



Prognosis: America 2018

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Doctors seek a unifying diagnosis to explain symptoms and inform a prognosis. My diagnosis for a Trumped-up White House with pseudo-populism as a diversion is naked greed. “Trust me” winks from the far-right wing predict a dire prognosis for the 99 percent.

In one career, my 38 working years as an oncologist, U.S. society has done a “180”—from a Peace Corps legacy to TV’s “Apprentice” and a mentality of social Darwinism. Rupert Murdoch’s Fox, echoing the Koch brother’s ALEC, the Cato Institute, and James Buchanan/Milton Friedman libertarianism have made “you eat what you kill” the sacred creed of their right-wing propaganda machine. And much of America has joined in the chant of “money over all.”

Soul searching over civil rights, the Pentagon Papers and Watergate once prompted a national catharsis and predicted an era of enlightened, transparent governance of America. But since those innocent days, the decades of my medical career have witnessed health care turned from a noble profession into “profit center” exploitation among Big Insurance, Big Pharma and Big Hospitals.

Many physicians joined in the gold rush, emboldened by Wall Street’s “greed is great” mantra. One of the executives over me, his salary measured in the millions per year, would interrogate me regularly—“Fangman, is there any money in stem cell transplants” or other research trends du jour he’d seen a headline for in The Wall Street Journal. Never did the question he was paid to ask arise: Will innovation x, y or z improve our community’s health care?

That same slickster CEO was also an early adopter of Beltway hyper-polarization. His oft-used curse—“those dirty Democrats”—was a warning to anyone with a liberal instinct in his sphere of influence.

Understand that I am no socialist or partisan advocate. I’ve always been an independent. I earned money by hard work and respect a foundational tenet of capitalism: If you snooze, you lose. There was bad governance by Wendy Lee Gramm, Bill Clinton, Lawrence Summers, George W. Bush, Barack Obama. They coddled and then bailed out the pervasive greed of Wall Street and that of greedy mortgage bankers like Angelo Mozilo at Countrywide, as it flushed away much of my career’s work and the security of millions of others in the Great Recession. This casino mentality is still taking the 99 percent for suckers. Trump’s “tax reform” is yet another smoke screen for unvarnished greed. Read about Kimberly Clark’s tax cut plans as an example.

I don't write to grind my ax. I write because con men running this nation are confusing American voters. Since the 1980s, hucksters too numerous to recount—see Bush/Dick Cheney, Henry Paulson, Lloyd Blankfein and now Donald Trump—have seduced solid, hard-working Americans to believe in bogus scams like invading Iraq. The Koch brothers' anti-democracy libertarianism has taken Friedman's dog-eat-dog "trickle down" to new lows.

Today's ruling "Republi-cons" have no kinship with Dwight Eisenhower's Republican Party or with principled Republican moderates of the Watergate era. Their stealth service to billionaires is simply not divulged, and the corporate media obliges their secretive agenda with distractions about conventional boogymen and hype.

Implausible Ayn Rand theories espoused by greed merchants support party-over-country gridlock and the culture of unconscionable partisanship that never brings introspection to Washington, D.C. Sen. Jeff Flake's book, "Conscience of a Conservative" and his speeches should have done that. A sobering array of deregulatory-, regulatory- and privatization-induced wounds plague our society, yet they never get airtime or congressional action, overshadowed continually by the raging scandals that hyper-partisanship makes inevitable.

In health care, poor leadership has cursed us with the labors of Sisyphus, in the form of counterproductive electronic medical records, billing, data collection and prescribing systems. The Joint Commission watchdogs once did good work but now seem like a bloated bureaucracy nitpicking health care to death. We have irrational drug-pricing burdens, artificial intelligence threatening to sweep away human interactions from even medical care, and much more that complicates (rather than streamlines) the whole system.

Society is battered on many different fronts: poisonous GMO foods, crumbling infrastructure, a corporate tax gift to the wealthiest (cut too low at 21 percent from too high at 35 percent), Amazon and robotics decimating jobs (as offshoring already has). The right wing wages incessant attacks on all that works well for the "general welfare" espoused by our Constitution: Social Security, Medicare, the U.S. Postal Service, our struggling passenger rail system, NREL research and renewable energy development ... the list goes on.

And, yes, even with the Olympics of peace in South Korea underway, we're reminded of greed in our U.S. Olympic Committee, a wealthy organization that provides essentially no help to our hard-working athletes. Most of these "best of the best" have to suffer deprivation and hardship to refine their skills and make America proud. Meanwhile, our Olympic committee holds tightly to its monetary bounty, some \$600 million in endowments, with pay scales for its management ranging from several hundreds of thousands to millions per year. The Olympic Committee receives hundreds of millions in TV money, and over 40 governing bodies like that of track and field are often headed up by individuals making between \$1 million and \$2 million a year. Rather than offering helping hand financially, the Olympic Committee aggressively enforces rules against athletes securing their own endorsements from commercial interests willing to defray athletes' costs for training and travel.

These examples are a few of the many more facets of greed firmly rooted in our society. Ascendant for nearly 40 years, misbegotten libertarianism, worship of private property rights

over the common good and the ensuing social Darwinism that it all demands have masqueraded as “conservative prudence.” What it’s really become is quite different than what Barry Goldwater would countenance.

Insidious corruption unparalleled in American history—what I regard as Deception Inc.—is in control of our society. Partisan propaganda pits Main Street Americans against one another to distrust the “other” and vote for con artists and thieves doing the bidding of billionaires.

We, the people, must learn the details of all this corruption in the service of greed. Scholars and investigative journalists exposing our corrupt system of dysfunctional leadership must become household names among the 99 percent. We must unite to demand moderation and fairness from authentic leaders who respect democracy.

If we are to regain balance and cohesiveness in our society, we must understand genuine facts and interpret the truth required to vote rationally. This type of sophistication must replace polarization. To encourage the brightest to govern in Washington, D.C., scholars must uncover and convey verified evidence. This kind of work can promote citizen participation in the pursuit of centrist, pragmatic consensus.

Knowledge, organized and available to all motivated voters, can win out. And we can get our country back.