

The Third Worlding of America

Whether it is forest fires caused by [decrepit infrastructure](#), the use of intelligence agencies [to target domestic political opponents](#), [growing inequality](#), or a rejection of our political traditions, America more and more feels like a third world country.

First, consider what it meant to be a first world country. This has always been a small club: the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, and, more recently, Singapore and South Korea made the cut.

The former Soviet Union and its satellites were part of the so-called Second World. In both material and moral terms, they were decidedly inferior: little political or social freedom, shoddy consumer goods, and a malfunctioning economic system.

The Third World was everyone else.

Our First World Past

First world status comes from various political, social, and economic achievements. One of the more salient is [low corruption](#). The classic symbol of third world corruption is the shakedown for bribes by border officials and police officers. For the most part, this has been absent from American public life. There is a reason Norman Rockwell painted police officers as [heroic and non-threatening](#), and that Americans living in the most American parts of our country still talk about leaving their doors unlocked at night.

Low levels of corruption foster another distinct feature of America's first world status: the dominance of the private sector and high degrees of entrepreneurialism.

While all first world countries enjoy low corruption, Europe's

governments were always more involved in it. In the United States, the government sector was historically small, competent, and responsive. Most people made their living privately.

To the extent anyone worked for the government, it was either true public service among those who achieved their success elsewhere, or a tradeoff of more modest wages for higher job security within the civil service. Increasingly, the government sector is both higher paying and more secure, with access controlled by [nepotism and racial classifications](#). In other words, the private sector—other than the top echelons—is for suckers.

Another feature of American life has been low levels of crime and disorder.

You don't need to be a historian to see this; you merely need a set of eyes. When you see the decaying, boarded-up facades of yesteryear—the [modest and orderly row homes of Baltimore](#), the grandiose public works of [Detroit](#)—these are the ruins of a prosperous and orderly society. They could not have been built so sturdily or well by the current denizens of these communities. They are a window into a disappearing America of prosperous small towns and orderly and civilized cities, where a middle class could live and work. Such “normalcy” exists now, if at all, in the rings of suburbs around our cities, usually more shoddily and [less beautifully built](#) than the original cities themselves.

Political normality, compromise, and restraint are other features of first world societies. These habits of self-limitation are the products of a common culture, where the goal of preserving and strengthening an existing society is taken for granted. This is the inheritance of George Washington, who stepped down after two terms. It is reflected in [Richard Nixon taking advice from LBJ](#), and the whole country mourning the murder of JFK. Further back, it is seen in the

high degrees of trust among voters for the government and its institutions, which has been [falling for decades](#).

Many commenters like to say the country's historical stability and wealth are the product of its [ideas and creed](#). That's certainly part of it, but it's also because of the people.

These habits developed over a long time. Our countrymen's common background, religion, and language limited the range of domestic political disagreement. The American people were not just an assembly of economic units with nothing in common. They were a *people*.

Everything fit together. The combination of austere Christian morality, a lack of formal class system, and a predictable legal regime led to dynamism, ingenuity, and growth. America went from a colonial backwater to a world power in 200 years. Unlike France, which is on its fifth constitution, or the Soviet Union, which broke apart after 70 years, the United States and its legal order have proven to be remarkably durable.

Even so, things feel different. In the passing of a generation or two, the features outlined above feel less prominent. Politics, morality, economics, and demographics have all undergone a substantial, engineered change. Old commitments, whether to free speech or respect for religion, are in decline. New images, new habits, and new human types have emerged following the multi-faceted social revolution since the 1960s.

It feels, for lack of a better word, more and more like we are living in a third world country.

Our Third World Future

What is the Third World? What are its features? It is not just grinding poverty. Some of the [richest people in the world](#) and

their [opulent palaces](#) can be found in the Third World. But even as the Third World has gotten comparatively wealthier, it retains many features that make it unpleasant, particularly for the common man. This is why millions of people from that part of the world risk life and limb to come to the United States and Europe.

One feature is a lack of public spiritedness. The public space and the commons are literally [trashed](#). In the Third World, political office is a means to [enrich oneself and one's family](#). This is as true for presidents as it is for mayors and lower-level officials. The endemic corruption of the Third World both reflects and reinforces an extreme tribalism, which elevates the extended family above the public as a whole.

Elections and parties reflect these ethnic divisions, and [a winner-take-all spirit prevails](#). This is as true in India as Iran, in Mexico as in Mauritania. In parts of the United States heavily populated with immigrant groups from the Third World, the [local politics reflects the same values](#). Old habits die hard.

To the extent there is a private sector in the Third World, it is intertwined with and dependent on the political one. Bribes are a necessary cost of doing business. But the real money is in public corruption, whether in the form of official or unofficial monopoly, government contracts, or the like. This is increasingly true at home, where whole sectors of the economy—health care, green jobs, aerospace, and e-commerce—are dependent on a combination of regulatory assistance, government contracts, or outright subsidies.

As the Hunter Biden episode reminds us—along with the [dozens of other well-paid relatives of politicians](#)—self-enrichment among the political class is becoming an unremarkable feature of American life. One cannot imagine today a president ending up, like Harry Truman, [near-broke at the end of a presidency](#).

A related feature of the Third World is failing infrastructure. While gleaming homes, sports cars, and private affluence are well-known, public investments are often shoddy, decrepit, and obsolete. You can't drink the water. There is little incentive to fix these things, as politics chiefly consists of individually rewarding one's close associates, rather than benefiting the public as a whole. Complex problems remain unsolved and persistent.

Along these lines, here at home, we see increasing evidence of both [organizational](#) and [technological](#) decline. A nation that once built skyscrapers, world-class universities, beautiful highways, and railroads from coast to coast, now finds much of it is in disrepair, with repair projects [often exceeding the cost of the original construction](#).

This does not mean money is not spent. In 2009, Obama enacted a \$1 trillion stimulus. In response to COVID-19, President Trump authorized \$2 trillion in spending. But what do we have to show for either? Where is the Golden Gate Bridge or Hoover Dam? For that matter, where's our wall?

Yet another notable feature of the Third World is poverty, lawlessness, and disorder. The most jarring symbol of third world inequality and chaos are the shantytowns that surround their urban centers.

Here at home, we now find [armies of homeless and tent dwellers](#) in our most prosperous cities. San Francisco and New York now have to deal with a [public defecation crisis](#). There is little serious discussion of these problems. No one in power has the will to end them. At the same time, private security and gated communities are becoming the symbols of the age.

A final feature of the Third World, now familiar at home, is high stakes politics. While democracy exists in some measure in many third world nations, it is what Fareed Zakaria has called "[illiberal democracy](#)." Everything is on the table.

Political opponents are often targeted for punishment if they lose power. Thus, every election becomes a referendum on the freedom and safety of large sectors of the populace, and thus they are often marred by fraud and violence.

America's traditions of a peaceful transfer of power and political decorum are disappearing. Open talk of "[burning it down](#)" and [changing the rules](#) to guarantee victories are now becoming common. There is no restraint, because the stakes are higher and the visions of America's future come from entirely different traditions. The Left's view is a foreign import with totalitarian implications; it is alien to the principles of due process and restraint embedded in America's constitutional order.

It Pays to Be a Winner

It's all rather depressing. But the change is also undeniable. Conservatives like to talk about American exceptionalism and a silent majority, but this seems to be, especially now, mere nostalgia. America, like every nation, can undergo revolutionary change or slow decay. It's legal forms can become devoid of substance as its people change.

The talk of tiny homes, the gig economy, and vibrancy are the coping mechanisms of a nation where a middle-class existence cannot be had for more and more people, who are weighed down by low wages, rising real estate costs, debt, and the insecurity of urban life.

From [rolling blackouts](#) in California and millionaire "[private-sector](#)" jobs for ousted politicians in D.C., to draconian enforcement of mask mandates while arsonists shut down our streets, this is not Norman Rockwell's America. Indeed, it's not even the America one might remember growing up in the 1980s and '90s. It's changed for the worse.

More important, the rules required to survive and thrive are

quite different from those of the recent past. As in Venezuela or Iraq, politics and life are becoming “winner take all.” It’s important to know when compromise is not possible. And, under these circumstances, it pays to be a winner.

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