

America in a Shambles

Canada has a chance to emerge from the shadow of that great nation. There is no sign that we will

by Conrad Black



Canada's 4,000-mile border with the world's most powerful country, what Prime Minister W.L. McKenzie King described to General Charles de Gaulle in 1944 as "an overwhelming contiguity," has generally been a veritable blessing. To the best of my research, Canada is the only country in the world that has had land borders with other countries for over 200 years that has not been invaded in that time (I consider the U.S. Civil War an invasion of the Union). And on the two prior occasions when we were invaded, the Americans were in the first case conducting what is generally reckoned to be a just revolution against oppressive colonization (though it is massively romanticized and George III hideously defamed in American mythology). The second invasion, the War of 1812, was

an American response to outrageous provocations by the British. We only survived that brush with pre-national extinction because of the loyalty of the French-Canadians, the generalship of Isaac Brock and the fortuitous incompetence as a war leader of President James Madison, one of history's great lawgivers, as the chief author of the Constitution of the United States, though he was.

Many countries bordered by two or more other states have suffered indescribable misery these 200 years; Poland, a valiant historic nation, was divided up and annexed by the Prussians, Russians and Austrians, and in the last century, after 20 years of independence, Poland was brutally crushed first by Hitler and then by Stalin. I am not a reflexive cheerleader for the United States, and few Canadians have been more heavily inconvenienced by the corruption of the American legal system than I have, but the U.S. has not really bothered us these last two centuries and for the last century, has been more responsible for our security than we have ourselves.

The United States in the 244 years of its independence has enjoyed a swifter rise by every measurement of power, population and prosperity, than any nation or people in the history of the world, from a couple of million colonists at independence in 1783 to overwhelming pre-eminence in the world at the end of the Second World War, just two long lifetimes later. Canada, to avoid being subsumed into the mighty American updraft, had to strive hard throughout that time to keep pace with America's rise. But Canada did keep pace with it, and in doing so its achievement, comparatively unpublicized and unglamorized by the American genius for showmanship, has been as or more remarkable than the rise of America, though obviously on a smaller scale and of less importance to the world. Our problem, a benign but intimidating neighbour, is the opposite of the problem faced by our nearest analogue in the world, Australia, a magnificent country that suffers from being a 12- to 20-hour airplane

voyage away from any large country with which it has anything in common. The British imagine that the Americans are "our cousins" though the British still resent the rise of America and its usurpation of Britain's place in the world. But because of the Gloriana of Churchillian Britain and that nation's proverbial Finest Hour, and because of the benignity of America, Britain managed the smoothest and most elegant transition in the history of the nation state from the first rank of world powers to the second rank, but the premier ally of its successor as the world's leading power. Canada, much influenced by both countries, better knows the distinctions between them.

When Winston Churchill spoke to the United States Congress 17 days after the attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the Second World War, he said in reference to the Japanese: "What kind of a people do they think we are... We will teach them a lesson, which they and the world will never forget." The Americans did no less, concluding with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the notion that the British and Americans are one people is an almost complete fabrication, achieved with prodigious ingenuity by Churchill and his collaborators when the embrace of the United States was a life-vest of national British survival. The legislators whom he addressed at the United States Capitol on Dec. 26, 1941, represented a population approximately three-quarters composed of people of Irish, German, Italian, eastern European and African descent. The American ethos is revolutionary, republican, naturally disorderly, optimistic and comparatively generous, but also heavily commercialized, uniquely violent for a very prosperous country, addicted to fantasy – a trait of which the film industry is both the evocator and the voice, and simultaneously both more cynical and less worldly than the British.

For the first time in 90 years the United States is in an epic internal struggle that is very profound and sometimes violent.

As a young man, Abraham Lincoln said that no foreign army "will ever drink from the Ohio River or leave a track on the Blue Ridge Mountains. America will flourish as a democracy or perish by suicide." It is an irony that the United States that has secured the apparent triumph of democracy and the free market in the world is not now a well-functioning democracy. The recent presidential election appeared to me to be rigged sufficiently in five swing states to determine a winner in a close election, and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to adjudicate the issues even when petitioned by 18 states to do so. The national political media are a totalitarian cartel of ideological and partisan bigotry and the heads of the social media giants sandbagged the president, shut down the Twitter account of the White House press secretary, boycotted the country's oldest newspaper, owned by one of its largest media companies (the New York Post) and they all stifled in the last month of an election campaign and dismissed as "Russian disinformation" what we now know to have been for the last two years a burgeoning grand jury criminal investigation into the family of the presumptive president-elect. "Peaceful protesters" ransacked cities across the country all summer killing scores of people, injuring 700 police officers and committing \$2 billion of property damage while masquerading as crusaders for civil rights. None of it was mentioned at the Democratic National Convention. Prosecutors win 98 per cent of their cases, 95 per cent without a trial; the American criminal justice system is an anthill of corruption and hypocrisy. America's claim to being a democratic society of laws has become tenuous.

American politics are in shambles. Joe Biden is unequal to the tasks of a president and his election and personal probity are tainted. The Trump phenomenon will not go away whether Donald Trump himself does or not, and in the next four years America will be in a fierce struggle between the left and the centre-right (with extreme fringes on both sides). Canadians are best placed to judge this astonishing spectacle but are not doing

so; our media are not as nasty as the American media, but they are just as incompetent. Imitative to some extent of America, as usual, but without the same lengthy legacy of slavery, we are torturing ourselves for imagined shortcomings. Our per capita incarceration rate is only about one-sixth that of the United States, but in this country people are thrown off the airwaves for stating that Canada is not a profoundly racist country (I was). Wilfrid Laurier was a century early when he said the 20th century belonged to Canada. The American crisis confers a huge opportunity on us to emerge creatively from the shadow of that great, turbulent nation. There is not a sign on the horizon that we are doing anything to exploit that opportunity, or are even remotely aware that it exists. Instead we prattle on about race and gender and climate.

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