

Barbara Kay: Is it any wonder Americans are losing trust in their institutions?

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In the summer of 2018, Donald Trump was enjoying himself in Florida, immersed in his favourite activity, a rally for Donald Trump. CNN reporter Jim Acosta, an aggressive critic Trump loves to bait, was covering the event live on air, when a group of Trump supporters started screaming at him and making threatening gestures behind him into the camera. But after the rally ended and Acosta got off the CNN camera stand, some of those ostensibly hostile Trump fans came over to get his autograph and shake his hand. Some asked for selfies with him; Acosta obliged. One scruffy-looking guy wearing a MAGA flag cape chatted amiably with Acosta, and “by the end of the exchange, the Trump fan was begging Acosta for an on-air shoutout.” Yuval Levin is the director of social, cultural and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute and editor of *National Affairs* magazine. In his insightful new book, “A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions can Revive the American Dream,” the author cites this incident, which he compares with a WWE wrestling match, “partially scripted and entirely performative,” to make his case that American institutions — the presidency, obviously, but journalism, too — have lost sight of their purpose, and their integrity. American institutions ... have lost sight of their purpose, and their integrity (—image—)

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Confidence in American institutions has been falling for years, Levin says. In the 1970s, 80 per cent of Americans told Gallup they had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in doctors or hospitals; in 2018, only 36 per cent said the same. Forty years ago, 60 per cent had confidence in public schools; in 2018 only 29 per cent did. In 1975, 52 per cent had confidence in the presidency (this was *after* Nixon resigned); in 2018, 33 per cent did. In the 1970s, 42 per cent polled had confidence in Congress; in 2018 — only 11 per cent (!). Younger Americans especially are bombarded with examples of institutional failure, Levin says. National politics looks to them like a “debauched rampage of alienation and dysfunction,” so unfortunately, “(a) country repeatedly disappointing itself is the only America they have known, and so they take it as a norm, not an exception.” Levin defines institutions ecumenically. They are “the durable forms of our common life ... the frameworks and structures of what we do together.” Some are corporate in nature, technically and legally formalized, like universities, the legal system, religions, the military and legislatures. Others lack a corporate structure, but have tremendous influence, such as the family, the primordial institution of every society. (—image—)

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during the daily coronavirus briefing at the White House on April 10, 2020, in Washington, D.C.

Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images

More narrowly defined, Levin says institutions are “durable”: “An institution keeps its shape over time, and so shapes the realm of life in which it operates.” Institutions change incrementally, as continuity is essential to what they hope to accomplish in the world. “The institution organizes its people into a particular form moved by a purpose, characterized by a structure, defined by an ideal, and capable of certain functions.” Institutions “mould” us by forming our habits and expectations, and ultimately our character. They help us understand our obligations and responsibilities. Institutions train us to think of our behaviour in relation to the world, and act responsibly. Within successful institutions, we accumulate the habits and “mental maps” that encourage us to thrive and acquire social capital. We trust institutions, Levin says, when they take their obligation to the public interest seriously, “and when they shape the people who work within them to do the same.” Here it should be noted that only two formal institutions — the higher courts of law and the military still command strong indicators of public trust. We trust institutions, Levin says, when they take their obligation to the public interest seriously (—image—)

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But most institutions have lost their way. Instead of moulding our characters, they have become platforms for self-expression and self-display to the wider world. On the right we see a populism that believes all our institutions are rigged (Trump’s base). On the left we see identity politics activists, hostile to institutions and with no wish to be formed

by them (campus Social Justice Warriors, and congressional disruptors like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez et Ilhan Omar.) Social media were invented as platforms, not moulds, ways for us to shine individually, not to be integrated into our institutions. Many politicians for whom Twitter is a natural home, Levin says, “have come to understand themselves most fundamentally as players in a larger cultural ecosystem, the point of which is not legislating or governing but rather a kind of performative outrage for a partisan audience.” Most institutions have lost their way (--image--)

A book about the erosion of institutional integrity is timely, given our present extraordinary dependence on national and global institutions for best crisis practices. Some of those institutions are failing us, and feeding our distrust. Whether Levin’s idealistic prescriptions for institutional renewal can take hold after such upheaval is moot. Here is the book’s takeaway nugget, a question we all — epidemiologists, policy-makers, journalists, parents — can and should ask ourselves: “Given my role here, how should I behave?” And if not now, when? • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: BarbaraRKay

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