

Can Democracy be Restored in America?

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Democracy in America is dead. Its health was always in question — even the founders acknowledged that — but, early on, democracy was young and vital, if contentious. By the end of the 19th century, however, it fell seriously ill. Despite occasional rallies of apparent recovery, by the mid-20th century, American democracy had expired.

American democracy was not done in by invaders from beyond our shores. It was also not a sudden or singular event. No, the demise of our democracy was a slow poisoning from within, part suicide and part murder, perpetrated over time by Americans, many of whom considered themselves upstanding citizens and passionate patriots. They chose to make America an oligarchy at home and a global empire abroad, and democracy wilted, then perished. No funeral or burial was held. The corpse was carefully embalmed and so meticulously maintained that it appears remarkably life-like. Even today, most Americans believe our democracy to be, if not vibrant and well, at least still alive. But it's not. Democracy in America is deceased and now merely a ghostly illusion of memory and sentiment.

Yes, I know that opinion is unpopular among Americans and will probably offend some readers. I didn't start out my life with that view. I came to it slowly, over more than half a century, by observing current events unfolding in real time, and also by studying American history in depth.

My conclusion is that empire killed democracy. Other causes contributed, of course. Greed, arrogance, and ignorance were all co-conspirators in the homicide, plus a compliant population that succumbed all too easily to corporate control and a consumer culture that, taken to the extremes we see today, is ultimately devoid of meaning, but all these and other factors can I think be folded into empire as the main culprit.

When French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in 1831 and subsequently wrote and published his still-famous paean, *Democracy in America*, our young republic was apparently thriving. Symptoms of our self-poisoning were already present however, in the enslavement of Africans, the ongoing genocide of indigenous native populations justified by Manifest Destiny, and the Monroe Doctrine that asserted our intention to dominate not only the North American continent, but the entire western hemisphere. Soon, the Industrial Revolution of the Gilded Age would provoke deeper toxicity to the body politic through the

concentration of staggering wealth in individual fortunes and the transformation of labor from relatively independent artisan crafts to menial, wage-based jobs that amounted to indentured servitude. By the end of the 19th century, when America's imperial ambitions grew to global proportions, the die was cast. The fix was in to make the American state all-powerful by elevating the rich above the rest of us. At that point, and despite temporary periods of apparent reform, democracy's downfall was assured.

America's two primary but conflicted ideals — both enshrined within the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and our cultural mythology — have always represented a difficult dichotomy. One ideal — that of *equality* or *social justice*, the right to fair treatment under the law — has typically taken a back seat, invoked mainly to convince a gullible public of our innate goodness. The other ideal — *freedom*, which is the right to act, speak, or think without external constraint, but has pragmatically meant the unfettered pursuit of personal wealth — has been central to American business, government, law, and society for almost two centuries now, to the point that the vast majority of Americans don't even question it anymore. We may prattle on about "the people" and their wants and needs, but we live in an oligarchic, corporate plutocracy — what political theorist Sheldon Wolin termed "inverted totalitarianism" — that is a representative democracy in name only.

Put simply, empire is incompatible with democracy, and America chose to become an empire. As a political party, Democrats are every bit as committed as Republicans to America's absolute power. Even though our Empire has been slowly decaying since its peak at the end of World War II, both Republicans and Democrats have been consistently devoted to maintain American hegemony and dominance in the world.

For more than a century, America has tromped around the globe in seven-league boots — by wielding our supreme economic clout and military strength — doing everything imaginable (and some things that are almost unimaginable) to cement and continue our reign as the world's 800-lb. gorilla. On too many occasions, we've used our power to threaten and bludgeon, frequently fighting overt wars to overthrow foreign governments (such as in Cuba) or put down independence movements (in the Philippines), while even more often doing so covertly, through our support of subversion and insurrection.

Regime change has been a consistent policy of American foreign policy for a long, long time. In 1893, we engineered the overthrow of the Hawaiian government and annexed the islands. During the Cold War, when America was obsessed with paranoia about its arch-enemy, the Soviet Union, we feared that social, political, and economic movements toward nationalism in many countries, particularly in the third world, might move those nations into the Communist camp, which would damage our prestige and threaten the profits of American business. As a result, we overthrew governments in Iran, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, Chile, and even tiny Grenada, replacing them with American-approved

regimes. Many of these coups were conducted and carried out by the CIA, but our spooks didn't choose to do them on their own. They were "black ops" in name only. In each case, the CIA was acting on direct orders from a sitting American President or Secretary of State. The policies may have been secret, but they were official and came down right from the Executive branch, not some subterranean Deep State.

Of course, most Americans do not know this part of our history. They don't know that we overthrew 14 foreign governments over the past 125 years. The public is bathed in the propaganda of American Exceptionalism and the endless narratives of our helping those in other countries who long for freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity. Personally, I find it astonishing that so many Americans continue to believe these fairy tales, since the actual history of what we've done is well-documented, factual, and available for anyone who cares to learn about it. Despite that, delusion remains the general condition among much of the population. By and large, Americans prefer comforting fantasies to hard realities. Our need to see ourselves as good overwhelms the unpleasant truth of what's been done in our name.

Throughout history, empires have taken what they want from other countries that are weaker and more vulnerable. They do so by force, often through military conquest, but also by the subtler means of diplomatic or economic pressure. What separates Americans from the populations of earlier empires is the fictional belief that our interventions are benevolent and humanitarian. They are not. Fostering democracy is not part of the calculus. In fact, democracy is typically rejected out of hand by the American government wherever it takes root in the world, since freedom and the will of the people in other nations and regions is considered dangerous to the hegemonic power of the American state and the economic interests (i.e., access to resources, foreign markets, and finally profits) of American big business.

This is an appallingly short-sighted approach to foreign policy. Time and again, America has demonstrated its military might, but we have used that tool as a sledgehammer rather than a scalpel. We've also shown that, where other cultures are concerned, America has neither the patience nor the understanding to engage effectively in nation-building.

Rather than taking the slow and difficult path of cooperation for mutual benefit, our government has usually chosen the quick decapitation of regime change, followed by the installation and propping up of despotic, brutal dictatorships that are willing to go along with our wishes. Although we are extremely successful at toppling governments, the long-term repercussions have been tragic for America and the world.

Despite the sincerity of millions of Americans who have worked to serve the greater good with diligence and conscience, including many thoughtful and wise voices in government, such lofty concepts as democracy, freedom, equality,

justice, and self-determination for other nations and peoples have played little to no part in the American Empire's ultimate policies.

In a very real sense, the rise of global terrorism was the direct result of American actions. Had we not overthrown Mossadegh's Iranian government in 1953, Iran might today be a mature democracy, and Islamic terrorism would quite probably never have taken root, much less grown into jihad. But no. We installed the Shah to protect our oil interests (profits), turned a blind eye to 25 years of brutal dictatorship in that country, and then were shocked and surprised when it all blew up in our faces. In the aftermath of 9/11, when Bush the Younger asserted that "they hate us for our freedoms," he lied. "They" hate us out of disappointment. The world was in love with the promise of America, but we didn't live up to the ideals. They hate us because too often we turned out to be like every other empire in history. Eventually, they came to hate our hypocrisy and callous domination of their countries, as well as our stunning ignorance about their cultures and disdain for their religions.

"National security" doesn't mean protecting the safety of the American public. If it did, our government would surely address the dangers of nuclear war and catastrophic climate change. If it did, America wouldn't suffer from the extreme wealth inequality that worsens with each passing year. No, it means insuring (and — whenever, wherever, and however possible — increasing) the power of the American state and the wealth of elites in business and government who hold the reins.

That's a pretty nasty picture of America. I put it forth not because I think Americans are evil, but because the facts of our dark side are so routinely denied or dismissed. My intention is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but to set up a realistic framework from which to consider change.

Can democracy be restored in America? Can it be resuscitated and brought back to life? I don't know if it's possible or not, but we have to try. Our current situation — where America has seriously lost its way — is both a crisis and a crossroads. Paradoxically, this may offer us clearer choices for the road ahead.

Viewed from the affirmative possibility, it seems obvious to me that we can't go back to the forms of democracy we had as a young nation. We are not the same country or people that we were then, and anyway, we wouldn't want to go back to 1820. We will also have to find ways to become an empire that does not seek domination, which would be an astonishing feat and a new development in human civilization. America is far from that beneficent empire today, but events over the next two decades may change our minds and alter our course.

The idea of something new in civilization lies at the very heart of the matter. For democracy to be restored in America, many developments need to occur (and fairly soon) that are unprecedented in collective human affairs. That mountain is right in front of us. Let's mount the expedition and get on with the climb.