THE AMERICAN ANGST OF 1992

By Humphrey Taylor

Golden ages are always in the past; no one ever thinks he is living in one. The word politician is usually a pejorative, and we have almost always believed that "today's" politicians (whenever today was) are a worse lot than those of earlier times. In a 1943 NORC survey, a 48% to 43% plurality agreed that it was "almost impossible for a man to say honest in politics." Whenever the question has been asked, polls have shown that pluralities or majorities thought that the "level of ethics and honesty" had gotten worse recently and that politics was "more corrupt."

Nonetheless, data point strongly to the conclusion that today's political malaise (to use the word made notorious by Patrick Caddell and President Carter) is deeper, and in some other ways different, than that of yesteryear.

Long-term Trends in Public Confidence

Measuring changes over time requires that we have clear trends with the identical questions and methodology (and, preferably, the same survey firm). As a result, good long-term trend measures are few and far between. Those that exist suggest three-things. First, public confidence in those with power — whether in government or the private sector — has been declining for the last 25 years and is now as low or lower than it has ever been. Second, public alienation from those who exercise power, the political and societal establishment, is at an all-time high, and has risen sharply since President Bush's 1988 election. And third, this increased hostility to, and suspicion of, those with power, is focused not only on political leaders but on most other leaders as well.

Harris surveys have tracked the levels of confidence in "the people in charge of running" many different institutions for 26 years. In 1966, confidence in all institutional leadership was extraordinarily high. At no point in the series (which started again in 1971 after a 5-year hiatus) have confidence levels come anywhere near their 1966 peak. While events have produced all kinds of ups and downs (for example, confidence in the military shot up following the Gulf War), the long term trend has been downward (Table 1).

Table 1
Confidence in Institutions Since 1971

Mean percentages saying they have "a great deal of confidence" in "people in charge of running" different institutions

	1966	1971-1979	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1992	Change 1970s to 1990s
U.S. Supreme Court	50%	29%	30%	27%	28%	-1
Television News	NA	36	26	26	23	-13
The White House	NA	20	26	22	19	-1
The Press	29	23	17	18	15	-8
The Executive Branch of Federal Government	41	19	21	18	14	-5
Major Companies	55	22	17	18	13	-9
Congress	42	16	19	18	10	-6

Source : Surveys by Louis Harris and Associates in the years shown.

We have been using a set of five questions to measure public alienation and to produce an Alienation Index almost every year since 1966. The most recent survey asking, in December 1991, found a higher alienation score—66—than any of its predecessors. By way of comparison, the Alienation Index stood at 58 in 1989, 62 in 1983, 59 in 1977 and in 1974, but at just 36 in 1968 and 29 in 1966.

However (and contrary to the impression given by much of today's media), the sharpest decline in confidence and the biggest increase in alienation took place between 1966 and 1974 (and possibly earlier; both time series started in 1966). Changes since then have been more modest. In a very real sense the nation lost confidence in its leadership following Vietnam and Watergate and nothing that has happened since has made very much difference.

One problem which confronts researchers in all fields is what to do with data which do not fit the pattern. One set which does not indicate any long-term decline in confidence comes from a Gallup question on the "honesty and ethical standards of people in Congress". Surprisingly in the last two such surveys (1988 and 1991), the answers were less negative than they were in both the 1977 and 1981 surveys (Table 2). These findings clearly don't mesh with declining "confidence in people who run" the Congress, where the 1990-1992 numbers are far worse than in any previous period since 1966.

Both Parties, and Other Institutions, Blamed

For a brief moment, before Ross Perot, before the primaries, and before the Gulf War, many Democratic leaders were optimistic that they could capitalize on a growing tide of discontent and reaction to the Reagan-Bush years of Wall Street greed, junk bonds, insider trading, and the S&L crisis. At other moments Republican leaders were optimistic that they would benefit from the Democrats' association with Charles Keating and the House checking scandal. They were all wrong. Several polls using different questions all show that the public either does not distinguish the parties or blames them in almost equal numbers.

Why Now?

There are many hypotheses to explain why — so soon after the collapse of the Evil Empire, the triumph in the Gulf, and the generally affluent 1980s — the public is so angry. They cannot easily be tested with hard data. One such hypothesis is that we need an enemy, and that with the disappearance of the communist threat we turn in on ourselves and look for new enemies (Japan?). Some believe that the recession from which we are slowly recovering played a major role; yet this was a relatively mild recession. Others explain the discontent in terms of legislative gridlock and the failure of divided government to deal seriously with the budget deficit, the health care crisis or crime; yet when asked, most Americans have usually expressed approval of divided government with one party in Congress blocking, or being blocked by, another party in control of the Administration. Other hypotheses suggest the blame may rest with the increasing gap between the wealth of the richest two or three percentiles of the population and the middle class, or on the loss of well-paid, relatively unskilled, blue collar jobs in industries, from cars to steel, hit by foreign competition.

One plausible (to me) explanation for at least part of the current angst is the decline of the political parties. In the days when parties still meant something and many more people voted the party ticket, when party bosses controlled candidate selection and party machines controlled congressional committees, things were very different. It was easier to craft legislation and to push through policies which the leadership thought necessary, even if unpopular. Congressmen who were loyal to their party leaders were less likely to be unseated by challengers within their own parties and were less concerned than they are now about both public opinion and special interest clout. Strong public support for the parties meant there was usually a loyal core of Republicans and Democrats who would support their parties rather as Dodger and Cub fans support their teams. Party loyalty meant that many people had a knee-jerk defensive reaction to criticisms of their parties.

Money and Politics

Survey data is much better at describing what people think and feel than in explaining why they feel that way. But one reason why so many Americans are alienated is clearly money. The biggest single contributor to the record high alienation index is the 83% of the public who feel that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Economists and statisticians tell us that the gap between the rich and the poor has indeed increased, and Kevin Phillips has written persuasively about the damage this has done to the Republicans. Actually, it seems the damage is to both parties and to all those who exercise power. And it's not just the gap between rich who got richer and the rest of the population who did not; it is also the power of money to buy influence.

In a 1989 Harris survey the public was asked which of four types of political scandals they thought most serious. Extramarital sex (4%) and excessive drinking (7%) were hardly mentioned. Many (33%) thought "lying" was the most serious concern, but the majority (54%) thought "taking money for favors" was the worst.

A recent (May 1992) Gordon Black poll plumbed some of the depths of contemporary disenchantment. More than 70% of registered voters believed that "Congress is owned by special interests" and that "Congress is moving in the wrong direction," 83% that "special interest campaign contributors have more influence than voters" and 85% that "special interest money buys the loyalty of candidates." Most people believe that many politicians can be bought and often lie.

Something *Is* Different Today

As I said at the outset, historians and myth-makers write of golden ages, but such ages exist more in the minds of future generations than of those who live in them. If people are unhappy about almost anything — inflation, crime, unemployment, the government or politicians — they usually reply, when asked, that things are getting worse even when the facts tell a different story. All the relevant surveys I could find in the Roper Center archives show on balance a jaundiced public believing that politicians are more corrupt or less honest than they used to be. History and fiction since Socrates report the belief that today's leaders are somehow lesser mortals than yesteryear's. House Speaker Thomas Reed (terms 1889-91, 1895-99) had it right when he said that "a statesman is a dead politician."

However, the mood today is different; public cynicism and hostility is higher than it was. And hostility to Congress (including "my congressman") is markedly higher now than even two years ago. In a September 1990 Harris survey, a 56% majority of Americans agreed with the statement that "the Congress is doing such a poor job that it's time to turn most of the rascals out of office." A year and half later

Table 2
Ethics of Members of Congress

Question : How would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of congressmen?

	1977	1981	1985	1988	1991
Very high	4%	2%	3%	2%	2%
High	12	13	17	14	17
Average	48	47	49	52	44
Low	26	22	20	20	24
Very low	10	10	7	7	8
No opinion	--	6	4	5	5
High minus low	-20	-17	-7	-11	-13

Source : Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of May 16-19, 1991.

(March 1992) after the check-kiting scandal, a much larger 76% majority felt this way. In 1990 a modest 51% to 41% majority felt that its own members of Congress deserved to be re-elected. By March 1992, a 50% to 44% plurality said its congressmen shouldn't be. Will Rogers may have been on to something when he replied to a question on whether most congressmen were thieves and scoundrels, that they might well be since they were probably a good cross-section of their constituents.

Low presidential job ratings, and their extreme volatility, are another sign of the times. A reading of all the Harris and Gallup polls since they first appeared does not produce one instance where a sitting president with a negative job rating was re-elected. And yet, President Bush whose job ratings have been negative since December of last year seemed headed for probable re-election until Ross Perot came out of nowhere to take the lead in the horse race polls.

Perot — the Man of the Hour?

This raises a difficult question about Ross Perot and how much of his present support is really a vote for him and how much of it is just approval of a challenge to the power of the two parties and the traditional politicians. While Perot is obviously the beneficiary of a massive "plague on both your houses" or "throw the bums out" mood, it is not clear that other outsiders could have achieved what he has. The Perot phenomenon seems to be fundamentally different from many other third-party or non-party campaigns over the years. One interesting analogy was provided by William Castro in a recent op-ed piece in the Washington Post (June 18). He wrote that the voters' fascination with Ross Perot has echoes of the country's clamor for Henry Ford during the summer of 1923. Ford had won the Michigan presidential preference primary in 1916. In 1923, his support soared. Newspaper editorials praised his management skills, his ability to cut through problems and get things done. Nobody knew his stands on the issues, but this didn't seem to harm him. At the height of the Ford fever, President Harding died, Calvin Coolidge succeeded him, and Ford then endorsed President Coolidge. Who knows what would have happened had Harding lived.

A British View of the Former Colonies

As a Brit (who came here 16 years ago), I'm often asked how the US compares to other countries. Lacking hard data, it's too easy to come up with a facile reply—but there are some obvious differences. No other country has a constitution so deeply rooted in the belief that power corrupts (and that government with too little power is better than government with too much). In few other countries, if any, are lobbyists so rich, powerful and well organized. In few other countries, if any, is access to television so dependent on the financial power to buy time. In no other country do politicians raise so much money or spend so much time and effort raising money, although Japanese politicians are no slouches in this regard. In no other country that I can think of is it so difficult to pass substantial new legislation. Few other countries have such strong populist, anti-elitist traditions.

In Britain, for example, television and radio time is allocated free of charge to the parties who cannot buy time. The parties (but not individual candidates) can buy billboards and space in the print media but, in a frenetic 3-4 week campaign in which many hours of broadcasting and many newspaper pages are devoted to election "news," the power of advertising is minimal. (The power of the overwhelmingly — and appallingly biased — Tory press is something else, however.) Individual politicians and members of parliament are limited to spending only a few thousand pounds each, so they could not accept anything except the most modest financial assistance from special interests even if it were offered. There are other important differences. There are very few opportunities (or temptations) for British M.P.s to cast their votes for special interests—given the strength of party discipline.

Americans today are quick to criticize their leaders for what ails the polity. Perhaps they should be quicker to reexamine the implications of how their national governmental institutions are structured.

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