

Who can we trust?

By Jim Nowlan

I was prompted to this topic of “Who can we trust?” by two concerns. First, how does the public, which is expected by our system to be competent, absorb information and develop perspectives in a world where the complexities are seemingly beyond us?

And second, public confidence in our governmental and societal institutions has plummeted in recent decades to historic lows, and what does this portend for a democracy that is based upon trust?

I spend more time than the typical citizen, I would guess, trying to understand the issues of the day. Yet, try as I may, I don’t adequately understand energy policies, pension liability computations, “net neutrality,” and myriad other issues, let alone the big matters such as what to do in the Middle East.

Almost a century ago, the brilliant journalist Walter Lippmann observed in *Public Opinion* (1921) that the “pictures in our heads” distort reality because they are based on information that is second and third-hand, always inadequate and selective, generally biased, and filtered through a noggin filled with preconceived notions and prejudices. He lamented for the future of democracy.

But Lippmann lacked any substantive ideas for remedying the defects he saw, other than to propose an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to our decision-makers.

Different from Lippmann's era, today there is a surfeit of information about the issues of the day. But the information is often trivialized by media outlets that are too often simply throwing red meat advocacy out to their partisans on the right and left.

Thank heavens that we still have the liberal *New York Times*, conservative *Wall Street Journal* and moderate *Economist* magazine.

And, since Lippmann wrote, there has been a significant increase in the relatively objective information available to the executive branch and legislators at all levels.

At the federal level think of the Government Accounting Agency, the Office of Management and Budget, the Congressional Budget Office, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and many others, plus hundreds of thoughtful analysts at private think tanks that huddle around the seats of governmental power.

No longer do elected officials have to rely almost solely upon lobbyists, who are intense advocates after all, for their pictures of the world around them, as I did nearly half a century ago when I was a back-bench state lawmaker whose branch had no staff whatever.

Yet we appear to have lost confidence in our decision-shapers and makers.

The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has taken the public's pulse annually since 1973. Whether it is the Presidency, Congress, the courts, press and media, business and labor, public confidence has eroded badly.

Only about 10 percent of us have "a great deal of confidence" in the Executive and Congress in 2013, down from the 30 and 40 percent range in the 1970s (and higher than that prior, I am sure).

Ditto for the press and television. Business and labor fare little better.

My old political science professors used to worry that low public trust in our major institutions would make it easier some day for a fast-talking demagogue on a white steed to sweep a disengaged public off its feet and lead us away from meaningful elections and the rule of law.

So in whom can we, should we put our trust? After all, we do ultimately consent that others shape and make our major governmental decisions.

I lament the erosion of the institution of political parties. Party organizations once nurtured promising young politicians and gave them the support necessary to gain public office by providing money, campaign workers and skill at contesting elections.

But big money from a very few has been pushing political parties aside, just as the super-wealthy Crassus and his like two millennia ago pushed aside the Roman Republic to make way for emperors.

This relates to my belief that we must somehow constrain the exponentially increasing amounts of money flowing into politics from billionaire campaign financiers. Yet this will apparently require a change in the make-up of the U.S. Supreme Court, to overturn recent decisions that declare money equals speech and thus cannot be limited.

I have racked my brain, but thus far I have no satisfying proposals to offer for restoring trust.

In the meantime, beware of smooth talkers who promise you the moon and will do so with lower taxes.