



Abstract



World Futures Studies Federation 19th World Conference

"Futures Generation for Future Generations"

21-24 August 2005

Futures Studies Department

Corvinus University of Budapest

Unbound to fail? A strong nation with a weak state: America's current path and challenging futures

Jim Dator

This paper explores some alternative futures of the current direction of American policies and actions. It focuses specifically on the fact that the trajectory of the American state (that is, the formal instruments of governance) are increasingly and purposely weakened by ideology and debt while appeals to patriotism and religion have never been more strident or effective.

Over the past quarter century, the official future foreseen for governance everywhere was the clear, forward trajectory of neoliberal globalism. While this image of the future had many detractors and active opponents, the efficacy of nation-states and the international system were progressively and properly to diminish, while increasing the likelihood of some kind of economics-attuned global governance. Suddenly, the neoliberal globalized future is no longer seen as inevitable or even desirable by many people in the US and elsewhere. Neoliberal globalization is no longer "the most likely future". It still is viewed as a desirable possibility by some people, but the current Bush administration (which tried from the start to shift policy in a new direction) used the events of September 11, 2001 to put the US and the world on a new path of greatly enhanced nationalism while at the same time (by lowering taxes and increasing debt and trade imbalances) diminishing the ability of the state to serve its citizens, asserting that citizens can best serve themselves. In foreign affairs, America seeks unilateral solutions via military actions, or bilateral agreements with temporary allies, rather than via multilateral treaties or UN processes. Thus, a new kind of hypernationalism with a puny state has emerged in the US and may by imitation emerge elsewhere. It is an interesting experiment.

The combination may succeed for the foreseeable future, but it is also possible that the state will eventually become too weak. Citizens can be loyal to their nation when, in return for their loyalty, its welfare state takes care of them by guaranteeing such things as superior educational opportunities, unemployment compensation, job retraining, medical care, social security, sturdy roads and bridges, pure water, and a

clean and safe environment. But in an "Ownership Society", where every good citizen is to take care of herself with no help from the state, there are diminishing incentives for her to be loyal to the nation. If the only part of the state that remains is a bloated military and paramilitary, and if these institutions are manned by mercenaries as they increasingly are, there is additionally less incentive for citizens to be loyal. An army of drafted citizens may be even more problematic if it is used to carry out overseas adventures that many people don't support but that cause their only-children to die. Loyalty could fade, quickly turning distrust of the state into active rebellion against the nation. Or, though loyalty wane, a kind of apathetic acquiesce might linger in the absence of perceived better alternatives.

This paper will discuss these and other possible futures of the unusual combination of a strong nation with a weak state.