

The Failed Dogma of Neoliberalism

In the 1980s, British Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan depicted neoliberal or “free market” capitalism as the ideal system, a dogma that extends to the present despite its horrific failures and other options, says Sam Ben-Meir.

By Sam Ben-Meir

Oct .13 marked the birthday of the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – so perhaps it would be fitting to take a moment to consider how Thatcherism still rules the global capitalist landscape.

During her political prime in the 1980s, Thatcher said she was out to change the soul, to change the conceptual universe in which people live, and her idea that “there is no alternative” (TINA) became so deeply embedded in our psyches and in our consciousness that it seems we could no longer imagine that there is an alternative to capitalism.

The neoliberalism of Thatcher was characterized by deregulation (especially in the financial sector), the suppression of labor, attacks on trade unions, and the privatization of state-owned corporations. Both Thatcher and Ronald Reagan oversaw the shift toward a more laissez-faire version of capitalism, which in effect reversed the post-1929 movement towards increased state-intervention and social-democratic capitalism.

It is long overdue that we lay this TINA concept to rest. Consider this: in the 1930s there was a clear sense that there was an alternative. After World War II, an alternative emerged in which the state was heavily involved; and taxation rates in the U.S. were very high. One of the persistent lies that we hear from Republicans is that high taxation rates destroy growth.

Donald Trump repeated this fallacy in the second presidential debate, but the record speaks differently. In 1945, that taxation rate on the top income brackets was 92 percent; it never fell below 70 percent until Ronald Reagan brought it down to 30 percent.

In 1981, Reagan significantly reduced the maximum tax rate, which affected the highest income earners, and lowered the top marginal tax rate from 70 percent to 50 percent; in 1986 he further reduced the rate to 28 percent. Between 1945 and Reagan, the average rate of growth in the U.S. was around 4 to 5 percent per year: one of the most successful boom periods of American history, when the top tax rate was always at 70-odd percent.

Since Ronald Reagan, the top tax rate has hovered around 35-39 percent and the average rate of growth since the 1970s has been 2 percent. Despite Trump's absurd claims to the contrary, Americans remain among the least taxed citizens of advanced industrial nations, with 28 percent of gross domestic product taken for taxes versus an average of 36 percent for the 38 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

So what is the alternative? The fact is that we are currently facing a bankruptcy of ideas. There is an overload of negative critique of capitalism; and relatively little positive critique. To begin with, we should take a hint from CUNY economics professor David Harvey, and look inside the factory system itself for potential solutions.

Observe, for example, how corporations today manage and direct: they have a command-and-control system back through their supply chain. Their operations are centrally planned in a highly sophisticated and efficient way. One can easily imagine adopting that methodology and directing it to a social purpose other than merely enhancing bottom lines.

Another Way

There is one further element of any viable alternative that needs to be mentioned; and it will serve to balance the need for centralized planning – namely, worker self-management (WSM). Worker self-management involves the extension and reinforcement of democratic principles beyond the political realm.

Each enterprise is managed by those who work there, and it is they who hold the decision-making power when it comes to determining, for example, what is to be produced, how much and for whom; how net proceeds are to be distributed; and how the firm is to be organized and administered. WSM is a collective process drawing on the common goals of people joined together in a cooperatively managed productive organization.

The first essential condition for the existence of WSM is that management of the company is entrusted to all people who work in it. The crucial point here is that the firm is controlled by the workers themselves and not by capital owners: in other words, the people who are most involved in production of goods and services have control over that production.

This is sine qua non for worker self-management. To meet this condition a democratic process is called for; where goals can be internally defined, and there is equality of voting power among all who work in the company and, ideally, equal opportunity to participate democratically in managing the organization's affairs.

Economic democracy is a central pillar of legitimacy in any fully democratic system. The workplace has to be a space in which individuals acquire the participative skills, values and experiences which make for a vibrant democratic polity. This kind of “social training” is severely hampered by the prevailing forms of alienation.

Self-management is critical to the formation of an unalienated work-community and productive process – it shapes a space in which people come together, not only to meet their financial needs but also their need for community, dialogue and fulfillment from work. The topic of worker self-management is especially timely: in the era of global capitalism, economic democratization is more relevant than ever. Fortunately, there is a great deal of empirical evidence to show that worker self-managed firms perform as well as, if not better than, traditionally managed firms.

We also know that managers who are employed in firms where workers have some influence tend to be supportive of greater worker empowerment: that would hardly be the case if these projects were not seen as successful. Workplace democracy is able to satisfy the “imperative of efficiency” – of that there can no longer be any doubt. Otherwise, no one would want democratization extended to the workplace. WSM would remain at best a worthless bit of theory.

According to the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, there are over 300 democratic workplaces in the United States alone, employing thousands of individuals and generating over \$400 million in annual revenues. The fact is that more and more ordinary people want workplace democracy, and such an attitude toward social change is an absolutely necessary prerequisite for activism.

So, in honor of Margaret Thatcher’s birthday, let us prove to ourselves, the world, and to future generations hence that there is indeed an alternative to a global capitalistic system that increases poverty, misery and destitution; that despoils the environment and robs man of a human environment fit to live in, all in the name of an insane imperative that can be summarized in a single word: growth.

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Obama Re-imposes Neoliberalism in Latin America

President Obama's chief "accomplishment" in Latin America was not restoring diplomatic ties to Cuba; it was his administration's "regime change" strategy re-imposing "neoliberal" economic orthodoxy on the region, as Ted Snider explains.

By Ted Snider

Shortly after taking office, President Barack Obama promised to change the way America does business with Latin America, a recognition of the appalling history of interference and regime change dating back to the Nineteenth Century, from Thomas Jefferson's hostility toward Haiti's slave rebellion to William McKinley's betrayal of Cuba after "liberating" it from Spain.

Then, there was the case of Theodore Roosevelt severing Panama from Colombia in 1903 for the purpose of building the Panama Canal. And another case in 1908 when the U.S. government cooperated in the ouster of Venezuelan President Juan Vicente Gómez. And, in 1909, when William Taft removed Nicaragua's José Santos Zelaya because he insisted that U.S. companies in Nicaragua honor their agreements and tried to make his country less dependent on the U.S. by borrowing from European, not American, banks.

In the modern era, Dwight Eisenhower had the CIA overthrow Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 and –before leaving office – Eisenhower started the covert action aimed at removing Fidel Castro as Cuba's leader, a process continued under John Kennedy with the Bay of Pigs invasion and beyond. Then, there was the 1964 coup in Brazil to overthrow Joao Goulart, and the political action to encourage the removal of Guyana's Chedi Jagan undertaken the same year.

In 1971, Richard Nixon destabilized Chile, encouraging a bloody coup against Salvador Allende. Ronald Reagan sponsored a covert war to oust Nicaragua's Sandinista government while also throwing U.S. military support behind various brutal and repressive regimes in Central America. In 1989, George H.W. Bush destroyed civilian neighborhoods in

Panama City in an invasion to arrest Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. And impoverished Haiti periodically showed up on Washington's radar. With the backing of the Bush-41 and Bush-43 administrations, coup plotters removed Haiti's popular leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide, twice. George W. Bush also supported a short-lived coup in 2002 to oust Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. And this is only a partial list of U.S. interventions in its "backyard."

So, it is important to evaluate Obama's performance on his promise to change this tragic and shameful history. Yet, it didn't take long to see that nothing really had changed. It appears that the Obama administration adopted an eight-year-long strategy of rolling back what has been called the Pink Tide of progressive or socialist leaders who dared challenge Washington's neoliberal economic model for the hemisphere.

The Obama administration favored a more subtle approach to regime change than some predecessors. Unlike the military coups sponsored by earlier administrations, Obama's coups didn't require tanks in the streets. Rather, they were disguised as domestic political clashes, starting with civil unrest and media accusations of abuses by the targeted leader, followed by legislatures or courts using impeachment or other "constitutional" means to effect the regime change. These were silent or "soft" coups carried out in democratic disguise.

An early example came on June 28, 2009, when Honduras' democratically elected and liberal President Manuel Zelaya was accused of plotting a constitutional amendment that would permit more than one term for a president. At the instructions of his political opponents on the Supreme Court, the military seized him at gunpoint and whisked him away in a plane that refueled at a U.S. military base.

That would have been a good moment for Obama to show that he meant business, that he placed democracy and social progress at the center of his regional agenda. Instead, he allowed his State Department to send signals that the U.S. was privately delighted with Zelaya's ouster.

After the coup, the American ambassador was not recalled; the U.S. refused to join the demand of the United Nation's General Assembly and the Organization of American States (OAS) for the return of the elected president; and the word "coup" was banned from the State Department's lexicon.

Although the OAS refused to recognize the new coup president, the State Department under Secretary Hillary Clinton went in the opposite direction, recognizing the coup government as the winner of controversial new elections. U.S. military support increased, too.

Yet, despite the Obama administration's linguistic gymnastics in not publicly labeling Zelaya's removal at gunpoint a coup, Obama's White House knew that it was a coup. By July 24, 2009, less than a month after the coup, the White House was in receipt of a [cable](#) sent from the U.S. embassy in Honduras informing President Obama of the facts.

In an almost comical lack of subtlety that was clearly never meant to be public, the cable is called "Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup." In it, the embassy reported, "There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup."

The conclusion could not be clearer. But just in case there were any remaining doubt, the cable added that "none of the . . . arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution."

In the most generous interpretation of Obama's action or inaction, you could say he permitted the coup to succeed by maintaining his silence. More likely, however, his administration was a supportive participant, holding a dialogue with the Honduran military up to the day of the coup and by recognizing the coup government as legitimate soon afterwards. Zelaya has always insisted that "the coup came from the north from the U.S."

In the heat of the coup, the plane that was carrying the kidnapped president landed at the U.S. military base of Palmerola for 15 to 20 minutes while it refueled. The U.S. chose not to intervene.

In her memoir, *Hard Choices*, [Clinton admitted that she aided the new leadership](#) by short-circuiting any efforts to restore Zelaya to power. “In the subsequent days [after the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary [Patricia] Espinosa in Mexico. We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot,” she wrote.

Ecuador in the Crosshairs

After the coup against Zelaya, Ecuador’s popularly elected president, Rafael Correa, said, “We have intelligence reports that say that after Zelaya, I’m next.” He may have been right. The year after the Honduran coup, there was an attempted coup against Correa. Although the action failed, Latin American expert Mark Weisbrot said [it was clearly an attempted coup](#) to overthrow Correa’s government.

Correa had renegotiated oil contracts and demanded a larger share of the big oil companies’ revenue for the people of Ecuador. He also opposed a free trade agreement with the U.S. and closed the U.S. military base in Ecuador. And, he joined Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia and Ecuador in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and successfully defaulted on over \$3 billion of foreign debt that was illegitimately contracted by Ecuadorian leaders who Correa said were CIA-supported dictators.

The U.S. had started action against Correa during George W. Bush’s presidency. An October 2005 embassy cable sent by U.S. Ambassador Linda Jewell outlined action for “desirable political and economic change in Ecuador.” In 2006, she cabled that a Correa election would “derail” U.S. hopes as the embassy expects Correa to join Chavez and other nationalist South American leaders. In the same cable [06QUIT02150], Jewell said that the U.S. has “actively discouraged potential alliances” with Correa. She admitted [06QUIT02991] to “working in concert with other Ecuadorians and groups who share our vision.”

During the Obama years, the U.S. would continue to intervene in

Ecuador. In March 2009, Ecuador expelled Mark Sullivan, an American official who was accused of being the CIA station chief in Quito and of playing a role in the suspension of U.S. assistance to a special investigative police unit when Ecuador named a new chief of whom the U.S. didn't approve.

On Oct. 30, 2010, the attempted coup that Correa had been expecting came. The coup leader was a graduate of the School of the Americas. A government-appointed commission found that "foreign actors" had participated. One of members of the commission announced his belief that the U.S. State Department and the CIA had been involved in the failed attempt to remove Correa from power.

Haiti, Again

In 2010, Obama failed another test when Washington bankrolled the Haitian elections at the cost of \$14 million, a price tag that presumably gave America significant say. Yet, Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) banned 14 parties from running, including Fanmi Lavalas, the party of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had twice been removed in U.S.-backed coups.

Haiti's largest and most popular party, Fanmi Lavalas has won every election that it has been allowed to participate in. But in this U.S.-sponsored election, Fanmi Lavalas was not allowed to compete. In other words, the Obama administration financed the election that specifically excluded the party the people wanted to elect.

The next indicator of Obama's failing grade came in Paraguay, where in June 2012, Fernando Lugo, the democratically elected leader of Paraguay was removed in a coup. The right-wing opposition opportunistically capitalized on a skirmish over disputed land that left at least 11 people dead to unfairly blame the deaths on President Lugo. It then impeached him after giving him only 24 hours to prepare his defense and only two hours to deliver it.

The Latin American organizations Unasur and Mercosur suspended the new Paraguayan government, but the U.S. government spent the day of the coup negotiating a new military base in Paraguay. As with Honduras,

U.S. officials publicly avoided using the word “coup.”

Yet, as early as 2009, a U.S. embassy [cable recognized](#) that Lugo’s political opposition has as its goal to “Capitalize on any Lugo missteps” and to “impeach Lugo and assure their own political supremacy.” The cable noted that to achieve this goal, the opposition was willing to “legally” impeach Lugo “even if on spurious grounds,” a so-called “soft coup.”

Focus on Venezuela

The next year, 2013, the focus moved to Venezuela in the wake of Hugo Chavez’s death from cancer. Against the wishes of the United States, Hugo Chavez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, won the right to continue the Bolivarian Revolution by winning the [next national election](#) results, though 150 electoral monitors from around the world observed Venezuela’s election, including delegations from the Union of South American Nations and the Carter Center.

The Obama administration’s pressure on Venezuela’s government has been unrelenting. American money – totaling at least \$90 million since 2000 – has been pumped into Venezuela to fund groups who oppose the Chavezista movement with the U.S.-backed opposition attempting another coup in 2015, which Maduro blamed on the U.S. government.

Though mocked by the U.S. government and the mainstream U.S. news media, the accusation was not an empty one. Venezuelan officials produced a significant volume of evidence that the events constituted a failed coup that had U.S. support, including a recording of a communique that was to be issued after the Maduro government was removed from power. Maduro’s government has also shown confessions by military officials. And, there was a recorded phone conversation between opposition leaders discussing the coup and involving Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, who is known to have made phone calls to a U.S. phone number.

Lucas Koerner of Venezuelanalysis.com added that the [aircraft](#) to be used as part of the failed coup has links to the notorious American

security firm Academi (formerly Blackwater). And it has been reported that a number of the coup leaders obtained [U.S. visas](#) from the American embassy to facilitate escape should the coup fail.

And, just this past May, President Maduro declared a state of emergency, accusing the U.S. of once again conspiring with right-wing groups in Venezuela to overthrow his government. [Maduro said](#) that “Washington is activating measures at the request of Venezuela’s fascist right.”

The Ebbing Pink Tide

The cumulative effect of all this pressure on progressive leaders in Latin America has been a noticeable ebbing of the Pink Tide movement, which had to its credit a significant improvement in the living standards of the region’s poorest citizens, although many of those gains are now being reversed.

Perhaps the sharpest blow to Latin America’s attempts to reduce poverty and structure economies more for the benefit of average people, not the wealthy, came just this year in Brazil when another “soft coup” was organized to remove Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff from office and replace her with a right-wing regime.

Again the evidence of a coup was obvious with opposition parties seizing on a budgetary dispute to overturn the voters’ will in South America’s largest country and biggest economy. The evidence included the publication of a [transcript](#) of the call between Romero Jucá, who was a senator at the time of the call, and former oil executive Sergio Machado, discussing “a national pact” to remove Rousseff and install Michel Temer as president. Jucá revealed that not only opposition politicians but members of the military and Supreme Court were in on the conspiracy.

Regarding the military’s role, Jucá says, “I am talking to the generals, the military commanders. They are fine with this, they said they will guarantee it.” And, as for the Supreme Court, Jucá admitted that he “spoke with and secured the involvement of numerous justices on Brazil’s Supreme Court,” [according](#) to journalist Glenn

Greenwald who is based in Brazil. Jucá further boasted that “there are only a small number” of Supreme Court justices that he had not spoken to. (Jucá has since become planning minister in Temer’s new government.)

So confident was Michel Temer that he had U.S. support for his coup that he was comfortable to openly boast about it in New York in front of an audience of business and foreign policy leaders in September. Temer confirmed to his American audience that Rousseff was removed from power because she refused to implement a pro-business economic plan, which featured cuts to health, education and welfare spending as well as increased emphasis on privatization and deregulation.

Temer said, “many months ago, while I was still vice president, we released a document named ‘A Bridge to the Future’ because we knew it would be impossible for the [Rousseff] government to continue on that course. We suggested that the government should adopt the theses presented in that document called ‘A Bridge to the Future.’ But, as that did not work out, the plan wasn’t adopted and a process was established which culminated with me being installed as president of the republic.”

As Inacio Vieira [reported](#) for The Intercept, “[Temer’s sales pitch](#) was chock full of standard neoliberal euphemisms and buzzwords, including the ‘universalization of the Brazilian market,’ ‘reestablishing trust,’ ‘extraordinary political stability,’ public-private partnerships, and the implementation of ‘fundamental reforms’ in areas like labor law, social security and public spending.”

And if there was any remaining doubt about the coup government’s motivation – ostensibly its indignation at Rousseff’s fiscal maneuver – there is the fact that one of the coup government’s first acts of legislation was to explicitly [legalize](#) the very budgetary act that they had impeached Rousseff for two days earlier.

American Satisfaction

While direct American participation in the Brazilian coup has not been established, Obama’s satisfaction with the coup was clear from his

silence over the reversal of one more democratic result, occurring in the most important economic country in Latin America.

Considering how his administration denounces supposedly undemocratic developments in, say, Russia, Obama's unwillingness to protest another severe blow to democracy in the Western Hemisphere suggests a happiness with the imposition of a new neo-liberal economic agenda in Brazil.

That is also the conclusion of many analysts close to the Brazilian scene. "There is no doubt that the biggest players in this coup attempt – people like former presidential candidates José Serra and Aécio Neves – are U.S. government allies," according to Latin American expert Mark Weisbrot.

And Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said Brazil is awash in financing from American sources, including "CIA-related organizations."

The day after the impeachment vote, Sen. Aloysio Nunes, a significant player in the coup government, began a three-day [visit to Washington](#). Nunes scheduled meetings with, among others, the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker and Ben Cardin, as well as with Undersecretary of State and former Ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon.

Though Nunes denies it, there were reports that his trip to Washington was ordered by Michel Temer. The willingness to go ahead with the planned meetings with Nunes right after the impeachment vote demonstrated, once again, at least tacit approval on the part of Washington. If the U.S. government wanted to send a message of disapproval, the trip could have been canceled.

The cumulative impact of Obama's presidency on Latin America has been the steady rollback of the Pink Tide as socially progressive governments around the hemisphere were either removed via "soft coups" or placed under enormous economic pressure, reversing many of the social gains that occurred in the previous decade.

Ironically, progressive Latin American governments made greater strides when Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, was in office because his administration was focused more on the Middle East and the "war on terror."

So, Obama's presidency represented less a new page in the history of U.S. relations toward its Latin neighbors than a repeat of old chapters in which the U.S. government teamed up with local oligarchs and right-wing ideologues to create an economic climate favorable to outside investors and the traditional local elites.

Obama's approach may have been more subtle than that of earlier U.S. presidents – using "soft coups" rather than deploying tanks in the streets – but the effect has been much the same, imposing U.S. economic and political domination over the region and casting aside democratic governments that dared put their people's interests first.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history.

How America Expunges Bad Memories

America is a place that expunges unpleasant memories that belie the happier vision of its "exceptionalism," most notably the brutal ugliness of the Vietnam War and more recent war crimes in the Middle East, observes Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

How collective memory is formed, and the crucial influence it exercises on the way a people orient themselves toward the world, is the subject of a fascinating new book by Viet Thanh Nguyen – author of the brilliant novel *The Sympathizer*. His probing exploration of the differing experience of the Vietnamese (on the two sides) and the Americans in what has been assimilated from their encounter over a period of roughly 15 years offers insight into the make-up of each nation as well as casting light on the mechanisms by which collective memory takes shape.

In this sense, national memory is intimately bound up collective identities before and after the experience. It is a dynamic cultural phenomenon wherein

politics *per se* plays a subordinate part.

While reams of studies have concentrated on the “lessons of Vietnam” in terms of foreign policy, military doctrine and so-called nation-building – relatively little attention has been paid this deeper process. Wars are trauma. They shake societies to their roots – especially when they are protracted, follow no established script and conclude with an unprecedented outcome. Those are features of the American experience in Vietnam and about Vietnam. One might naturally expect that the after-effects would cut deep into the national psyche and endure. Yet, oddly there is little evidence of that.

Americans are largely as oblivious to the war’s consequences as they are ignorant of its events. This is true not only now, but was discernible decades ago. Yes, many visit the moving memorial in Washington, veterans of the war are powerfully affected by grazing their fingers across the gilded names and conjuring visions of those long lost. Relatives stare with silent emotion at photographs half-a-century old. That, though, is a very small minority of citizens.

While many served, casualties were low relative to population or to World War II. Disruption, much less sacrifice, at home was minimal. The graphic images played on television screens are effaced over time and anyone under 50 never has seen them.

Most significant, the country has made a systematic effort to forget – to forget everything about Vietnam. Understandably, since most of it was ugly – on every count. Textbooks in American history give it little space; teachers downplay it; television disregards it as retro; Hollywood has other fish to fry as it strains and struggles to bring our more recent wars in the greater Middle East into line with American myth and legend.

All we have are cinematic antiques like *The Green Berets*, *Deerhunter* and the weird *Apocalypse Now*. Each stirred American feelings (in different ways) for a time before disappearing over the emotional horizon. One could speak of displacement were it not that Vietnam was expunged from the collective memory book well before 9/11, Iraq and all that.

Forgetting Napalmed Children

Even the most graphic images have proven transient. That came home for us just a few weeks ago when *Facebook* expunged the infamous picture of a young girl, her clothes burnt off her scorched body, fleeing in terror from her napalmed village. No one in the company recognized it as other than child pornography posted by a pedophile of the S&M variety. “Zuck,” America’s favorite genius, and

his fellow ignoramuses in Menlo Park, were clueless. And that's a guy who allegedly spent four years at Harvard. [Phan Thi Kim Phuc, still living in Vietnam, does not mind the photo being displayed.]

In a sense, the most noteworthy inheritance from the post-Vietnam experience is the honing of methods to photo shop history. Vietnam was a warm-up for the current more thorough, systematic cleansing that has made palatable Presidential mendacity, sustained deceit, mind-numbing incompetence, systemic torture, censorship, the shredding of the Bill of Rights and the perverting of national public discourse – as it degenerates into a mix of propaganda and vulgar trash-talking. The “War on Terror” in all its unsavory aspects.

The great innovation we Americans have made in the handling of collective memory is cultivated amnesia. That is a craft enormously facilitated by two broader trends in American culture: the cult of ignorance whereby a knowledge-free mind is esteemed as the ultimate freedom; and a public ethic whereby the nation's highest officials are given license to treat the truth as a potter treats clay so long as they say and do things that make us feel good.

So our strongest collective memory of America's wars of choice is the desirability – and ease – of forgetting them. “The show must go on” is taken as our imperative. Or “find closure” in the convenient pop psychology jargon that our elites favor. That is to say, the pageant of American life must go on: shopping, spectating, ogling celebrities; grabbing riches where and however we can; and titillating ourselves with games of every sort – sex, fantasy football and Pokeman being the outstanding examples.

The tumult that shook American in the late 1960s and early '70s had Vietnam as one epicenter – civil rights at the other. The rebellion in politics intersected the simultaneous youth rebellion in numerous complicated ways. One fed off the other. Each seemed poised to recast the United States' collective identity – or at least transform it in significant respects. From today's vantage-point, those expectations clearly were misplaced – whether one viewed them with hope or anxiety.

In regard to how we relate to the rest of the world, there is no discernible change whatsoever. The overweening pride, the belief in American exceptionalism – as duty and/or prerogative, the penchant for using military force, the self-righteousness, the double standards applied in politics and ethics – they remain hallmarks of our foreign policy.

Back to Picking Fights

That truth has been demonstrated in the Middle East, in the yen for picking

fight with Russia, Iran or whomever, in our *sub rosa* interventions in Latin America. These days that is done without the Cold War justification of our facing a diabolical threat to our core interests (even survival) as the Soviet Union and/or Red China supposedly did. Instead we have the disorganized Salafist thugs with a penchant for acts of terror – 98 percent of them abroad. By no measure can so-called Islamo-Fascism be equated Soviet-led international communism (actual or imagined). On this score, America has become more belligerent than it was in 1968.

On the other side of the equation, today's university campuses are more like the 1950s than 1965-1972 – as far as collective action is concerned. Almost no one protests our mindless wars, or draconian surveillance, or administration's kow-towing to reactionary state legislators and other forces pushing hard for the vocationalizing of higher education. Only identity issues stir a modicum of student interest.

In the cultural domain, we observe a different story unfolding. But one with strange plot twists. If we think of what altered American life the most since that date, we have to put "the pill" and the behavioral revolution that it encouraged at the apex. At the personal level, that change has been dramatic and enduring. The same, though, does not hold for associated aspirations as regards life-style. Quite the opposite.

The communal ethic *cum* ideal is gone with the wind. Today, we are more isolated, individualized and atomized than ever before. Our liberation from the strictures and constraints of social convention has led to runaway selfishness. The man in the grey flannel suit may have given way to the gender unspecific person in jeans – but that person is a money-grubbing careerist whose idea of a morning workout is a sharpening of elbows.

In this society of the new nihilism, the ideal of humanistic equality is viewed as a quaint irrelevancy – like tie-dye paisley t-shirts. Our bimodal culture is anchored at its ends by gross billionaires and the burgeoning tattooed proletariat.

The one saving grace of the era which has brought to fruition 1960s hopes and expectations is the dedication to racial and ethnic tolerance. This proposition holds even in the year of Trump. The evidence is all around us – despite the disturbing headlines of outlaw police, the vicious racist attacks on Barack Obama, and the vicarious lynching of Mexicans and Muslims at Tea Party rallies. Step back and recall the state of affairs 50 years ago.

What we are seeing is the recrudescence of old, tarnished half-buried passions that have been brought back to life by the new-found insecurities of American

life. Some insecurities are financial – the institutionalized gig economy (sweated labor), some stem from the renewed crisis in white masculine identity paradoxically heightened by the sexual revolution and its deformations in pop culture, some by the multiple neuroses pervading a country that has lost solid points of reference. Some have been stirred by politicians and self-seeking hustlers in the media or business on the make.

And some of this flailing about is due to the fraying of the myths that have given meaning to the American experience all these years. Those myths are bound up with the country's unique place and mission in the world. Now untenable, the inability to come to terms with awakened awareness of realities that should have been evident in 1975 adds markedly to what haunts us.

Cultivated amnesia in effacing collective memory did not serve the nation well. It will harm us even more – going forward. It cannot be otherwise among those masses of Americans who see memory itself as a threat to the precious autonomy to live in the instant. Poking at their smart watches to recall the home address they text to the robot who sends an automated Uber taxi, they have closed off all mental space for pondering Tet, the Mekong, Pol Pot, My Lai and those fellow countrymen who fell in the misbegotten quest for an imagined America.

And the national memory book already is closing, too, for Guantanamo, Fallujah, Abu Ghraib, “black” torture sites, Bush's puerile “Mission Accomplished” stunt, and Obama's hacking of the Senate Intelligence Committee to better serve the CIA's extra-legal machinations abroad and spying at home. (*Really? When did that happen?*) In compensation, we'll always have *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Sniper* to cuddle with.

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