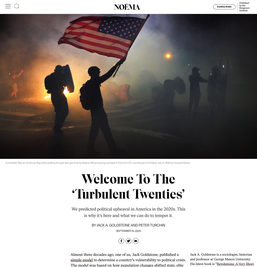

Welcome To The 'Turbulent Twenties'

We predicted political upheaval in America in the 1920s. This is why it's here and what we can do to prepare.

BY JACK A. GOLDSTONE AND PETER TURCHIN

SEPTEMBER 6, 2021

Almost three decades ago, one of us, Jack Goldstone, published a book predicting political upheaval in America in the coming years. The model was based on how population changes shifted state, elite and popular behavior. Goldstone argued that, according to this Demographic-Structural Theory, in the 21st century, America was likely to get a populist, America-first leader who would use a whirlwind of conflict.

Then ten years ago, the other of us, Peter Turchin, applied Goldstone's model to U.S. history, using current data. What emerged was alarming: The U.S. was heading toward the highest level of political instability in its history. Based on data from hundred years, from before Trump was elected, Turchin published his prediction that the U.S. was headed for the "Turbulent Twenties," forecasting a period of growing instability in the United States and western Europe.

Given the Black Lives Matter protests and cascading clashes between competing armed factions in cities across the United States, from Portland, Oregon to Kenosha, Wisconsin, we are already well into that way there. But worse lights lies ahead.

Our model is based on the fact that across history, what creates the risk of political instability is the behavior of elites, who all too often seek to increase their wealth and political power at the popular conflict arise. First, faced with a change of labor that dampens growth in wages and productivity, elites seek to take a larger portion of economic gains for themselves, driving up inequality. Second, facing greater competition for elite wealth and status, elites tighten up the rules of entry into elite competitions, making it harder for commoners to an increasingly meritocratic society, elites could keep places at top universities limited and raise the entry requirements and costs to ways that favor the children of those who had already succeeded.

Third, anxious to hold on to their rising fortunes, they *do* all they can to resist taxation of their wealth and profits. Fourth, if all that means starving the government of needed revenues, leading to decaying infrastructure, declining public services and fast-growing government debts.

Such efforts also fuel the way to revolutions. They create simmering conditions of greater inequality and declining effectiveness of, and increasing competition among, elite actions alone are not sufficient. Urbanization and greater education are needed to arouse consciousness of issues and organized groups to the populace who can mobilize and act for change.

"Such selfish elites lead the way to revolutions."

f ✉ ✓

Top leadership matters. Leaders who aim to be inclusive and solve national problems can manage conflicts and defer a crisis. However, leaders who seek to benefit from and for political factions may fan the fiscal crisis closer. Typically, tensions build between elites who back a leader who promises to restore their fortunes and those who seek to rally popular support for major changes to bring a new and inclusive social order. Each side seeks to paint the other as a fiscal threat to society, creating such deep polarization that little of value can be accomplished, and polarization grows worse until a crisis comes along that explodes the fragile social order.

These were the conditions that prevailed in the lead up to the great upheavals in political history, from the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, to the revolutions of 1848 and the U.S. Civil War in the nineteenth century, to the Great Depression and World War I in the twentieth century and the many "color revolutions" that spread in the twenty-first century. So, it is eye-opening that the data show very similar conditions now building up in the United States.

In applying our model to the U.S., we tracked a number of indicators of popular well-being, inequality and political polarization, all the way from 1800 to the present. These included the ratio of median wages to GDP per capita, the share of wealth held by the top one-tenth, wealth inequality, the share of wealth held by the top one-tenth, wealth inequality, the share of wealth held by the top one-tenth, wealth inequality

bipartisan methods to ensure that the election outcome will be widely regarded as fair and legitimate. It will take heroic efforts to rebuild the political center, to join businesses and workers in partnership and consensus, and to restore fairness in both taxation and public spending. Only if all sides can again recover a stake in our government, no matter which party controls it, can we avoid sliding into a crisis that will undermine our Constitution and pit Americans against each other in a way we have not seen for generations.

MORE FROM NOEMA MAGAZINE

ESSAY FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Shaken Nation Needs To Renovate Democracy

NATHAN GARDELS

ESSAY FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Citizenship Is A Myth

ANEESH ANEESH

ESSAY GEOPOLITICS & GLOBALIZATION

Rebuilding A Multilateral World After Trump

ERNESTO ZEDILLO

NOĒMA

Published by the Berggruen Institute

Terms of Service
Privacy Policy
©2021 Noema Magazine

TOPICS

Philosophy & Culture
Geopolitics & Globalization
Future of Capitalism
Technology & the Human
Future of Democracy
Climate Crisis
Digital Society

ABOUT

About Us
Masthead
Editorial Board
Careers
Contact

FOLLOW US

Subscribe
Facebook
Twitter
Instagram
YouTube
LinkedIn
Newsletter