

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

Look to history to see cyclical nature of crises

University of Missouri professor's book says current challenges for government echo other turbulent periods in last 100 years



CHUCK RAASCH
St. Louis
Post-Dispatch

WASHINGTON • Crisis.

Of race. Of policing. Of economic equity. Of what it means to be an American.

A crisis of confidence in government's ability to do anything about the issues.

With the echoes of real gunfire in Minneapolis, Baton Rouge and Dallas literally and liberally coming through Americans' televisions, these are not abstract challenges.

A University of Missouri professor says we've been here before and surpassed crises of various iterations.

In his upcoming book, "Four Crises of American Democracy," Alasdair Roberts, a professor at the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, traces post-Civil War crises and what can be learned in confronting the "crisis of anticipation" he said that Americans have just entered.

"This sense of American democracy getting into deep trouble has been something that has been building up for three or four years," Roberts said. "... I felt it was time to address that."

Roberts' book, which Oxford University Press will publish in December, traces previously similar periods of democratic self-doubt:

- A "crisis of representation" during the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, when disenfranchised women and blacks and working-class Americans protested and government

struggled to respond.

- A "crisis of mastery" stemming from World War I through World War II, when America's economic and physical safety were tested through the Great Depression and the rise of Nazism and fascism.

- And a "crisis of discipline," as represented in the economic and energy shocks of the 1970s, and then-President Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech.

Now we are entering a "crisis of anticipation," Roberts said, as Americans rethink the Reagan-era paradigm of small government, economic and trade liberalism, and other doctrines of the last 30-plus years. He said there is a sense that democracy is not equipped to deal with long-term challenges on everything from climate change to illegal immigration to policing.

"One of the basic things that government has to do is maintain peace and order inside the country, and do it in such a way that the use of force is seen as legitimate by the people that are being governed," Roberts told the Post-Dispatch. "One of the issues we clearly see coming on the agenda is whether local police forces are policing in such a way that is regarded as acceptable by the people who are being policed."

Roberts said that both presumptive presidential candidates are struggling along with the rest of us to define where to go next. He said the extreme rhetoric and widely divergent solutions being offered, from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders, are reminiscent of extreme nature of the early years of previous crises.

Roberts compares Trump to a home remodeler who relishes the demolition but has not drawn coherent plans for the remodel.

Roberts says Hillary Clinton is tethered in the public's mind

to "Clintonism" — a sense that her husband's administration in the 1990s continued the Reagan paradigm on everything from trade to welfare reform. Roberts points out that Bill Clinton famously declared in his 1996 State of the Union speech: "The era of big government is over."

Now Hillary Clinton is struggling to appropriate some of the themes of Sanders, her primary challenger, such as opposing free trade agreements, that require her to walk away from Clintonism.

"In order to win an election, they have to have a story about where the country is going that is compelling to a large number of people," Roberts said of Clinton and Trump.

"On Trump's side, he can tell the story of what he thinks has gone wrong, but he can't articulate a vision of where to go."

Clinton's "inclination is basically to say, 'I have a story about what we are going to do. It is the same story we have been telling for many years,'" Roberts said.

"That is not satisfactory to people, and she is improvising: 'What elements of Sanders' campaign will I take on board?'"

"She is improvising a story," Roberts said, "but it is pretty obvious she is improvising a story."

Roberts said he is "cautiously optimistic" the U.S. will move through this crisis, but he says it could take 10 to 15 years, and the effort will be pushed by new generations of politicians who think and speak differently about challenges and solutions.

"If you look at history, you have grounds to feel more upbeat," Roberts said. "You have to take a longer view. It is not something that gets fixed in a year or two."

Chuck Raasch • 202-298-6880
@craasch on Twitter
craasch@post-dispatch.com



Roberts