

FOUNDATION OF TRUST

# Don't believe the headlines about Americans' mistrust of government, institutions

To see what happens when people actually lose trust, look at what's happening in Haiti.

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By BRUCE PETERSON

In a suburb of Port-au-Prince, a gang bulldozed a police station with a front-end loader. Armed gangs control 80% of the city and loot and burn buildings in all sectors. Underfunded police have abandoned several areas and many officers have deserted. In the law-enforcement vacuum, some neighborhoods have built roadblocks to protect themselves, and there have been some 60 vigilante lynchings. The health care system is collapsing.

The terrible drama underway in Haiti, so near to our shores, makes our own political theater look more like a soap opera.

I am not objective about the contrast. Several years ago, I had a trial in my courtroom about a terrible three-car accident on a suburban highway in a snowstorm. I won't forget the dramatic testimony, pictures, and video of the

first responders quickly arriving, the highway patrol blocking off the dangerous traffic, and the medics starting work on a woman still trapped in a car while the firefighters were unloading their heavy tools.

We have a country where if you call for help, someone comes.

Sure, even here police sometimes lose control of the streets. And emergency response times in some areas are too slow. But those are unacceptable deficiencies we will remedy.

The latest dismal report on trust in government, this one by The Economist, is entitled flatly, "America's trust in its institutions has collapsed." I don't believe it.

Take the most trendy woke ideologue or the most ardent conspiracy fan, and you can bet that when their partner collapses or they hear glass breaking at 2 a.m., they will call 911 and trust that someone will come. Right Now.

I complain about potholes, but I trust that I will not be stopped at a roadblock manned by gangsters with AK-47s. I trust that water will come out of the faucet. That the garbage will be collected.

And trust is explained not just by our fond-

ness for local control. Trust in local government is almost as high as it was in 1960. But on things that matter to their lives, people trust the Feds, too.

Judging by the number of unworried people shopping in grocery stores and drug stores, most people trust the safety of their food and drugs. And an awful lot of people seem to trust the security of their investments in the stock market. And though Social Security payments may be adjusted in coming decades, we retirees trust that the checks will not stop next month.

OK, I can practically hear skeptical voices saying they don't trust America's foreign policy or immigration policy or climate policy. But for most of us, those activities are faraway abstractions built out of partisan images implanted by advocates and activists with an agenda. When it comes down to personal experience, we trust that we inhabit a structure of good people banded together to help each other.

Harvard cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker says we divide the world into two zones. We apply a reality mindset to the people and things around us and the rules and norms that regulate our lives. Our beliefs about these things have to be accurate because we conduct our lives in this zone.

But to faraway people and places and remote corridors of power, we apply a mythology mindset. These beliefs do not need to be accurate because they make no discernible difference to our lives. Instead, they function to bind a tribe together.

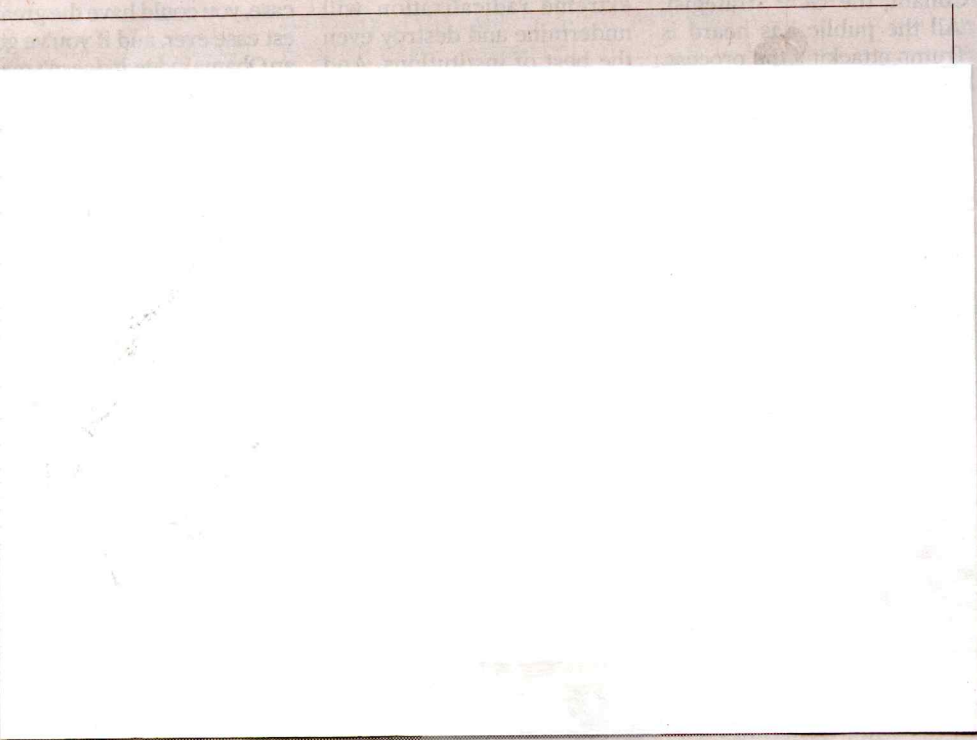
All around us we see mythology unmoored from personal experience. Of the people who adamantly don't trust the government to secure the borders, I strongly suspect very few have ever suffered at the hands of an immigrant. Of the people who loudly proclaim their mistrust of the government's policy toward Israel, I am equally sure that very few have ever talked to a single Israeli or Hamas militant.

I am certainly not criticizing having strong views about things outside our experience — it's just that such opinions don't have to be accurate.

We humans seem to have the capacity to retweet the latest diatribe about the despicable Washington swamp and then calmly buckle ourselves into the seat of an airliner.

It looks like The Economist tapped the mythology mindset, and that did us a disservice.

Creating the institutions that enable us natu-





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JOSE A. IGLESIAS • Miami Herald

Policemen on patrol keep their eyes on traffic at a checkpoint near the U.S. Embassy in Haiti.

rally suspicious humans to trust each other is a signature accomplishment of humanity. The default human condition is chaos, from which spring up groups of marauding men. (Yes, I mean men.)

We know that it happened in the past. For example, in the 15th century, Europe was split into 5,000 pieces of gang turf, called "baronies," from which warlords, called "knights," terrorized peasants and raided each other.

We see that it happens in present times. More than 120 militias — gangs — operate in the chaotic eastern Congo. And now some 300 in Haiti.

And we know that it can happen in the future because we have seen the marauders in "Mad Max" and "The Walking Dead."

Autocrats can overpower chaos at great human cost. People are forced to trade violence by strangers for oppression by tyrants.

But democratic order like ours is created only by the wisdom, energy, goodwill and, yes, trust of good people. The United States is a particularly beautiful example because creating the bonds of trust was intentional. Those brave souls in 1776 trusted each other to hang together rather than hang separately.

The upcoming campaign will exploit all our negative attitudes toward government and toward each other. To be sure, we have serious problems that need correcting — climate change, injustice, immigration. Many people feel that government has not served them well.

But our country has a 250-year-old core of trust and goodwill on which to build solutions. We must commit to preserving this foundation. One place to start would be to think from time to time think about the suffering Haitians, to appreciate what a true collapse of trust looks like, and to remember the difference between reality and mythology.

Bruce Peterson is a senior district judge and teaches a class on lawyers as peacemakers at the University of Minnesota Law School.