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Why is our country just not functioning?

Joan Chittister | Sep. 8, 2011 From Where I Stand

It?s been a tumultuous decade, hard to equal in terms of long-term effect. In this short span of U.S. history, spasms of upheaval and change swept through every major system in the country: political, military, social and economic. Historians to come may well see it as a major turning point, not only for U.S. global domination, but also for the very history and internal stability of the country itself. The temblors have been legion.

In these years the United States has had two consecutive presidents who were not elected by the popular vote. The Supreme Court decided one of them -- the Bush-Gore election in 2000; the Democratic Super-Delegates, a 1982 invention of the Democratic Party and a political device of questionable value even at its inception, decided the other -- The Obama-Clinton race in 2008.

A nuclear military, touted as the strongest in the world, was nevertheless powerless to avert the suicide bombings by 19 foreign nationals of the New York World Trade Center, the Pentagon and, presumably, the White House itself. This strike at the economic, military and political center of the country by a small group of Islamic fanatics -- using four of our own domestic airplanes to do it -- was chilling in its symbolism and conclusive in its redefinition of war.

Social wars, as well, rent the fabric of a people who, until now, it appeared, had never questioned the nature of marriage, or sexual orientation, or the meaning of ?family,? or the definition of life, or the place of the church in the state. Now, we?re deeply mired in all of those questions. Mired and polarized. Mired and almost equally divided.

Economically, the moguls of institutionalized greed -- reminiscent of the era of the ?Robber Barons? -- created a fantasy world of million dollar mortgages out of Monopoly Money that left the rich richer but brought the economy down on the heads of a once middle class and the poorest of the poor.

Then, faced with the most culturally defining election in U.S. history -- between an African American and a Republican war hero -- the nation defied its own history and elected the African American. A win for idealism, right? A win that would heal the social-political fissures the years before this had spawned? Maybe. Then again, maybe not.

Nothing got healed, no national direction changed when it came to a call to stimulate the lagging economy of the poor in the same way the government had rescued the broken-down businesses of the rich: With bonuses for the banks, the oil companies, the automobile companies and their revived CEO?s whose schemes had buckled the economy to begin with.

Now, it seems, when the money is for education or health care or job creation or social service programs for the poor or middle class, we?re back to ?rugged individualism? and balanced budgets and tightened debt ceilings.

Worse, it?s possible that we have given up the practice of democratic negotiation for the fine art of youth gangs. We now have a locked-down Congress in battle gear, so seriously partisan, so arrogant in their positions that

they can now boldly proclaim that politics is not the ?art of compromise,? not ?the art of the deal,? not ?the art of the possible.? It is now the art of refusal. It is the art by which a minority -- or better yet, a minority of a minority -- can promise chaos and shutdown and non-negotiables.

In 2009, Senate Republicans filibustered almost 80 percent of all proposed legislation. But who doesn?t know that endless filibusters, endless unwillingness to come together for the good of all rather than simply in the interests of a few, signals the very end of democracy.

The situation we?re in now, then, is clear enough. What is not clear is why. What exactly is going on that is bringing us to such an impasse, such a stand-still, such a decade of destruction on all levels? If the feminists have taught the world anything in the last 50 years it must be that you can?t solve a problem you can?t name. So what?s the problem?

Is the problem covert racism? Did all the people who seemed to welcome Barack Obama so warmly already decide that he simply could not be allowed to succeed, or heaven only knows what ?those people? would do next? In which case we can only be sure that they would have done the same thing or worse to a woman even if, as the T-shirt reads, ?It shoulda been a girl.?

Is the problem lack of leadership? Is the issue that the idealist is not a leader and simply does not know how to put together the kind of old time coalitions that got us ?The New Deal,? ?Desegregation,? and ?The war against poverty.? In which case, why has no one else risen up to fill the vacuum?

Or is the issue that we ourselves have moved away from respect for professional politicians, from the very ones whose gifts lie in the making of a deal. Are we no longer sending politicians into politics? Have we ourselves become enthralled by the allure of personal posturing and intransigence mistakenly defined as strength, however politically effective, however nationally sound it may or may not be?

Or is the real problem a conscious political intention by some to simply make it impossible for the government to function? Is the real problem a sick and totalitarian strategy? In that case, the hope may be that, frustrated by the present impotence of what has always been a model of civil and collaborative government of opposites, voters will simply reverse directions again and hope for the best.

But then who will put Humpty Dumpty back together in an environment where it is now established that among our official listeners listening has ceased, where compromise has been abandoned in behalf of bullying, where disdain for the Presidency is now public sport and where ?negotiations? start out with announcements about what will not be negotiated?

Maybe the problem is not the president at all. Maybe the problem is a Congress, whose whole game of governance, especially since the mid-term elections, is ?No.? ?No taxes for us, no jobs for you, no concern whatsoever for the common good. Our concern is not the people, it?s the Party.?

In which case, ?Welcome, Comrade, to a long list of failed governments before you.?

But, if that?s the problem, we are now set up to play the game of ?No,? all over again and even better. Only now we have a new device, ?The Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction? created by the Budget Control Act of 2011, called by some a ?Super Committee,? to do it.

Twelve people -- some of which have already declared what ideas they will not entertain -- out of a congress of 541 members are now empowered to say no for all of us and no one can say other.

Except the voters, of course, who got us into this mess in the first place -- who voted for their own extremes,

who selected extremists instead of listeners, dealers, politicians.

The point is that in this decade of massive social change, everything feels upside down and we?re looking for someone else to set it right again -- as if that past will ever return. The easy and comfortable thing is to lay what may be specious blame for what the Congress does at the feet of the President -- and vice versa -- forgetting that we put all of these people in office ourselves.

From where I stand, however, it may be our own extremism that?s showing.

Maybe this time, we could all start by identifying good politicians who are committed to making American ideals real, good leaders who know how to negotiate and work across the aisle.

Otherwise we will go on playing Russian roulette with our national future instead of putting our hope in those great old three-legged races we once staged at every county fair.

You remember those: Opposite types -- tall/small, old/young, male/female -- are organized into pairs who must run the course together. The problem is that to win the race you have to cooperate with your partner, however unlike you both may be, because one of your legs and one of theirs is tied together.

The model of the limping, halting, awkward three-legged race couldn?t possibly be any worse for the country than the dangerous game we?re playing right now.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*.]

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