

Two neighbours, not so much alike

by Conrad Black



In recent weeks, less attractive characteristics of both the United States and Canada have been on display. The racist violence of some maladjusted American police produced a white police homicide of an African-American in Minneapolis (George Floyd), that disgusted America and shocked the world. It generated civilized protest that was exploited by extremist political groups and maniacal hooligans, mobs so destructive, nihilistic, and often well organized, that they qualify as urban terrorist guerillas.

In Canada, the reaction to American events elicited the much gentler but inexpressibly tedious practice of taking political correctness to a level well below the point of diminishing returns. Just weeks ago, no one would have anticipated that there were any conceivable circumstances in which 20 or more of America's greatest cities could be convulsed by outbursts

of arson and pillage, even in some of the most expensive areas and on some of the most famous avenues of the world.

The United States, in its competitiveness, veneration for firearms, and almost unconditional fixation on success, has always been an immensely creative and productive country, but often fractious and violent and rarely serene for long. The America of Norman Rockwell, Walt Disney and the old Hollywood exists, but it does not represent even half the country. It is an idealized self-image but it has been 50 years since there was severe violence in more than one or two American cities at a time.

The ultimate root of the problems that make American society so vulnerable to partial disruption is the legacy of slavery. Despite recent attempts to pretend that Canada was a slave-holding country, in fact there has been no slavery in Canada since Canada became self-governing in 1848, 14 years after slavery was abolished in the British Empire. But before that there were never more than a relative handful of slaves in New France or British North America, apart from the numerous native slaves captured by warring tribes, a practice the British and French eventually ended. The economic rationale used to justify slavery in the American South and Caribbean was the belief that Africans were much more productive agricultural workers in tropical climates than Caucasians were. Slavery increased production and reduced labour costs in harvesting cotton, tobacco, sugar, and tropical fruit. We should not be under any illusion that we would not have yielded to the temptation to import slaves had there been any economic argument for it. Instead, our history of giving refuge to fugitive American slaves and anti-slavery agitators was a very distinguished one. As Canada envies America many things, especially that it is the great locomotive among nations and we are seen as passing, pleasant countryside, we are now, perversely, both disdaining and envying America its guilt.

The American Constitutional Congress of 1788 at Philadelphia barely scraped together a compromise based on acknowledging the status of slavery in the former colonies where it existed and permitting 60 per cent of the slave population to be counted for purposes of determining the number of congressmen and electoral college members from each state, even though the slaves had no right to vote. The original Democratic Party (called the Republican-Democrats for a time), founded by Jefferson and Madison, won 13 of the 15 presidential elections between 1800 and 1856 as the party of the South in the South and in the north as the party that would keep the South in the Union. (It was a formula a little like that later employed by the Canadian Liberals, who from the First World War until the Mulroney era sold themselves in Quebec as the party that would make Confederation work for French-Canadians and elsewhere as the party that would keep Quebec in Canadian Confederation; the Liberals were in office for 51 of the 63 years between 1921 in 1984 using this formula.)

The Civil War, which cost 750,000 American dead in a population of 31 million, was initiated after Lincoln manoeuvred the South into firing the first shot and called for volunteers to suppress an insurrection. Two years into a war to preserve the Union, he proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves, though there were none in the intact Union, and he was hoping to incite a slave revolt in the South. It is an illusion that the majority of the northern states were prepared to fight such a terrible war entirely to emancipate the slaves, though the majority of Americans opposed slavery and Lincoln himself considered it an evil institution.

The United States waited another 100 years until in another formidable act of statesmanship, President Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, secured the adoption of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, which finally enfranchised all African-Americans. President Richard Nixon effectively ended school segregation by persuading local authorities that it was the only

alternative to the imposition of court-ordered, forced transference of millions of schoolchildren all over the nation out of their neighbourhoods and against their parents' wishes in order to achieve racial balance in the nation's schools. The United States has made a prodigious and admirable effort to raise African-American incomes and levels of education. And in the last months prior to the coronavirus pandemic, President Trump's economic zones and tax incentives had reduced unemployment to the point where there were more accessible positions to fill than unemployed people.

Paradoxically, the achievement of the full right to vote in the mid-1960s coincided with the release of the pent-up frustrations of centuries and along with the Vietnam War, contributed to massive African-American rioting throughout the country that did terrible damage to Black neighbourhoods and cost hundreds of mainly African-American lives. In recent weeks, many protesters against the killing of George Floyd were white, and so were many of the extremists who inflicted terrible damage in many cities, using the Floyd demonstrators as a cover for their totalitarian and anarchist objectives, somewhat as the Weather Underground and other violent groups did with the civil rights movement in the '60s. The violence subsided quickly with, compared to previous eras, only a modest application of force and only about a dozen fatalities.

The local authorities, mainly complacent, corrupt, long-entrenched Democratic urban machines completely out of touch with anything except self-enrichment, were clearly caught off guard. The country will ignore the nonsense about defunding the police, though reforms of police techniques have been desperately needed forever and not only in race-related matters, and will finally be achieved. The president has already acted by executive order. (The entire American criminal legal system is a fascistic cesspool from the streets to the steps of the Supreme Court; reforming it will be an exacting process.)

As in most matters, Canada is not as complicated or as challenging as the immense, always slightly revolutionary, formerly slave-holding and firearm-loving United States. But in these two weeks, we have seen Canada over-achieve in political correctness. Former federal opposition leader Stockwell Day said on a CBC news panel two weeks ago that there was not systemic racism in Canada, and he was fired as a director of the telecommunications company Telus and as an adviser to the McMillan law firm. Completing the circle in Stalinist terms, he has apologized for saying the truth. "Systemic racism" means racism throughout society and its governance and is a false description of Canada and the United States. There are some racially bigoted people and there is a legacy of racist attitudes, especially in the U.S., but both countries have made admirable and mainly successful efforts to end racism. I myself have been the subject of a pitiful little act of persecution for public truth-telling about systemic racism.

This sort of cowardly hypocrisy is less onerous than the assorted violences of America, but it is distressing that so fine a country as Canada diminishes itself with such a prissy, fraudulent, self-righteous attachment to false puritanical truisms that it cannot even abide an innocuous statement that flatters this country. Canada will outgrow its fetishistic political correctness eventually, though not as quickly as the United States purges its nasty urban guerrillas. Canadians are right to celebrate that this is a gentler country than the U.S. But it is mad to treat as racist the assertion that Canada is not a "systemically racist" country.

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