

Blog for OurFuture

When Change Is Not Enough: The Seven Steps To Revolution



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"Those who make peaceful evolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable."

— John F. Kennedy

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There's one thing for sure: 2008 isn't anything like politics as usual.

The corporate media (with their unerring eye for the obvious point) is fixated on the narrative that, for the first time ever, Americans will likely end this year with either a woman or a black man headed for the White House. Bloggers are telling stories from the front lines of primaries and caucuses that look like something from the early 60s — **people lining up before dawn to vote** in Manoa, Hawaii yesterday; **a thousand black college students** in Prairie View, Texas marching 10 miles to cast their early votes in the face of a county that tried to disenfranchise them. In recent months, we've also been gobstopped by the sheer passion of the insurgent campaigns of both Barack Obama and Ron Paul, both of whom brought millions of new voters into the conversation — and with them, a sharp critique of the status quo and a new energy that's agitating toward deep structural change.

There's something implacable, earnest, and righteously angry in the air. And it raises all kinds of questions for burned-out Boomers and jaded Gen Xers who've been ground down to the stump by the mostly losing battles of the past 30 years. Can it be — at long last — that Americans have, simply, had enough? Are we, finally, stepping out to take back our government — and with it, control of our own future? Is this simply a shifting political season — the kind we get every 20 to 30 years — or is there something deeper going on here? Do we dare to raise our hopes that this time, we're going to finally win a few? Just how ready is this country for big, serious, forward-looking change?

Recently, I came across a pocket of sociological research that suggested a tantalizing answer to these questions — and also that America may be far more ready for far more change than anyone really believes is possible at this moment. In fact, according to some sociologists, we've already lined up all the preconditions that have historically set the stage for full-fledged violent revolution.

It turns out that the energy of this moment is not about Hillary or Ron or Barack. It's about who we are, and where we are, and what happens to people's minds when they're left hanging just a little too far past the moment when they're ready for transformative change.

Way back in 1962, Caltech sociologist James C. Davies published an article in the American Sociological Review that summarized the conditions that determine how and when modern political revolutions occur. Intriguingly, Davies cited another scholar, Crane Brinton, who laid out seven "tentative uniformities" that he argued were the common precursors that set the stage for the Puritan, American, French, and Russian revolutions. As I read Davies' argument, it struck me that the same seven stars Brinton named are now precisely lined up at midheaven over America in 2008. Taken together, it's a convergence that creates the perfect social, economic, and political conditions for the biggest revolution since the shot heard 'round the world.

And even more interestingly: in every case, we got here as a direct result of either intended or unintended consequences of the conservatives' war against liberal government, and their attempt to take over our democracy and replace it with a one-party plutocracy. It turns out that, historically, liberal nations make very poor grounds for revolution — but deeply conservative ones very reliably create the conditions that eventually make violent overthrow necessary. And our own Republicans, it turns out, have done a hell of a job.

Here are the seven criteria, along with the reasons why we're fulfilling each of them now, and how conservative policies conspired to put us on the road to possible revolution.

1. Soaring, Then Crashing

Davies notes that revolutions don't happen in traditional societies that are stable and static — where people have their place, things are as they've always been, and nobody expects any of that to change. Rather, modern revolutions — particularly the progressive-minded ones in which people emerge from the fray with greater rights and equality — happen in economically advancing societies, always at the point where a long period of rising living standards and high, hopeful expectations comes to a crashing end, leaving the citizens in an ugly and disgruntled mood. As Davies put it:

"Revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal. The all-important effect on the minds of people in a particular society is to produce, during the former period, an expectation of continued ability to satisfy needs — which continue to rise — and, during the latter, a mental state of anxiety and frustration when manifest reality breaks away from anticipated reality..."

"Political stability and instability are ultimately dependent on a state of mind, a mood, in society...it is the dissatisfied state of mind rather than the tangible provision of 'adequate' or 'inadequate' supplies of food, equality, or liberty which produces the revolution."

The American middle class was built on New Deal investments in education, housing, infrastructure, and health care, which produced a very "prolonged period of objective economic and social development." People were optimistic; generations of growing prosperity raised their expectations that their children would do even better. That era instilled in Americans exactly the kind of hopeful belief in their own agency that primes them to become likely revolutionaries in an era of decline.

And now, thanks to 28 years of conservative misrule, we are now at the point where "manifest reality breaks away from anticipated reality," and the breach is creating political turbulence. The average American has seen his or her standard of living contract by fits and starts since about 1972. This fall-off that was relieved somewhat by the transition to two-earner households and the economic sunshine of the Clinton years — but then accelerated with the dot-com crash, followed by seven years of Bush's overt hostility toward the lower 98 percent of Americans who aren't part of his base. Working-class America is reeling from the mass exodus of manufacturing jobs and the scourge of predatory lending; middle-class America is being hollowed out by health-care bankruptcies, higher college costs, and a tax load far heavier than that of the richest 2 percent. These people expected to do better than their parents. Now, they're screwed every direction they turn.

In the face of this reversal, Davies tells us, it's not at all surprising that the national mood is turning ominous, from one end of the political spectrum to the other. However, he warns us: this may not be just a passing political storm. In other times and places, this kind of quick decline in a prosperous nation has been a reliable sign of a full-on revolution brewing just ahead.

2. They Call It A Class War

Marx called this one true, says Davies. Progressive modern democracies run on mutual trust between classes and a shared vision of the common good that binds widely disparate groups together. Now, we're also about to re-learn the historical lesson that liberals like flat hierarchies, racial and religious tolerance, and easy class mobility not because we're soft-headed and soft-hearted — but because, unlike short-sighted conservatives, we understand that tight social cohesion is our most reliable and powerful bulwark against the kinds of revolutions that bring down great economies, nations and cultures.

In all the historical examples Davies and Brinton cite, the stage for revolution was set when the upper classes broke faith with society's other groups, and began to openly prey on them in ways that threatened their very future. Not surprisingly, the other groups soon united, took up arms, and rebelled.

And here we are again: Conservative policies have opened the wealth gap to Depression levels; put workers at the total mercy of their employers; and deprived the working and middle classes of access to education, home ownership, health care, capital, legal redress, and their expectations of a better future for their kids. You can only get away with blaming this on gays and Mexicans for so long before people get wise to the game. And as the primaries are making clear: Americans are getting wise.

Our current plutocratic nobility may soon face the same stark choice its English, French, and Russian predecessors did. They can keep their heads and take proactive steps to close the gap between themselves and the common folk (choosing evolution over revolution, as JFK counsels above). Or they can keep insisting stubbornly on their elite prerogatives, until that gap widens to the point where the revolution comes — and they will lose their heads entirely.

Right now, all we're asking of our modern-day corporate courtiers is that they accept a tax cut repeal on people making over

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3. Deserted Intellectuals

Mere unrest among the working and middle classes, all by itself, isn't enough. Revolutions require leaders — and those always come from the professional and intellectual classes. In most times and places, these groups (which also include military officers) usually enjoy comfortable ties to the upper classes, and access to a certain level of power. But if those connections become frayed and weak, and the disaffected intellectuals make common cause with the lower classes, revolution becomes almost inevitable.

Davies notes that, compared to both the upper and lower classes, the members of America's upper-middle class were relatively untouched by Great Depression. Because of this, their allegiances to the existing social structure largely remained intact; and he argues that their continued engagement was probably the main factor that allowed America to avert an all-out revolution in the 1930s.

But 2008 is a different story. Both the Boomers (now in their late 40s to early 60s) and Generation X (now in their late 20s to late 40s) were raised in an economically advancing nation that was rich with opportunity and expectation. We spent our childhoods in what were then still the world's best schools; and A students of every class worked hard to position ourselves for what we (and our parents and teachers) expected would be very successful adult careers. We had every reason to believe that, no matter where we started, important leadership roles awaited us in education, government, the media, business, research, and other institutions.

And yet, when we finally graduated and went to work, we found those institutions being sold out from under us to a newly-emerging group of social and economic conservatives who didn't share our broad vision of common decency and the common good (which we'd inherited from the GI and Silent adults who raised us and taught us); and who were often so corrupted or so sociopathic that the working environments they created were simply unendurable. If wealth, prestige, and power came at the price of our principles, we often chose instead to take lower-paying work, live small, and stay true to ourselves.

For too many of us, these thwarted expectations have been the driving arc of our adult lives. But we've never lost the sense that it was a choice that the America we grew up in would never have asked us to make. In Davies' terms, we are "deserted intellectuals" — a class that is always at extremely high risk for fomenting revolution whenever it appears in history.

Davies says that revolutions catalyze when these deserted intellectuals make common cause with the lower classes. And much of the energy of this election is coming right out of that emerging alliance. The same drive toward corporatization that savaged our dreams also hammered at other class wedges throughout American society, creating conditions that savaged the middle class and ground the working class toward something resembling serfdom. Between our galvanizing frustration with George Bush, our shared fury at the war, and the new connections forged by bloggers and organizers, that alliance has now congealed into the determinedly change-minded movements we're seeing this election cycle.

4. Incompetent Government

As this blog has long argued, conservatives invariably govern badly because they don't really believe that government should exist at all — except, perhaps, as a way to funnel the peoples' tax money into the pockets of party insiders. This conflicted (if not outright hostile) attitude toward government can't possibly lead to any outcome other than bad management, bad policy, and eventually such horrendously bad social and economic outcomes that people are forced into the streets to hold their leaders to account.

It turns out there's never been a modern revolution that didn't start against a backdrop of atrocious government malfeasance in the face of precipitously declining fortunes. From George III's onerous taxes to Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake," revolutions begin when stubborn aristocrats heap fuel on the fire by blithely disregarding the falling fortunes of their once-prosperous citizens. And America is getting dangerously close to that point now. Between our corporate-owned Congress and the spectacularly bad judgment of Bush's executive branch, there's never been a government in American history more inept, corrupt, and criminally negligent than this one — or more shockingly out of touch with what the average American is going through. Just ask anyone from New Orleans — or anyone who has a relative in the military.

Liberal democracy avoids this by building in a fail-safe: if the bastards ignore us, we can always vote them out. But if we've learned anything over the last eight years, it's that our votes don't always count — especially not when conservatives are doing the counting. If this year's election further confirms the growing conviction that change via the ballot box is futile, we may find a large and disgruntled group of Americans looking to restore government accountability by more direct means.

5. Gutless Wonders in the Ruling Class

Revolution becomes necessary when the ruling classes fail in their duty to lead. Most of the major modern political revolutions occurred at moments when the world was changing rapidly — and the country's leaders dealt with it by dropping back into denial and clinging defiantly to the old, profitable, and familiar status quo. New technologies, new ideas, and new economic opportunities were emerging; and there came a time when ignoring them was no longer an option. When the leaders failed to step forward boldly to lead their people through the looming and necessary transformations, the people rebelled.

We're hard up against some huge transformative changes now. Global warming and overwhelming pollution are forcing us to reconsider the way we occupy the world, altering our relationship to food, water, air, soil, energy, and each other. The transition off carbon-based fuels and away from non-recyclable goods is going to re-structure our entire economy. Computers are still creating social and business transformations; biotech and nanotech will only accelerate that. More and more people in the industrialized world are feeling a spiritual void, and coming to believe that moving away from consumerism and toward community may be an important step in recovering that nameless thing they've lost.

And, in the teeth of this restless drift toward inevitable change, America has been governed by a bunch of conservative dinosaurs who can't even bring themselves to acknowledge that the 20th century is over. (Some of them, in fact, are still trying to turn back the Enlightenment.) Liberal governments manage this kind of shift by training and subsidizing scientists and planners, funding research, and setting policies that help their nations navigate these transitions with some grace. Conservative ones — being conservative — will reflexively try to deny that change is occurring at all, and then brutally suppress anyone with evidence to the contrary.

Which is why, every time our current crop of so-called leaders open their mouths to propose a policy or Explain It All To Us, it's embarrassingly obvious that they don't have the vision, the intelligence, or the courage to face the future that everyone can clearly see bearing down on us, whether we're ready or not. Their persistent cluelessness infuriates us — and terrifies us. It's all too clear that these people are a waste of our tax money: they will never take us where we need to go. Much of the energy we're seeing in this year's election is due to the fact that a majority of Americans have figured out that our government is leaving us hung out here, completely on our own, to manage huge and inevitable changes with no support or guidance whatsoever.

Historically, this same seething fury at incompetent, unimaginative, cowardly leaders — and the dawning realization that our survival depends on seizing the lead for ourselves — has been the spark that's ignited many a violent uprising.

6. Fiscal Irresponsibility

As we've seen, revolutions follow in the wake of national economic reversals. Almost always, these reversals occur when inept and corrupt governments mismanage the national economy to the point of indebtedness, bankruptcy, and currency collapse.

There's a growing consensus on both the left and right that America is now heading into the biggest financial contraction since the Great Depression. And it's one that liberal critics have seen coming for years, as conservatives systematically dismantled the economic foundations of the entire country. Good-paying jobs went offshore. Domestic investments in infrastructure and education were diverted to the war machine. Government oversight of banks and securities was blinded. Vast sections of the economy were sold off to the Saudis for oil, or to the Chinese for cheap consumer goods and money to finance tax cuts for the wealthy.

This is no way to run an economy, unless you're a borrow-and-spend conservative determined to starve the government beast to the point where you can, as Grover Norquist proposed, drag it into the bathtub and drown it entirely. The current recession is the bill come due for 28 years of Republican financial malfeasance. It's also another way in which conservatives themselves have unwittingly set up the historical preconditions for revolution.

7. Inept and Inconsistent Use of Force

The final criterion for revolution is this: The government no longer exercises force in a way that people find fair or consistent. And this can happen in all kinds of ways.

Domestically, there's uneven sentencing, where some people get the maximum and others get cut loose without penalty — and neither outcome has any connection to the actual circumstances of the crime (though it often correlates all too closely with race, class, and the ability to afford a good lawyer). Unchecked police brutality (tasers, for example) that hardens public perception against the constabulary. Unwarranted police surveillance and legal harassment of law-abiding citizens going about their business. Different kinds of law enforcement for different neighborhoods. The use of government force to silence critics. And let's not forget the unconstitutional restriction of free speech and free assembly rights.

Abroad, there's the misuse of military force, which forces the country to pour its blood and treasure into misadventures that offer no clear advantage for the nation. These misadventures not only reduce the country's international prestige and contribute to economic declines; they often create a class of displaced soldiers who return home with both the skills and the motivation to turn political unrest into a full-fledged shooting war.

