

PERSPECTIVES

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The Kantor Center publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: kantorce@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the tenth issue of Perspectives.

The Unthinkable

It's time to discuss a scenario that was once pure fiction

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According to an opinion poll conducted in June 2021 by YouGov and Bright Line Watch, a think tank of political scientists who fear for the future of American democracy, no less than 37% of Americans would support their state's secession for a smaller union more aligned with their "Red" or "Blue" orientation. Support among southern Republicans for the breakup of the United States was the highest at 66%.

Surveys that pose hypothetical questions should always be taken with a grain of salt. This one adds to alarming evidence.

If there is one lesson to learn from the recent Russian aggression that shocked the world, it is the strategic importance of distinguishing between the unlikely, the undesired, the unthinkable – and the impossible.

A breakup of the United States is still not a likely scenario, but it has become a possibility.

Dr. Yoav Fromer, a scholar of American politics at Tel Aviv University, suggested in January that only a war against an external enemy could restore a sense of unity among Americans.

Perhaps if Russia had attacked Pearl Harbor this would have been the case. The Ukraine conflict shows the great, universal appeal the liberal ideals of freedom and

sovereignty have. It also showed just how dangerously divisive American public life has become.

In 2022, some Americans cannot recognize an enemy unless that enemy is Republican or Democrat.

Former President Trump, who, according to most recent opinion polls, will be reelected in 2024, praised Putin's brutal, fascist-styled policies. His admiration for a ruthless despot was unequivocal.

In the 1980s, such words would have immediately been labeled un-American, and the politician uttering them would be shunned.

Not anymore. Republican officials, fearing Trump's wrath, did their best to avoid condemning him. Some went as far as to praise Putin for defending Christian values, whatever that means for them.

It is a terrible thought, what would have become of human civilization if Trump had been president in 1941.

In January, New York Times columnist David Brooks offered evidence that Americans are becoming increasingly anti-social towards one another.

One example is a seven percent rise in deadly traffic accidents during 2020, when the number of miles Americans drove fell 13 percent. Another is a sharp increase in hate crimes during the same period. Yet another is a drastic decline over the past two decades in the number of households that give charitable donations of any sort.

Brooks confessed that he could not explain why Americans act this way.

Whether politics are the cause for rising animosities, their reflection, or both, clearly, the house is divided against itself. American democracy is no longer a competition between adversaries who champion competing points of view. It has become a vicious tribal fight.

The reason is not that ideological differences are sharper than ever before. Today, Americans are not at odds over core cultural and social issues more than in 1925 or 1968.

Unlike then, however, today, differences are absorbed and nurtured in the echo chambers of social media and cable news networks. The internet revolution has had an ironic effect. The more American media became pluralistic, the more Americans became impatient with any opinion but theirs.

The echo chambers culture encourages the thriving of intellectually oppressive hypocrites on the left and conspiracy-obsessed lovers-of-loathing on the right. The diminishing mainstream, those still able to think in bipartisan terms, cling to empty, anachronistic clichés of unity.

There is another reason why two distinct American nations are emerging. In the broadest sense of the word, the system – health care, education, public safety, a just judiciary, merit-based mobilization – does not deliver compared to those of other Western states. The American story used to be synonymous with optimism and innovation. It is now characterized by rage and fear.

Instead of recognizing this reality, the mainstream insists on praising the American way of life, fueling the anger of many who are not doing well and have realized their children will not either.

The political showdown will possibly come sooner rather than later.

A republic cannot survive unless a solid majority of its public agrees about the rules and narratives that regulate its politics.

According to various opinion polls, around one in three Americans, and a majority of Republicans, still believe in the baseless notion that the 2020 election was rigged. On January 6, hundreds of rioters violently attacked Congress with the aim of intimidating lawmakers into overturning the people's will.

The man who encouraged this subversive act consistently claims he won an election he lost by seven million votes and is now promising to pardon the January 6 culprits.

Is there anything that would appease his millions of supporters if he ends up losing again in three years? Is there anything that would convince the millions who detest him that he is a legitimate national leader?

To make matters worse, some of the genius balances introduced in the Constitution to safeguard the Union and its democratic system have become helplessly partisan.

The Constitution requires the president to be chosen by electors rather than by popular vote, in part as a check against authoritarianism. States were allocated an equal representation of two seats in the Senate as a check against the marginalization of less populous states.

These balances worked fine for over a century, creating a remarkably stable and relatively efficient political system.

They do not anymore. Because of demographic changes, for the past thirty years, the American electorate has leaned Democrat, though by small and fluctuating margins. Since 1992, Republicans have only once won the popular vote in presidential elections. However, Republican presidents served in office for 12 years, and Republican lawmakers have dominated Congress.

The recurring disparity between the popular vote and the electoral outcome came close to repeating itself in 2020. It may well do so in 2024.

The Supreme Court serves, among other roles, as the ultimate arbiter between political actors about the rules of the game. Because of pure coincidences, the Court, now a highly politicized panel, is destined to be dominated by conservative justices for the next generation, maybe more.

The Constitution cannot be amended, practically, without the consent of both major political parties. The Republicans will not agree to change rules that favor them. How long will the people of California and New York accept a Union in which their votes are worth less?

If someone has an idea for a happy end, kindly inform.

Following the Russian invasion, there is much talk about the decline of America. The reality is more complicated. The Ukraine War has provided another demonstration

that the United States has significantly weakened since the 1990s as a world power. Yet it also proved the United States' indispensability as the protector of the liberal democracies that are formally allied with it.

The prospect of an end to the United States should alarm anyone who cares about world peace and democracy. Just think how the people of Germany, Taiwan, Poland, Japan, or Australia would have felt amidst the most recent news from Europe if there were no United States – divided but still a liberal democracy that is the strongest military, technological, and economic force on earth – by far.

The fate of the Jewish people, and the Zionist project, has been particularly closely intertwined with the existence of a strong United States.

The American Jewish community has been the richest, safest, and most influential Jewish community in history. Israel has relied on the support of American Jews since its inception and, since the 1970s, has been heavily dependent diplomatically and militarily on American support.

An end of the Union will not be good news for either.

However, from a Zionist point of view, a breakup may not necessarily be *only* bad news.

The Union may dissolve either violently or peacefully, with radically different implications.

A second civil war, with the human tragedies and financial wreckage it will involve, will be a great encouragement for the anti-liberal forces across the world, including Iran and other Islamist actors. This is the bad news.

Still, other than Britain and France, Israel is the only American ally that can ensure, in a worst-case scenario, the mutual destruction of any of its enemies. In a Middle East after the breakup of the Union, moderate Sunni states just might have to rely more openly on the strongest regional power and further enhance their alliance with Israel. It is entirely possible that this prospect did not escape the Arab signatories of the Abraham Accords and their Saudi backers.

In a post-American world, Israel will be forced to diversify its alliances. It may do away with a “client state mentality” and become truly independent on the world stage.

A violent end of the Union may encourage hundreds of thousands of American Jews to make Aliyah. Israel will be enriched with a highly educated population and secure its Jewish majority. The Zionist state will become the unchallenged primary center of Jewish existence.

From the 1960s to the late 1980s, nothing threatened Israel's existence as the migration of its citizens to the United States. Israel was the place of ideology, community, and family. America was the place to realize one's ambitions and individual dreams.

This changed. Israel has become a better place to live today in most aspects of life. It's not just the quality of life; it's life itself. Just consider that despite the security threats, the pollution, and the way Israelis drive, the life expectancy of Israeli males is six years more than that of American males.

The transformation of Israel into a better place to live has not led thus far to a Jewish exodus from America in part because American Jews are doing, on average, much better than the average American. If the Union comes to a bloody end, with the inevitable economic and social consequences, many will make use of their birthright.

Israeli Jews and American Jews have very different cultures. This is why Aliyah is often a tough hill to climb for the latter. Still, there is much in Israel to make Americans, in particular, feel at home – and the creation of a massive community would further minimize the adjustments new migrants would have to make, as was the case with the migration from the former USSR.

With the difference between unlikely and impossible in mind, Israelis should seriously consider whether their economy is prepared for a scenario of hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Israel's urban centers have a lot to offer, but not housing.

It is also possible that the United States comes to a peaceful or almost peaceful end. The Reds and the Blues will manage to agree at least on parting. They will somehow figure out how to divide Florida, Pennsylvania, and other contested states, as well as who gets the seat on the Security Council and how to divide the US \$30 trillion national debt.

Two Americas will not be as strong on the world stage as one. Still, even as separate states, a Red America and a Blue America would rank among the most powerful nations on earth technologically, militarily, and economically. Each would be a formidable ally for other countries.

In both, pro-Zionist voters will remain crucial, suggesting the pro-Israeli lobby will remain strong. In Red America, it will not be possible to win elections without the evangelical vote. In Blue America, it will be impossible without the Jewish vote.

In a “two-Americas” reality, Israel would negotiate with each separately. Instead of fearing the far-reaching implications of the potential rise of a hostile administration – an isolationist Republican or anti-Zionist Democrat – Israel would have its chips divided between two administrations.

If at this moment you shrug your shoulders and wonder why you wasted the last ten minutes reading nonsense, ask yourself what you thought in 1988 of the possibility that by 1992 there would be no USSR.

Prof. Uriya Shavit is Head of the Kantor Center. An Arabic translation of his book (with Ofir Winter) *Zionism in Arab Discourses*, exploring 120 years of Arab fascination with the achievements of the Zionist project, was published this month by the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research.