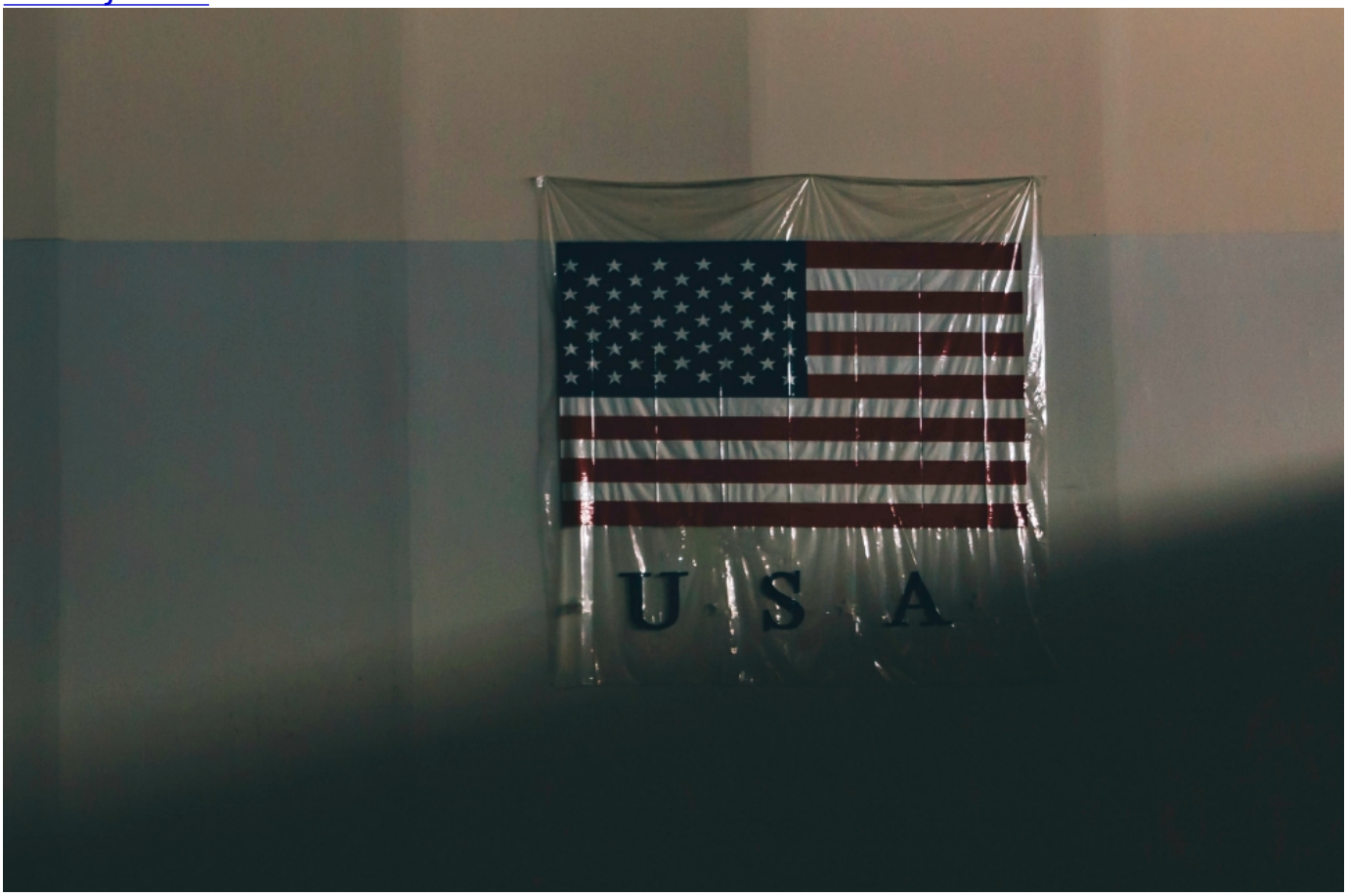
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(Unsplash/Matthew T. Rader)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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George Will, veteran journalist and social analyst, intoned in his avuncular way, "The strongest continuous thread in America's political tradition is skepticism." While looking for virtues suitable to a country in political and social disarray, I couldn't help but be particularly happy at the thought of nominating *skepticism* as the electoral foundation of the future.

Why? Because I hope he's right. Without skepticism, democracy is dead. Then there's nothing but monarchy, tyranny and autocracy left.

It seems to me that, instead of scrutinizing the promises that come from politicians in an election year, we simply take for granted that what they say is true, that what they promise is doable. So, we vote with certainty without examining what could certainly happen if we got what we say we want.

And when we don't get what we were told we'd get, we blame everybody but our most gullible selves for the perverse situations political hyperbole spawns. We buy into fantasy and blame it on everybody but ourselves and our greed, ourselves and our misogyny, ourselves and our disinterest in the needs of the rest of the country.

Clearly, certainty is the communicable disease spread by elections. Few voters make the effort to compare one political promise with another, let alone assess the probable effects of them on other important programs. At the last election, for instance, we voted to bring American industries back to America. An iota of awareness could have alerted us to the fact that just about nothing is made exclusively — let alone totally — anywhere in this interlocking global world. We all make parts for things everybody else makes and then we all sell them to one another. Which is what keeps creativity alive, money moving and the economy growing, but it does not re-create a world long gone.

Truly, no one is an island anymore. Commerce is the peace plan of a global age. It is the only spiritual proof a secular world has that we really do need one another.

And yet, that kind of narrow-minded political dogmatism becomes the overriding electoral political value — not our needs, not our budget. Instead, we spread out our cloaks before whomever it is who feeds our fantasies with the certainty that they are about to pull our White Rabbit out of the voting machine. With no data whatsoever to support a candidate's claims, the various political parties woo us to vote for this year's "America's Got Talent" nominees with all the glitz and glamour — and eventual disappearing act — that implies.

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As a result, the ability to be certain about an aspirant's commitment to the issues of the age, as well as the quality of their characters or the effectiveness of their proposals, go too often unexamined. And with it, the likelihood that what candidates guarantee is really possible becomes at least slim, if not totally speculative.

All they need to do, it seems, is to feed our wildest dreams.

For instance:

Fossil fuels, we're asked to believe, are coming back as the savior of the country's economic backbone simply because a candidate says, like God the Creator, "Let there be light! And there was light."

Question: But what about the collision course between fossil fuels and climate change, global warming, desertification, flooding and the massive immigration that occurs when people live near flood-prone rivers or coastlines, or on dry and sterile and fruitless land? What makes us think that industries given over to robots and pollution and computerization will ever bring back the corporations of the past as they once were? Like buggy whips, for instance. Or dry wells. Or the fossil fuels of one industrial era to power — and threaten — a newer one?

I'd be skeptical if I were you.

Or what about the warning that the country is being overrun by foreign robbers or rapists, muggers and murderers from which only a countrywide wall can save us.

Question: How many people — what percentage — of foreigners who have walked into the country across the river from us have really committed crimes here other

than speeding tickets, perhaps?

According to the March 4 report of the Cato Institute on "Illegal Immigrants and Crime — Assessing the Evidence" by Alex Nowrasteh, the criminal record of undocumented immigrants is lower than that of native-born Americans.

In fact, Jennifer Doleac in "Are Immigrants More Likely to Commit Crimes?" concludes that studies using different data sources and approaches have also concluded that immigrants are generally less likely to commit crimes. Citing data from a recent study that looks specifically at flows of immigrants from Mexico, she points out that Mexican immigration has no effect on violent or property crime in the United States. In fact, most undocumented aliens, various Homeland Security reports attest, have been in jail for foreign reasons: meaning they've been put in jail because they're here without documentation. And so the merry-go-round of political racism goes on.

I'd be skeptical of labeling a whole people miscreant if I were you.

We did that once with the Indians, the African Americans, the Irish and the Eastern Europeans. You can see how that worked out.

But we go on our certain ways, selecting candidates by party affiliation and personal promises rather than on the basis of the effect of their values, beliefs and judgments on the Constitution. As in, money allocated by Congress for the upgrading of the U.S. military has been moved without congressional approval to build a wall most of the country does not want. But if an administration can do that kind of tampering with the laws and values of the nation, what else will they do to distort the other democratic values our Founders left us?

I'd be skeptical if I were you.

Once a Constitution can be ignored so blithely, nothing else is safe.

Unfortunately, that's not the only problem that comes with political fantasies or political lies.

It is one thing to get the political version of snake oil by failing to exercise the skepticism necessary to save ourselves from buyer's remorse after an election. But quite another serious concern is the emerging data on the effect of the deliberate

implantation of false information.

Elizabeth Loftus, one of the country's ranking psychological researchers in memory development for more than 25 years and holder of the Western Psychological Association's "Lifetime Achievement Award," warns us that the deliberate implantation of false memories — lies — can affect a person's behavior in the future.

The attitudes created, for instance, in American children from the negative, biased and untruthful information parleyed about the Soviet Union during the Cold War has left U.S.-Russian relationships at a disadvantage to this day.

Hardly a grade school child of the '50s has forgotten being ordered to crawl under a desk during "air raid drills" designed to save them from atomic bombs. Those bombs, we were told, with one enemy only recently vanquished, could well be dropped on us, this time by Russia.

A little more skepticism, perhaps, could have saved us from decades of nuclear hysteria. A little less labeling might have left us with a little less East-West tension. A little less enmity, a little more peace and prosperity.

From where I stand, in fact, it is groundless, false enmity that we are suffering from right now. And it is being stoked by actors most advantaged by a country in fear of the unknown.

Skepticism, a healthy dose of scrutiny and uncertainty, may well save the world from more political charlatans than the world ever dreamed. Then, perhaps, we would be less amenable to baseless certainties and exaggerations, more in tune with the kind of political status that is gained by being publicly moral, publicly nonpartisan and publicly committed to the needs of the entire nation rather than simply half of it.

The question, of course, is whether we ourselves are wary enough to distinguish universal good from just one more set of frangible fantasies when we see them.

Judging from recent history, I'd be a bit skeptical about that, if I were you.

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]

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