

U.S. GOVERNMENT TURMOIL

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As this is written, the U.S. government, which seeks to be a model for others to emulate, is in turmoil and experiencing a partial shutdown. In addition, a major financial crisis with worldwide ramifications looms in the very near future. Both are possible because of the division of powers created by the country's constitution, which makes the legislative, executive and judicial branches separate entities.

On the surface, the two problems are easy to explain. The Congress has not appropriated money to run the government for the fiscal year that began October 1. Nonessential activities have ceased, contractors and their employees have not been paid, some product inspections (such as the safety certification of newly completed aircraft) have stopped, 800,000 government civilian employees are staying home without pay.

The looming, second crisis arises from a fiscal practice that virtually no other country follows. When Congress appropriates more money than the government collects, it does not automatically empower the government to borrow the difference. Separate legislation is required to "raise the debt ceiling." The existing ceiling will be reached, it is said, on October 17 and when it is, the government will have to default on its obligations unless an increased authorization is enacted. Worldwide ramifications will follow which will inflict damage well beyond the U.S., as well as to the U.S.

Enactment of a stopgap budget, a so-called "continuing resolution," and authorization for increased borrowing have both been tied to acceptance of Republican demands that are unacceptable to the President and his fellow Democrats. Thus, the turmoil.

By the time this is read, hopefully some resolution of these matters may have occurred. However, the immediate issues are symptoms of deeper, divisive issues stemming from changes in demography and law.

Throughout virtually all its history, the U.S. government has reflected the male, Christian (mostly Protestant), Western European origins of its founders. But changes are underway that make it inevitable that this demographic will no longer dominate the government. As with all dominant groups, it is painful for them to have to share primacy. A substantial part of the motivation for opposition to the President, his party and their programs begins with this fact.

History tells us that parties out of power seek to thwart those in power but what is happening goes beyond that. There is much evidence but a supportive sample would include:

The persistence of questions about the place of birth and religion of the President and thus his legitimacy

The re-drawing of Congressional district boundaries by the states (which make these determinations) to fragment minority population concentrations and the concentration of members of the dominant group into districts of their own

The opposition to policies and programs designed to equalize opportunities – education, voting rights, employment – for all and the willingness to erect new barriers

The unwillingness to grant full legal status to those residents who lack it

The animosity toward programs designed to ease the situation of women, ethnic and national minorities, in fact, any group different from the long-existing mainstream.

Aggravating the situation for those sensing a loss of power is that time is running out. They fear, and openly express, their apprehension that when in operation, new programs and policies will be appreciated, effective and thus protected from change. This is particularly true of the re-casting of the U.S. health care funding system which they thought they could blemish by naming it Obamacare. They have made this the focus of their demands, in part because its existence is the hallmark success of the President.

Those who oppose the President have to be worried by history. They have seen their candidate win a majority of the popular vote in only one of the last 6 presidential elections. Since government is less likely to be in "their" hands but controlled by "others," they want to make government as small as possible. They argue for freedom from government intrusion in their lives but do not find limitations on women's private decisions to be intrusive.

All this is occurring in a changing legal, institutional environment. Huge amounts can now be spent on what have become unending election campaign cycles. The result seems to be what would be expected. Members of Congress devote themselves to raising money and pleasing those from whom money can be raised. Combine that with homogenized districts, so that little heed need be paid to those with alternative opinions, and the result is Members who are virtually independent of the needs of the nation or of their party.

Further, a geographical divide exists. Strenuous resistance to the impacts of the emerging national re-alignments is not found throughout the country but is concentrated in such areas as the states that tried to secede 150 years ago over slavery. On many issues, the United States is divided geographically.

All this makes the future murky. Were one to make a bet, however, the likelihood would seem to be that muddling through would win, giving time for existing trends to intensify. When they do, the likelihood then will be that there will be a

revamped, revised, perhaps renamed Republican Party, with its present, most antagonized, members in another organization.