

This Presidential Race Is Neither The End Nor The Beginning

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ALTOONA, WI - Never seen anything quite like this before. The presidential race, that is.

It's been so dark, so ugly, so ridiculously comical at times, it must signal something. The fall of an empire. The birth of a new American fascism. A major party coming apart at the seams. Something.

Or not.

This much is clear, national politics right now is reflecting nationwide angst. The causes of that anxiety did not suddenly appear this year, they have been mounting for several decades. America is being socially transformed. Civil rights. Women's rights. Gay rights. For many, this all feels right, it was about time. Some find the social upheaval discomforting, but they're adjusting. For others, such change is intolerable, and they are pushing back. Hard. The ferocity of the political backlash is itself a sure indication of how transformative recent social movements have been and continue to be.

At the same time our country is experiencing dramatic social change, we are in transition economically. Economic dislocations are always painful and traumatic. And the fear and uncertainty and sense of loss that accompany them always find a political outlet. When large numbers of people left the land and went to factories and offices more than a century ago, there was political turbulence. With a global economy emerging and with factory jobs here at home disappearing and with great recessions and jobless recoveries and rapidly expanding income and wealth inequality, there is political turbulence.

All of this has many if not most Americans convinced that the country's best days are in the rear view mirror. They are wrong. A three-year journey across America didn't reveal a dying nation to journalist James Fallows. Instead, in place after place — from Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Bend, Oregon to Columbus, Mississippi and Holland, Michigan and from San Bernardino, California and Duluth, Minnesota to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Greenville, South Carolina — Fallows repeatedly found evidence of reinvention and renewal and revival.

America is being remade, both socially and economically. This makeover didn't start this year, and it won't be completed this year. Fallows observed that in many ways Americans are adapting better and faster to the shifting ground beneath our feet than people in much of the rest of the world, but our national politics is lagging behind and dragging us down. That means the U.S. has a harder time taking the steps that would make adjusting to the challenges of our time less painful and more productive. For example, workers now have to change jobs much more frequently than in the past. Guaranteeing access to medical care by making health insurance truly portable so it follows workers regardless of where they are employed makes all kinds of sense in this new economy, but the political system has so far proven incapable of meeting the need.

This is why there is so much anti-establishment fervor. This is why the race for the White House is so ghastly. America is being remade, both socially and economically. It needs to be remade politically too.

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