

David Brooks: The National Humiliation We Need

By David Brooks | July 3, 2020 3:01AM ET

July 3 (New York Times) -- July 4 and America's crisis of the spirit.

We Americans enter the July 4 weekend of 2020 humiliated as almost never before. We had one collective project this year and that was to crush Covid-19, and we failed.

On Wednesday, we had about 50,000 new positive tests, a record. Other nations are beating the disease while our infection lines shoot upward as sharply as they did in March.

This failure will lead to other failures. A third of Americans show signs of clinical anxiety or depression, according to the Census Bureau. Suspected drug overdose deaths surged by 42 percent in May. Small businesses, colleges and community hubs will close.

At least Americans are not in denial about the nation's turmoil of the last three months. According to a Pew survey, 71 percent of Americans are angry about the state of the country right now and 66 percent are fearful. Only 17 percent are proud.

Americans are reacting in two positive ways. We're seeing incredible shifts in attitudes toward race. Roughly 60 percent of Americans now believe that African-Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination. People have been waiting for a white backlash since the riots, or since the statues started toppling. There isn't much if any evidence of a backlash. There's evidence of a fore-lash.

Second, Americans have decided to get rid of Donald Trump. His mishandling of Covid-19 hurt him among seniors. His racist catcalls in a time of racial reckoning have damaged him among all groups.

I'll be delighted when Trump goes, but it's worth pointing out that it wasn't only because of Donald Trump that Americans never really locked down, and then started moving around again in late April.

It wasn't Trump who went out to bars in Tempe, Austin and Los Angeles in June. It wasn't Trump who put on hospital gowns and told the American people you could suspend the lockdown if your cause was just. Once you told people they could suspend the lockdown for one thing, they were going to suspend it for others.

Our fixation on the awfulness of Donald Trump has distracted us from the larger problems and rendered us strangely passive in the face of them. Sure, this was a Republican failure, but it was also a collective failure, and it follows a few decades of collective failures.

On the day Trump leaves office, we'll still have a younger generation with worse life prospects than their parents had faced. We'll still have a cultural elite that knows little about people in red America and daily sends the message that they are illegitimate. We'll still have yawning inequalities, residential segregation, crumbling social capital, a crisis in family formation.

Trump's rise in 2016 was a symptom of all these crises, long before he had a chance to become an additional cause of them.

What's the core problem? Damon Linker is on to a piece of it: "It amounts to a refusal on the part of lots of Americans to think in terms of the social whole -- of what's best for the community, of the common or public good. Each of us thinks we know what's best for ourselves."

I'd add that this individualism, atomism and selfishness is downstream from a deeper crisis of legitimacy. In 1970, in a moment like our own, Irving Kristol wrote, "In the same way as men cannot for long tolerate a sense of spiritual meaninglessness in their individual lives, so they cannot for long accept a society in which power, privilege, and property are not distributed according to some morally meaningful criteria."

A lot of people look around at the conditions of this country -- how Black Americans are treated, how communities are collapsing, how Washington doesn't work -- and none of it makes sense. None of it inspires faith, confidence. In none of it do they feel a part.

If you don't breathe the spirit of the nation, if you don't have a fierce sense of belonging to each other, you're not going to sacrifice for the common good. We're confronted with a succession of wicked problems and it turns out we're not even capable of putting on a friggin' mask.

In the days leading up to this July 4 weekend, I've been thinking about a scene in "Good Will Hunting." We've seen Will perform all these mathematical feats and flights of verbal brilliance, but the Robin Williams character sits him down on a park bench and confronts him with a rot at the core of his character. "I look at you; I don't see an intelligent, confident man; I see a cocky, scared" kid.

The last three years have been like that Robin Williams speech for a whole nation -- an intervention, a truth-telling. I had hopes that the crisis would bring us together, but it's made everything harder and worse. And now I worry less about populism or radical wokeness than about a pervasive loss of national faith.

What's lurking, I hope, somewhere deep down inside is our shared ferocious love for our common country and a vision for the role America could play as the great pluralist beacon of the 21st century.

July 4 would be a good day to find that faith.

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