Americans Losing Faith in Democracy

by Paul R. Pillar via stacy - Consortium News *Wednesday, Dec 3 2014, 8:32am*
international / prose / post

> Kurt Campbell, who was assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs until last year, had an interesting op-ed the other day that relates the growing inequality of income within the United States to a lowering of the international standing of the United States and of its ability to sustain international engagement abroad.

We the 'Disenfranchised' and 'Expendable'

Partly the connection involves a depletion of U.S. soft power. Much of that power has rested on the image of a durable American middle class, which has long been attractive to millions in stratified societies overseas but in more recent times has been tarnished as that middle class has suffered from stagnant or declining income while watching the one percent fly ever higher and farther away.

Another part of the connection, writes Campbell, is that “as a growing segment of the population strains just to get by, it will increasingly view foreign policy ... as a kind of luxury ripe for cuts and a reduction in ambition.”

For the American public, lack of active support for an active foreign policy is not only a matter of competition for scarce resources. It also involves a sense of empowerment, or a lack thereof. The public will care less and be less informed about foreign policy to the extent that it does not believe it has a say that really matters in determining that policy.

A sense of empowerment can be very effective in getting people active and engaged. That is a large part of what was going on in Tahrir Square in Cairo over three years ago. Ordinary citizens not only protested but cleaned up the trash because for the first time — albeit only temporarily, as it turned out — they had reason to believe that what they were saying had a real effect on setting the direction of Egypt.

Michael J. Glennon, writing in The National Interest, does raise the problem of a missing sense of empowerment and correctly relates it to a broader detachment of most of the American public from foreign policy, as reflected among other things in the woeful public ignorance about foreign affairs.

Glennon badly errs, however, in blaming the whole situation on a supposedly unaccountable national security state — which he calls the “Trumanite network,” named after the era when most of the apparatuses Glennon doesn’t like assumed their present form. He distinguishes this from the

“Madisonian” system that includes the familiar constitutional institutions of an elected legislature and chief executive.

Glennon declares that the entire Madisonian system has lost so much power to the Trumanite network that he likens it to the monarch and House of Lords in Britain having lost power to the cabinet, prime minister, and House of Commons.

This description bears very little resemblance to what anyone who has worked at the interface of these parts of the U.S. political and policy-making system would recognize. Even those who have not worked there can reflect on where the impetus for the most important developments related to U.S. national security policy have come from.

Presumably the Trumanite network wasn’t much in favor, for example, of government shutdowns that have been the work of extortionists in the legislative part of the Madisonian system. Nor would the military and security agencies have favored sequestration budget cuts, which were legislative efforts to avoid more damage from the same extortionists.

Or think about the single biggest U.S. foreign policy initiative of at least the last couple of decades: the Iraq War. It was the work of a willful group that had captured enough of the Madisonian system to embark on their project despite the better judgment of much of what is the Trumanite national security apparatus.

Part of the problem with Glennon’s analysis is that he throws a big assortment of otherwise unrelated incidents and policies together, the only common thread of which is that they somehow each involve some part of the military, intelligence or security bureaucracies (and that Glennon doesn’t happen to like them).

There is no sense of the very different issues involved in, say, a procedural altercation between an intelligence agency and an oversight committee in the course of performing oversight, and indefinite detention of militants that the military has scraped up on some distant battlefield. Nor is there much attention to the specific ways in which the Trumanites really are accountable to political people in the Madisonian system.

One would never have guessed from the article, for example, that major changes occurred four decades ago that brought not only intelligence activities but the entire covert action arena under legislative oversight and political control that were previously deficient. Also missing is how much of what Glennon (and many others today) consider to be excessive or abusive was firmly rooted in earlier, mostly in the immediate post-9/11 period, attitudes and priorities broadly shared by the American people and their political leaders.

The priorities did not originate with national security agencies and departments, which instead have tried to implement the missions they have been assigned by the people and political leaders. If you or Glennon or I disagree with the position that majorities on Congressional oversight committees have taken at times over the past few years on issues such as interrogation techniques or bulk collection of telephonic data, that’s politics; it is not a usurpation of politics by the agencies being overseen.

At times Glennon describes the Trumanite network as so broad that one starts to lose any sense of where the lines that distinguish it from the Madisonian system lie. He pitches his argument initially as if it were about part of the federal bureaucracy but then criticizes postures that lie far beyond that bureaucracy.

He quotes, for example, Madeleine Albright's question to Colin Powell about what the point is of having a superb military if we can't use it, and identifies the attitude expressed in the question with the Trumanites. But it was Powell, the career military officer, who presumably was the party in this conversation who was more on the Trumanite side of Glennon's Trumanite/Madisonian line.

Glennon is critical — and has good reason to be critical — of people who "define security primarily in military terms and tend to consider military options before political, diplomatic or law-enforcement alternatives," but that attitude is not centered in the national security bureaucracy. The attitude is promoted mainly by neoconservatives, with a major assist from liberal interventionists, who seek and often get support for their positions within the Madisonian system.

As far as military interventions are concerned, it certainly is true that the professional military tends to prefer more resources and bigger forces to accomplish decisively whatever mission is assigned to it — that's part of the Powell Doctrine. But it does not have the sort of preference Glennon asserts when it comes to getting assigned such a mission in the first place.

That's another part of the Powell Doctrine: take military action only if it has clear support from the American people. And it's not just Powell. Military members and veterans of the military are less inclined to support U.S. military interventions than are civilians who never served in the military.

Chicken hawks — and many people of similar ilk who not only favor starting wars but also insist that counterterrorism is a "war," with all of the implications that are supposed to flow from that label regarding matters such as handling of detainees — are not part of any network centered in the national security bureaucracy.

What chicken hawks have been able to do brings us back to the issue of empowerment and how an unempowered public may tune out foreign policy. There is indeed a problem here, but it is not a problem because some shadowy deep state, an American version of an Algerian pouvoir or an Arab mukhabarat, has managed to make U.S. political institutions as feeble as a modern British monarch.

It is a problem because such developments as extreme partisan tactics, perfected gerrymandering, and unrestricted campaign bankrolling have made those political institutions less responsive than they could or should be, on foreign as well as domestic policy.

Regarding that offensive war begun in Iraq, for example, consider the situation of an American voter in 2000 who didn't much care for Al Gore and the Democrats but also had no desire for the United States to get involved in anything like the Iraq War. That voter would have had no basis for predicting — even if he could have predicted something like the 9/11 terrorist attack — that a vote for George W. Bush would become a vote for such a war.

The Madisonian system was captured not by a Trumanite network but by a neocon cabal. Tom Friedman, sitting in Washington shortly after the beginning of the war, observed without exaggeration, "I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and a half ago, the Iraq War would not have happened."

There also is the matter, of course, of Gore having won the popular vote in 2000. Twelve years later, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives won 1.37 million more votes than Republican candidates, but the Democrats won only 201 seats compared to the Republicans' 234. And every two years, voters in only a very small percentage of districts nationwide are given a genuinely competitive choice of candidates for what is supposed to be the people's House.

The Arab Spring erupted largely because many people in the countries concerned felt they had no stake in either an economic system that passed them by or a political system in which they effectively had little or no voice in the direction of their country. Many Americans are facing something similar with a pattern of economic growth that leaves them behind and an often dysfunctional political system that gives them little sense of having a role in setting policy.

Americans are not likely to stage their own Tahrir Square. But it is unsurprising if they become increasingly disengaged from foreign policy and if, as Campbell anticipates, this becomes a source of weakness for the United States internationally.

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