

'America's crisis is not about economics. It is about the very purpose of politics, government and nationhood.'

BEWILDERMENT

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IT'S CHERRY BLOSSOM time in this most political of all cities. Along the Potomac and up The Mall the pink flowers beckon America's faithful — as they have for generations — to do homage to the 'nation's capital'.

And they come of course in their hundreds of thousands: from the Midwest, the South, and California; tourist and child alike, to gaze up at Lincoln's brooding face, Jefferson's graceful pagoda and the deep wound in the turf of The Mall which is the Vietnam memorial. It is a gentle season: the days are warm and the joggers on the many pathways are shirtless in the noonday sun.

But there is a mood in America this spring which belies the seeming normality of the season. It is a sense not of despair (though there is some), nor malaise (of which there is plenty of evidence): it is deep, deep questioning.

How? Why? What's wrong? Where to?

It is certainly true that these and other questions are long part of this — yes — great political tradition but this is something more.

The ring-a-ding of the Primaries (and the looming Conventions) have faded into an empty charade. Arkansas' Governor Bill Clinton — the first child of the Sixties to aspire to the Presidency — was sent home to Little Rock after the New York Primary to rest his voice. Is this a metaphor for a political system in which, as many now think, there is too much talk, too little action?

BUT THERE have been more serious casualties this season than the Governor's voice. The highly-respected Republican Senator from New Hampshire, Warren Rudman, announced he would not seek re-election. His example has been followed by others; at the time of writing, nearly 20 in the Senate and the House of Representatives have announced they will quit.

At a private dinner a Republican Senator ventured a mixture of pain, anger and frustration. Bipartisan coalitions to tackle serious social problems have for 12 years been kiboshed by a White House which had abdicated executive responsibility. The on-going squabble over perks and government pork-barrelling has focused legislative attention on the "profitability of the Senate Gift Shop" rather than the serious national malaise. Then, there was profound anger at politicians: as a result, he, and others, preferred to keep their heads down in Washington rather than visit their constituencies. Small wonder then that he questioned whether he would seek re-election in '96.

This is not, it seems to me, a malady of the vital signs. In contrast to elsewhere, America's look good: inflation is running at 4%, unemployment is slightly more than 7%. Measured in any basket, America's standard of living is probably the best in the world. (Even if this claim is debateable, why is it that so many millions are trying to sneak into the country every year?)

"Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" — the great American claim — seems more than a little tarnished this spring. It is wan. In all respects, this is curious — after all, no lesser a figure than George Bush proclaimed America's victory in the Cold War.

But the Cold War, too, has left its scars. Greg Treverton of the Council on Foreign Relations tells of the CIA Soviet analyst who pointed out that "Reagan's huge arms buildup of the 1980s broke both the US and the Soviets: only *they* have realised it".

And yet, as I have tried to stress, America's crisis is not about economics, it's about the very purpose (in this order) of politics, government and nationhood. It is perfectly true that embedded deep within the American political psyche is a streak of anti-politics. The current moment has burnished this impulse with (in the view of many) two potentially reckless outcomes this election season.

One is the re-emergence of former Governor Jerry Brown as a Democratic contender with his "Take America Back" slogan. After his dismal showing in the New York Primary few believe that he can do anything more at this stage than wound the Democratic Party. Brown's politics — with his proposal for a Flat Tax — seem a throwback to the 'moonbeam' politics of flower power of which he was a child.

And then, there is H. Ross Perot, Texas computer billionaire and almost-candidate for the Presidency. Perot has emerged as the anti-politics politician: the self-made man who — as in the Davy Crockett story — will go down to Washington to set things straight. In this age of disillusion, Steve Bosworth of the Japan-America Foundation believes Perot can make a deep impact on the American people. This was confirmed by a barmaid at my Washington hotel who confessed that Perot "excited" her!

From the incumbent President and Republican candidate for the Presidency — George Bush — the message seems to have been replaced by muddle. There are increasing signs that there is a deep conflict between the White House and the Bush campaign. And when the President moves — other than to walk with his wife along the Potomac to

THE ANTI-POLITICS POLITICIANS 'WILL GO DOWN TO WASHINGTON TO SET THINGS STRAIGHT.'



Chronic inability to help those at the margin of the American Dream

watch the cherry blossoms, that is — it ends in panic and bumble.

For all this political spring there really seems no end to America's bewilderment. A rising stock market will provide no jump-start to a public mood which is introspective to the point of despair. How could it? How is one to rejuvenate a social order where one in every four black youths are either in jail or on parole? Where the most common form of death among black teenagers is homicide? Where 60% of black children are born out of wedlock? Where 11% of every cohort (the 4-million births in America every year) will be functionally brain-damaged by the day they get to school?

The list is endless and there is no need to go on, in order to make this point: If American self-esteem is reeling this spring, more than a little of this must be laid at the chronic inability to help those at the margins of the American Dream.

WHILE MUCH of this is structural of course, the problems were compounded during the 1980s by Ronald Reagan's voodoo economics.

Is there a cure? In the short term, probably not.

And yet the thoughtful head of the Pew Charitable Trusts, Tom Langfitt, put his finger on something with his plea for a revival of local politics. Decades of centralised government have alienated America's people from their public life. Their government process is bankrupt with voters and leaders caught in a hopeless tangle. Only at the local level can their trust be rebuilt, can the system regain its ballast.

And where does that leave Washington?

Still in the centre of things, but not promising to deliver what it cannot. Not articulating a "public interest" with no mandate. A place only to be visited in cherry blossom time, not a place to provide the answer to America's every anxiety. ●

Township Violence: A sane and sympathetic analysis

reassess the dynamics peculiar to the situation here. Although she refers extensively to other literature on violence in all parts of the world she isolates factors which are specifically South African and which we will have to recognise if we are to find solutions.

She does this by using her original case histories taken in 1986, and then further interviews done in 1989 with the same subjects. In doing this longitudinal study she is trying to establish the permanent and long-term effects of the violence on the individual.

Unfortunately, like much South African work, the original interviews were done in an emergency and she has little information about the psychological status of these people before the violence. Nonetheless she manages to give a comprehensive and effective analysis of the effects suffered by this group.

She uses the technique of case studies, pointing out in her Appendix that the cases were not those of individuals but composites of clusters of people falling into the four categories she has defined. She examines the entire spectrum of traumas that have befallen them including loss of loved ones, loss of family structures, witnessing or helping to commit an atrocity and coming to terms with apartheid and grinding poverty. Her subjects are all young people aged between 14 and 25, all have been "warriors", most have been injured and detained, and many have lost schooling and any job opportunities they may ever have had. She comes to the conclusion that although all of her subjects have been permanently affected, not all are permanently psychologically disabled.

HER FINDINGS are that 50% of this group have managed to rebuild their lives, still have the ability to maintain caring relationships and are

functioning and concerned citizens despite the fact that their living conditions are basically unchanged. She argues that there is still room for a solution to the "brutalisation" of the youth, and that the negative media perception of a "lost generation" may not be accurate. She points out that the perception of "brutalisation" being a solely black problem is far from accurate, and that the effects of apartheid and violence on white soldiers and policemen has not even begun to be addressed.

Straker sees the solutions coming from the communities themselves, in conjunction with the churches, helping professionals, traditional healers and rituals which enable people to begin again.

She is adamant that there can be no healing until people have worked through the guilt and anger, and redressed the wrongs they have committed. She says you can forgive, but not forget, and that the memories need to be cleansed in order to be healed. She points to the Zimbabwean experience as an example, and lays stress on the building of socio-economic conditions which re-establish the social order and the family.

There are so many facets to this book that no review can do it real justice. It is a sane and sympathetic analysis, which while abhorring the violence attempts to understand and translate it into comprehensive terms that enable concerned people to begin to act constructively.

As a person who has been involved in the effects of the violence and the problems of refugees my only regret is that I did not have the advantage of being able to read the book before my involvement, and I highly recommend it to all those people who are concerned about the levels of violence in this country. ●

— WENDY LEEB