

National Will and National Security

John H. Johns
10 August 2010

In the January 2010 edition of Atlantic Monthly, James Fallows declared that the U.S. political system is dysfunctional. Unless we fix it, he said, we will either have a new Constitution, or a coup. He rules out both as unthinkable, and argues that we will fix it. His 26-page essay did not convince many that we will have the political will to fix it. The coming election promises to be one that will bring many new members to Congress who are dedicated to “constitutional government.” None of the candidates gives specifics on what this means.

This six-week lecture series focuses on what many have identified as the two most serious, short-term threats to our national welfare: the national debt and international terrorism. The topics I have chosen are the results of my academic background, my military focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, and my teaching experience during the last 30 years, which focused on national security. I also coordinate the Washington Area National Security Seminars held by the National War College Alumni Association (NWCAA) at the National Defense University. In all these programs, my activities have been sponsored by non-partisan, military organizations, which are by-and-large conservative. While I am more liberal than most of these organizations, especially the senior members, I have endeavored to present balanced presentations that will elicit dialogue among diverse audiences.

The topics I will address during the six weeks are very controversial in many respects; in fact, they face the probability of tearing our political fabric asunder. Thus, I am focusing on the matter of “national will” (this is often labeled as political will) as it relates to our national security. As readers will see, I believe that national cohesion (the willingness to sacrifice for the common good), or what I refer to as national will, is the most critical element of national power that will enable us to meet these threats to our security. Since this element is so important, I start the series of lectures by summarizing a theoretical construct of the major factors that determine whether individuals will be willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to meet threats to a society. The discussion will be focused on concrete issues that students will quickly recognize as critical problems facing the nation. Sacrifice for the nation is often defined as “patriotism,” but this term is normally associated with sacrifice in times of war. The kind of sacrifices that is required to meet today’s challenges go beyond that narrow range of sacrifices, although they include such acts, as I will discuss.

Because these issues are controversial and the political dialogue in the country has become uncivil to a large degree, I believe it is important that all that choose to participate in these sessions make an attempt to engage in rational dialogue, respecting the fact that people of good will—and equal sincerity—hold conflicting views. In that regard, I ask that all read the essay “How Do We Know What We Know? This paper is a paper adapted from a reading used by the faculty at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, where I taught for many years. It was designed to encourage students to question ideological beliefs that prevent them from having an open mind to new ideas. **Please read the essay**, but if you can’t wade through it, here is a synopsis:

Most of our beliefs tend toward over-simplification. Once we form a belief—political, religious, economic, and social, etc.—we seek confirmation of

those beliefs. We select media that support our beliefs; we associate with people of a like mind; we filter out evidence that contradicts our deeply-held beliefs. In a sense, we all tend to practice “cerebral hygiene” by keeping our beliefs pure. This often leads us to view people with opposing views as not only wrong, but evil. Some people are uncomfortable with complexity, ambiguity, vagueness, and uncertainty and look for simplistic answers to complex problems. Because most of the problems facing the nation fit this description, it is easy to turn to sources that provide simplistic, bumper-sticker slogans. These sources—most often political leaders and talk-show hosts—provide “talking points” that are repeated by their “base” without critical examination. Such uncritical followers are sometimes called “ditto heads.” All of us should keep an open, inquiring mind and continuously question our beliefs in light of evidence in the real world.

Session 1: National Will. This session will discuss the following factors that impact on cohesion and assess how they apply to U.S. society today:

- **Tradition.** Common customs, language, ethnicity, religion, race, and history of institutions that have served them.
- **Trend of recent experiences.** Cohesion is greatest when things are going well (nothing succeeds like success); conversely, cohesion breaks down when things aren’t going well (e.g., economic difficulties)
- **Sense of equity.** Individuals *perceive* that sacrifices and benefits are justly distributed. It must be emphasized that the term is *equity*, or fairness, not *equality*.
- **Crises.** External threats that pose a clear and present danger, e.g., Pearl Harbor, elicit solidarity. Vague external threats and internal threats are problematic and often cause dissension and finger-pointing, often leading to incivility.
- **Leadership.** Of all the factors impacting on cohesion, trust and confidence in the leaders in a nation are the most critical. Individuals must believe their leaders are competent and are putting the welfare of the people over their personal agendas. This includes political, religious, and business leaders and institutions. The latest polls at this writing show that only 13% have confidence in the Congress. Inspirational/charismatic leaders are valuable, but the charisma fades if solutions to problems are quickly found.

Session 2: The U.S. Constitution. This session will summarize how the Constitution was designed to balance maximum individual freedom and privacy with the requirement that people work together to promote the general welfare and collaborate to achieve common goals and manage conflict in a civil manner. This delicate balance creates tension between conflicting ideologies, especially regarding the role of the national government. One can argue that this conflict is the central issue facing the body politic today. In our discussions, I will attempt to keep the focus on concrete issues rather than bumper-sticker slogans that elicit more emotion than rational discourse. I will pose the question: Is our current political system, as dictated by the Constitution, appropriate to meet today’s challenges? The Founders were not sure this grand jump to Democracy would work: one essential condition was **civic virtue, to include the willingness to sacrifice for the common good.**

Session 3: Morality and National Security: This session will focus on what is called “macro ethics,” behavior dealing with national policies having to do with distributive justice (economic,

criminal, civil rights, etc.) and international moral order. The latter will address the issue of torture and intervention in foreign countries. This discussion will provide a theoretical construct for the discussions on how morality impacts on the national debt and terrorism.

Session 4: National Debt. Many argue that the national debt represents the greatest threat to our national security. This session will review some economic data showing the problem and then focus on the future. There is perhaps no other issue that better defines the different political ideologies of the major political parties. The national debt soared from less than \$1T in 1980 to \$11.2T in 2008. Faced with a world-wide recession that threatened to turn into a severe depression, governments around the world decided that the respective governments would make up the lack of private stimulus by government spending. Combined with reduced revenues, this led to large deficits in all countries (China, India, and Brazil have fared the best). The current U.S. total national debt is about \$13.5T (this includes both public-held debt and internal debt owed trust funds such as social security). According to the latest estimate by the Congressional Budget Office, the deficit for 2010 is about \$1.3T and this will continue until the economy recovers. Projections are that the debt will grow to \$16-18T by 2014. Assuming the economy has returned to normal by then, how do we pay off that debt? It will require sacrifices by all Americans for many years; it will require increased taxes and spending cuts. The three big budget items are defense, social security, and health care. The days of a free lunch will be over; we must set priorities. Can we meet the challenge?

Session 5: International Terrorism. The focus of this session is worldwide insurgency against established world order by non-government radicals who employ terrorism as their weapon of choice. It is crucial that we accurately define the nature of this threat and employ the right response. I will challenge our military reaction to 9-11. While authorities in both the Bush and Obama administrations have expressed the view that it is not primarily a military problem, our policies have by-and-large treated it as military. I will argue that it is primarily a war of ideas—a war we have been losing. I will critique our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and suggest what we must do domestically to respond effectively to what will undoubtedly be more instances such as the Times Square effort.

Session 6: Synthesis and look into the Future. This will be a free-thinking seminar to tie things together and project the future. Participants should come to the session with concrete policy proposals.