of Debbie Nelson in Chicago. She concedes that she voted for Trump "because of Hillary's lies." Already disillusioned, she posted, "We need a mature adult as a president. Can I take my vote back?" The final straw for her was Trump's behaviour and his continuing jihad against the media as purveyors of "fake news" and as "enemies of the people." Not surprisingly the account has also become a target for angry and threatening Trump fans, presenting a sad, real-time update on the bitter divisions that divide America.

Perhaps the most astonishing development post-November 8 has been the explosion of protests against him, apparently self-organizing in many cases. The Women's March following his inauguration drew bigger crowds than Trump. Within hours of the bungled ban on travellers from seven predominantly Muslim Middle East countries, American airports were besieged with angry protestors. While Trump used his Twitter account to great effect during the campaign, the power of social media now threatens to become a more effective source of opposition than the media, the intelligence community, the Democrats and his unhappy GOP critics combined. Drawing on the powerful symbolism of a resistance movement, the groups are increasingly branding themselves as "Resist!"

The Obama team first demonstrated

the power of Twitter and Facebook as organizing tools. Ironically, the Trump presidency appears likely to give birth to a real-time globally connected international opposition movement. This may be a mixed blessing for the Democratic Party. The leaders of many of these groups clearly don't need the endorsement of politicians to be successful, and may come to challenge their relevance to the Resist movement itself.

We have seen this movie before. When Students for a Democratic Society and the 1960s anti-war movement undermined the legitimacy of the Democratic party in the Johnson, it was the GOP who were the beneficiaries. History does not repeat itself precisely, however, and this era is marked by two important differences: a much wider network of opponents than angry anti-war students and a Republican party which already holds deep reservations about its president. Each seems likely to grow.

An optimistic view of where these trends will go is an early and decisive collision between Trump and his de-tractors. His resignation within two years and his replacement by Mike Pence are the outcome English bookies are already giving good odds on. Nothing in his makeup and behaviour to date leads one to think that he would fall on his own sword, however. But even a showdown that he wins, and allows him to continue to govern like an angry crazed autocrat, is preferable to the most pessimistic scenario.

Surely the gloomiest vision of the years ahead is one in which the skirmishes and guerilla warfare between the courts, the media, Congress and the White House grind on for four long years, and protests and street violence escalate, each undermining American self-confidence and credibility internationally, and plunging the nation itself into a form of venomous digital civil war from which recovery and healing would take years. **P**

*Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears, a principal of Earncliffe Strategy Group, is a former national director of the NDP and a board member of the Broadbent Institute. robin@earncliffe.ca*