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# How to Avoid Becoming China's Bitch

A Radical Centrist  
Manifesto for  
Fixing What's Broken  
Peter D. Kiernan

# Where do I get off using a title like that?

Because we are frozen in perpetual stalemate in this country, our leaders afraid to tackle the big challenges we face because of the way it will be spun by the other side's noise machine. And as our leaders play it safe for the television cameras and pander to their respective bases, China is busy erecting entire new cities, building an infrastructure and economy for the twenty-first-century at a pace that, instead of matching, we simply marvel at from afar.

The time has come to get you out of your comfort zone. In fact, it's well past time for all of us. If we don't, we will lose more than our superpower status—we may well lose our national soul. This manifesto is a radical centrist approach to avoiding the doom-and-gloom vision of a national future we so often hear from the talking heads on both sides of the political spectrum. This manifesto is an attempt to diagnose what's wrong, to face up to the challenges we face as individuals and as a nation, and yes, to avoid becoming China's bitch.

Let's start by gazing in the mirror. The looking glass never lies, and it reflects two things about our beloved country:

**We have allowed ourselves to become paralyzed.**

**And, worse, we are so used to being poorly led that we refuse to lead ourselves.**

How did we let this state of affairs happen to us? Well, to begin with, we haven't chosen the right leaders for the right times—and that used to be our talent.

Could these times be any more uncertain? Imagine piloting the ship of state through all the global and domestic cross currents we face today. Leadership in uncertain times must be different than when the path is clear.

Certainly two starting points for leaders today have to be:

1. Gauging our state of readiness and promoting nimble response to swiftly changing issues
2. Prioritizing the most important problems we face

And, of course, there is a third: uniting your people to tackle your most vexing problems.

Nothing magical, I admit... but against these three yardsticks, how does America measure up?

Let's face it, we are frozen like an almond in a piece of toffee. We have developed a surprising capacity to ignore our biggest problems. And we are about to pay the price. This state paralysis and denial leads to a reasonable query: How did we get here?

America has always had a distinctive culture. Henry Adams wrote his expansive nine-volume history of the United States and stopped after covering just seventeen years. By the Madison Presidency the national temperament had been set and Adams put down his quill. There was no need to write any more.

*“ Sometimes fresh thinking sneaks up on you. Often the most dynamic changes come in brown wrapping paper.*

What was so extraordinary was the new country's ability to allow as many voices as possible to hold forth and then somehow to unite in common purpose? Certainly other nations have forged democracies, but none has had the ability to tolerate so much dissent and disagreement while, in the end, being mutually respectful. Most countries never cared to even try.

The power to unite was central to the American thesis as its DNA. E pluribus unum—out of many, one. Benjamin Franklin is purported to have said, “Uniters don’t make great heroes, but they do make great democracies.” What has happened to make us so divided today?

A cursory view of our history shows a pretty consistent pattern of violence and divide. Finding unity is never easy. We bickered, we demonstrated, we debated, we fought, we killed... and then we united. Always. But for all of history’s lessons, something feels different this time.

Because it is different this time. We have created a multi-billion architecture of divide. The annuities spawned by our divide have grown larger, and that spells just one thing: entrenchment.

What’s so surprising is that Americans don’t do entrenchment very well. We are notoriously impatient with any status quo. But here we are glaciated like a specimen in the ice. And if you do not understand how this infrastructure of divide works, we can never thaw out. Yes, I am saying that we need you.

So, before we decide to tackle our most pressing problems, shouldn’t we understand why we keep culminating at stalemate?

How Did We Get Here? I believe there are five factors that freeze us.

# FACTOR 1: Media-ocrity

Study the evolution of our media and you know why talk TV has become a multi-billion dollar addiction for the major players.

Old timers will claim that radio has been the bully pulpit for brassy opinions since Father Coughlin's choleric in the 1930s. But by the 1970s something new was happening. For decades the network news anchorman was the high priest, speaking in objective and measured tones to his flock. Every evening tens of millions tuned in. The afternoon gazettes were wheezing their last breath, replaced by the anchorman like a sage from the Old Testament.

The Cronkites of the day were variations on a singular theme: objectivity and trust. "That's the way it is," and very little on TV ever dared to venture into the realm of "that's the way it ought to be."

But out in the hinterlands, in the town-by-town back lots of radio, a whole new breed of impressionists were painting in a new style, rejecting the dictates and dogma of network news. They labored as many emerging revolutionaries do, independent and unaware of the philosophical collision course they were charting.

Make no mistake, though, a collision was coming.

Something crucial was missing. These players were off, off, off-Broadway and the city lights were represented by the Big Three Networks. It had been that way since Sarnoff and other imagineers first begat the medium. And harsh rhetoric was never served with TV dinner. Menus are hard to change.

Sometimes fresh thinking sneaks up on you. Often the most dynamic changes come in brown wrapping paper.

Out in the hinterlands a cottonseed salesman was starting an unexciting business in an unexciting town that would lose him, and then make him, a vast fortune.

It began unexpectedly as a rural revolution. The salesman's simple idea was to string cable from a big receiver to remote rural towns that couldn't get TV reception. His boring new business would change everything.

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Such were the humble origins of the opinionator revolution.

Cable TV was a forgettable business until a few geniuses reimagined it as another pathway into the home. The third wire was upon us. First electrical wires, then telephone, and ultimately cable linked every household in a spider web. And of course from these networks sprang another web altogether.

But cable buccaneers had stumbled upon the rarest of rarities: they had created a monopoly utility like electric and phone that had a huge advantage and a near fatal flaw. The distinguishing characteristic was that their utility had the potential for explosive growth other utility monopolies didn't have.

The nearly fatal flaw of this new utility played perfectly into the hands of our emerging opinionator class. It had all the makings of a bargain with the devil—something for everyone and the requisite array of unintended long-term consequences.

The utility had built railroad tracks to the home but was starved for product. And the talking heads needed a pulpit to ply their craft. It was a marriage made in heaven, with a helluva cash flow as a result.

To put things into context, Fox News creates more cash flow than every other broadcast news outlet combined. Across the dial, opinion news and “talk” television has become a multi-billion dollar franchise that thrives on divergent, even outrageous opinion.

And we are watching.

Oscar Wilde said it best—“Never confuse the public interest with what is interesting to the public.”

## FACTOR 2: Lounge Lizards turned McKinsey Consultants

Most people think lobbyists are overweight blowhards who spend their days and especially their evenings wining and dining their targets in the House and Senate on behalf of the titanic corporations. Once upon a time most people were right. Not today.

Lobbying has evolved into a huge and sophisticated network of intelligence gathering, research, and fact-finding. Instead of trolling for Congressmen in the lobbies of the Willard and the Hay Adams Hotels, Lobbyists can be found throughout K Street and across the world studying, analyzing, writing, consulting and, of course, advocating.

Lobbying has become a growth industry with over fifteen thousand professionals, on its way to twenty. And if you are wondering how vital they have become, lobbyists have become the Blackwater of our government. They are such a critical component of the lawmaking process that few in Washington can imagine politics working without them. That's because today it simply can't.

Throughout federal and state government, lobbyists bridge the needs of corporate clients with the management of the political process. Imagine the state legislator who in many states meets every two years trying to cope with the flood of analysis that accompanies most complicated bills. Part time legislators need full time support in processing the affairs of state. Enter the lobbyist-turned-consultant.

Consider the plight of a big box retailer with thousands of outlets coping with regulatory regimes in every state. Take the challenge of a multinational corporation facing harsh new regulations and trade issues here and abroad. Imagine a bank or a drug company or an entertainment colossus in the Congressional cross hairs.

Worst of all imagine a lawmaker faced with a vote on a 4,000-page bill that they have no time to read.

Who would you call?

These days, very few bills are straightforward and simple. Especially with the advent of omnibus legislation, it is hard to expect legislators to have command of every single part of the bill, and of the consequences to constituents and to re-election prospects.

However big you think lobbying is to running our republic, you have probably underestimated. These are professional outsourced problem solvers, game theorists and power negotiators with unparalleled access to decision makers on all sides of the equation. They comprise a multi-billion dollar persuasion and political management machinery.

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And their ranks filter through a revolving door. Of the 100 most recent members of Congress to leave for private life, over 42 have become lobbyists.

Welcome to the jungle.

## FACTOR 3: The Selectorate

There is another important influencer you may have overlooked: Think Tanks. Dismissing them as policy wonks entirely misses the point and the reality.

Think Tanks influence the policies of our nation. Imagine policy formulation as a complex cycle. Think Tanks participate at the most potent intervals in that process, almost always behind a closed door where you and I aren't present—and they are.

First, Think Tanks have extraordinary access. Most Presidents and virtually every Secretary of State belong to Think Tanks. Same goes for many senior statesmen and women after their tour in government. Think Tanks enjoy enormous convening power. They can attract foreign heads of state, CEOs and Committee Chairs when the time is right. Think Tanks are smart. The best of them boast extraordinary talent rosters and their prodigious output of books, articles, studies, whitepapers and plenary discussions lead to tens of thousands of media citations every year. This does not include the hundreds of thousands of media influences not cited but encountered annually. By the way, few of these media mentions classify or clarify the ideological leaning of the enterprise.

This vague affiliation is a part of their dark charm. Think Tanks are dressed up as universities without students. Their work—no matter how slanted—is termed “research,” and their members are described as fellows and distinguished scholars. Their funding sources vary widely, but some wealthy benefactors have led a number of right wing think tanks to be described as a Mighty Wurlitzer.

Think Tanks are well capitalized, some with endowments bigger than most Colleges.

Consider the contrasts. Many Think Tanks toil in relative obscurity even as they train thousands of House and Senate staffers, even as they publish hundreds of books and provide media analysis and citations tens of thousands of times a year. Many of our Executive Branch’s most senior appointments and cabinet members come from the ranks of Think Tanks. They are the closest thing we have to a shadow government. One major Think Tank claims to have been a vital player in every major piece of legislation during the Bush presidencies. Yep, both father and son.

Whatever music they are grinding, Think Tanks are the politics of the selectorate, the inside influencers, the thoughtful agents provocateur. And when big decisions are being evaluated, they and their ideas find their way into the room. And you don’t.

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## FACTOR 4: Heaven Help Us

Religions span such wide landscapes that it is best to start with the big canvas. Two billion Christians make up just under a third of the world’s population—over half consider themselves Catholic. The number of Muslims is about to exceed a billion and a half and Hindus come next at about 900 million. Judaism has about 14 million adherents, with most living outside the Jewish homeland of Israel.

Here in the United States we have a fascinating religious demographic. We are the largest community of Jews, with 5.7 million. Nearly 80% of Americans consider themselves Christian. The number one religious group is Catholic—about 67 million. The next largest is the Southern Baptist Convention, with 16 million members spread over 42,000 churches.

But religion in America has become a moveable feast.

Powerful trends are bringing historic fluidity to American religion. If you include shifts within Protestantism, 44% of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised for another religion, or increasingly to no religion at all. If you exclude Protestant shifts the number is still a significant 28%.

Adding to the churn is the growing trend toward interfaith marriages—between a third and a half of marriages each year are interfaith or with a partner who has no religion.

The trailing trends are interesting and sometimes lead in opposite directions. Religious shifts often create greater allegiance to a core set of beliefs by some who join with like-minded prayers, and yet we see ample evidence of a growing comfort with religious pluralism—including comfort with one of the fastest growing segments that believes in no religion whatsoever.

How do these shifting sands influence the separation of church and state?

Our great Constitution contains 4400 well-constructed and carefully chosen words and not one of them is “God.” Nor is there any phrase even remotely resembling a “separation of church and state.” In fact, what makes the Constitution so durable on the matter of religion is that there is so much left out.

It says the government cannot forbid the formation of a religion but nothing about vice versa.

But that doesn't mean we don't fight pretty aggressively about it.

Here is the problem and the benefit in a nutshell: so much of what Americans hold dear about religion is nowhere in the Constitution, by design—a very intelligent design.

And the framers changed their minds on religion so often that you can use the same signer to argue either side of the debate. John Quincy Adams and James Madison are frequently called upon by all sides of the argument, having conveniently spoken out of both sides of their mouth.

It should be noted that religion doesn't compromise particularly well on matters where faith and the state intersect. But it defies history to say the two don't intersect with great frequency.

E.J.Dionne quite rightly pointed out that “The separation of church and state is one thing and the separation of religion and politics is another.” The state and religion have a long history of collaboration in providing social services. Judging with a historical sweep, they've been pretty good partners.

It would be a sin to undo all that.

And it is inaccurate to claim that the Right has some unique and special sway over religion. Certainly Republicans have connected religion to positions on stem cells, family planning, gay marriage and most recently the nature of the history lessons taught to Texas school children.

But consider the vital role religion has played in forging actions on the left. The Civil Rights movement that played such a potent role in the Democratic agenda was born and bred in churches across the south. The same is true for much of the entitlement debate. It is hard to imagine what rights Americans might enjoy without the role of leading preachers and church establishments.

Yet a recent President said from the Oval Office “God is not Neutral.”

My wife of more than three decades responded on the fly, “Oh yes She is.”

Tread lightly on matters of religious freedom and keep in mind the vital difference between separating church and state and separating politics and religion.

## FACTOR 5: The Life of the Party

Something should tighten inside you whenever you hear the claim that we are more divided than ever as a nation.

Differently divided? Absolutely. But our government began a journey of divide the moment George Washington wrote his farewell address.

We have lived through Federalists, Anti-Federalists, Whigs and Free Soilers. We are party animals when it comes to our politics. But what emerged from generations of heated and passionate debate were two major parties, a creaking duopoly which represents an inability to come to terms rather than a sparkling advertisement for democracy.

It was the schism of slavery that rent the Democratic Party in two and propelled the Republican candidate, in only their second presidential campaign, to the role of Commander in Chief of a truly divided nation.

The end of the Civil war brought less fighting obviously but not a lot more civility to the discourse. When we quarreled it was with vigor and meanness. Industrialization, the labor movement, numerous wars and a surge in our role to global superpower all provided ample grist for debate. And debate we did. But the twin pillars fortified themselves.

The vitriol and spite, and even the occasional duel to the death were all seed corn for the twin behemoths that are today's political standard bearers. Their survival and prosperity indicates Americans' willingness to veer right and left when sides get taken. But the twin parties' durability signals one more thing: Don't expect too much.

So how do today's twins differ from their contentious and rambunctious predecessors?

Two things mainly: money and organization.

The last three presidential cycles spent over \$12 billion to elect one president twice and one for the first time. And President Obama has set a record target fundraising for his incumbency: a billion for his own coffers. Even away from the presidency the numbers have become stagger-

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ing. Al Franken’s closely watched and contested election cost the participants over \$50 million.

The “money ball” element of today’s politics makes running with or without a party’s support a pretty neat parlor trick. Mayor Mike Bloomberg was chided for spending \$102 million on his third mayoral term, shattering the previous record held by... Mike Bloomberg. The three term Mayor responded “If I could have done it cheaper, I would have—believe me.”

The parties’ duopoly is powerfully organized and harmonically protected.

Monopolies inevitably topple and oligopolies make circular motions in terms of who controls the politburo, but there is something immutable about the well-entrenched duopoly.

Each side arranges itself intensely contemplating the other. They circle and spar, each lunging whenever possible to undo what the other has done. But for all their enmity, duopolies are the most self-protective construct in nature. It may be Spy versus Spy, but duopolies are always alert for the third eye.

Splinters may form, and sub groups may gain power and voice in the inner chamber. But there is nothing in business, commerce or the law more resistant to change than the twin towers of a powerful and well-financed duopoly.

But all across the country signals of change have been sounding. Media has gone from three networks on air to unlimited choice. Over a million books will be published this year. Silo driven corporations have been forced by consumer preference to offer choice and nimble response to changing tastes.

Yet through it all, in ways both obvious and far more subtle, the duopoly persists even as tired relics.

The rising tide of voter independence is the most marked trend in the last two decades. Fifty years ago only about 20% of voters considered themselves Independent. Today about 45% of voters between 25 and 40 describe themselves as Independents.

Long derided as the fringe, Independents are the largest and fastest growing segment of the electorate. Books have been written calling the independent surge a myth—when the curtain closes, independents tend to vote right or left. Fair enough, but these books miss the larger point.

If independents move from one side of the boat to the other, they can tip the outcome. In six key swing states, Independents outnumber Democrats and Republicans. In 2008 there were over a million independent voters in states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia. You can't live without 'em.

The Parties have to watch their canoe, but they shouldn't be too worried about third party candidates—no matter how independent. Since Civil War Reconstruction there have been 31 Senators, 111 Representatives and 22 Governors that weren't affiliated with a major party. That makes less than one independent victory a year.

But even if the system is rigged against third party candidates, there has been a tempest in a teapot which tells us how a party can splinter.

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What is most striking to me is not the independent fervor of the Tea Party members, or the particular stance they take on the issues. I am not sure I like either. What I do admire is that most Tea Party members have not been long-time or even short-time activists. They prove that you do not have to be on the cabinet member or a US Senator to change things in Washington—quite the contrary.

Whether they are obstructionists or reformers will be for historians to dissect and decide. What the Tea Party has done is open topics for discussion that would have been tabled in the old party regime. They have also had the prudence to shift from an anti-Obama, anti-Obamacare banner to something with far more lasting opportunity: excessive government spending and intervention. That platform, as they say on Broadway, has legs.

The greatest danger is to conclude that the Tea Party is bad news for Democrats and good news for Republicans. Because there is an anti-incumbency thread that runs through the Tea Party garment. As an elected official, ask not for whom the bell tolls....

Political parties are bigger and by some measures more powerful than ever, certainly in monetary terms. But they carry in their cold war construct a whiff of the tired regime. They are institutionally arrogant and exclusionary, even as they face greater splintering within their ranks. Their registrations are flagging in the face of the independent surge, but they overwhelm with the strength of their organization and size.

And even in the face of modern incursions like American's Elect, an on line political party that has gathered astonishing traction, the parties have the duopolists' ability to outlast us. Remember in the event of an inconclusive presidential election, the House Chamber is the court of last resort.

The political parties possess these non-traditional barriers, like blocking most likely independent candidates from the Presidential Debates. They have a tendency to run endless primaries meant to energize the base.

But does such an energizing process truly unite or merely deliver the ultimate compromise candidates? Either way, the Tea party and other independent groups show us all how we can influence the outcome. We can believe in our representatives, especially when they are brave. We can fight to elect ourselves a better batch of politicians.

Surely we can clear that hurdle together.

But for all of the individual acts of personal patriotism, for all the individual voices, we remain less nimble and more paralyzed by virtue of a frosty and inert duopoly, rolling forward but always protecting their ample flanks.

It's their party after all.

# What's an American to do?

First, use your voting franchise to elect better candidates. Let's face it. Many of the folks who represent you, particularly at the state and local levels, are not people you would ever hire into your company. Can you imagine working for them? So why are you voting for them?

Second, stand by your candidates when they do something brave. It stands to reason that not every issue will fall neatly along party lines. A congresswoman in Seattle may have different priorities from a congressman in Arkansas, whatever the party. If they cross party lines it is certain the Speaker will speak to them or the Minority Whip will whip them. Will you protect them?

Third, don't vote like an invertebrate—have the backbone to fight for change. Charter schools bubbled up from individuals and educators dissatisfied with what school boards were offering. After local groups showed that charter schools could work, then government created the construct.

Local power brought us community banks and credit unions. Local organizations are the main infrastructure in feeding the homeless.

Nobody nationally tucks in their blanket.

Fourth, take responsibility and push for more regional authority. National standards have value, but schooling, health care, hunger and homelessness all subscribe to the Tip O’Neill maxim “All politics is local.”

*“Don’t vote like an invertebrate—and have the backbone to fight for change.”*

It’s also time to insist that your fellow Americans take more personal responsibility. We have gotten better at guarding our rights than living up to our responsibilities. As a nation we have made a national pastime of delineating: “Here is how I just got screwed.”

Here’s a news flash: nobody really cares. They think they just got screwed, too. Instead of tabulating our tragedies, why don’t we just stop a few things?

Regulations never die—especially the really dumb ones. Delete them. Taking on one dopey rule usually opens a whole can of worms, which is just what we want.

Stop feeding the media machine that has helped support the polarization we all find abhorrent. If the “talking” heads are instead screaming, change the channel. Find some real reporting and real dialogue. Vote with your eyeballs.

Responsibility will eliminate some of the most corrosive entitlements. If you are indigent, we need to find a way to help you to the best of our ability and reason. But if you lived well but saved nothing for health care because it's a God-given right, you have missed a generation. Perhaps once upon a time it was such a right. After World War II there were forty workers for every retiree. By 2030 each retiree will theoretically be supported by two workers.

That's like every working family getting a new grandma.

Most of the rest of the world has figured out what has just dawned on us. The government can't take care of everything—even if tax rates are absurdly high and everyone is hard at work. This is the new reality. It's not that we can't afford what we want; we can't afford what we have.

Pursuing any analysis that ignores and refuses to study our most vexing problems is a failed strategy from the outset. Some of the very programs meant to care for and protect us were created over fifty years ago. They need evaluation and upgrade—even if we intend to continue to cover those in need.

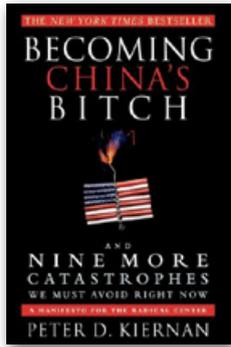
You know what doctors recommend for 55-year-old men every year—a proctology exam. It is well past time for our aging entitlement programs to assume the position.

Finally, we have to stop the trade ostriches from observing the global picture. China and India know a lot more about us than we know about them. And they like it that way. Do you have any idea where the presidential and national candidates stand on the emerging economic powers? Let's be sure Obama is the last president elected whom we have no idea where the candidate stands on China.

Recall the three simple rules for leading in uncertain times: one, build flexibility to adjust to dramatic changes; two, prioritize your biggest problems and; three, find the courage and the wisdom to unite and face those challenges.

**We have miles to go before we sleep. 🇺🇸**

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Peter D. Kiernan is a successful businessman, venture philanthropist and corporate and government advisor. For decades he has been a tireless advocate for poverty fighting organizations, education reform, disability and disease related charities and hospital boards. His work in these activities has taken him to every continent on the globe. He has watched our nation procrastinate and ignore its most pressing problems and he has written a book with fresh analysis and bold prescriptions for fixing what's ailing America.

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