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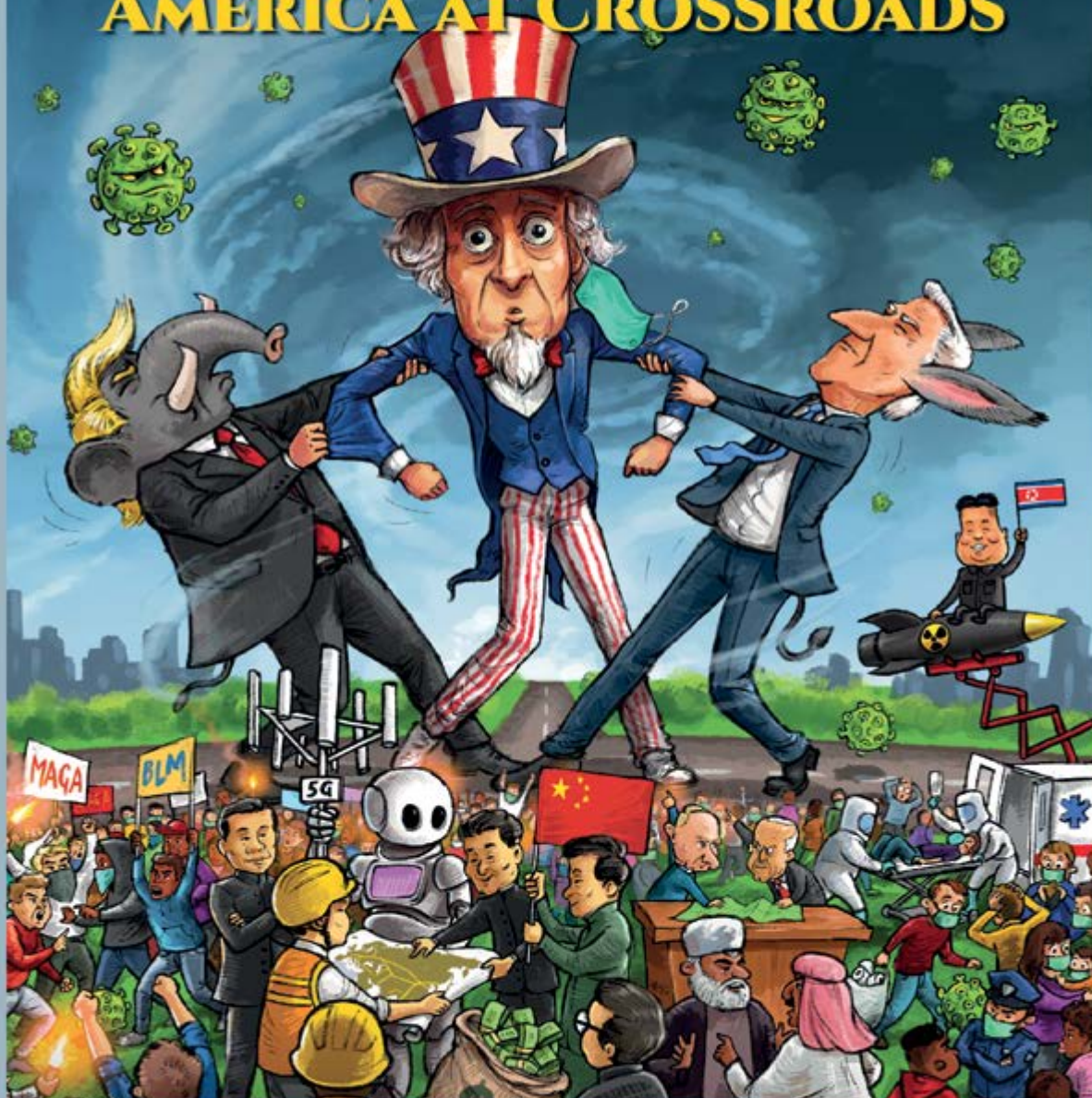
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AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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BEST OF TIMES, WORST OF TIMES

Douglas McAdam

THE THEME of the present issue of *Horizons* is “America at the Crossroads.” Often, when writers deploy the “crossroads” metaphor, it can feel forced and hyperbolic. But not this time; the fate of the American experiment really does feel like it is hanging in the balance.

Another way to characterize the United States, poised as it is between the unprecedented protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25 and the upcoming presidential election, would be to draw on the famous opening line of the 1859 novel by Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. If the protests are the “best of times,” an inspiring interracial call for a rebirth of American racial democracy, the election has the very real potential to usher in “the worst of times,” nothing less than the end of the American experiment.

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THE BEST OF TIMES

Since the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, every publicized death of an African-American at the hands of police has triggered a spasm of protest, before winding down. But what happened in the month or so following the horrific killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on Memorial Day was very different.

For starters, in the aggregate, the protests were sustained for well over a month, with the movements in some cities lasting considerably longer. Second, the numbers—of protestors, protest events, and protest sites—grew steadily over time. To see the number of protestors increase is not unusual in the early days of a movement. But an increase in protests events, and especially protest sites, is rare. Given the pattern of previous Black Lives



Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

Citizens gather at the White House as the fate of the Republic hangs in the balance

Matter demonstrations, the initial wave of protests in major cities around the country was hardly surprising. And the spread of the movement into progressive communities such as Santa Monica, California; Boulder, Colorado; Cambridge, Massachusetts, etc., was predictable as well.

But when the protests began popping up in conservative, predominantly white communities, it was clear, to quote Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* movie (1939), that we were “no longer in Kansas.” Or rather that, counter to history and recent partisan politics, we were in Kansas; and not just in Kansas

City, but, as reported in the *Kansas City Star*, in small, overwhelmingly white towns, such as Overland Park, Shawnee, and Olathe. And this pattern was repeated, literally everywhere, encompassing all 50 states. And though the protests have now dissipated for the most part, the signs of continuing support for the Black Lives Matter movement and its vision of a racially just America are still everywhere. And when I say “signs,” I use the term literally. Hand lettered signs supporting Black Lives Matter can be found in house windows, on lawns, on fences, and adorning businesses all over the United States.

This brings me to the most important, and potentially consequential, difference between the George Floyd protests and any we've seen in recent years. I refer to the racial/ethnic diversity clearly evident in the summer 2020 protest wave. Given the recency and fluidity of the protests, it is hard to get a systematic handle on the demographics of the protestors, but there is simply no denying the diversity of those who took part. Working with Michael Heaney, Dana Fisher (the acknowledged maven of contemporary protest studies) surveyed protestors at early demonstrations in L.A., New York, and DC, and reported the following percentages of those taking part: White: 61 percent; Hispanic: 9 percent; Black: 12 percent; Asian 12 percent; Multi-racial: 2 percent; and Other 3 percent.

Video footage that I've seen from protests in these and many other locations, suggests a far more even demographic distribution than the above figures suggest, but even allowing for variation across sites, it's clear that the demographic mix is far more varied than anything we have seen in recent years; and indeed, far more diverse than anything we saw during the heyday of the mass civil rights movement of the 1960s. In fact, while the

Sixties movement benefitted at times from considerable white support, the levels of actual protest participation by whites was minimal.

This is hardly surprising when one considers that the major campaigns or actions during the early Sixties heyday of the movement—the sit-ins in 1960; the Freedom Rides in 1961; Albany, Georgia in 1962; Birmingham, Alabama in 1963; Selma, Alabama in 1965—took place in the South, and virtually all white southerners were implacably opposed to the threat the movement posed to “the southern way of life.” To be sure, there were sympathy demonstrations in the North in support of the sit-ins and considerable white financial support for the major civil rights organizations, but very little in the way of active white participation in the major southern campaigns.

And when the struggle turned northward in response to the onset of the riots in the mid-Sixties, even the generalized sympathy the movement had enjoyed in the early Sixties largely evaporated. This shift was occasioned by the new goals the movement embraced as it sought to contend with the more complicated forms of systemic racism

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the complex patterns of “institutional racism” in which the interests of many who had earlier “supported” the movement were implicated. The effect of this change was to greatly erode white support for, and significantly increase white opposition to, the movement.

endemic outside the South. Movement aims during the Southern phase of the struggle called for little more than the dismantling of an anachronistic caste system in which few whites outside the South had any stake. Over time, however, the movement's goals were broadened to embody a more holistic critique

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Geographically, the shift of the struggle from South to North had much the same effect. Confined almost exclusively to the states of the former Confederacy in the early 1960s, the movement posed little threat to residents in other regions of the country. With the advent of the riots, open-housing marches, and court-ordered busing in the late Sixties and early Seventies, however, the comfortable illusion that racism was a distinctly southern problem was shattered. By the mid to late Sixties, white opposition to the movement was as much a northern as a southern phenomenon.

It should also be noted that the movement's shift from interracialism to Black Power and black separatism after, say, 1965-1966 also limited the opportunities for white participation in the struggle. Bottom line: without gainsaying the reality and significance of generalized white support for the movement in the early 1960s, the number of whites who were active in a sustained way in the struggle were comparatively few, and certainly nothing like the percentages we have seen taking part in recent weeks.

But the demographic diversity of the protests isn't the only thing that marks the recent protests as distinctive. For all the attention and hope we tend to lavish on protests, the truth is very few such episodes result in any meaningful social/political change. Occupy Wall Street burst upon the scene in the fall of 2011, generating widespread public sympathy, and temporarily “changing the conversation,” but in the end, accomplished little.

Or think of the various gun violence protests triggered by the numbing litany of mass shooting incidents that have taken place in the United States over the past decade or so: Parkland High School, Sandy Hook, Charleston, the

Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. And yet, little or no meaningful policy change has come from any of those protests. And save perhaps for the rare instance of local police reform, the same can be said of the protests that occurred in recent years in the wake of the killing of far too many African-Americans at the hands of police...at least until George Floyd. It looks, for all the world, like these protests are achieving what very few do: setting in motion a period of significant, sustained, and widespread social, political change that is as rare as it is potentially consequential.

Something remarkable appears to be happening beyond the efforts to reform law enforcement and reimagine what a more generous and equitable social welfare system would look like.

The many efforts to reform policing are rightly getting the lion's share of attention at the moment, but they hardly exhaust the changes being considered. Indeed, the many calls to "defund" or even eliminate police departments are as much about reinvesting resources in social programs, mental health initiatives, job training, and the like, as it is narrowly about police reform. If the change efforts being proposed were confined to the above, we would be justified in declaring the George Floyd "movement" a slam-dunk success. But, something remarkable appears to be happening beyond the efforts to reform law enforcement and reimagine what a more

generous and equitable social welfare system would look like.

Lots of organizations and institutions appear to be embracing this as a watershed moment in their history, asking what the current moment demands of

them, or what changes they need to make to advance the overarching goals of social justice and racial equity.

For example, Comcast has pledged it is committing \$100 million to a three-year plan to advance social justice

and equality and fight "injustice and inequality against any race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation or ability." Following suit, PepsiCo announced a five-year, \$400 million initiative to increase African-American managerial representation by 30 percent and more than doubling business with black-owned suppliers. Not to be outdone, Bank of America announced a \$1 billion, four-year commitment to strengthen economic opportunities in communities of color. PayPal is committing \$530 million to supporting black and minority-owned businesses in the U.S., as well as bolstering its internal diversity and inclusive hiring practices.

Even allowing for a healthy dose of cynicism on the part of NFL, Commissioner

Roger Goodell's embrace of Black Lives Matter is symbolically significant and a pointed rebuke to Donald Trump. NASCAR's banning of Confederate flags at its events is another striking symbolic response to the moment, especially given the sport's popularity in the South.

And for every one of these highly publicized actions by high profile enterprises, there are countless others taking place in smaller, less visible companies and institutions. I will confine myself to just two from my own life. The daughter of a friend of mine works for an urban design firm whose CEO organized, and hired a professional, to facilitate an online, company-wide conversation about race and equity, as a first step toward reforming its internal practices. Stanford's Academic Program Review Board—the body that rules on cases of academic probation and suspension—is undertaking a systematic review of its procedures, to determine whether they are sufficiently sensitive to the challenges faced by traditionally disadvantaged students, especially in the context of COVID-19 and the protests roiling our communities.

I could multiply these examples many times over, but the reader gets the point.

We appear to be experiencing a social change tipping point that is as rare in society as it is potentially consequential. So, this is all good news, right? Well... almost.

And so we come to the "worst of times" part of the scenario.

We appear to be experiencing a social change tipping point that is as rare in society as it is potentially consequential.

THE WORST OF TIMES

Notwithstanding all the energy and momentum generated by the protests, and what, for a time, appeared to be a related drop in Trump's poll numbers,

he could still very easily be re-elected in November. How is that possible?

For starters, Democratic electoral success has come, in recent years, to depend critically on high, if not record, turnout. At first blush, widespread antipathy toward Trump, combined with the energy of the protests, would seem to make turnout a non-issue. But in fact, achieving high levels of turnout this year will be especially challenging. For one thing, Trump and his allies are committed to blocking all efforts to make voting easier. The principal focus of this effort has centered on a concerted attack on the use of mail-in ballots, a form of voting that has been non-controversially in place for decades, and which would seem to be especially

well-suited to an election that will be conducted against the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic.

But that's not how Donald Trump sees it. Instead, with no evidence to support the allegation, the president has charged that voting by mail promotes fraud, and that the Democrats are intending to "steal" the election through the use of fraudulent mail-in ballots, never mind the fact that Trump himself has voted by mail for years. But with no authority to ban or restrict

the use of mail-in ballots, Trump has opted to attack the postal service directly. If he can't outlaw vote-by-mail, he seems determined to so undermine the efficiency, morale, and operation of the postal service, as to impede or prevent the flow of mailed ballots and perhaps even discourage Americans from attempting to vote by mail.

Toward this end, in May 2020 Trump appointed a loyalist and Republican fund raiser, Louis DeJoy, as the new U.S. Postmaster General. Upon taking office, DeJoy immediately began implementing "reforms" including the removal of electronic sorting machines, critical to the processing of the millions of pieces of mail that the postal service handles in a day. Trucks also began

showing up on the streets of American cities and towns and began removing the comfortingly familiar free-standing mailboxes that have long been a fixture of everyday life in the United States. With postal service employees sounding the warning, Americans *en masse* began to protest the new "reforms;" but

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to date, DeJoy has yet to clearly reverse course and restore the integrity of the institution he seems determined to weaken.

But what about voting in person? Surely, Trump and his allies

have little ability to interfere with this time-honored means of voting. Think again. In fact, because of the coronavirus pandemic, Trump and his allies are in a great position to engage in various forms of electoral mischief designed to suppress the vote. This year's primaries in Wisconsin and Georgia can be regarded as the cynical, amoral playbooks for this suppression effort. With the pandemic raging in both states, Republican election officials choose to limit both the number of polling places and the number of hours the polls were open, forcing residents of the state to stand on line for hours, effectively risking contracting the virus as a condition of voting.

And then there's the case of this year's Iowa primary in which the

Republican Secretary of State, choose to send a mail ballot application to every registered voter, as a way to safeguard both the health and voting rights of state residents. The result was an unqualified success: smooth, efficient, and resulting in record turnout. Great news, right? Not

according to Republican legislators who, in response, passed a bill in June that bars the Secretary of State from mailing ballots to registered voters—precisely because this would enable significant Democrat turnout.

But more than any of these specific tactics or ploys by Trump, the thing we most have to fear is the certainty that he will do anything—illegal no less than legal—to stay in power.

Still, with the momentum and Senenergy generated by the recent protests, and some 55 to 60 percent of Americans disapproving of Trump's performance in office, there's reason to hope that even these transparent efforts to suppress turnout won't be enough to deny Joe Biden the presidency. Perhaps not, but to make matters even worse, Trump has made it clear that he is not committed to accepting the results of the election, if they are not to his liking.

During an interview with Fox News anchor Chris Wallace on 19 July 2020, Trump refused to commit to accepting the results of the 2020 election and called polls showing him trailing former Vice President Joe Biden "fake."

Pressing Trump, Wallace asked: "can you give a direct answer that you will accept the election?" Trump's response: "I have to see. No, I'm not going to just say yes." Since then he has repeated a version of this answer, including in the first presidential debate.

But more than any of these specific tactics or ploys by Trump, the thing we most have to fear is the certainty that he will do anything—illegal no less than legal—to stay in power. I am reminded of something that David

Frum, the distinguished writer for *The Atlantic*, a highly-regarded magazine, said matter-of-factly on some talk show many months ago. In a calm, off-hand way, he said something to the effect that "if Trump cannot hold onto power democratically, he is perfectly prepared to do so non-democratically." Frum's words rang chillingly true when he said them, and they seem even more prescient now. And that is the biggest single reason for fearing a Trump "victory" in November. As one looks ahead, one keeps thinking about this year's contest in relation to past elections. But in no past elections was America confronted by a candidate like Trump, with no respect for the country's democratic institutions and no commitment to the rule of law.

For that reason, one cannot afford to take the current threat lightly and assume that our democratic institutions will ensure a democratic outcome. Just because we were born a democracy, doesn't mean we will always remain one. Nothing less is at stake this November than the fate of America's democratic experiment. Make no mistake about it: four more years of Donald Trump will bring that experiment to a close, at least temporally, and usher in "the worst of times," especially for America's most vulnerable populations.

Just because we were born a democracy, doesn't mean we will always remain one. Nothing less is at stake this November than the fate of America's democratic experiment.

The best we can hope for is to do everything we can to maintain the momentum, energy, and inclusive, pragmatic, and non-violent character of the recent protests. Our goal should be two-fold: to capitalize on the change possibilities inherent in this moment, while quickly pivoting toward those forms of electoral mobilization crucial to success in November. The survival of American democracy will depend on how successfully we attend to this agenda. ●

