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Beirut's blast is a warning for America

Many Lebanese are starved for a government that represents the common good. The same is true for America

Read this article in German.

When I first heard the news of the terrible explosion in Beirut, and then the rampant speculation about who might have set it off, my mind drifted back some 40 years to a dinner party I attended at the residence of Malcolm Kerr, then president of the American University of Beirut.

During the course of the dinner, someone mentioned the unusual hailstorms that had pelted Beirut the previous two nights. Everyone offered an explanation for this extreme weather event, before Malcolm, tongue in cheek, asked his guests, 'Do you think the Syrians did it?'

Malcolm — a charming man and brilliant scholar, who was tragically murdered a few months later by unidentified assassins — was being both humorous and profound. He was poking fun at the Lebanese tendency to explain everything as a conspiracy and, in particular, a conspiracy perpetrated by Syria, which is why we all laughed.

But he was also saying something profound about Lebanese society — that, alas, also applies to today's America — the fact that in Lebanon then, and even more so today, everything, even the weather, had become political.

Everything is now politics

Because of the sectarian nature of Lebanese society, where all the powers of governing, and the spoils of the state, had been constitutionally or informally divided in a very careful balance between different Christian and Muslim sects, everything was indeed political. Every job appointment, every investigation into malfeasance, every government decision to fund this and not that was seen as advantaging one group and disadvantaging another.

It was a system that bought stability in a highly diverse society (between spasms of civil war) — but at the price of constant lack of accountability, corruption, misgovernance and mistrust.

That is why the first question so many Lebanese asked after the recent explosion was not what happened, but who did it and for what advantage?

The United States is becoming like Lebanon and other Middle East countries in two respects. First, our political differences are becoming so deep that our two parties now resemble religious sects in a zero-sum contest for power. They call theirs 'Shiites and Sunnis and Maronites' or 'Israelis and Palestinians.' We call ours 'Democrats and Republicans,' but ours now behave just like rival tribes who believe they must rule or die.

And second, as in the Middle East, so increasingly in America: *Everything is now politics* — even the climate, even energy, even face masks in a pandemic.

Everything is just about power

Indeed, we in America are becoming so much like a Middle Eastern country that, while the Lebanese were concluding that the explosion was truly an accident, President Trump was talking like a Beirut militia leader, declaring that it must have been a conspiracy. 'It was an attack,' he said his generals thought. 'It was a bomb of some kind.'

But a society, and certainly a democracy, eventually dies when everything becomes politics. Governance gets strangled by it. Indeed, it was reportedly the failure of the corrupt Lebanese courts to act as guardians of the common good and order the removal of the explosives from the port — as the port authorities had requested years ago — that paved the way for the explosion.

But if you listen to the street demonstrators in Beirut, you can hear how so many Lebanese are starved for a government that represents the common good.

'For a healthy politics to flourish it needs reference points outside itself — reference points of truth and a conception of the common good,' explained the Hebrew University religious philosopher Moshe Halbertal. 'When everything becomes political, that is the end of politics.'

To put it differently, when everything is politics, everything is just about power. There is no centre, only sides; no truth, only versions; no facts,

only a contest of wills.

If you believe that climate change is real, it must be because someone paid you off with a research grant. If you believe the president committed an impeachable offense trying to enlist the president of Ukraine to undermine Joe Biden, it's only because you want power for your party.

It's literally killing us

Illiberal populists like Trump — or Bibi Netanyahu in Israel, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Vladimir Putin in Russia — deliberately try to undermine the guardians of facts and the common good. Their message to their people is: 'Don't believe the courts, the independent civil servants or the fake news generators — only trust me, my words and my decisions. It's a jungle out there. My critics are *killers* (which is what Trump called his press corps on Friday), and only I can protect our tribe from theirs. It's rule or die.'

This trend is not only hurting us, it's literally killing us. The reason Trump has utterly failed to manage the Covid-19 pandemic is that he finally met a force he could not discredit and deflect by turning it into politics — Mother Nature. She is impenetrable to politics because all she consists of is chemistry, biology and physics. And she will do whatever they dictate — in this case, spread a coronavirus — whether Trump affirms it or not.

The leaders of Germany, Sweden and South Korea asserted just the opposite, saying: 'No, there are scientific facts independent of politics and there is the common good, and we will bow to those facts and we will serve the common good with a public health strategy.'

The other day Trump told a GOP audience in Cleveland that, if Biden won, Biden would 'hurt the Bible, hurt God. He's against God, he's against guns, he's against energy, our kind of energy.'

Our kind of energy?

Yup, it turns out there is now Republican energy — oil, gas and coal — and Democratic energy — wind, solar and hydro. And if you believe in oil, gas and coal, you are also supposed to oppose abortion and face masks. And if you believe in solar, wind and hydro, you are presumed to be pro-abortion rights and pro-face mask. This kind of thinking, in the extreme, is what destroyed Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen and is

increasingly eating away at Israel.

But if you listen to the street demonstrators in Beirut, you can hear how so many Lebanese are starved for a government that represents the common good. Here in America, too. Who are the leaders many of us still respect and yearn for — even when we disagree with them? asked Halbertal.

Trump would have torn America apart over that, and trust me, if he loses in November, there is no way he will put the common good ahead of his own and go quietly into this good night.

'They are the leaders,' he answered, 'who believe that there is a realm of the sacred — of the common good — that is outside of politics and who make big decisions based on their best judgment of the common good — not their naked power interests.'

These leaders will do a lot for their parties; they are not averse to politics. They engage in it intensely — but they recognise where it has to stop and start. They won't subvert the Constitution or start a war or play down a public health hazard to save their own power.

In the Middle East, those people are rare, and usually get assassinated — but we remember their names: Yitzhak Rabin, Anwar el-Sadat, Rafik Hariri and courageous Lebanese journalists like my colleagues Gibran Tueni and Samir Kassir.

It is why many of us admire Chief Justice John Roberts when he occasionally sides with the liberals on Supreme Court decisions. It is not because the decision is liberal, but because he seems to be acting on behalf of the common good, not his political tribe.

It is also why we still admire our military, the guardian of our common good, and are appalled and alarmed when we see Trump dragging it into 'politics.'

Think of the dignity of Al Gore gracefully submitting to a highly politicised Supreme Court decision giving the 2000 election to George W. Bush. Gore put the common good first. He took a bullet for America.

Trump would have torn America apart over that, and trust me, if he loses in November, there is no way he will put the common good ahead of his own and go quietly into this good night.
'When you lose the realm of the sacred, that realm of the common good

outside of politics, that is when societies collapse,' said Halbertal. That is what happened to Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq. And that is what is slowly happening to Israel and America.

Reversing this trend is the most important project of our generation.

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Thomas L. Friedman
New York City

Thomas L. Friedman became the New York Times's foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995. He joined the paper in 1981, after which he served as the Beirut bureau chief in 1982, Jerusalem bureau chief in 1984, and then in Washington as the diplomatic correspondent in 1989, and later the White House correspondent and economic correspondent.