

OPINION

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How To Seek Solutions Now To America's Future Problems

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Anti-War Protestors At The White HouseGetty Images

Every year is different, and the first half of 2023 has been no exception.

To name a few: Congress got off to a rocky start this session, having to vote 15 times to elect a House Speaker. The debt ceiling talks and debate consumed the attention of our elected officials for several weeks, as representatives from both parties maneuvered through the political landmines that have become the norm in Washington. The nation has been disrupted by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools that can mimic human conversation and abilities. We've also experienced historic floods, wildfires, smoke, heat waves and earthquakes. What the rest of 2023 holds is anyone's guess.

Optimists hope that things will get better, while pessimists see only the darkest clouds on the horizon. Realists waffle between the two, often spending time with one group or the other depending on their circumstances. Seeing where we are heading is mostly futile, as no crystal ball exists that can peer into the future with any great accuracy. As Yogi Berra once said, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.”

Instead of trying to predict where we are heading, let’s look back five or 10 years ago and see where we were and assess if there were any clues to foretell the future.

A decade ago, in 2013, Barrack Obama was in the White House. Some of the major news events included the Boston Marathon bombing, a security breach of personal information at Target impacting 40 million customers, the National Security Agency experiencing its worst security leak in history, and a federal government shutdown after Congress could not come to terms to pass a federal budget (a recurring theme faced by Congress).

By comparison, five years ago, the year 2018 was somewhat placid. With Donald Trump in the White House, his policies and actions began to take hold, disrupting immigration, creating a stir in the Supreme Court, as well as initiating engagement between North and South Korea that ultimately proved unsuccessful.

There was nothing during these periods that could have predicted the emergence of the SARS-Cov2 virus and the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic. This public health crisis has been the most significant worldwide event of the 21st century so far, overshadowing Sept. 11 both in lives lost and economic consequences.

Even with all the chaos of the Trump administration, the Jan. 6, 2021. attack on the U.S. Capitol could not have been predicted much before it unfolded.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is another one of those difficult-to-pinpoint events for which there was little warning until Russia began its preparation and eventual assault.

What this means is that what the rest of 2023 and beyond holds is anyone’s guess.

However, instead of trying to forecast what will occur, it would be more productive to ask the right questions that can elicit thoughts about the future and bring into focus issues that are worthy of discussion, debate and investment. Taking the optimistic (or pessimistic) perspective, here are four such open-ended questions:

1. What are the biggest opportunities to make America stronger and healthier (or weaker) as a nation?
2. What components of our Constitution and Bill of Rights can be improved (or are etched in stone)?
3. What are issues that can unite (or dissolve) America?

4. What is the best (or worst) position for America in the world?

When answering such questions, one might dig into the weeds covering issues like gerrymandering, gun safety, climate change, women's health issues, artificial intelligence in society, the national deficit, economic inequality and access to health care. Numerous others can be added to the list.

What ensures that the road to solutions will be rocky is that these issues are largely presupposed as "them versus us," which translates into discussions rife with conflict, chaos and disagreement. Moreover, the likelihood that any of these issues will predict a major upheaval in the 2024 election cycle is small, as their persistence desensitizes most people over time.

Indeed, these issues will do little to help us see what events may be coming in the future that are an even greater threat to our nation and perhaps to humanity.

What has remained true over the past year, the past five years, the decade and for much of our nation's history, is the resiliency of America despite the many challenges that it has faced. Does this mean that all is well and that we can surmount any challenges? Of course not. What it does mean is that in the face of crises, the American people have responded in a way that has ultimately taken us to new places.

Can we do better? Certainly, and we should strive to do so. Yet, it is when we come together rather than remain apart that we as a nation are at our very best.

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