

# *AJISS-Commentary*

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## **POLARIZED AMERICA AND TWO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

***Toshihiro Nakayama***

If you had to characterize the state of American politics today in a word, it would have to be 'division.' This is totally opposite from what then-candidate Obama promised in the 2008 presidential election. Since January of 2011, President Obama has undertaken bold measures to reform the country. However, this has also unintentionally brought about a deep division.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

During the eight years of the George W. Bush administration, most notably in the second term, the Republican Party was clearly adrift. The Bush administration, after having won the 2002 mid-term election, was seen as perfecting the 'conservative revolution.' However, in the latter part of his presidency, Bush was often criticized by the conservatives themselves as being a 'big government conservative,' and his war effort in Iraq was seen as being somewhat of a distraction from more important conservative agenda items.

Conservatism has long been the driving force of the Republican Party. However, it became more and more unclear as to what it actually meant. Modern conservatism in the US has always had its own internal divisions, but the contradictions that surfaced under the Bush administration seemed to overwhelm the movement itself.

Then came the bold initiatives, most notably 'Obamacare,' undertaken by the Obama administration, which had the effect of redefining what it meant to be a conservative in the Obama era. President Obama's 'big government initiatives,' as seen by the conservatives, stimulated the fundamental impulse that shaped the conservative movement in the first place.

In 2008, the American people entrusted then-candidate Obama to overcome divisions and to realize the rather naïve notion of 'one America' that he eloquently presented in his 2004 Democratic convention speech, rather than to bring about a specific change in policy. In his inauguration speech, President Obama stated that America has to set aside 'childish things' and tackle the real issues facing the country. Indeed, the Obama administration has achieved significant policy results. However, in the case of 'Obamacare,' this came at a huge sacrifice. The bill passed seemed to create an unbridgeable chasm within congress and beyond. This was the total opposite of the consensus building effort that President Obama deemed so important. Ironically, President Obama, rather than achieving 'one America,' accelerated the division that was haunting America.

The most remarkable manifestation of the division is that we are witnessing the rise of two social movements on opposite ends on the political spectrum, the Tea Party movement on one side and Occupy Wall Street on the

other, the former affirming the case of radical libertarianism extending far beyond the traditional conservative message of 'small government' and seeming to want no government at all, and the latter denouncing the increasing economic disparity within society. The two social movements, though different in scope and political influence, should be seen as insurgencies in their own ranks. The American people are extremely dissatisfied.

Almost a half a century ago, America saw the rise of the social movements on opposite ends of the political spectrum. On the left, you saw the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) dissatisfied with the prevailing 'liberal consensus.' On the right, there were the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) rebelling against the mainstream Republicans who, however reluctantly, more or less went along with the 'liberal consensus.'


On the surface, the situation then resembles the situation America is facing today. However, there is a fundamental difference. Fifty years ago, it was a clash of two visions on what kind of country America should be. Today, the clash is about what America had become and who is to blame for it. One side says it's vulture capitalist's fault and the other accuses 'socialist president.' This change in tone reflects the sense of stagnation permeating the society.

For a country like America, the notion of the 'American dream' is almost as important as the physical infrastructure that keeps the country going. The promise of a better tomorrow, and the belief in the notion that your child or a grandchild would live a better life than you did, had the effect of diverting attention from the fact that America was indeed a country with deep economic disparities. However, once the reality of the 'American dream' became hollow, the contradictions in American society became more visible. Observers of America tend to look at the Tea Party Movement and Occupy Wall Street as fringe movements. Yet, it would be difficult to understand what is happening in the United States without grasping the dynamic behind their rise.

Watching this trend from outside, what worries us is that the two movements could be seen as a symptom of America turning inward. One major American politician has recently stated that the US domestic political situation is the biggest threat to US foreign policy. After the Iraq war, many critics around the

globe were critical of America's 'unilateral intervention.' Yet, no one wants America to turn inward. America today would never give in to the temptation to retreat into a cocoon as it did in the 1930s. However, this psychological constraint would no doubt be a distraction if America sought to play a positive leadership role on the issues we care about most in this region and beyond.

The Obama administration has clearly stated its vision of newly focusing attention on the Asia-Pacific region. This shift in focus seems to be bipartisan in nature. However, the recent Republican National Convention held in Tampa was notable for its lack of focus on foreign policy. Surely this was an election event and, except in rare cases, you don't win an election with foreign policy positions. Still the lack of focus was conspicuous. For America to remain an active player in the region, ad-hoc participation will not work. The US has to remain a full-time player. In an age when budgetary constraints are severe and people are looking inward, it is the role of the political leadership to provide the nation with a narrative to remain engaged internationally.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties have their own isolationist wings. There is no sign yet that the isolationist factions will have the final say on foreign policy, and they probably never will. We should not overreact to the suggestion that American isolationism is on the rise. Institutional commitment is strong. However, we should also remember that if America decides to do so, it could conclude unilaterally to deemphasize the importance of the region. What America lacks today is a bipartisan vision of its role in the world. This absence of 'vital center internationalism' worries America's partners and forces us to speculate endlessly whether there will be a major shift in foreign policy every four years. 

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