



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Le Fin de Siècle

The French, naturally, have a phrase for it: le fin de siècle. The End of the Century. In its broader context it is meant to encapsulate squalls of cynicism, doubt, spiking religious fervor, a tinge of helplessness, and general pessimism during epochs of dramatic change. It is a kind of phenomenon that seems to settle over large numbers of people when the trail ahead seems dark and rocky, beset with troubles, and the wagon-masters not quite up to the task of guiding the company through.

This seemingly endless caterwauling carnival side-show of an election seems to have cast many of us into a kind of End-of-the-Century mindset. And this discomfiting spectacle truly is relentless in its inarticulate, blunt, and raw depravity — the natural result, perhaps, of decades of Jerry Springer

television, failed education models, the continuous pumping of divisive philosophy into the mainstream for profit, and industrial shouting matches that pass for heady political analysis on the evening news.

I'm susceptible. Some days I want to wear a hair shirt and flagellate myself with a cat-o-nine-tails just to see if it would make them — that conquering horde of tweeters, facebookers, and zealous party hacks — stop and reconsider what they are doing to a process and a nation that deserves far more dignity and gravitas than this offering of bloated political nabobs is capable of rendering.

There are some pressing issues, actually, we might want to consider. And whomever it is that wakes up as our President on November 9 — I can't, and in good conscience won't, vote for either one of them — might want to reflect on some of these actual issues with some heretofore undemonstrated intellectual honesty and sobriety.

Debt. We don't hear any of the candidates discussing a meaningful strategy to address this looming catastrophe. Debt is the dry rot in the foundation of our house. We can't pay what we owe without massive sacrifice and hardship, which modern Americans, largely insulated from genuine hardship — read: starvation and cataclysmic homelessness — for

nearly a hundred years, are loathe to even contemplate. An entrenched and polarized Congress, which increasingly acts only in its own best interests, when it acts at all, means the probability of our representatives managing the government within their means hovers at exactly zero.

That's really bad news for all of us, and even worse for the generations yet to come.

Government corruption. If it isn't an inveterate fact, it is at the very least a widely shared perception. That perception is extremely corrosive to the functioning of government, which rests on the consent of the governed and requires at least the pretense of accountability and justice. Vast swaths of intelligent, honest citizens rightly suspect that their government is debased, their representatives dirty, and manipulated — if not outright owned — by forces unseen and unapproved of by the electorate.

Most disconcerting is that many in government seem to believe the citizenry is stupid, and have forgotten — or never really understood — their rightful place in the order of things. Watching any brief from a "government spokesperson," such as the White House Press Secretary, or any of the designer diplomats at Foggy Bottom, is an exercise in enduring the most egregious displays of condescension and arrogance. We don't do royalty here. Or do we, now?

Credibility. Whichever candidate lands in the oval office will have almost one half of the country believing they are either an assassin, a treasonous criminal, a racist, a serial groper, a closet Bolshevik, or a kind of Manchurian Candidate waiting for the trigger phrase from one dark interest or another.

Half of the country, largely good people, hold those beliefs religiously.

What can either of them possibly do, at this stage, to unite fully half of a nation that holds them in utter contempt? Bread and circuses? A good war? It isn't difficult to forecast even more divisiveness and the continued balkanization of the American electorate four years from now.

War drums. We have been at war for 15 years and there is no end in sight. Having tossed Jefferson's notion that foreign entanglements were dangerous and counter-productive, we now find ourselves responsible for everything and everyone, and our "national interests" inextricably tied to the results. New conflicts seem probable, at least of the fast, extremely violent, and low-duration

variety. A large-scale war isn't far-fetched. Perhaps with an increasingly nationalist and chafing Putin. Or the Chinese. Or the North Koreans. Or the Iranians. Or some, or all of them at once.

What concerns me, as I sit here contemplating precisely what size of hair shirt I actually wear, and I think it concerns many of us, is this inescapable notion that the people we are robotically installing in high office aren't actually up to the job.

So I'll quote Dr. Richard Beeman, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. "There is a story, often told, that upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin was approached by a group of citizens asking what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer was: "A republic, if you can keep it." The brevity of that response should not cause us to under-value its essential meaning: democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health.

Dr. Thomas R. Rheuben

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