Slouching Towards the Barackalypse

Contributed by Albert Bates
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Watching the drama unfold in Washington last week, and listening to the sound as it echoed around the planet, I was struck by how bi-polar our shared political reality has become.

Many of us, probably the majority, are still hoping and praying that now that the wicked witch is dead, the Wizard will whisk us back to Kansas and Auntie Em will have a hot apple pie waiting.
People in that category think either the recession will be shortened by Keynesian infusions and Rooseveltian public works, or if that fails and it enlarges into The Greater Depression, it will rebound eventually, perhaps a decade hence, just in time for the bulk of the baby boom to retire to their gated communities and golf courses, bent but unbroken.

The other hemisphere of our brain is populated with EROIers, Malthusiasts, the Club of Rome, 2012ers, and The Doomsayers (see link to New Yorker below) of various stripes. Of course, one is only a “doomer” if one turns out to have been wrong. If one turns out to have been right, the better term is “visionary.”

We inhabit the bicameral mind of Joan of Arc or Nostradamus, and wonder, are the voices to be taken literally, or can we just write them off to hallucination?

President Obama’s inaugural address, a bouquet of big tent politics with fragrant notes of a tent revival meeting, embraced both ends of that schizoid spectrum.

Who could argue with this:

...our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions -- that time has surely passed. Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

The problem is, those two very agreeable sentences were preceded by this:

We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth. Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year. Our capacity remains undiminished. But...

Now, saying we are of undiminished capacity is something a great many people would take issue with, and have. Let me quote a few.

On the bioregional list (Bioreg.yahoogroups.com), David Haenke said,

We no longer have the vast bounties of nature to burn, and the enormous capacity of nature's sinks to absorb, dilute, and neutralize the entropies of a deliberately wasteful economy. Mr. Obama purports to go back to the playbook of 1933 and Lord Keynes and rev up the economy (viz.: burn resources, primarily fossil energy) to get us back "growth." As well, the total level of public and private debt for the U.S. has reached levels that are barely calculable, and then unfathomable. It's neither 1933 nor Kansas anymore. China took it as collateral.

In the Clusterfuck Nation, (link below) James Howard Kunstler said,

Credit may be in extremely short supply this year, and hence crops may be in short supply as we turn the corner into spring and summer. Just as in the case of WalMart versus Main Street, the reform of farming in America is one of those "changes" much larger than most of us imagine. I'd go so far to say that a large proportion of young people now in college will find themselves not working in office cubicles, but in some way or other in farming...

At Club Orlov, Dmitry Orlov (link below) said,

According to the latest International Energy Agency projections, the half-life of industrial civilization can be capped at about 17 years: it's all downhill from here. All industrial countries will be forced to rapidly deindustrialize on this time scale, but the one that has spent the last century building an infrastructure that has no future -- based on little houses interconnected by cars, with all of the accompanying moribund, unmaintainable infrastructure -- is virtually guaranteed to fall the hardest. An American's two greatest enemies are his house and his car. But try telling that to most Americans, and you will get ridicule, consternation, and disbelief.

From The Automatic Earth, Malibu Barbie edition (link below), where Ilargi said,

Our economies are shrinking, not growing, and they will continue on down that path for a very long time. Perpetual growth is over, and if you look closely, it has been for at least 30 years. Education, health care and many other fields have become more expensive and less affordable during that time. Who needed day-care in the 1960's? Who could not afford to go to a doctor? Today, both parents need to work full-time -- or more -- just to pay the monthly bills. It wasn't like that in the 1960s. Not at all. So were our parents so much less happy than we are? Not at all.

The fallacy of perpetual growth has led us into a sense of entitlement that is based on complete blindness and utterly wrong assumptions. If we are not awake enough to leave that behind, we will be the reason for fighting in the streets, in our own [Malibu] Barbie neighborhoods. If we want to prevent that from happening, we need to take not one, but 826 steps back. But the president of Hope and Belief talks about resuming the economy of growth. That is not possible. People need a reality check. They need to adjust to living on less personal, corporeal, space. If you think or hope that the PM of Iceland is the last one to be thrown out by the wayside, you need to start thinking instead of believing.

Obama was right about one thing. This is not a crisis that can be solved by government. It won't be fixed by printing more money. It will be a rough slog, no matter what, but to repeat again what our first President said at Valley Forge,

Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it.

Now, truth be told, old George knew that the odds of the American Revolution succeeding at that point were slim to none, and this is as much a wishful recruiting statement as a St. Crispin's Day rallying cry (link below), but it contains some nuggets of eternal truth. As Mr. Kunstler opined,

Many Americans of good will also stand ready to face reality, to roll up our sleeves, ditch the video games and the Nascar and the microwaved cheese treats, and the internet porn and all the other noxious, narcolepsy-inducing distractions of our time, and put our shoulders to the wheel to haul this nation into a plausible future.

So if, in distant days, our progeny look back to where we coalesced our will, assembled our tattered permaculture army, joined hands between city and country, laid back the carbon under our desertifying farmland, and Hudson-River-landed our rusting steel spaceship into a brighter, more realistic future with a sustainable volume of frugal humans once again living in harmony with nature, then let them say this is where it began.

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References

"The Dystopians," by Ben McGrath, The New Yorker, January 26, 2009, p. 41:

newyorker.com

Clusterfuck Nation! by Jim Kunstler:

jameshowardkunstler.typepad.com

"The next stop is "yard-sale nation," in which all the plastic crapola accumulated over the past fifty years is sorted out for residual value and, if still working, sold for a fraction of its original sticker price. This includes everything from Humvees to Hello Kitty charm bracelets."

"Perestroika 2.0 Beta" by Dmitry Orlov, Jan. 22, 2009:

cluborlov.blogspot.com

"Tragedy only resides in reality" by Ilargi, Jan. 24 2009:

theautomaticearth.blogspot.com

Joan of Arc

Nostradamus

President Obama's inaugural address

St. Crispin's Day rallying cry:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_V_(play)