

# It Can't Happen Here

by Bill Herbst

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Oh, yes it can. And it has.

Democracy in America is dead. It expired a long time ago, even before our republic was a single century old. Democracy was not murdered by invaders from beyond our shores. It was also not a sudden or singular event. No, the demise of our democracy was a suicide, rather like a slow poisoning, accomplished over time by Americans, many of whom considered themselves upstanding citizens and unquestioned patriots. The corpse was carefully embalmed to maintain the appearance of life. No funeral or burial was held. Even today, most Americans believe our democracy to be alive and, if not completely well, at least functional. But it's not. Democracy in America is dead and long gone. RIP.

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, as I studied American history in depth.

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 rationalized 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 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 suicide became irreversible.

America's two primary but conflicted ideals — both enshrined within the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and our cultural mythology — have always represented an apparent contradiction. One ideal — that of equality and social justice — has typically taken a back seat, invoked mainly to convince a gullible public of our innate goodness. The other ideal — freedom, which has generally meant permission to pursue ever-increasing concentrations of wealth

and raw, dominating power — 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.

Historically, Republicans have been the political party that stood for individual freedom, while Democrats supposedly espoused equality and social justice. With regard to the American Empire, however, both parties have shown overwhelming support. Since the closing of the frontier and the beginnings of America's imperial outreach beyond our borders at the end of the 19th century, undertaken primarily to insure control of economic resources and access to foreign markets for American products, Republicans and Democrats alike have been fervent cheerleaders for maximizing American power throughout the world. The various counter-movements that arose along the way did so in small numbers from the fringes of the bell curve and — until recently — gained no traction in the center. Even though the American Empire has been slowly decaying since its peak at the end of World War II, both parties in the political duopoly have been devoted to maintain American hegemony and power dominance in the world.

For the past 70 years, 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, while even more often doing so covertly, through our support of subversion and terrorism.

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. Our government has been perfectly happy to install and prop up even ruthless and murderous dictatorships, as long as they were compliant with our wishes.

The current narrative that America has been far too generous with the world and that we have been victimized by "bad deals" internationally — now a staple of the politics of grievance in the Trumpian zeitgeist — is both false and ridiculous. America has never been particularly generous, and our own economic self-interest has always come first. Only a fool would believe otherwise. Of course, grievance has always been a dominant theme of American governance. That's what lobbying is all about — special interests that claim to be dealt with unfairly and want redress through favorable treatment from the government. Now, however, grievance and victimization have taken hold across the entire breadth of the political and social spectrum.

Meanwhile, the domestic policies of the American Empire — how it has treated its own people — have been only marginally more humane than our foreign policies. We've been extremely generous toward the few at the top, but

downright miserly with everyone else. The Empire has always favored the wealthiest and most privileged Americans. Over the past 40 years of neoliberal economics, that bias has reached stunning extremes, and it's worsening with each passing year. We spend trillions on the military, but social programs to protect and enhance the well-being of most Americans (meaning the bottom 80% on the economic and social ladders)? Heaven forbid. Those are "entitlements" that do not benefit the elites, so they're out of the question. The Empire can't afford them.

For instance, "national security" doesn't mean protecting the safety of the American public, despite endless lip service to the contrary. If it did, our government would surely address the dangers of nuclear war and catastrophic climate change. No, it means insuring (and, if possible, increasing) the wealth and power of the American state and the elites who hold the reins. That's what drives both foreign and domestic policy. If democracy — with its ideals of equality and social justice — happens to result from the government's actions, that's sometimes acceptable, but only within constrained limits. More frequently, democracy is rejected out of hand, since freedom is potentially dangerous to the hegemonic power and control of the state wherever it takes root, whether at home or elsewhere in the world.

What are the chances that democracy in America might be, if not completely resurrected, at least partially resuscitated? Given the astrology of the coming years (from now into the early 2020s) for humanity overall and for America in particular, the odds of that happening do not look good.

Those who make appeals for cooperation, civility, and our coming together are, I think, barking up the wrong tree. Not that I question the sincerity of such sentiments, only their timing. This period at the end of the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s is not one of gentleness, inclusion, or compassion. Quite the contrary, it's a time of partisans and enemies, of pitched battles, and of winning at any cost. Passions dictate beliefs and behaviors, and reason is overwhelmed.

I think back to 1965, as America descended into the hell of the Vietnam War, to the Byrds' chart-topping iconic single, "*Turn! Turn! Turn!*", adapted to a folk-rock arrangement from Pete Seeger's song, "*To Everything There is a Season*," itself a revision of Biblical verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven*

*A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal, a time to laugh, a time to weep*

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven*

*A time to build up, a time to break down  
A time to dance, a time to mourn  
A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together*

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven*

*A time of love, a time of hate  
A time of war, a time of peace  
A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing*

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven*

*A time to gain, a time to lose  
A time to rend, a time to sew  
A time for love, a time for hate  
A time for peace, I swear it's not too late*

Here's a link to an old black-and-white video of the Byrds lip-synching a live television performance of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" (probably from 1966 on the local Los Angeles show *Shivaree*). We sure were young back then:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPbR3uovtf8>

America is slogging through a time of hate rather than love. It's not that love and compassion are irrelevant. They're as important as ever, but for now are reserved only for close personal relationships — friends, family, lovers.

Collectively, love and compassion lie fallow, buried beneath harsh cruelty. And that's not letting up tomorrow, next week, or next year. For now, we have to fight to keep goodness alive.

I liken our current dilemma to that faced by President Lincoln during the Civil War. Public sentiment in the North to end the war by making peace with the South ran high, especially during the middle two of those devastating four years. Lincoln felt that his task was to preserve the Union by winning the war, which meant defeating the South. He hoped that "the better angels of our nature" would emerge afterwards to reunite the country. Lincoln's assassination ended any chance for reconciliation, and so the war never really ended.

Most saviors are eventually martyred, and their movements and causes are usually undone. Hoping, looking, or waiting for a savior is not a viable solution.

As far as I can see, the only way for democracy to be rekindled in America is for some kind transformation of our collective consciousness to occur.

For that, we will need a miracle.