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On the State and Future of US Politics

GB sits down with one of America’s leading presidential thinkers to discuss where the Trump presidency, its likely evolution and its consequences

Conversation with JEREMI SURI

GB: How would you describe the current state of American politics?

JS: I would say that American politics today are characterized by disruption, division and profound uncertainty about the future.

GB: Why?

JS: It is a combination of longstanding ideological differences in American society, as well as the breakdown of many of our institutions. Most importantly, however, we are seeing a new generation entering American politics and an older generation, represented by the Trumps and the Clintons, holding power as long as they can. This demographic transition in America is a key source of much of our difficulty right now.

GB: Which American institutions have broken down?

JS: To some extent, our electoral system has broken down. Our public markers of political acceptability and objectivity have broken down. There is no longer an agreed factual framework for the ways in which we discuss policy, and the ways in which we discuss many important national issues.

GB: Have American media institutions broken down?

JS: The media have been heroic in recent months. One of the best protections of American democracy is a long-established, vibrant and independent media, and much of what we know and what is, to some extent, holding President Trump accountable is due to the courageous investigative reporting of the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. We can point to media entities on the right and the left that are actually doing more than other national institutions to preserve democracy in the country.

GB: Will the US survive this century as a country?

JS: If the US and our democracy can weather the present difficulties and stress test, in a few years we could be stronger and more democratic than we have ever been. What this moment is doing is mobilizing and engaging young people and often, in a largely unprecedented way, with the political system and forcing them to appreciate the importance of preserving the democratic system. So there is, today, a new generation of idealists in America – a new generation of committed democrats (lower case ‘d’) – throughout our society. We are seeing them in demonstrations. We are seeing them out voting in places like Alabama and Pennsylvania. And they are bringing a new democratic energy to our politics. We just have to get them into power and get this older generation out.

GB: But will the US, as a state – democratic or not – weather this century?

JS: Yes, but it will do so with scars. There will be many who will suffer in the process, as they did in the 19th century development of American democracy. We will also see the US losing some of its lustre around the world as a consequence.

GB: How do you see the next year of the Trump presidency unfolding?

JS: On the home front, the investigations and scandals surrounding the presidency will only deepen, as they do nearly every day. The Republican Party will continue to split apart. We will see a major victory for Democratic candidates in November. The Trump administration will likely become more alienated, more isolated, and more stylin’ on domestic policy. On foreign policy, we will likely continue lurching from crisis to crisis. More often than not, we will see bombastic rhetoric without much follow through, as we have seen in Syria and, arguably, in respect of North Korea.

GB: What crises, in international or foreign policy, do you see over the next year for America?

JS: The North Korean question will not go away, despite the superficial amity between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. The Singapore summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un has not magically eradiated what remains a security crisis surround- ing the intercontinental nuclear capabilities that North Korea has developed (see the Feature article by Barthélémy Courmont at p. 40). Iran, for its part, will continue to adhere to the nuclear agreement with the European powers, but at the same time also continue to support Assad and his other supporters and proxies in the region. So those are two theatres where we will see continued tension and conflict, which will bring Vladimir Putin and the Russian leadership into closer conflict with the US, as Russia continues to pursue a separate set of interests in both theatres.

GB: How would you characterize the mentality of the American political class today across the spectrum? What is their belief system?

JS: The mainstream policy experts and professionals advising Congressional and federal leaders, as well as state leaders, are committed to free trade. They are committed to an international stance that is less militarized than it has been for the last 20 years or so. They are committed to a set of alliances – particularly the NATO alliance. So there is, in my view, a traditional liberal internationalism that is still quite strong in America.

What we are witnessing and experiencing is a revolt against this liberal internationalism from a minority – an organized minority – across the country that puts Trump and other politicians like him into positions of power. In the short run, those anti-internationalist or hyper-nationalist voices still have a great deal of day-to-day influence over American policy. They are holding certain politicians – especially Republican politicians, who others know better – hostage because our primary system gives these minority voices a great deal of influence in the electoral process.

GB: You have written about the ‘Impossible Presidency’. What do you find ‘impossible’ about the modern American presidency, and how do you see that institution evolving over the next couple of decades?

JS: I argue that the presidency has become impos- sible because American presidents are simultane- ously asked to do more internationally and at home, and given fewer sources of effective leverage than executives in others contemporary settings. The expectations of the presidency are astronomical, while the resources for getting things done are actu- ally minimal. This contradiction is a major problem. The solution to the contradiction is to rethink what we are looking for in the presidency. The solution should not be to give him or her enormous powers, or to reduce the office. The solution is going to be to focus the office on what it should be focussed on – that is, the issues that matter the most to the country. These issues – internationally or domesti- cally – are the ones where national leadership is most consequential and needed. These are issues relating to core national security interests, and is- sues of core economic growth and domestic welfare interests. We need a more strategic presidency – not a ‘stronger’ presidency.

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China is, today, a regional and sometimes global strategic and economic competitor with the US. This is not necessarily a threatening thing. On the contrary, it could actually be a source of stability. The Chinese are as invested in global capitalism as the US. 

GB: What are the top five issues on which the presidency should focus? 
JS: A future president will do a much better job than recent and current presidents by defining his or her office less through involvement in every part of the world. Instead, there should be a keen focus on American relations with China, Europe and Russia. These will be the core international issues. Those issues will involve security, trade, as well as environmental and trade matters. At home, the president will not focus on cultural issues like abortion or guns or religion. He or she will instead focus on infrastructure development. This will require an emphasis on providing a climate that encourages mobility for citizens and also economic opportunity for citizens. By the way, these core Republican values in the 19th century, before the office grew into much more of an imperial institution than an actual leadership office.

GB: How do you see the evolution of the continental relationship with Canada and Mexico? 
JS: The continental relationship will continue to be dominated, as always, by state relationships and other subnational relations. What makes the enduring peace and prosperity across these two borders so significant is that there is so much investment in the continental relationship across American party lines from figures like governor, mayors and business leaders. (This is reciprocated by Canadian provincial premiers and city mayors, and by Mexico’s governors and mayors.) The best thing that the US federal government can do today is what it has always done – namely, to provide a peaceful and stable climate, including through a modernized trilateral trade and investment regime, for subnational agents to do the good work that they do in the service of economic growth, development and peaceable relations across these borders.

GB: Should Americans be impressed by the return of China to the centre of international affairs? 
JS: Americans have to come to grips with the fact that we are no longer in the world of the late 1990s and first two decades of the 2000s, where there were really no peer competitors. I don’t think anyone could actually do better than the US. We evidently have differences – significant differences – in how we manage things like intellectual property rights. There are differences over differences – in how we manage things like intellectual property rights. There are differences over differences – in how we manage things like internet governance. The US will have to work more with China and Russia to facilitate and promote open internet governance.

GB: Do you see any prospect of direct conflict? 
JS: There is, of course, a possibility. Neither side wants this, but we could well stumble into conflict. Again, this would be unintentional. Both sides may want to take a much more direct approach to the Middle East, or somewhere else. To be clear, however, once again, I do not believe that there is any interest or intent on either side for such direct conflict.

GB: How do you see the evolution of American policy in the Middle East for the remainder of this presidency? 
JS: We will see continued American disengagement from the Middle East and continued reliance by both the US and China with respect to the future of East Asia.

GB: What about America’s relationship with Iran, and specifically around the Iran nuclear agreement? 
JS: Working very closely with the Israelis and the Saudis is, by implication, working against Iran. That is why the US pulled out of the nuclear deal, against the wishes of all of our European allies. We will see a return to nuclear proliferation by Iran, and we might very well see Iran coming closer to having a viable nuclear weapon within the next few years.

GB: How do you see the evolution of social media in the US, given possible additional regulation of that sector? 
JS: We are in a moment with those platforms that is similar to what we have seen in the railroad industry in the late 19th century. The railroad companies were, as with today’s internet giants, largely unregulated entities filled with warts and inequities and very resilient. It is going to get far more difficult for them to survive. Revelations from Bob Woodward and the anonymous New York Times op-ed show that the team the president has chosen to advise him is actually revolting against him.

GB: If President Trump were to leave prematurely, would there be a destabilization of the American political system? 
JS: The American political system is extraordinarily resilient. It is filled with checks and balances and undemocratic elements, but in the end, the long departure of someone like Donald Trump, as with the long departure of Richard Nixon, will yield to a pullback toward the political centre (continued).

For the rest of the Interview with Jeremy Suri please visit the GB website at: www.globalbrief.ca