

The Brutality Cascade

By DAVID BROOKS

Let's say you were a power hitter during baseball's steroids era. You may have objected to steroids on moral and health grounds. But many of your competitors were using them, so you faced enormous pressure to use them too.

Let's say you are a student at a good high school. You may want to have a normal adolescence. But you are surrounded by all these junior workaholics who have been preparing for the college admissions racket since they were 6. You find you can't unilaterally withdraw from the rat race and still get into the college of your choice. So you also face enormous pressure to behave in a way you detest.

You might call these situations brutality cascades. In certain sorts of competitions, the most brutal player gets to set the rules. Everybody else feels pressure to imitate, whether they want to or not.

The political world is rife with brutality cascades. Let's say you are a normal person who gets into Congress. You'd rather not spend all your time fund-raising. You'd like to be civil to your opponents and maybe even work out some compromises.

But you find yourself competing against opponents who fund-raise all the time, who prefer brutalism to civility and absolutism to compromise. Pretty soon you must follow their norms to survive.

Or take a case in world affairs. The United States is a traditional capitalist nation that has championed an open-seas economic doctrine. We think everybody benefits if global economics is like a conversation, with maximum openness, mutual trust and free exchange.

But along comes China, an economic superpower with a more mercantilist mind-set. Many Chinese, at least in the military-industrial complex, see global economics as a form of warfare, a struggle for national dominance.

Americans and Europeans tend to think it is self-defeating to engage in cyberattacks on private companies in a foreign country. You may learn something, but you destroy the trust that lubricates free exchange. Pretty soon your trade dries up because nobody wants to do business with a pirate. Investors go off in search of more transparent partners.

But China's cybermercantilists regard deceit as a natural tool of warfare. Cyberattacks make perfect sense. Your competitors have worked hard to acquire intellectual property. Your system is more closed so innovation is not your competitive advantage. It is quicker and cheaper to steal. They will hate you for it, but who cares? They were going to hate you anyway. *C'est la guerre.*

In a brutality cascade the Chinese don't become more like us as the competition continues. We become more like them. And that is indeed what's happening. The first thing Western companies do in response to cyberattacks is build up walls. Instead of being open stalls in the global marketplace, they begin to look more like opaque, rigidified castles.

Next, the lines between private companies and Western governments begin to blur. When Western companies are attacked, they immediately turn to their national governments for technical and political support. On the one hand, the United States military is getting a lot more involved in computer counterespionage, eroding the distance between the military and private companies. On the other hand, you see the rise of these digital Blackwaters, private security firms that behave like information age armies, providing defense against foreign attack but also counterattacking against Chinese and Russian foes.

Pretty soon the global economy looks less like Monopoly and more like a game of Risk, with a Chinese military-industrial complex on one part of the board and the Western military-industrial complex on another part.

Brutality cascades are very hard to get out of. You can declare war and simply try to crush the people you think are despoiling the competition.

Or you can try what might be called friendship circles. In this approach, you first establish the norms of legitimacy that should govern the competition. You create a Geneva Convention of domestic political conduct or global cyberespionage. Then you organize as broad a coalition as possible to agree to uphold these norms.

Finally, you isolate the remaining violators and deliver a message: If you join our friendship circle and abide by our norms, the benefits will be overwhelming, but if you stay outside, the costs will be devastating.

In his effort to fight what he regards as Republican zealots, President Obama is caught between these two strategies. He never quite pushes budget showdowns to the limit to discredit Republicans, but he never offers enough to the members of the Republican common-sense caucus to tempt them to break ranks.

Clearly the second option is better for dealing with the Chinese. Establish a Geneva Convention that bans cyberactivity against citizens and private companies. Establish a broad coalition to enforce it.

Unfortunately, standard-setting is a dying art these days, so we are living with these brutality cascades.
