

Ask A Genius 78 – Present-Day America (1)
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Scott: What's the general picture of America now?

Rick: Let's preface this. We're talking about the end of the America, whether we're seeing it and what it might be. There was a duology, a pair of books, in the late 60s by John Brunner called *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up*. At the end of one of them, it's been set in America the whole time. At the end, there's a chapter set in England. Somebody smells something and asks somebody on the street. The person on the street says, "That's America burning."

(Laugh)

It is the most dire picture of the end of America, but we should pin it down. There are various flavors. One involves the end of civilization, where we have some World War that includes nukes and other stuff that leaves the world a wasteland. That is seen as more likely under Trump than somebody else. Then there are other ends of America. The end of democracy, or functioning democracy, where politics in America may never be representative of the people again and politics will be stupid from now on, with stupid people being elected. It would be a kakistocracy or rule by the worst people.

A lot of people thought that Hillary Clinton getting elected would, maybe, start getting normal politics back. Of course, that didn't happen. The next really terrible Republican politicians dominated. They haven't always been, and aren't always, but are particularly right now. Gerrymandering is a problem. Based on the 2010 census and sophisticated political trickery with the Democrats not paying attention, the Republicans took over a lot of state houses that favored Republicans. So, Republicans are overrepresented relative to how many people voted for Republicans thanks to gerrymandering.

And thanks to primarying, which is a consequence of gerrymandering, where the most extreme candidates win the primaries, we have a lot of assholes in office with most being Republican. It is probably the worst time for someone actually serving in national offices such as congress people, senators, and presidential administrations.

Scott: What traits do you see in them? What are in their policies?

Rick: Not wanting to compromise because compromise doesn't serve any purpose in the gerrymandered and primaried system, you win by going extreme because if you don't go extreme then some more extreme person will come along to draw in the extreme voters. There are charts based on voting patterns that show this is possibly the least compromising era in American politics. Also, what comes along with it is not caring about what most people think, it is a cavalier attitude about approval among the general population.

Win-at-all costs gamesmanship, McConnell is the best example of that. Where they decide they are not going to give Obama his last Supreme Court nominee using a bullshit argument, an

unprecedented argument with a basis in nothing, and the running around and saying, “The Democrats may do the same thing with this same nominee, and so are being obstructionist.”

Scott: Does politics in the United States tend to attract worse people?

Rick: It depends on the era. Right now, it does. We see old school politicians quitting because they hate being politicians. There have been other times in American history where it hasn't been as bad to be a politician and better people have run. If you look at the conditions of the job to see what people are going to be attracted to it, politician isn't an attractive position. Same with teaching. Teaching isn't as attractive as a profession. If you look at GRE scores, GRE scores are lower for teaching than for any other profession.

If teaching paid a quarter of a million dollars per year, and if teachers were looked at as skilled professionals as doctors are, then it might attract better people. In Russia, medicine and doctors are not as highly valued, so that has allowed more women to enter into the field. It is a chicken and egg thing. You have more female doctors who have been shown by studies to do better than male doctors. In Russia, it is seen as women's work, so not as highly valuable.

Politics has gotten much more miserable. It has gotten much more miserable to be a national-level politician than it was 30, 40, 50 years ago. So, it attracts more dickheads. So, we've talked about two set ups for the end of America. The end of America having reasonable politics. The end of America with international conflagration. Then there's the end of America culturally and technologically. All three of those things have good and bad implications for America and the world.

Probably, the least serious one for people individually throughout the world is America losing its place culturally, technologically, and economically. It will still be a rich and sophisticated country, even as or if we lose our place as number one country in the world by China and even India at some point. Americans will still have a decent standard of living. We'll still have access to all sorts of cultural and technological and economic opportunity, and products.

We'll be like England, which once had an empire greater than anything else at the time. Now, it is a sophisticated country that is mostly nice to live in, but doesn't dominate the world. Ditto for Italy. Less so for Greece, it has a lot of miserable conditions. 2,200, 2,400, years ago, it dominated certain aspects of the world. Ditto for Spain. Now, these are empires reduced to being just countries. There are plenty of pressures that could work to have that happen independent of Trump.

Trump makes it more likely by reinforcing the idea of America as a dumb and self-satisfied country that's not going to work hard to maintain its dominance. You could argue Trump, by setting business free, will lead to an American resurgence, but his idea is reducing taxes and regulations. Some analysis will show those shouldn't be the priorities if you're looking to maintain dominance. There should be an emphasis on education, hard work, innovation, government support of science and research rather than a willfully anti-science and ignorant stance.

Citizens should be challenged on their stupid beliefs. Instead, we have politicians who encourage Americans to be comfortable in their stupidity, which threatens our dominance. Also, the immigration stuff, we have been able to cherry pick and attract the best and most talented people from the other 95% of the world. If we're going to become an outwardly racist and nationalist, and separatist, country, we're going to lose those most talented people to other countries such as China, which was seen, even 10 or 20 years ago, as a super repressive place to live.

Now, it is a pretty great place to live if you're a captain of industry and live in an industrial Chinese city as decadently and indulgently as much as you want in America with hot and cold running sexy ladies, gourmet meals, penthouse apartments, and \$200,000 cars. China will set that up for you if you're a good business person in China.

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