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# What Happened to America?



By Marty Kaplan

It was while I was explaining to an Australian student that Rupert Murdoch was the reason America had gone batty that I realized how inadequate my answer to his question was.

“How did this happen to America?” I was in Australia just after the debt-ceiling debacle, and by “this” the student meant the highchair spoon-banging in Washington that had nearly caused a world financial tailspin.

As we talked, I saw that “this” also meant other jaw-dropping news that had reached them down under — like the near-unanimity among Republican presidential candidates that global warming is a hoax; the Gallup finding that 40 percent of Americans believe “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years”; the Tea Party signs saying “Keep Your Government Hands Off My Medicare”; the surging number of American children living in poverty; the gap between the rich and the rest growing so extreme that the U.S. is now the 42nd most unequal country in the world, below Cameroon and the Ivory Coast, and only just above Uganda and Jamaica.

During the three weeks I traveled in Australia, I was often asked, with genuine bafflement and considerable sympathy, how the world’s greatest nation had become captive to a band of ideologues and fundamentalists, how the American dream — a beacon to people everywhere — had become so powerless to deliver on its promise of opportunity for all. From kids in the classroom, from journalists and executives, from people on the boat to the reef and in the van to the rain forest: virtually everyone wanted to know what caused America to take such a sharp wrong turn.

So I gave them my usual answers.

Our political system has become the problem, not the solution. Our Founders could not have known that campaigning and governing would turn out to be all about ads, and the money required to pay for them, and the special interests tapped for that cash, and the quid pro quos inherent in those transactions, not to mention the profits raked in by the TV stations that get free licenses to use the public’s broadcast spectrum because they promise to serve the public interest.

The profit to be made from monetizing attention has transformed our republic from one where education was declared the bedrock of democracy, to one where entertainment has pretty much swallowed up every other domain, including news, which has abandoned its obligation to sort through competing claims (“we’ll have to leave it there”), replacing journalism with propaganda and civic discourse with food fights.

But as I went on in this vein, I realized that my account was missing something, and it took a taxi driver to show me what it was. Yes, I know that The Taxi Driver is straight out of Cliché Central — the character who conveniently supplies an apt quote making a point that a columnist would prefer to attribute to some salt-of-the-earth guy instead of himself. So I don’t expect you to believe me when I tell you what happened. But it’s true; you can’t make up stuff like this.

I had just finished speaking in a class on media and politics for the United States Studies Centre on the University of Sydney campus. I'd wrestled with the question of how America had reached this dispiriting moment. And then I went out to City Road and hailed a cab.

Usually I'm not much of a talker in taxis. But the driver, an Australian who looked to be in his early thirties, asked me what I'd been doing at the uni, and I told him about the class — not in detail, but enough to indicate that America's predicament in the time of the Tea Party and the climate-change deniers had been on the table.

For a bit, we rode in silence. Then he said, "Do you happen to know of a fellow named Noam Chomsky?"

"Yes, I do," I said, after a beat, trying to conceal my astonishment.

"By any chance," he asked, "are you familiar with his concept of 'spectator democracy'?"

Once I got past the out-of-body experience of having this conversation at this moment with my taxi driver, we talked about "spectator democracy" as he drove across Sydney. Now I suppose it's hopeless to discuss anything Chomsky ever said without first taking a stand on whether he's anti-Semitic, so I'll stipulate that whatever you think about that, you're right, and that (but that) it's (still) very much worth engaging with his take on current history.

Framed approvingly by Walter Lippmann in the early 20th century, "spectator democracy" is the idea that the U.S. public is a "bewildered herd" that needs to be benevolently directed, manipulated and controlled by elites with the tools of propaganda and disinformation. As they consume content about politics, people gain the (false) impression that they're actively participating in democracy — that they're empowered, not bludgeoned, by the media.

What Chomsky adds is that spectator democracy is now on steroids not because of technology, or because the media industry has figured out how to make a tidy profit from political spectacle. It's because more than ever before, the functioning of the American economy requires distracting the herd from the immensity of corporate power.

Fox News doesn't rile the Republican base because Karl Rove tells Roger Ailes what to do. It does it because the investment banks and the war industry and Rupert Murdoch and the Koch brothers and the rest of the oligarchs and plutocrats running the show need to divert the public's attention away from their economic power, their ownership of the political system, their plunder of public resources.

'How did this happen to America' is the wrong question. After decades of corporate triumphalism, which has concentrated wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands, and after generations of government being so demonized and compromised that it is no longer capable of checking that power, the better question may be: How could it not have happened?

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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