

First Thoughts on a National Tragedy

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GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

January 7, 2021

A physician is taught to avoid emotional involvement with patients. If he suffers with them, the pain will break him and his judgement will be impaired. He must be clinical and disinterested in order to understand what he is seeing. Avoiding emotions is necessary, but it exacts an extraordinary toll of either pain or an insensitivity to pain. Striving to understand demands distance, but that distance inevitably breaks.

The task I have set myself is to try to understand the way the world works, and to do that, to some extent, I must not allow myself to participate in it. The world is filled with opinions about what ought to be, and the cacophony of self-certainty is a luxury from which I must imperfectly try to remove myself. As Wednesday unfolded, the opinions were overwhelming. I am a citizen of the United States, and it is at times impossible to keep my distance, much as it would be for a physician to treat his own child.

My job is to say something, but what can you say about the unthinkable? How can you speak when you are grieving? The capital of our country was invaded by a mob, some carrying weapons, who had been encouraged to do so by the president. Nothing that was said for or against Donald Trump was sufficient for the moment, and all those who claimed to have foreseen this or claimed that what we saw did not happen are merely continuing the routine chatter of political discourse. I am supposed to be able to explain what has happened, but the ordinary criticism or defense of Trump doesn't comprehend the moment, and in any case it misses the point. It is not Trump but we ourselves who are to blame, and what we have become toward each other that has somehow been corrupted. None of this could have happened without the rancor tacitly or deliberately embraced.

I am not able to think analytically about this, nor can I pretend that my writing predicted this. I must approach this as what I am: a citizen of a nation that gave me sanctuary, to which I owe my life and which I tried to serve as best I could. I have traveled the world and seen many acts of political rage and cruelty. I have seen coups. This may have been a blundering one, but it was a coup nonetheless, carried out with the intent to change the outcome of an election. It happened in my country, and in its capital city, and in its Capitol building. That moment made us simply another country, and not the city on a hill, shedding light on the world.

I was forced into silence by grief. When something enchanting dies, it calls for a moment of silence over what was lost. Every word uttered demeans the moment. And so I was silent. Now I speak, but what is there to say? The light of the shining city on a hill must be relit, and to relight it we must begin by willing ourselves to friendship and to refuse to despise each other regardless of disagreement. That is the start. I don't know if we have the will or the strength to do it.

This is all opinion, not carefully thought-out analysis. And much of it is cliché. But clichés carry some truth. I have tried to understand, but now I am reduced to grief. Others will say they told me so, but then they have said so much that they must at times be right.

We did not lose our country yesterday, but we received a warning that our country is in danger. And it is most in danger, I think, from the spirit of self-righteousness that has gripped our nation. Each of us seems to hold our views as unassailable. Each of us regards other views as monstrous. From this cauldron only poison will be brewed.

I have spoken for myself here, not for my method. For the moment I don't care for the method, or for the understanding. I long for a lost world in which reasonable people could disagree over politics and still be friends. Donald Trump did not rip friendships apart. We did that to ourselves.

There is no wisdom or genius in what I have said. For now, it is what it is. I will seek to return to ironic distance soon. But my country is in danger, and now is not the time for distance nor the endless chatter of opinions passionately repeated.

I love this country. It is time for its citizens to get a grip.