

20.01.21- the Japan Times ‘How could the storming of the U.S Capitol have even occurred?’

The motto of the worldwide Boy Scouts and Girl Guides movement is, “Be Prepared.” It is clear that there were not many Boy Scouts around on Capitol Hill in Washington on the fateful day of Jan. 6.

Not only was this great citadel and emblem of democracy totally unprepared for the invasion of an angry and violent mob, but there were even suggestions, so far not fully proven, that some of those who were meant to be on guard actually let the rioters in.

Questions abound about how this disgraceful event could ever have been allowed to occur. Blame is being spread in numerous directions: obviously against Donald Trump for his inflammatory oratory; against a large section of the Republican Party for backing him and his insistence that the whole election was fraudulent; and in particular against the giant network platforms, which have both allowed and perpetuated an avalanche of bigotry, hate mail, fake news and conspiracy theories to sweep across the public debate in America, burying middle ground opinion and entrenching extremism and intolerance on its way.

America will hold its own inquiries, and these will be prolonged and bitter. But perhaps the most immediate question for the rest of the world is whether this is an event peculiar to the United States, its culture, its immense racial diversity, its history and its adherence, at least in part, to the kind of direct democracy that invariably leads to direct protest. Or whether we are witnessing something much deeper still, with repercussions spreading far beyond American shores.

For instance, should parliamentarians everywhere be fearful that their institutions, and the buildings that house them, could come under direct physical attack as electronically-fired protests across the world against government, ruling classes and official hierarchies take yet a further violent twist?

One view is that older nations with a stronger sense of identity, and with less vulnerability to populist hysteria than the vast United States, can rely on the restraint of innate loyalties and senses of responsibility and compromise to avoid such outbursts. Mob rampages, riots and revolutions aplenty there have been in past centuries, not to mention the upheavals of world wars. But in modern times, established authority and its headquarter structures have survived and been ultimately respected, and, so it is assumed, will generally continue to hold such societies together.

That is probably the prevailing view in London, as in most European capitals, and no doubt in Tokyo as well.

But can we really be so sure? Or is there a dangerous complacency here? The very fact that the Capitol was so completely unprepared for assault shows how distant conventional wisdom and official opinion can be from the new way the world has begun to work. To understand fully just how deeply attitudes, patterns of behavior and politics have changed is just not possible without comprehending the fundamental and all-pervasive impact of information technology.

The consequences have been unfolding not just in America but in Europe, and almost everywhere else, for at least three decades now. Parliamentary buildings may still be intact but traditional democratic institutions are not. Elected politicians have been murdered, city streets filled with burning vehicles, with riots springing from nowhere to bring about the near-paralysis of societies. Nationwide revolts like France's *gilet jaunes* (yellow vests) movement have welled up without apparent central leadership, but with total network coordination.

Nevertheless, all this was predictable and long ago predicted. On this very page more than 20 years ago, this author wrote that "the prospect now opens up of an unending series of campaigns, crusades, copycat protests, demonstrations and rioting, spreading far across national boundaries and obeying no local law" (Oct. 1, 2000). That was several years before the appearance of the iPhone and the accelerated rise of the platform giants, such as Facebook and Twitter, and a forest of smaller networks, which have vastly amplified what went before and now wield huge power above the state and within every state.

After Jan. 6, these organizations are bound to be increasingly called to account. Having argued for years that they were no more than communications companies, which, like telephone networks, could not control what was said on them, their tune has now changed. Now they admit they are publishers, but publishers outside normal laws. They are exercising ex-judicial power not only to cut out harmful and hateful items, not before time, but to exclude users at will, including a furious outgoing President of the United States. For all this, they will be increasingly held responsible. Their current extraordinary degree of legal protection will go.

But the reality is that the power of the internet to challenge authority and governance systems goes deeper even than the ubiquitous social media. It has placed in the hands of the people unparalleled power to organize and to question and overturn government laws and measures. The age of the identitarian, the separatist, the localist and the permanent rebel has truly arrived. This cannot be put back in the bottle except by canceling the entire digital age. So it is here to stay and grow, with or without the permission of the likes of the multi-billionaire technology bosses such as Mark Zuckerberg, Tim Cook, Sundar Pichai and others.

It is not just in America that politicians aspiring to govern ordered, coherent and prosperous societies will have to find new ways of maintaining the necessary trust and respect to go forward. Democracy may still be the best antidote to mob rule, but it needs to be a much improved model.

The other key but less well known motto of the Boy Scouts is to "do a good turn daily." That might be a wise principle from which to start preparing — using the latest technology — for the new era of governance now upon all of us.

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