

The American dream is ending in a psychotic breakdown

A rising tide of political violence and the rejection of legal norms suggests the America of the Founding no longer exists

Janet Daley

•

The murder of Charlie Kirk has shaken the American Right Credit: Charly Triballeau/AFP

“We got him”, said the governor of Utah, Spencer Cox, making an unqualified judgement of guilt on the man who had just been apprehended. Will they bother with a trial at all, and if so, how could any jury now be unprejudiced? Has Tyler Robinson, who is still being described officially as a “suspect”, already confessed and made it clear that he will plead guilty? President Trump has expressed a wish for him to be given the death penalty. Has there been (or will there be) a psychiatric examination to establish that the accused, who had not even been charged when the Governor held his triumphant press conference, is fit to be held responsible for his actions?

To British ears, accustomed to the principle of innocent until proven guilty in a court of law, this was all pretty shocking and even by American standards it was rather exceptional. But these are exceptional times. This is no longer about a particular crime: it is a test of nerve for the governing class. Can rationality and moral decency be restored to the public square or are we entering an era of lynch mobs and licensed mass hysteria from which there is no escape?

Is this how the American dream ends? With a mass psychotic breakdown: an epidemic of insanity in which the freedoms and virtues that were intended to guarantee a great modern nation, are turned into murderous parodies of their original intentions? Maybe this was a historic experiment that was doomed from the start. Perhaps the whole project was naively idealistic and misconceived: the idea that you could create a unified, stable nation state from displaced people who have chosen to leave behind their historic roots and the precious sense of belonging to a place – however terrible and dangerous that place may have been.

The founding intentions were magnificent: this was to be the Age of Reason incarnate where every individual would be granted the rights to self-determination and personal liberty, and be guaranteed those rights by a written contract (the Constitution) with a government whose powers were strictly constrained and delineated. It was the embodiment of the Enlightenment dream of human potential which relied on the principle of rational debate and the participation of the population in a permanent open discussion about their own future. There is real doubt now – the anxiety is quite palpable – about whether that concept can survive a 21st century reality in which threats of death and retribution have become the common currency of public discussion.

It would be a mistake to think that this latest eruption of homicidal psychopathy has come from nowhere, with no warning. The United States is a dangerously volatile country. There has always been a palpable element of derangement in its social order. It has a record of assassinations and attempted assassinations, and a perennial problem with violent crime which is matched by almost no other first world country. But what is happening now feels different: apocalyptic and inexorable. And the reason it cannot be stopped is that the people, both the population at large and those who are supposed to be in charge, do not want it to stop whatever they may claim.

If they sincerely wanted to put an end to it, they could do so in a moment of reasonable consensus. But they have consistently resisted any attempt

to enforce standards or controls on the virulent social media activity which is undermining the real freedoms they revere. So the tide of what would once have been called “extremism” – the incitement of violence and the perpetration of blind hatred – are now the accepted currency of political discourse.

This is much more psychologically and socially complicated than it might appear. The chronic dissatisfaction which is the other side of individual freedom has long been a neurotic fact of American life. If you are promised every opportunity to improve yourself, to succeed, to go beyond what might have been the limitations of your birth, and you do not – or cannot – live up to those expectations, what then? The anger and frustration that comes with that disappointment was always a danger to the dream of aspiration which is supposed to be your birthright.

Discontent and resentment are built into the national way of life, because they are the inevitable counterparts of success and achievement. Not everybody can win in this frantic race and if you are one of the losers (or even one of the less spectacular winners), it is deemed to be your own fault: you did not try hard enough or, worse, you threw away the chances you were given. The work ethic of Americans, and the judgemental attitudes that it breeds often strike British people as ruthless. Just as the condescending compassion that is shown to those who do not succeed in Britain is surprising to Americans, who find the complacency and resignation of those who make no attempt to escape the poverty of their origins deeply shocking.

This is a profound difference that is quite difficult for the nations of Old Europe to grasp. They may feel that they share the democratic spirit and intentions of the United States but in truth, they are entirely different in their social assumptions. The 18th century French revolutionaries who expressed their support for American rebels against British monarchic rule may have assumed that they were fighting for the same republican cause, but they were not creating a country out of nothing, with an

entirely new population of incoming peoples. The French may have rejected their monarchy but they were still recognisably themselves: an identifiable nationality with a sense of their own shared history.

Tragically, it seems that the very notions that were intended to be the foundations of this model of an enlightened society are contributing to its downfall. The sacred right to free speech has been poisoned by malign actors who use the new social media made possible by technological innovations which burst upon the scene without any political consideration, to foment violent hatred. Is it possible to distinguish the legitimate uses of freedom from the dangerous irresponsible ones? We may be about to find out.