

My Turn with John Bos: My answer, your answer, the correct answer

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Here's an indisputable fact; we have a narcissistic authoritarian as president who has brought us – all of us – to a moment of reckoning about the future of America.

“There's no question that the institutions of our democracy are being tested every day in terms of the fundamental checks and balances built into our constitution,” said Leon Panetta, a former defense secretary and CIA director. “There are some days when you wonder whether the system is going to work well, but I think generally we've been able to survive. But presidencies ought to be about a hell of a lot more than just survival.”

Sidney Blumenthal, a biographer of Abraham Lincoln, has written “Trump is certainly the person with the worst character ever to be president. At two years and counting, the damage may equal the damage done by the worst presidents which brought on the civil war, and the damage done by Andrew Johnson who encouraged the Ku Klux Klan and white nationalist attacks on Reconstruction that brought about legalized segregation.”

Following in the footsteps of Andrew Johnson, Donald Trump has overturned a racist rock that has forced white Americans to confront a racism many believed had all but died. Another overturned rock has forced everyone to confront our broken political “system,” a duopoly that protects and preserves the two-party system against intrusion by a third party.

It may be true, as Trump said early on, that “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters.” But it is not because the voters who might continue to vote for Trump see him as a decent, honorable or talented human being. It is because they view him as a wrecking ball that can demolish an ill-performing and unfair political system. I agree with those voters about the unfair political system. We differ on the choice of wrecking ball.

There is an old saying that there are three answers to every question; my answer, your answer and the correct answer. Whether or not Trump is fit for the office of president of the United States is not a matter of opinion. No one, including those who voted for him, can deny the correct answer: he is not.

Biographer Blumenthal, a former senior adviser to Clinton, warns that even if Trump – who lost the popular vote in 2016 and saw House Republicans routed in 2018 – is defeated in 2020, his legacy will endure. “The idea that there can be a simple restoration and the country can pick up where we left off the minute before Trump took the oath is a dangerous illusion. We're going to have to deal with the damage. It is too profound that it is an unprecedented assault on our constitution.”

Conservative columnist David Brooks in the Dec. 20 New York Times asked: “Are you optimistic or pessimistic about America’s future? I’m optimistic,” he wrote. “I say that because there have been many moments in our history when old ideas and old arrangements stopped working and people chopped them up. Those transition moments were bumpy, and it was easy to lose hope, but then people figured it out. Never underestimate the power of human ingenuity.”

Brooks then describes what he describes as one of the most creative think tanks in America today, the Niskanen Center which was founded in 2015. It was started by a group of libertarians who broke off from the far right Cato Institute. Over the next few years many of the leaders of Niskanen began to lose faith in the libertarian ideology. The founder, Jerry Taylor, wrote a brilliant essay in October explaining the process. [<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/the-alternative-to-ideology/>]

“I have abandoned that libertarian project,” Taylor wrote, stating that “the first disagreements were over the issue of global warming. ‘Libertarianism’ is,” Taylor said, “a philosophy that emphasizes limited government, free markets and individual rights. There is nothing in that creed that should bias a person one way or another over whether global warming is a serious problem or not. That’s a scientific question, not a philosophical one.”

Yet Taylor found that many libertarians, fired by ideological zeal, had slid into the position of minimizing climate change because they didn’t like some of the expensive big government remedies that were being proposed to address it. Once he saw this tendency on climate change, he saw it everywhere and on all sides. “People with single all-explaining ideologies have a tendency to let their philosophic blinders distort how they view empirical reality” he says.

As a result Taylor decided to abandon the belief that a single ideology can be applied to all problems. There are a lot of different goods in society: liberty, social justice, equity, community, virtue, prosperity. “It’s crazy,” Taylor argued, “to prioritize one of those goods in nearly every single policy context. And yet that’s what ideologues do.”

Taylor and his colleagues came to see that the central debate in our politics is completely bogus. Since at least 1964, American politics has pitted conservatives who believe in a small government and a free market against liberals who believe in a bigger government.

Niskanen thinkers, however, made a simple and empirically verifiable observation. The nations that have the freest markets also generally have the most generous welfare states. The two are not in opposition. In the real world they go together.

Brooks closes his NYT column by stating that the Niskanen authors “are making a compelling case for moderation; for understanding that politics is striking a rough but workable balance between competing goods; for understanding that the world is complex and our knowledge is limited, and so it’s best to proceed constantly, but skeptically.”