The Last Best Hope? Understanding America from the Outside In
The Crisis Episode
Series 1 (Trinity term 2020)
Published 2 May 2020

TRANSCRIPT

NB the text below was transcribed automatically by https://otter.ai.

Adam Smith 0:10
Hello and welcome to the Last Best Hope, the podcast from Oxford's Rothermere American Institute which looks at America from the outside in. My name's Adam Smith. In this episode, we're talking about crises. How do we know when we see it? When and why do they begin and end? And how do they shape historical development? The term crisis has medical roots. The 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary defined it as that change which indicates recovery or death. Will the fever break and the patient be restored to health? Or is this the end? But beginning in the 17th century, it was also used as a metaphor for the body politic.

Reading: Benjamin Rudyard 1:02
Mr. Speaker, this is the crisis of Parliaments. By this we shall know whether Parliaments will live or die. Mr. Speaker, we are not now upon the business of the kingdom. We are upon the very essence of it. Whether we shall be a kingdom, or no.

Adam Smith 1:27
That was a Benjamin Rudyard, poet and Member of Parliament in a speech to the House of Commons on the 22nd of March 1626. Later, at the end of the 18th century, during the American and French revolutions, people began to apply the term widely to the secular realm. Tom Paine series of pamphlets commenting on the American Revolution, for example, was just called the crisis. And then in the 1850s and 60s, as America collapsed into war, the notion of crisis was widely used to imply that this was an existential moment, it would either destroy or would entirely reforge the nation.

Reading 2:15
The turning point, you know, disease is a crisis. So is a journey on a railroad or steamboat in a man's history for he is then placed in so critical a position that he scarcely knows whether he ought to hope for live or prepare for death. At present, the nation considered politically has reached this turning point this critical moment and will soon arrive safely at the end of

its present excursion, or be blown into fragments by an explosion or be crushed by a collision. It will shortly recover from its convulsions or die under the disease of politics. Crisis is the proper and the best word to express the existing state of the country. New York Ledger, October 25 1856.

Adam Smith 3:21
The term crisis implied that time itself had sped up, and that for better or worse, one epoch was ending and something else beginning. Well, joining me now to discuss the idea of crisis and how it's shaped America is Jay Sexton, the Kinder Institute Chair of Constitutional Democracy at the University of Missouri, formerly the Director of the RAI here in Oxford. Jay's most recent book is A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History, which was published by Basic Books in 2018. Jay, thanks so much for, for joining me on the Last Best Hope podcast. It's great to see you. How are you?

Jay Sexton 4:07
I'm doing good. And it's good, good to see you, Adam.

Adam Smith 4:10
Jay, we're talking about what is a crisis? I mean, it feels like we're in the middle of a crisis at the moment, everybody's using the word. But it kind of feels to me like people have been using the word crisis for a good few years. So yeah, as historians. How do we know a crisis from a non-crisis? How do we detect a real crisis from a false one?

Jay Sexton 4:34
Well, we want to listen to what our observers at the time are saying, but they can't be the ones that make that determination for us because as you say, everything's crisis, everything higher ed crisis, drugs, crisis, housing crisis, etc. So we have to impose some kind of order on this and the way that I've done it is to have a couple of benchmarks about what determines what a crisis is. The first is pretty simple a crisis cannot be contained. So, you know, a malady or an illness in one sector of public life kind of spreads to another and existing political structures cannot contain the contagion. And I'm using this the metaphors here of health because actually a lot of the observers in the in the New Deal especially but also in the in the days of the Civil War, and other moments of acute crisis, thought of these things as pandemics. You think of Roosevelt's quarantine speech, for instance. So you hear you have example of historical actors understanding something is spreading and metastasizing. So that's the first kind of benchmark I use. The second is, I think, perhaps the more significant one in terms of thinking about crisis leading to a different political outcome, to be a moment of transformation. And that is when you have one of these metastasizing crises. It requires rapid mobilisation of power. And that's a wrenching process of political change that up-orders, existing ways of doing things doesn't clear the decks completely old structures remain standing, in fact, old, old ways of doing things sometimes get a new lease on life during a crisis. But what you have is the mobilisation of power and a complete transformation of the way of a political order operates. So those are my two sort of benchmarks for thinking about this.

Adam Smith 6:38
The medical analogy, I mean, it's not just an analogy, it's I mean, it's the root of the word rests in a kind of medical idea, doesn't it? Certainly, I mean, what I can see in the way that people wrote about it in the 19th century and earlier, when they use the word crisis to apply to politics or commerce. They're more self-consciously than they would be nowadays using it as a metaphor. Yeah. The the body politic is like the body.

Jay Sexton 7:07
Yeah, absolutely existential. There's, there's, there's no going back to the way things used to be. And then the other thing about the the language, that metaphor, and when it emerges in the in the 19th century, and you'll know this probably better than me, but a lot of the public health scares and when crisis was used in the body politic was in danger. I mean, you're talking about port cities and epidemics, you're talking about cholera things that begin in one society and then somehow transfer to another. And so you have these early like quarantines don't you in the in the, in that in that period, and I think that's when that language really, really takes really takes off.

Adam Smith 7:49
The United States was created as an independent country, in a context of of world crisis of which what was happening and what was happening in North America. It was only a subsection of a larger world crisis in the late 18th century.

Jay Sexton 8:04
Absolutely. I mean, you have the upending of a geopolitical order, you have a shift in the balance of power globally. And then also within within the old world within Europe itself. You have the ascendance of Great Britain. And so the United States is a byproduct of that process. I mean, you also have a sudden, rapid, dramatic growth of the economy, population and power of British North America, from the sort of mid 18th century onwards. So you have, you know, all kinds of rapid change, geopolitical change and economic change. And the the old political institutions, the old hoary political institutions, and I'm not persuaded by these people who say that the early 18th century British Empire was so much more sophisticated than we think. Perhaps, but it wasn't able to adapt to those new circumstances, certainly not. So that's the crisis that Tom Paine is talking about, course Tom Paine, an immigrant to the to the United States, he'd only been in Philadelphia, what 16 months when he's writing Common Sense. He's a product of this rapid moment of transformation.

Adam Smith 9:17
If today the crisis is being caused by a literal and actual virus, what was the contagion that was unstoppable in the late 18th century?

Jay Sexton 9:29
The the contagion I think at it at its heart was sudden, unexpected growth in North America, and this put strains on the geopolitical order. This put immense strains on the Imperial administration of the British Empire. It put strains on relations between settlers and indigenous peoples. It put strains on the colonial societies themselves, and social relations

and social tensions intensified. Growth. In other words, and this is a characteristic, not just of the run up to the American Revolution, I'd say it's a characteristic of run up to the other crises I talk about. But sudden growth booms can be just as perilous to political establishments as can busts, you know, crisis of growth. So I think that if I had if I had to zoom in on one factor and how I opened that chapter, that's what I that's what I that's what I talk about. And when you have an economic burst, that demographic burst, the old the old institutions are unable to keep up and something new needs to emerge in their place. So that's, that's how I would answer that one.

Adam Smith 10:49
Yeah, so okay, so the upheavals of the 18th century meet the criteria for crisis for two reasons. Number one, because the underlying problems, whatever they were, whether they were demographic, economic, ideological, were uncontrollable. They metastasize, to use that brilliant medical analogy, in ways that were unpredictable. And secondly, because the response to those problems, which in the case of North America was the movement for American independence, was a response that ended up sweeping away important dimensions of the old order that what was left at the end of this crisis was something fundamentally different from what had been there before. There was no going back. A very similar pattern occurred in the middle of the 19th century, didn't it in the second big moment of crisis that you write about in your book, which was the problem of slavery, which again metastasized in unpredictable ways, affected economic life, obviously, political life, religious life. In the end, the political institutions of the country couldn't cope with it, there was a huge civil war, three quarters of a million people were killed, it was a massive traumatic event. The response the mobilisation of the state, the building of the Union Army created a United States as a response to that crisis, which was profoundly different from the one that had existed before. So how does the Civil War fit into your schema exactly?

Jay Sexton 12:28
Well, I mean, in in this in the schema again, prioritising how America fits in to the to the broader international system. What's left standing is a settlement of the internal political controversy which had inhibited the growth of American power geopolitically, because the United States didn't know what it was going to be. Was it going to be pro slavery and free trade? Or is it going to be anti slavery and protectionist Okay, and and so you come out the other end in 1865, you have a more powerful central state and more powerful federal government, though you still have that lingering tradition to talk about the old things that persist, you know, federalism and states' rights is very powerful after 1865, but you do have a new apparatus, you do have a new industrialising system of finance capitalism, based in the urban northeast, which is on its on its way to becoming the centre of the global economy within the next half century. And then you have two three things in particular, I think that are really important after 1865. One, the United States becomes the world's most desirable market for capital, the world's largest debtor nation, and for migrant labour, the United States attracts 25% of global migrants in the from the sort of mid 19th century to the days of the First World War. 25% of international migrants. It's like a giant hoover sucking up capital and labour. And this was not by no means written in stone that this was going to happen. I mean, the 1850s sees really powerful, nativist, xenophobic political movements emerge in the north. So one of the interesting things about the Civil War is the way in

which immigrant military service flips the social politics of immigration. 25% of the Union army is foreign born. That's like the least known but most important statistic about the Civil War, 25% are foreign born. If you include second generation, that number goes up 43%. And then if you tack on to that, obviously the military service of African Americans, you have a majority already have the Union army is minority. I don't know why that's not taught in schools here. So you got capital, you got immigrants, and then the third thing is you have protection. The United States obviously is going to have some of the highest tariffs in the world. This is the golden age of protectionism. It's going to spawn competitors with Japan and Germany, two also upstart rivals, but the the the sort of fundamentals of how America is going to position itself within the wider world order are completely transformed by the by the American Civil War, even though we tend to think of it internal in internal terms.

Adam Smith 15:42
Do you know, I love I love your metaphor of the Hoover and we're, we more often hear the metaphor of the magnet right? Which is which is much gentler, isn't it? And it and it implies, and is that is implies attraction, doesn't it? Where's the Hoover, it's just brute force right. In your in your Hoover metaphor, what is it that's providing the electricity or the motor that powers the Hoover? It's, I guess it's economic transformation. It's industrialization and it's and the need for labour force.

Jay Sexton 16:15
Yeah, I mean that's that that's what's sucking in and of course, that there's the push factors from economic dislocation and change in, in in Europe and indeed across the Pacific. So that's there. But now I know that you're a scholar of ideas and that you'll rake me over the coals if I don't miss mention ideas, but ideas are, I suppose, relevant here, belonging into this discussion. You know, the Civil War does a lot to improve America's international reputation and standing, I mean, you think about the global celebrity of Abraham Lincoln, the self-made man. Here's a place that has an opportunity, where the normal guy born in a log cabin can can can raise himself all the way up to the highest office of the land. A lot of those immigrants that end up in the in the Union Army, come to the United States, because you have the prospect of land ownership and independence, you know, individual autonomy. And that's both an economic practice and structure, but it but it's also an abstraction. It's it's an idea and you just can't have that really in the slaveholding society. Confederacy has nothing to offer, for foreign immigrants.

Adam Smith 17:36
Some nevertheless, did go of course, didn't they, there were Irish immigrants going into Charleston and so on, which has always kind of fascinated me. So the 19th century crisis left the United States much stronger in geopolitical terms just as the late 18th century crisis did. And the third big crisis moment that you write about in your book is the crisis of the period, let's say 1929 to 1945, the period of the Great Depression and the New Deal and the Second World War, and that, of course, that also in a very dramatic way, left the United States in a in a vastly more powerful position in a geopolitical sense than it had before. That crisis began, I mean, you were talking about this earlier, that began as a financial crisis. At least that was the way it was experienced at the time, a financial crisis on Wall Street. And that was the sense of contagion, that nobody knew how to deal with this sudden collapse of

financial confidence. But it became a lot of other things as well, didn't it? So how would you characterise that 20th century crisis moment? What made that crisis and what were the forces driving it?

Jay Sexton 19:00
Just the sheer scale, I mean, just the the sheer scale of the, the the social cost of the collapse of the global economy, the sheer scale is is surely important and understanding that the cost and the and the scope of the crisis, but the scale is also relevant when you think about not just things like unemployment and social conflict in the United States, but when you think about the global dimensions, and the global response to the, to the, to the Great Depression. And here, you have an intensification of the trends from the First World War of nations turning inwards, of, of nationalist political responses of tariffs, immigration restrictions. This is of course when the old 1865 order of open borders is finally comes to an end. It's actually before that Great Depression, but that nationalism coming out of the, of the Great War, and then obviously international rivalry and competition and ultimately global warfare. So the really interesting thing about this moment is how you have that nationalist response. But what you get coming out the other end is America that looks completely different from it has before. An internationalist America, free trade, buying into international institutions, the UN, binding alliances like NATO, a very different from what you saw, not just after the Civil War, but what you saw in the 19, in the 1920s, and 30s. So that that's a moment of complete an unexpected transformation.

Adam Smith 20:51
So if each of these three crises that we've talked about, led to the United States being more powerful geopolitically, than they are had been at the beginning. What's the prognosis for the current crisis?

Jay Sexton 21:08
I just can't see, this is what keeps me up at night. Really. I can't see how the United States comes out the other end of this in any way, but weaker internationally. And, and, of course, one could point to the current administration that deserves a whole lot of blame on how it's handled the specifics, but this is but the, you know, the climax of what's been a long running trend that has carried through successive administrations of both parties. The other thing I would say, Adam, is that, you know, before the whole pandemic, you know, after 2016 everyone was scratching their heads about how do we explain Brexit and how do we explain the election of Donald Trump and one of the ideas that was out there and was kind of discredited, but I still buy into it, was that what's at stake is how these Western democracies are going to relate to the wider world. You know, the so called closed versus open debate, are we going to be closed, are we going to have tariffs, are we going to shut down immigration, are we going to pursue nationalist policies in the international arena? Or are we going to try to remain open as we have been, relatively so, since 1945? Immigrants, international free trade, free flow of investment, free flow of ideas and strengthening international institutions. And more than ever, I think that this crisis is accelerating that debate. It's raising the stakes of it. And to me, the fear is that it's giving the advocates of the closed side, of the nationalist side, it's giving them new-found advantage. I mean, tariffs are

the name of the day, border controls, surveillance. You name it, that is playing into their hands. If you want me to be optimistic, from at least from where –

Adam Smith 23:15
I don't necessarily want you to be optimistic, you –

Jay Sexton 23:19
Let me be optimistic, so so on the if you're if you're an advocate of internationalism, as am I, and you think it's served both the United States and Great Britain, but also it's it's served the wider world pretty well, you would say things like, well, an international pandemic, so obviously demands international solutions. I mean, it's just blatantly obvious that there's no solution to this crisis that doesn't cross national borders. And in particular, you could point to things like scientific collaboration, that could be really, really important in sowing seeds of other kinds of international collaboration. And then the other thing that springs to my mind is the actual shared experience of quarantining. I mean, when was the last time that people here in the middle of Missouri, in Boone County, Missouri, we're experiencing something very similar to what you're experiencing across the sea in Oxford or what someone in in Tokyo or in Mumbai is is experiencing? It could be a shared experience, a crucible, which could increase identification across borders. So that's that's me looking for the glass being half full. I don't know what what do you think from sitting over there?

Adam Smith 24:48
No, I, I think your last point about the shared experience is a really interesting one because it reminds us doesn't it that there is a there's a generational experience of crisis. As you don't have to search very far in writings about the Great Depression or the Civil War or the Revolution to, to hear people writing about this, this was the formative moment of our lives, we were young then, when it happened, this was the experience that shaped us. So the big question, in my mind is, is, you know, the Coronavirus generation, I don't know how that generation is defined, but I guess it's probably people, probably people younger than you and I, Jay. But that for whom, for whom, who, and it is, of course, younger people who are bearing the heaviest burden. It's just an interesting question of how this experience, which may go on for a long time, we just don't know will shape their political values, their sense of how they can organise, what kinds of institutions they want to build. We just don't know at the moment.

Jay Sexton 25:48
It sure would be, sure, it sure would be nice if a spokesperson a leader emerged to communicate the the meaning of all of this, and to create identification across borders. I mean, you know, an old fashioned thing to say here, but I believe it is, if you want to know why America's long-running tradition of Anglophobia kind of evaporates in the Second World War, you've got to start with the way in which Churchill's speeches and ideas spread across the United States and resonated with with listeners, he gave meaning to that conflict, and in doing so completely scrambled and upended America's political aversion to binding alliances and to Great Britain in particular. And wouldn't it be great if if someone kind of finds a way to emerge through all the, through all the noise, through all the clutter, there's just too many people talking these days, instead of not enough, but if someone's voice was

there, and in that message that she or he was articulating was one that resonated in different national contexts.

Adam Smith 27:08
In every crisis, in in the crisis we've been talking about in this conversation, there are people jumping in trying to shape the crisis moment and push it in one direction or another. And in each of those three moments, you know, the outcome that happened, that wasn't foreordained, right. I mean, they, the, as you say, in your book, you know, the, the, the rebel, the rebels could easily have been defeated in their attempt to establish independence. There are other outcomes, certainly other outcomes imaginable in the slavery crisis of the 1850s and 60s. And there are certainly other political outcomes possible after the crash of 1929. So we're in a situation now, aren't we, where you know, all that is solid melts into air, and the question is, who is going to be able to shape the flailing pieces and put something together again, in the in the coming in the coming years.

Jay Sexton 28:11
How about you know, but you know, what I'd say, man, is that if we if we want to just think about this in in in American terms from the perspective of the United States. You know, the the most overlooked actors in American history are foreign powers or foreign states. And it's, I guess, natural that that's been the case because most American history has been written since 1945, when the United States has really been a global hegemon and so it's, you know, no one's really thought much about anyone else determining the course of US history. But one of the points I tried to make in that book is foreign powers played a critical, crucial roles, as did immigrants, as did immigrants, and you don't hear much about the role played by by them. And so to answer your question about the pandemic, and with the nature of the United States' political system right now in disarray, I would be surprised if the United States is is the player that emerges on the international scene. We might want you might want to look elsewhere. The, you got me, you got me. You got me pessimistic again.

Adam Smith 29:31
We were optimistic for a moment then we went back to pessimism, didn't we. Is there a bit of you that is, as a historian as someone you know, interested in transformation professionally and how the world comes to be as it is, is there a bit of you that's kind of a little bit of you that sort of enjoying living in this exciting moment when 10 years of change happens in two weeks?

Jay Sexton 29:54
Not really, I kind of liked the old order. You know, the old order was there was a lot going for us in the old order and but no and but I do stay up at night man that I, you know, the United States and its international role. That keeps me up at night. And I I'm not a defender and or apologist of American power, but I happen to think that post 1945 America got more right than it got wrong, more right than it got wrong. And I'm not as confident that whatever might come out the other end of a geopolitical shake-up, the same will be able to be said of it.

Adam Smith 30:37
Just the last thought really. I guess the concept of crisis where it's the concept of non-crisis, which on which it is dependent is more problematic when you start to kind of look into it too closely, doesn't it? Because an awful lot of things change and then an awful lot of mini crises within the periods of crisis now.

Jay Sexton 30:53
It's a great no, it's a it's a totally, totally fair point. And a good one and you're absolutely right. Right, it's there isn't like equilibrium in between these moments. But again, again, if you step back, okay, and you're looking at the map, and you're thinking about it that way, and you're seeing the global flows, you're seeing the the relative power. You're seeing the kind of broader international system and how America fits in. And if that's your perspective, which is mine, so from 30,000 feet looking down, you know, the the crises over the McKinley tariff debates in 1890 or the the crisis of 1898, those things don't really they're not game changers. They're just the unfolding of a particular geopolitical order. So you know, when you're talking about how individuals experience it, I mean, the question that stumped me the most one time when I gave a little lecture on on the book, someone said, you've written a book about crisis. What does it have to tell us about resilience? Like, Oh, God, I don't know. I mean, I don't actually talk about people in the book. I mean, that's, that's not my interest. So it just, it's just all relative to what's going to be your frame. I mean, what are you actually looking at? What are you trying to solve?

Adam Smith 32:21
This has been great. Thank you so much.

Jay Sexton 32:23
Oh, thanks for having me. And I hope everybody over there is staying safe with the virus.

Adam Smith 32:29
Jay Sexton of the University of Missouri and we were referring there to his book, A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History. If our present moment rises to the level of a crisis by historical standards, the one thing that we know is that we don't know what the world will look like at the end of it. Some people think that the essential condition of modernity is perpetual crisis, but separating the signal from the noise, as historians must do, we can see that there are times when the plates really do shift, when empires fall and worlds collapse. If as Jay says the United States has emerged from its formative three crises stronger, and with a vacuum-like pull to the rest of the world, now may be the time when that phase of global history, the phase in which the United States was in many respects, at the centre of its story, finally comes to an end. Or it may not. This is the Last Best Hope podcast from Oxford's Rothermere American Institute. My name is Adam Smith. Goodbye