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A Crazy World, From Pyongyang to D.C.

With System Bought, Americans Have No Reason To Be Smug

By Leonard Fein



Strange Days: North Koreans lined up to mourn a dictator in the closing days of 2011. But with our political system hopelessly corrupted, Americans have little reason to be smug.

Our world has rarely seemed so impenetrably mysterious as it has these past days. The spectacle of hysterical weeping and wailing in North Korea follows hard on the heels of 10,000 protesters marching in downtown Cairo in outrage over photos of soldiers dragging women by the hair and stomped on them, stripping them half-naked in the street.

The nation — Iraq — that President Obama described just the other day as “stable and self-reliant” seems suddenly on the verge of collapse into sectarianism; President Assad of Syria

persists in his murderous rampage; Russia seems finally to be seething with resentment against its once and presumably future president (and currently its prime minister), Vladimir Putin.

Israel has its own “Dear Leader” moment as Prime Minister Netanyahu is “introduced” at a ceremony marking last year’s fiery tragedy on Mt. Carmel as the person who was “the first to understand the gravity of the incident, recruited all of the elements in Israel and the world to assist in putting out the fire, and since then has continuously cared for the families who lost what was dearest to them.”

Makes you shake your head in disbelief, no? Makes you feel a tad smug for living in so enlightened and civilized a country as the United States, eh?

And then, perchance, you recall the Republican competition for the 2012 presidential nomination and, more pertinently, the behavior of House Republicans in dealing with extensions of last year’s tax cut and of unemployment insurance payments. American exceptionalism, meet American dysfunction.

In one corner, we have the changelings of the Republican party, a newish generation of presumptives who presume too much. Those competing for the nomination are not the legitimate children of Everett Dirksen, Nelson Rockefeller, Clifford Case and Jacob Javits. It is not their illiberalism that is their most striking feature; it is their apparent delusion that they are qualified, be it by character, intellect, experience or leadership skills, to serve as the nation’s president. [I exempt Huntsman from the indictment, and might Romney as well were it not for his endless and oh so earnest flips and flops, which bespeak a serious character flaw.] Then again, it should not surprise us that a party that nominated Sarah Palin for the vice-presidency is now considering people such as Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry, Michelle Bachmann and Rick Santorum for the Top Job.

Alas, we are faced with more than farce; in the other corner there’s the House, where Speaker John Boehner is held hostage by some 30 odd Tea Party whippersnappers, the flotsam of the Republican Party — militant flotsam at that, as only Know Nothings can be. At this late date, Speaker Boehner should be deriving conclusions: Either he is in agreement with his obstreperous minority or he is intimidated by them. Either way, it is time for him to move on, return to his former relative obscurity.

We, the aghast citizens, cannot be satisfied by expressions of disgust. We need to know why Washington is so badly fractured. For truth to tell, the problem is not limited to Republican malfeasance; the Democrats are themselves guilty of at least nonfeasance, as, I fear, is too often the president himself.

Three explanations: First, a truly serious if inadequately articulated ideological divide on the question of the proper role of government. Is government a necessary evil or is it an expression of the common interests of the American people? Indeed, are the Americans a people or are we merely an aggregation of individuals? And, related, can the market be trusted to sort things out acceptably, or must the market be regulated to soften its hard places? Note: This divide is not limited to Washington; the American people are themselves deeply divided on these matters.

Second, I call attention to the noisy venom that audiences to the Republican debates have expressed at every mention of the president's name, as to all the questions regarding his legitimacy. Is it racism that is at the bottom of this? Yes — and no. The experience of Herman Cain, his manifest popularity in circles where we might have expected racism to sink him, suggests that if there is a racist tinge to the opposition to Obama, there's more to it than meets the eye. And the "more" is not only the fact that Obama is Black, but that he is uppity, he is not the earthy and occasionally minstrellesque Cain, he is in fact smarter and ever so much cooler than Black men are supposed to be (and than most white men are).

And finally, it all comes back to money. The role of money not only in elections — especially in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in the case of Citizens United —but also in legislation that is corrosive in the extreme. It determines access, it shapes legislation, it distorts and perverts the democratic process. And that means that until we figure out how to implement serious campaign finance reform, we will continue to careen from crisis to crisis.

In brief: There is nothing for us to be smug about.