

Democracy

by Bill Herbst

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Two events have occurred recently that carry simple but starkly provocative implications for American society.

One was what happened at and within the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th involving tens of thousands of Trump and QAnon cultists, hundreds of law enforcement officers, and many members of Congress. This wasn't just a demonstration. It also wasn't a riot. No, it was a planned event — I won't say "coordinated," since it was so half-assed — but it had been in the works for a long time. Anyone who's been paying attention over the past years could have seen it coming from a long ways off.

That spectacle didn't achieve its obvious aims, which were to overturn the results of the Presidential election by preventing Joe Biden's affirmation and subsequent inauguration, thus keeping Donald Trump in office for another four years, but it definitely provoked volcanic shock waves throughout the political arena, the mainstream news, social media realms, and — to a somewhat lesser extent — the rest of America.

The other event was the GameStop short squeeze in the stock market last week that was orchestrated (and, pretty much, pulled off successfully) by thousands of members of a Reddit subforum on investing by stock trading. That event came out of the blue. No one I know would have predicted it.

While both events carried major impact in the mass media landscape — the first as it unfolded and the second after it had already ramped up — the latter was both more surprising and more revelatory than the former. Nonetheless, they shared some significant parallels. Happening back-to-back in the same month, and despite seeming on the surface so very different in intention and tone, they jointly revealed certain important elements of democracy with which many people are extremely uncomfortable.

The question of whether or not America is or ever has been a democracy has many facets. One facet that I want to exclude is the difference between a "true" democracy and a "representative" democracy. What's clear is that America was originally created and set up to be a "republic," meaning a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and

which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch. In a pure or direct democracy, everyone participates in making the laws. In a republic, laws are made by representatives chosen by the people. Those representatives are subject to the limits of a constitution that (supposedly) protects the rights of minorities from the will of majority. For practical purposes in ordinary discourse, what we have in America can be called a representative democracy. Or so we claim.

Beyond semantic distinctions about the word democracy, some people (including me) assert that America is or has become an *oligarchy* and a *plutocracy* (rule by rich and powerful elites). The past four years of the Trump administration have added new terms to the derisive lexicon: *kakistocracy* (rule by unsuitable and incompetent citizens of a state) and *kleptocracy* (corrupt rulers who are essentially criminals and thieves). But ignore all that. For now, let's assume that America is or aspires to be a democracy.

Let me set the stage by citing a well-known quote about freedom of speech by Evelyn Beatrice Hall (often misattributed to the famous French essayist Voltaire): "*I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*" Sounds almost like Tom Paine, right? Sort of an egalitarian twist on "*Give me Liberty or give me Death!*"

The Hall quote enshrines a particular element of democracy that is most dear to libertarians, but also respected by both Democrats and Republicans, namely, that everyone should be free in choosing to say and do whatever they think, feel, or want, as long as doing so doesn't violate any laws about harming others.

In reaction to the breaching of the Capitol, many people were outraged by the criminality of what was done. People were killed, property damaged, and the safety of elected representatives threatened. OK, I get that. I agree that the perpetrators should be arrested and prosecuted. But some people also held that it was an attempt to overthrow democracy, and thus even more evil. I'm not so sure where I stand about that.

The second event — the GameStop short squeeze accomplished largely through the internet stock trading platform called Robinhood — added additional and very telling reactions. A significant percentage of Wall Street players and institutionalists (such as the CEO of Nasdaq), as well as much of the financial media (CNBC, etc.), immediately condemned the Reddit-inspired gambit. Robinhood even briefly restricted its users by shutting down permission to buy GameStop stock. Wow.

Look, the stock market is a rigged game. From the major players — the big investment banks and retirement fund managers, through the hedge fund guys (who are, almost exclusively, *guys*, meaning men), to the SEC and its regulators — nearly all of the powerful insiders are complicit in having set up a financial

system where the playing field is tilted and the rules mainly favor Big Money outright or, when they don't (such as with laws against insider trading), are ignored and unenforced. In other words, the stock market is built around thievery. Like so much in America, it's a racket.

And yet, when the gang at the Reddit subforum figured out how to turn those same rules to their own advantage against the trillion-dollar hedge fund that had shorted GameStop and then used those rules to take it down, Wall Street screamed foul. Seems that the Big Boys didn't like their own very dubious rules turned against them.

Both of these events carry lessons that many Americans will find disturbing if they care or know enough to consider the implications.

Democracy means that everyone gets to choose what they believe and, within reason, to do whatever they want. You may not like what I believe or what I do. I may not like what you believe or do. But, while we might harbor resentments, we don't use whatever power we have to forcibly coerce each other to stop.

I don't like Trumpists, and I sure as hell don't like QAnon followers. From where I sit, Trumpists are badly deluded and QAnon folks are downright crazy. Like way over the top batshit crazy. I will not allow anyone from either group into my life. (If you see that as "Cancel Culture," I disagree, but OK, so be it.) I try, however, to abide by the "Live and let live" and "No harm, no foul" rules. The people with whom I vehemently disagree or just plain dislike get to live their lives. They just don't get to have *me* in their lives (not that they'd necessarily want me to be in their lives — they probably don't and are happier without me).

But that's democracy, kids.

I wish we would collectively just start living as a democracy and stop endlessly prattling on about it. There's so much hooey that surrounds the idea of democracy — "*Democracy under Fire*" or "*Democracy at Risk*" or "*What's happened to our Democracy?*" The word itself is routinely invoked, not only by naïve idealists, well-paid cheerleaders for the corporate propaganda machine that keeps so many Americans hypnotized, but even by people who hate the reality of democracy and would prefer to live in an authoritarian dictatorship, as long as that dictatorship pleased them and kept them on the payroll.

It's all grown very tiresome to me, but — as with so much of American life — it probably won't change because I disapprove and don't like it.

And I can live with that. I'm not so sure that millions of other Americans can, though.