

Pay attention to the culture wars

Never mind those men behind the curtain

by Julian Sereno

Acrimony between the two major political parties has become the most divisive fault line in contemporary America -- more than race, religion, gender. The Republicans and the Democrats, parties that have governed the United States for more than 150 years, are now incapable of cooperating on anything. Both attract the most zealous partisans, incapable of compromise; willing to commit calumny as they denounce opponents in the most personal ways imaginable.

Of course demonizing opponents is how they make money. Find an outrageous quote, or just make one up if you are Breitbart, put it in a fundraising letter, and throw it like red meat to the cultural warriors, right and left.

As this fascinating, appalling spectacle roils along, it is largely besides the point. It is a diversion, a dangerous one, but a diversion all the same.

What is really happening is the destruction of the middle class and the creation of an oligarchy. Over the past roughly 40 years wealth of unprecedented proportions has been stripped from what was once the American middle class and seized by the wealthiest one percent. It began with the impoverishment the Blue Collar middle class -- the closing of old factories and the exporting of manufacturing jobs, along with increasing use of automation and robots at home. Then it moved on to White Collar America, where computers continue to replace human beings. Whole categories of professions have been profoundly affected by computers, from accountants to travel agents.

The rich are getting richer. For 2016, CEOs in America's largest firms made an average of \$15.6 million, or 271 times the annual average pay of the typical worker. It didn't use to be this way. Compare that 271 to 1 ratio to 1965: 20 to 1; 1978: 30 to 1 or 1989: 59 to 1. Today's executives are plundering their companies to a degree that they make the Robber Barons of the Gilded Age look like penny anti cheapskates.

Meanwhile the lives of those that work for these companies gets meaner. It's the cutbacks in the ranks of employees that pays for executive loot. That means remaining employees have that much more work to do. Salaried workers with benefits are at the beck and call of management 24/7. The average work week in the 1970s was 40 hours, now it's nearly 50. Vacations are discouraged. When they burnout, workers are dumped and replaced by new ones. Service workers, rarely paid a "living wage", have their shift hours assigned at the whim of computer algorithms designed to maximize profit.

American workers lead the world in productivity, but lag behind the other western democracies in wages, benefits, vacations, and, alarmingly, life expectancy.

Meanwhile, the poisonous political culture continues to polarize Americans. Oligarchs such as the Koch Brothers, who created the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the political scripture to which all Republican elected officials must swear fealty, spend hundreds of millions of dollars on national elections. George Soros, another oligarch, bankrolls liberal or progressive causes. But most high rolling oligarchs who fund political causes and candidates remain anonymous, thanks to the Supreme Court. Its *Citizens United* decision gave corporations the same legal rights and human beings. It *de facto* legalized bribery.

While these oligarchs are a diverse lot, they share commonality in their financial interests. That's why trade association lobbyists, who pay both political

parties, have written much of the tax code being discussed at this very moment in the halls of power in Washington. By most unbiased accounts, if it passes the current tax legislation will offer great benefit to the rich and will leave the middle class high and dry. It will add trillions to the deficit and the national debt.

They may disagree, but the Koch Brothers and George Soros have more in common with one another than they do with you and me. Ditto Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Culture Wars notwithstanding, there is a broad national consensus that crosses party lines on a variety of hot button issues, according to a number of public opinion polls. About marijuana (yes for medicinal purposes, maybe for recreation) abortion (yes early on, no later on) firearms (yes for background checks) on immigration (let the Dreamers stay). On the issue of LBGTQ rights, there has been great change toward acceptance, particularly in the past 10 years.

There is room for compromise and progress on all sorts of divisive issues. But don't count on our elected officials ever facing up to them. They owe their allegiance to the oligarchs who fund them, not to the voters who elect them.

They who fund them own them.

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