

FALL 2022

VOL. 37, NO. 2

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The *Kettering Review* ® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

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ISSN 0748-8815 (print)

ISSN 2471-2914 (online)

KETTERING
REVIEW

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Editors' Letter

Readers of the *Kettering Review* are more than casual observers of democracy. They are intensely curious, interested and, we think, hopeful that regular people can have a powerful role in shaping the directions of their political communities. As editors, we share these sentiments.

So our readers are likely as alarmed as we are at the turns democracy has taken over the past decade. While we have yet to see a truly equitable, just, multiethnic, and multiracial democracy, previously there had been a discernible arc toward a better society. But in recent years, progress toward this ideal has not only slowed but has been reversed. In many countries and communities across the world, democratic culture, habits, and institutions have moved in the direction of authoritarianism. What is particularly troubling is that, by and large, authoritarianism has not taken hold via coups or overt power grabs. Rather, these changes are increasingly brought to us through erosion of democratic norms and even via the ballot box. Citizens in purported democracies throughout the world have elected leaders who systematically seek to dismantle democratic norms and institutions with the aim of winning, protecting the interests of the few, and maintaining power. This has not been a surprise to those who have supported these leaders. The leaders campaigned on it, promising to get rid of all their enemies on dry land and in the swamp.

This phenomenon has been happening abroad and at home, whether your home is in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Africa.

As the 2022 Freedom House report notes:

Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power. . . . The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.¹

When we set out to produce this issue, we were motivated by the question of why? Why are people turning to authoritarian rule? That question leads to others: Have people become disillusioned with democracy? Do they simply prefer someone strong to relieve them of their burdens? Have political processes become so

dysfunctional and polarized that there is scant hope for any kind of democratic resurgence?

To answer these questions, we scoured the literature—and there is a great deal of it on these questions these days. These pages bring you a sample of what we have found. Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman provide a name for the problem we are encountering: “democratic backsliding,” which they describe as “the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments.” We think that is well put.

David Brooks asks what the key factor is that “has made the 21st century so dark, regressive, and dangerous.” Is this an aberration or is it, as he suspects, a return to normal? Over the millennia, he points out, normal life has not been democratic. Democracy takes a lot of cultivation. It is not our natural state.

But it is more natural, Ezra Klein points out, when we attend to local politics, in places where we live, and when we stop focusing primarily on national political narratives. He reminds us that we need not only identify with a political party, or identities in the most narrow sense of “identity-politics.” Rather, we can identify with our community, our disposition as fair-minded or compassionate, or with those we care about. A more expansive notion of identity and a closer identification with the local will not fix the problems of democracy and should not be taken to extremes. But it can provide some space apart from the grind of national political battles where politics might be more humane and where everyday people might have more ability to influence the texture and habits of democratic life.

Next, Nikole Hannah-Jones’ essay dispels the myth of a pure or just democracy of the past that has only recently been corrupted. The rise of democracy has not been smooth or linear and it has often been constructed and engineered to exclude groups of people based on identity. Hannah-Jones highlights the ways that the story of democracy in the United States has been one of simultaneous hope and longing for something different, while, at the same time, shot through with concerted efforts at exclusion, dehumanization, and violence against Black people by White people. As Americans have been invited to grapple with this non-sanitized version of US history, the reaction to close off, shut down, deny, and silence has been swift. We include the essay here because we find it incredibly hopeful: that in the face of all that Black people in the United States have faced—enslavement, systematic exploitation, discrimination, and violence—there remains a hope, a resilience, and a determination to continue the work toward a just,

inclusive, and equitable US democracy. This determination and resolve can serve as a reminder that it is possible to keep trying and keep making progress even when the challenges of realizing a true democracy seem insurmountable.

Advocates of democracy and those who long for equality, equity, freedom, justice, and human well-being are in a difficult season. So we looked for essays that pointed a way forward. Amanda Ripley's essay, "High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out," highlights possibilities for new ways of dealing with the conflict that is inevitable as human societies seek to solve problems and live among each other amidst meaningful and deep differences. The challenge, she argues, is not to do away with divisions and conflict, but to find ways to work through them, to turn high conflict, in which it is hard to think, into productive conflict where people with different views can work to find a solution.

"Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality," by Danielle Allen, meditates on the textual foundations of US democracy and gives a convincing account of the ways that close readings of texts can be a meaningful practice for the formation of citizens. In a time when students and institutions of higher education are faced with a constant insistence on the importance of a practical, skills-based focus on education—essentially the call to create better qualified workers—Allen reminds us that practices of paying careful reading and interpretation remain an important part of what it means to be a free person. Yes, we must vote, talk to our neighbors, work across difference, and attend protests. But we also must find ways to understand, be shaped by ideas, and by each other, as we learn and relearn together.

We are pleased to close the issue with reflections from the new president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, Sharon Davies. She invites us to consider the work that lies ahead for the Kettering Foundation, and for all of us who are focused on strengthening democracy. Davies notes that "the timeline of the US coming into the fullness of its democracy was slow" and reminds readers of the importance of situating ourselves in the story of democracy's progress, or lack thereof. Democracy is not something that happens apart from us, but rather because of us.

Elizabeth Gish and Noëlle McAfee

Endnote

- ¹ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, Freedom House, February 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf.

The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding

by Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman

Democratic backsliding is the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments.

Recent years have seen a growing number of countries around the world retreat from democracy. Unlike the emergence during the post-Soviet era of competitive authoritarian regimes in places that were never really democratic to begin with, this retreat is happening in countries that had crossed a democratic threshold. Leaders with autocratic tendencies are coming to power through democratic elections and attacking norms and institutions from within, typically with support from some portion of the electorate. While this may seem like the intuitive meaning behind the “democratic deficit”-based complaints of citizens, political organizations, and even academics, such concerns are not properly reflected within the main debates of democratic theory. Indeed, when one turns to normative democratic theory for guidance as to how to strengthen democratic institutions or reduce democratic deficits, one encounters sharp disagreement over what the ideal of democracy even requires in the first place, as well as attendant disagreements over the institutional reforms that would be most helpful for bringing current societies closer to that ideal.

Democratic backsliding is the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments. We analyze backsliding in terms of three interrelated causal factors. First, social and political polarization contributes to government dysfunction and lack of trust in institutions, and it increases the risk that incumbent parties will move toward extremes or that new antisystem parties will gain traction. Second, the effect of

polarization on backsliding will depend on whether would-be autocrats can capture the executive and then whether they manage to gain the legislature's support for or acquiescence to the concentration of their authority. Ironically, legislatures play a key role in a process that we

Political adversaries become not only competitors but enemies or even traitors.

call the “collapse of the separation of powers,” which provides the political foundations for assaulting other features of the democratic system. Finally, democratic backsliding is incremental in nature, which provides tactical advantage to incumbents. The gradual subversion of democratic institutions allows incumbents to slowly accrete powers, making the process difficult to detect and counter until it is too late.

To better understand how the process works, we studied 16 cases of backsliding in the following countries: Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, Hungary, Nicaragua, North Macedonia, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, United States, Venezuela, and Zambia. We looked at how each case was affected by the three causal factors: polarization, the capture of executive and legislative institutions, and the incremental subversion of democratic institutions. We took a multimethod empirical approach, comparing backsliding cases with relevant benchmarks¹ and considering indicators of the causal factors,

such as change in polarization over time. Yet the bulk of evidence comes from detailed case-study observations.

Polarization

Building on a growing literature, we conceive political polarization as a process through which political elites and publics become increasingly divided over public policy and ideology. In extreme circumstances, cross-cutting cleavages become submerged by a single, reinforcing cleavage that pits “us” against “them” on a range of issues. Partisan attachments become based less on issue positions than on underlying identities.² And political adversaries become not only competitors but enemies or even traitors.

Although we trace the underlying sources and extent of polarization in the case studies, we used the four indicators from the Varieties of Democracies Project (V-Dem) for our initial assessment of the level and path of polarization: a general estimate of social polarization, the use of hate speech by political parties, the strength of antisystem social movements, and whether political elites respect counterarguments.

Based on these measures, almost all the backsliding cases had significant histories of polarization or recent periods when it spiked significantly. What were the sources of polarization? The underlying social and political bases of polarization were diverse and are difficult to disentangle. Anxieties spurred by economic crises and structural changes induced by economic reforms, greater openness to trade, and skills-biased technological change mattered in a number of otherwise disparate cases including Greece, Russia, the United States, and Venezuela. Racial, ethnic, and regional differences were also

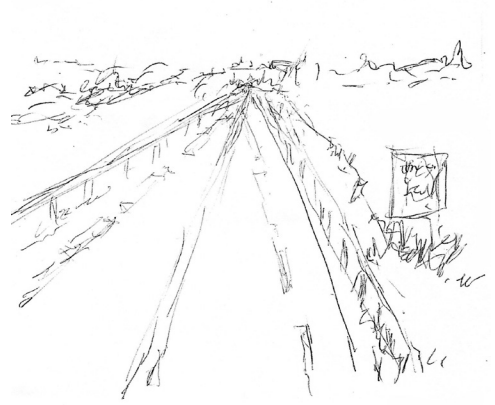
drivers in cases as diverse as Bolivia, Ukraine, and Zambia, as were deeper ideological divides between cosmopolitan and nationalist world-views. Finally, autocratic leaders made appeals that exploited grievances and portrayed competitors as “enemies of the people,” heightening divisions.

Whatever its underlying source, polarization is bad for democracy. First, where opposing parties are polarized, government is less likely to function efficiently and more likely to witness either stalemates or swings between policy extremes. As a result, popular disaffection and distrust of institutions tends to be higher. Second, in polarized settings mainstream parties are more likely either to be captured by extremist elements or displaced by new populist political movements arising from either the right or left.

Finally, the recasting of politics into stark “us-versus-them” contests is a common feature of populism—a majoritarian conception of democratic rule that is ultimately illiberal. Pop-

Whatever its underlying source, polarization is bad for democracy.

ulist movements convey a vision of society that sets the (virtuous) people against the (corrupt) elites, evoking Rousseau’s idea of a “general will” typically rooted in the nation.³ When populist candidates and their voters view critics and political opponents as existential threats rather than legitimate competitors, it is but a short step for them to place greater value on winning



than on maintaining the constitutional order, including the integrity of elections.⁴

Yet despite such majoritarian appeals, the rise to power of elected autocrats is not always rooted in surges of support and broad electoral majorities. Autocrats did come to power with absolute majorities of the popular vote in five of our cases—Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela. And in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro fell just short of winning the presidency in the first round but won the second. In the remaining 11 cases, however, autocrats initially came to power without a majority of the popular vote. In Serbia, the United States, and Zambia, would-be autocrats were elected with less than 50 percent of the vote in knife-edge contests by deeply polarized electorates. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega was elected with only 38 percent of the popular vote; and in Ecuador, Rafael Correa won in the first round with under 23 percent. In Greece, North Macedonia, Poland, Turkey, and Ukraine—all parliamentary systems—the parties behind the backsliding also secured only modest pluralities at the polls.



Despite these mixed electoral results, majoritarian claims were fundamental to the campaigns of illiberal politicians as diverse as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Donald Trump in the United States. Chávez's leftist campaign and Orbán's appeal from the right had surprisingly similar themes, evoking a battle of "the people" against corrupt economic or cosmopolitan elites and dishonest political establishments. Trump's 2016 campaign trod a surprisingly similar path, targeting Washington, DC, as a "swamp" and characterizing his political opponents as tools of "coastal elites" and a "deep state."

Weaker Legislatures, Weaker Democracies

If autocrats succeed in gaining executive office, they also gain access to significant organizational resources that can be used to undermine democratic rule. Along with control of the executive branch comes command of the bureaucracy, military, and security apparatus, as well as endless opportunities to influence the media and the economy. In some cases, networks of state-owned enterprises and private-sector

cronies became vehicles of patronage and outright corruption.

Ultimately, however, the consolidation of autocratic control depends not only on becoming president or prime minister, but on the cooperation of the legislature through the support of acquiescent ruling parties or coalitions.

The degree of executive control over the legislature varied among our cases. In Brazil and the United States, opposition parties retained at least some legislative leverage, and presidents encountered significant checks on their power. Bolsonaro lacked a ruling party and was forced to govern with unstable coalitions, which constrained his ability to abuse his constitutional powers. Trump's Republican majority in the Senate, meanwhile, helped to shield him from accountability and to appoint a number of loyalists to judicial and executive positions. Yet Republicans still pushed back against executive efforts to undermine investigations into Russian election interference, and after Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives in 2018, Trump was exposed to greater oversight and ultimately impeachment. Most important, congressional majorities, including some Republicans, adhered to long-standing constitutional procedures and certified the 2020 election of Joe Biden as president, even in the face of the violent January 6 uprising.

Some South American autocrats gained control over the legislature via frontal assaults. In most of the backsliding countries, however, legislative control was achieved through less dramatic, and sometimes surprising, political routes. In Hungary and Turkey, legislative acquiescence was grounded in the control that leaders exercised over their parties; this was also

largely true in the United States. But the path to pliant legislatures ultimately ran through the electoral battlefield, where divisions within the opposition played a crucial role.

In our cases, gaining a legislative majority augmented the executive's power in at least three critical ways. First, it eliminated an important source of oversight, making it easier for the executive to misuse the bureaucracy and to deploy public resources—including prosecutors and law enforcement—to target political enemies. Where horizontal checks were weak, corruption flourished. This was true enough in Orbán's Hungary for one former politician and scholar to dub it a "post-communist mafia state."⁵ Crony capitalism has also been documented as an essential feature of backsliding in the disparate examples of Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States, and Venezuela.

Second, legislatures both expanded and extended executive powers, including through constitutional amendments or the drafting of new constitutions. Nine countries in our sample saw fundamental constitutional change or amendments that concentrated power in the executive. That power came in different forms, both direct and indirect, ranging from increased executive discretion to greater authority in making judicial appointments to diluted independence of the legislature.

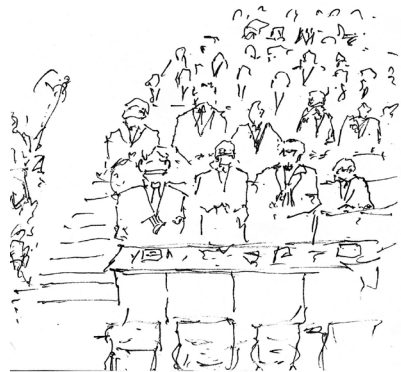
Moreover, of our 16 cases, governments in 6 undertook constitutional revisions or legislative initiatives, or effectively forced judicial rulings, that lifted term limits on the executive. The lifting of term limits allowed for exceptionally long reigns: 11 years for Rafael Correa; 13 for Evo Morales; 14 for Hugo Chávez; and, as of 2021, 14 for Daniel Ortega and 21 for Vladimir Putin.

In Turkey, constitutional reforms went so far as to shift the country from a parliamentary to a presidential system; not coincidentally, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has now been in office for almost 20 years.

Finally, and relatedly, compliant legislatures acquiesced in steps that directly weakened or dismantled institutions of horizontal accountability. With both the judiciary and the legislature itself as key targets, the executive's power soared. Indeed, a central irony of compliant legislatures is that they were frequently complicit in weakening their own powers. But executive appointments to high-level positions in the civil service and nominally independent agencies helped to erode checks on executive power.

Democratic Regress by Stealth

The final component of backsliding is the incremental nature of the process, the "stealth" with which democratic institutions are attacked and undermined.⁶ Illiberal executives who reach office through elections typically test normative limits through piecemeal initiatives to weaken constraints, making each subsequent step easier to pursue.



As noted above, autocrats enlist legislatures to weaken horizontal checks on executive discretion, leading to a process that we call the “collapse of the separation of powers.” With the collaboration of a captured legislature, curtailing the independence of the judiciary is a key

Often, verbal attacks on the veracity of the news are enough to undermine the media’s credibility and damage democracy.

element of the backsliding process. Either verbal assaults on the judiciary or actual meddling, particularly through control of appointments, were clearly visible in 12 of the 16 backsliding cases—all but Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Greece, and Serbia. Courts are not the only targets. Aspiring autocrats deploy the power of appointment and bureaucratic reorganization to undermine a range of institutions that normally serve to limit executive discretion and provide oversight, including central banks, civil service commissions, and specialized agencies designed to provide unbiased information on the budget, climate change, and public health.

Without these checks—particularly from the judiciary—autocrats can more easily violate their opponents’ democratic rights and liberties, especially those regarding speech, media freedom, assembly, and association. Often, verbal attacks on the veracity of the news are enough to under-

mine the media’s credibility and damage democracy without having to silence the press. But, as our cases demonstrate, backsliding regimes can curtail press freedom in a host of ways, from using regulatory tools and government media to intimidating and even assassinating journalists. All our cases—with the partial exception of Greece—saw declines in press freedom as measured by V-Dem scores.

Attacks on rights, moreover, are not aimed exclusively at the media or opposition; they are often used to rally support against scapegoats on the other side of the us-versus-them divide. Minorities or marginalized groups—ethnic, racial, or religious groups, women, and LGBTQ communities—were singled out for opprobrium in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Hungary, North Macedonia, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and the United States. Targeted groups are often depicted as not being legitimate members of the national community but nevertheless enjoying special benefits and protections while corrupting the fabric of society. Not surprisingly, immigrants have been targets of far-right appeals across a range of backsliding cases, from Hungary and Poland to the United States and Greece.



Finally, democracy ultimately rests on the integrity of the electoral system. But the ways in which electoral integrity can be undermined are legion and have spawned an industry.⁷ Manipulation of electoral authorities, for example, was a feature of virtually all 16 of our cases and was pivotal in those that regressed to authoritarian rule. There are also legal means on which empowered executives and pliant legislatures can rely to keep their hold on power while eating away at voters' faith in the system. These include redistricting and gerrymandering or simply taking advantage of disproportionate electoral rules, thresholds, and laws limiting voting rights and access. Should these tactics prove inadequate, a backsliding regime might interfere with the independent monitoring of elections or, in extreme circumstances, engage in outright fraud.

Viewed separately, any one of these derogations does not necessarily signal the collapse of a democratic regime; even in combination they may stop short of a full reversion to autocracy. But the very incrementalism of the process is not simply descriptive; incrementalism has causal effects, and in two ways. First, horizontal checks, rights and liberties, and the electoral system are mutually constitutive features of democracy. Therefore, an attack on any one of them poses a threat to the others. The integrity of elections depends on horizontal checks and the robust protection of rights. Rights, in turn, depend on independent judiciaries, the rule of law, and the accountability provided by elections. Weakening any of these institutions or procedures reduces the constraints on executive power and thus creates opportunities for an autocrat to grab more. The "slippery slope"

metaphor has a logic: one departure from democratic rules and norms sets the stage for the next.

The incremental nature of the backsliding process also has adverse effects through a second and unexplored social-psychological route.

One departure from democratic rules and norms sets the stage for the next.

Individuals anchor expectations in the status quo. The use of piecemeal attacks can normalize abuses, disorient oppositions, and encourage acquiescence. Autocrats are masters of ambiguity and obfuscation, if not outright disinformation. As a result, even if opposition groups are aware of what is happening, the wider public may not recognize that the playing field has been decisively tilted until it is too late to mount a meaningful defense.

Backsliding in International Context

Since the mid-2000s, efforts to expand and sustain democracy in the world have encountered strong headwinds. The backsliding cases that we examined unfolded as a widespread "democratic recession" placed liberal democracy on the defensive. Autocratic states, moreover, have become more prominent players on the global stage; China and Russia, the two most powerful autocracies, have become increasingly aggressive in seeking out and strengthening

authoritarian partners. Another unwelcome development is the growth of authoritarian international institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian

If the United States wants to serve as a model, it must be worthy of emulation.

Economic Union. Moreover, backsliding itself has had diffusion effects: Chávez's Venezuela heavily influenced Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Orbán's Hungary became a model for Poland. And Trump-style politics—for example, the use of catchphrases such as “fake news”—quickly globalized.

Given these international challenges, how can the democracy-promotion community help domestic political forces seeking to prevent would-be autocrats from winning office in the first place or, failing that, keep them from abusing their positions once in power? The anatomy of backsliding that we sketched above can help in identifying appropriate entry points and also suggests new areas of focus for democracy promotion.

In confronting political polarization, it is important to acknowledge the genuine anxieties and social grievances that give rise to polarization in the first place. Ultimately, if democracies are to remain viable, both national leaders and the international community need

to respond in meaningful ways by building more inclusive polities.

The viral spread of disinformation through social media, however, is clearly a critical contributor to this particular determinant of backsliding. Containing the spread will require an all-hands-on-deck approach by governments, social media companies, and civil societies in target countries. Perhaps most fundamentally, it is important to extend and deepen the debate over how to disincentivize the destructive tendencies of large social media companies that profit from circulating disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech.

What can democratic governments and activists do to deter autocratic capture of legislatures—the second major component of the backsliding process? Helping opposition parties to preserve institutional footholds, within legislatures as well as in other institutions of horizontal accountability, remains an important strategic principle for guiding democracy promotion. Beyond the still-essential task of electoral monitoring and assistance, this should include finding ways to support opposition parties more directly (where requested) through strategic advice, training activists, and encouraging closer links to civil society.

Finally, if incrementalism is central to backsliding, the United States and its allies need to think about developing early-warning systems. Annual human rights reports—whether from governments or leading organizations such as Freedom House—provide rich detail but do not necessarily spotlight the kinds of key institutional derogations that can have longer-term effects. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have

pioneered emergency-response campaigns to call out violations of individual rights, as have organizations such as Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists with respect to attacks on journalistic freedoms. But the subtlety of individual antidemocratic abuses can impede the ability to sound the alarm, both because the signals are often faint and because the case is hard to make.

If early warnings are to be effective, the advanced industrial democracies must also place a higher priority on defending democracy as a key foreign policy objective. And any initiative to establish a formal or informal alliance of democracies must make the defense of democracy itself a common priority. Washington and other democratic capitals will need to attach significant weight to sustaining democratic institutions in the face of stealth power grabs by incumbent leaders and deploy their diplomatic influence accordingly and collectively. Fortunately, we now have catalogues of best practices for embassies on the ground in backsliding countries. These include providing credible information, supporting and even convening diverse political and civil society organizations, using diplomatic appeals to identify problems, and providing support (and sometimes protection) for activists who run afoul of backsliding governments.⁸

If these challenges were not enough, the United States faces one perhaps more daunting:



“Physician, heal thyself.” In a globalized world, news travels fast. The deterioration of US democracy during the last decade has eased the way for backsliding elsewhere. If the United States wants to serve as a model, it must be worthy of emulation. That goal requires restoring not only the country’s commitment to democracy promotion globally but also to democracy within its own borders.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Latin American cases are compared to Latin American V-Dem regional averages; EU averages are benchmarks for the United States, Greece, Turkey, and the postcommunist countries; Zambia is compared with Mauritius, the African country with the longest democratic record.
- ² Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (January 2018): 16-42.
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- ⁴ Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 392-409.
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Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy

by Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman

*At any given time,
a regime can be more
or less democratic,
depending on how
close it comes to
meeting standards
of democracy.*

Many Americans think of the United States as synonymous with democracy. After all, the nation was born through a revolution against tyranny and monarchy. Emboldened colonists insisted on the creation of a government in which authority flows from the people themselves. The nation's founding documents herald democratic ideals, from the Declaration of Independence's claim that "all men are created equal" to the Constitution's preamble identifying "We the People" as its source. The ancient Greeks, in city-states such as Athens, had practiced direct democracy, in which citizens made decisions by deliberating face-to-face in assemblies. It was Americans who brought the concept to scale for a larger society, particularly through the Constitution, which established national institutions of government with representatives selected by the people themselves, through a combination of direct and indirect means. By the early 19th century, states extended the vote to nearly all white men, regardless of whether they owned property. These measures made the United States more inclusive than its European counterparts in that era, and the nation became renowned for its boisterous, highly participatory politics that included newly enfranchised men of modest means.¹

Yet the young nation simultaneously repudiated democracy in crucial ways that would shape its development down to the present. It did this by embedding social hierarchies into the Constitution and cementing them with

the power of law. When the Constitution was ratified, nearly one in five Americans—all of them of African descent—were enslaved, and the document itself sanctioned the practice. In the case of women’s status, which was among the topics relegated to the states under the 10th Amendment, once women married—as was expected of them—they relinquished their legal and economic rights to their husbands. As the country moved toward universal voting rights for white men, inclusion occurred on the basis of race and gender, establishing the United States in its early years as a “white man’s republic.”² Full membership in the political community—entailing the right to vote and to participate fully in public affairs—expressly excluded women and African Americans.

Over two centuries of struggle and contention, the United States democratized. The nation’s conception of “the people” slowly grew more inclusive and more Americans gained the rights of citizenship. But it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the United States formally extended civil and political rights to all Americans regardless of race or gender.³ The road toward full democracy was neither straight nor smooth. Generations of Americans organized, signed petitions, and marched in the quest for equal rights of citizenship, and they often faced violence, defeats, and reversals of progress.

But even though the United States has not been a full democracy from the beginning, the American Revolution established the modern *idea* of democracy—a system of government in which those who govern are held accountable to the people through competitive elections. However imperfectly the principles of American

democracy may be realized, inherent in them are standards by which we can measure the state of American politics. At any given time, a regime can be more or less democratic, depending on how close it comes to meeting these standards of democracy. Think of democracy as a continuum rather than an on-off switch. A country can be somewhere between being a full democracy and not being a democracy at all. As we look at democracy through American history, we can assess where on the continuum it is.

Democratic regimes can also move along the continuum in either direction. A regime might be moving toward more complete democracy, as the United States did during Reconstruction after the Civil War and in the 1960s. But regimes might also move in the other direction, toward less democracy, a process known as “backsliding.”⁴ There is no guarantee, even in the United States, that we will move in the right direction, and it is a grave mistake to assume either that the United States is automatically democratic because of what our Constitution says or that we have moved steadily and inexorably toward greater democracy.

History reveals that neither assumption is correct.

Thinking about Democracy . . . and Backsliding

The United States has not always been democratic. Moreover, American democracy has not developed through steady progress over time; sometimes it has been subject to decay or derailment, and the question is whether that is occurring again now. Before we can assess the prospects of democratic deterioration, what do we mean by democracy?

We tend to think of democracy as a political system in which authority flows from the people, rather than from an individual leader or a small group of powerful elites. But of course many autocrats around the world also claim to be the people's true representative. How then can we distinguish democracies from authoritarian governments—or, more to the point, identify whether a single nation exhibits signs of becoming more or less democratic?

Democracy is a system of government in which citizens are able to hold those in power accountable, primarily through regular competitive elections, and in which representatives engage in collective decision-making, seeking to be responsive to the electorate. Modern democracies that conform to this definition are systems of representative government, not direct democracies or systems of mob rule. Successful democracies also tend to be *liberal* democracies, regimes that effectively protect their citizens' rights to express their views, participate in the political process, and have their voices heard. Effectively functioning democratic systems tend to share four key attributes.⁵

These attributes—free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of the opposition, and the integrity of rights—provide us with clear indicators that we can use as standards to assess whether democracy is advancing or retreating in any given period of history. Nations that call themselves democracies may have some of these attributes but not others; variation abounds. Many nations, for example, hold democratic elections but do not respect their citizens' freedom of expression or dissent, and they have leaders who rule arbitrarily with little heed to the rule of law. Scholars describe such



regimes as “competitive authoritarianism,” a hybrid form of governance that combines democratic and nondemocratic elements.⁶ Just because a nation has attained a robust combination of all four attributes of democracy, moreover, is no guarantee that it will continue to maintain them: lapsing toward weakened or hybrid forms is common.

In recent years, some critics have begun to wonder whether the United States itself is undergoing democratic backsliding. Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization that is highly regarded for its rankings of democratic fitness based on political rights and civil liberties, downgraded the United States from a score of 94 (out of 100 points) in 2010 to 86 in 2019. While the nation still ranks among the 87 countries regarded as “free,” its rank fell from 31st to 51st in less than a decade. In a democracy index prepared annually by the *Economist*, the United States slipped from the classification of “full democracy” to that of “flawed democracy” in 2017. In doing so, it departed the ranks that included most

western European countries and Canada, and joined Argentina, Greece, and several eastern European countries, among others.⁷

Some scholars who study democratic deterioration worldwide seek to evaluate the United States today by comparing and contrasting it to Germany under Hitler and Italy under Mus-

For many Americans, partisanship has become a central part of their identity.

solini and, more recently, to Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Russia under Vladimir Putin, and Peru under Alberto Fujimori.⁸ But none of those cases involves a country with such a long constitutional tradition and established political institutions, not to mention the United States' wealth—all features assumed to ensure the continuation of democracy.⁹

The Four Threats

The history of American democracy has hardly been serene; to the contrary, it has involved extreme conflict and frequent violence and bloodshed. While developments in the past 60 years went far to deepen and expand democracy, earlier periods often witnessed it in peril and even being rolled back. In order to make sense of the conditions that most put democracy at risk, we have learned a great deal from scholars who study its rise and fall in countries around the world. In particular, we discern four major threats that can endanger it: politi-

cal polarization, conflict over who belongs in the political community, high and rising levels of economic inequality, and executive aggrandizement.

Political Polarization

Americans have heard plenty in recent years about the dangers of rising political polarization. Not many years ago, lawmakers in Washington frequently cooperated across party lines, forging both policy alliances and personal friendships. Now, hostility more often prevails, and it has been accompanied by brinksmanship and dysfunction that imperil lawmaking on major issues.

The public is no different. In the 1950s, when pollsters asked Americans whether they would prefer that their child “marry a Democrat or a Republican, all other things being equal,” the vast majority—72 percent of Americans—either didn’t answer or said they didn’t care. By contrast, in 2016 the majority—55 percent—did express a partisan preference for their future son- or daughter-in-law. For many Americans, partisanship has become a central part of their identity.¹⁰

But could rising polarization actually harm democracy? At first blush, this might seem unlikely; in fact, many political scientists have long argued that vibrant political parties are actually essential to the functioning of democracy. They bring elected officials together around a common set of priorities and foster cooperation so that they can accomplish goals on behalf of the public. They help citizens, who lack the time and expertise to study every issue, to make sense of politics and decide which candidates to support; this enables them to participate in

elections and hold elected officials accountable. Distinctions between parties help make democracy work by presenting citizens with meaningful choices. Yet when parties divide both lawmakers and society into two unalterably opposed camps that view each other as enemies, they can undermine social cohesion and political stability. Democracy is put at risk.

Polarization grows when citizens sort themselves so that, instead of having multiple, cross-cutting ties to others, their social and political memberships and identities increasingly overlap, reinforcing their affinity to some groups while setting them apart from others. In the mid-20th century, this process commenced as white southerners, beginning as early as the 1940s and accelerating by the 1970s, distanced themselves from the Democratic Party and shifted gradually toward the Republicans while the Democrats increasingly embraced the cause of racial equality. These new groupings diverged more from each other on ideology (conservative versus liberal) and views of particular issues (such as civil rights, abortion, and more recently gun rights).¹¹

Polarization intensifies as ambitious political entrepreneurs take advantage of growing divisions to expand their power. They may do this by adopting opposing positions on issues, highlighting and promoting underlying social differences, and using polarizing rhetoric and tactics in order to consolidate their supporters while weakening their opponents.¹²

But this approach hinders democratic governance by making it more difficult for Congress to work across party lines and address the major issues that most concern Americans today.¹³ This occurs in part because polarization makes

many of the attributes of a well-functioning polity—such as cooperation, negotiation, and compromise—more costly for public officials, who fear being punished at the polls if they engage in these ways with opponents. After the conservative political movement known as the Tea Party emerged in 2009, rallying against taxes, government programs, and immigration, its activists lambasted moderates and threatened them with primary challenges from the right. This strategy bore fruit in 2010, when the newly elected Republican majority contained several fewer moderates and many more hard-core conservatives.¹⁴

As division escalates, the normal functioning of democracy can break down if partisans cease to be able to resolve political differences by finding middle ground, through mutual accommodation. Politics then instead becomes a game of mortal combat in which winning is the singular imperative and opponents are seen as enemies to be vanquished. Furthermore, polarization is not a static state but a process that feeds on itself and creates a cascade of worsening outcomes.¹⁵ Over time, those who created it may find it difficult to control what



they have wrought, as members of the base become less and less trustful of elites and believe that none are sufficiently devoted to their core values. These dynamics give rise to less-principled actors, as epitomized by Donald Trump's ascendance. During the 2016 campaign, numerous established Republican politicians—such as Senators Lindsey Graham and Marco Rubio—expressed their strong disdain for him, only to eat their words once he was elected and to support him faithfully once he was in the White House.

Deep, almost tribal partisanship divides not only elected officials but also ordinary Americans today. People who identify with one party have become more distinct in terms of race, religiosity, and ideology from those identifying with the other. They are also more socially distant and more likely to hold stereotypes and negative views of one another. Partisans are animated even more by their shared dislike for the other party than by their own shared perspectives,



and this “negative partisanship” spurs them to react emotionally and to harbor anger toward members of the other party.¹⁶ Such polarization can affect social life, making gatherings between partisans of different stripes—including family occasions—fraught with tension.

As such dynamics intensify, people come to view society and politics as divided between “us” and “them.”

The culmination of polarization can indeed endanger democracy itself. If members of one political group come to view their opponents as an existential threat to their core values, they may seek to defeat them at all costs, even if it undermines normal democratic procedures in the process. They may cease to view the opposition as legitimate and seek permanent ways to prevent it from gaining power, such as by stacking the deck in their own favor. They may become convinced that it is justifiable to circumvent the rule of law and defy checks and balances or to scale back voting rights, civil liberties, or civil rights for the sake of preserving or protecting the nation as they see fit. Political polarization presents these very threats today, and they show no sign of abating.

Who Belongs?

Democracy has been built most successfully in places where citizens share broad agreement about the boundaries of national community: who should be included as a member, and on what terms, meaning whether all should have equal status or if rights should be parceled out in different ways to different groups. Conversely, when a nation features deep social divisions along lines of race, gender, religion, or ethnic group, some citizens may favor excluding certain

groups or granting them subordinate status. When these divisions emanate from “formative rifts” that either predated or emerged with the nation’s founding, they can prove particularly pernicious, and persist as formidable undercurrents in politics.¹⁷ Unless such rifts are purposely eliminated, conflict over them can habitually resurface and spur deep divisions, making democracy vulnerable.

Formative rifts may come to a head as the result of political change that prompts the two parties to take divergent stands over the status of implicated groups. Politicians may deliberately seek to inflame divisions as a political strategy that can unite and mobilize groups who would not otherwise share a common goal.¹⁸ Or social movements might mobilize people on one side of a rift, leading to a countermobilization by those on the other side. For example, the Civil Rights Movement sought to include more Americans within the boundaries of full citizenship, and that prompted racial conservatives to mobilize themselves to resist such changes; similarly, the feminist and LGBTQ movements each led to backlash movements by evangelical Christians. In either case, when such divisions are triggered, those who favor a return to earlier boundaries of civic membership and status may be convinced that they must pursue their goals at all costs, even if democracy is curtailed in the process. They may support political leaders who flout the rule of law and trample on voting rights, civil liberties, and civil rights, justifying it as necessary to preserve or restore the nation.

The United States at its inception divided the political community by race, creating a formative rift that has organized our politics

ever since. A commitment to white supremacy has often prevailed, impelling many Americans to build coalitions around appeals to racism and segregation in order to further their political interests. After the Constitution itself sanctioned slavery, the quest to preserve it drove politics for decades. Even after slavery ended, white supremacy often reigned in American politics, through decades of voting restrictions, denial of rights, discrimination, and segregation. This tradition has been one of the most important antidemocratic forces in American history.

Yet a countervailing commitment to equality and inclusion also emerged in American politics, fueled by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. This tradition repeatedly and powerfully challenged slavery and white supremacy and brought about critical reforms that expanded rights and advanced American democracy. It continues to do so today.

The American gender divide, also codified in law, made men’s dominance in politics and society appear to be natural and it rendered gender hierarchy resistant to change. A countervailing commitment to equality emerged, however, in the 19th-century women’s movement, articulated in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal.” Yet not until 1916 would the two major political parties embrace the cause of women’s suffrage at the national level, ushering in the 19th Amendment’s ratification in 1920. Numerous other aspects of women’s status remained defined at the state level for decades.¹⁹

Despite sweeping reforms in the 20th century, legacies of formative rifts around both race



and gender linger. Liberal democratic ideals championing equality and freedom have evolved over time and promoted broader inclusion within the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Yet they continuously contend with persistent traditions that sanction race or gender hierarchies.²⁰

Certainly some tendencies of human nature help explain why formative rifts can prove potent. Many people trust communities that seem familiar to them and that they associate with virtue and safety, while they feel distrustful of other groups, whose customs strike them as strange and even dangerous. When political figures or events ignite voters' anger, particularly around matters pertaining to gender or race, it elevates political participation particularly among those who favor traditional hierarchies.²¹

Yet these views about who belongs in the political community do not always consistently foster political conflict and threaten democracy; it all depends on how they map onto the political party system. In some periods, for example, neither party strongly challenged white supremacy, in which case the status quo prevailed. In

other periods, the conflict between racially inclusive and white supremacist visions of American society and democracy has overlapped with partisan divisions and fueled intense political conflict. At such moments, democracy stood on the brink. When egalitarian forces gained the upper hand, democracy became more robust, as occurred during Reconstruction after the Civil War and in the mid-20th-century Civil Rights Movement.²² But when politicians defending old hierarchies effectively aroused their supporters, democracy was put at risk.

For decades, Republican candidates and public officials mostly refrained from overtly invoking those views in their campaigns and public rhetoric, but Trump seized the opportunity to do so, and it helped him win the 2016 election. Contemporary American politics, more than ever before, features a party system sharply divided between proponents of racial

Countries in which inequality is on the rise are more likely to see democracy distorted, limited, and potentially destabilized.

egalitarianism and defenders of a system that has privileged whites. This political chasm is further exacerbated by rising hostility to immigration and simmering disagreement about the status of immigrants in American society. The resulting divergence makes for extremely

volatile politics, and the potential expansion of democracy—or its rollback—is at stake.

Economic Inequality

High rates of economic inequality can undermine the institutions and practices of existing democracies. Countries in which inequality is on the rise are more likely to see democracy distorted, limited, and potentially destabilized. By contrast, countries in which inequality is low or declining are less likely to suffer democratic deterioration.²³

People typically assume that inequality could make democracy vulnerable by increasing the chances that the less well-off will rise up against the wealthy, but that is rarely the case. Rather, as inequality grows, it is the affluent themselves who are more likely to mobilize effectively. They realize that working- and middle-class people, who greatly outnumber them, tend to favor redistributive policies—and the higher taxes necessary to fund them, which would fall disproportionately on the rich. Fearful of such policy changes, the rich take action to protect their interests and preserve their wealth and advantages. For a time, this may skew the democratic process by giving the rich an outsized voice, but it can eventually cause more fundamental problems, endangering democratic stability itself. This can occur when the wealthiest citizens seek to solidify their power even if it entails harm to democracy. They may be willing to abide a polarizing politics of “us versus them” and the adoption of repressive measures if that is what it takes for leaders to protect their interests.²⁴

Among wealthy democracies in the world today, the United States is the most economi-

cally unequal nation. After a period during the mid-20th century when low- and middle-income Americans experienced quickly rising incomes, they have seen slow or stagnant wage growth and shrinking opportunities since the late 1970s. The affluent, meanwhile, continued

Among wealthy democracies in the world today, the United States is the most economically unequal nation.

to experience soaring incomes and wealth, particularly among the top one percent. CEO pay skyrocketed from 30 times the annual pay of the average worker in 1978 to 312 times as much by 2017.

Early on, the United States did not feature such economic inequality. Of course, in the late 18th century and the 19th century up through the Civil War, the widespread existence of slavery made for extreme inequality in the American South. Other regions of the nation during that same period, however, featured greater egalitarianism than Europe, being unencumbered by feudalism and the inherited structure of rigid social classes. But as the 19th century proceeded, economic inequality grew, and by the late 19th century—the Gilded Age, as Mark Twain called it—the United States had nearly caught up with Great Britain. These disparities would endure until the stock market crashed in 1929. The wealthy lost much

through the Great Depression, and then, after World War II, the strong economy and government policies fostered upward mobility and the growth of a large middle class, otherwise known as “the great compression.” By later in the 20th century, however, economic inequality grew once again, owing not only to deindustri-

Greater political inequality generally accompanies rising economic inequality, and the United States has been no exception in this regard.

alization and globalization but also to changes (and failure to update policies amid transformed circumstances) in tax policy, labor policy, and other areas that favored the affluent. The fortunes of the wealthy soared higher than ever, outpacing those of their European counterparts.²⁵

Greater political inequality generally accompanies rising economic inequality, and the United States has been no exception in this regard. In the age of the robber barons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Industrial Revolution generated vastly unequal wealth paired with unequal political power, as we will see. Decades of bloody repression of workers ensued as an ascendant class of capitalists enjoyed protection by the courts and the prevailing interpretation of the Constitution. Progressives and populists made some policy

advances that restricted business power, and the New Deal and the postwar era brought a contraction between the rich and poor. As a middle class grew in the United States, a wider swath of Americans took part in public life, and democracy advanced.

As economic inequality has soared since the 1970s, however, the affluent and big business in the United States have become more politically organized than ever, in ways that present major obstacles to democracy. The amount of money spent on politics—both in campaign contributions and lobbying—has escalated sharply since the 1990s, owing to the deep pockets and motivation of wealthy Americans and corporations. Even more striking is the degree to which the rich have organized themselves politically, through highly effective groups such as Americans for Prosperity, American Crossroads, and Heritage Action, which pursue their policy agenda on the state and national levels. The wealthy have reaped windfalls in the signature achievements of the Trump presidency: the immense 2017 tax cuts, which primarily benefited the top one percent and big companies, and the extensive scaling back of regulations. When government responds primarily to the rich, it transforms itself into oligarchy, and they gladly help usher in the new regime, which better protects their interests. Keeping watch over democracy is not their concern.²⁶

Executive Aggrandizement

The final threat to democracy is “executive aggrandizement,” the enlargement of the powers wielded by a nation’s top leader. Democratic backsliding is often associated with the demise of checks on executive power, which typically

results when powerful leaders expand their power and autonomy relative to more broadly representative legislatures and courts that are expected to protect rights. These executive actions might be perfectly legal, such as filling the courts and government agencies with political allies. But executives might also be tempted to stack the deck against their political opponents, making it hard to challenge their dominance; circumvent the rule of law; or roll back civil liberties and civil rights. Such actions can diminish democracy.

The American founders sought to thwart executive tyranny and to prevent a single group of leaders from seizing control of all the levers of government power at once. One of the ways they aimed to do this was to distribute power among different institutions, as James Madison explained in *Federalist 51*. Madison did not expect politicians to act with restraint in wielding power. He assumed, rather, that they would tend to be ambitious people bent on acquiring power and that the separation of powers would help prevent the concentration of power in a single individual or group.

The framers of the Constitution clearly gave the legislature pride of place. Article I establishes Congress as the first branch among three and lays out its powers in detail. The tersely worded Article II, by contrast, offers few specifics about presidential power, and makes constraints on the office—including the power of Congress to decide whether or not to enact measures the president recommends, and also to impeach and convict him—more evident than its powers.

But separation-of-powers systems such as that of the United States are notoriously prone to intractable political conflict between the executive and legislative branches, each of which

can claim democratic legitimacy because it is independently elected. Moreover, a president engaged in such a conflict might be tempted to assume a populist mantle—to equate his supporters with “the people” as a whole and present his preferred policies as reflective of a single popular will as opposed to the multiplicity of voices and interests represented in the legislature.²⁷

Across most of the first 125 years of the nation’s history, with a few exceptions in the early republic and the Civil War period, the very idea of a president achieving autocratic powers would have seemed inconceivable because the office was limited and Congress prevailed as the dominant branch. In the early 20th century, however, presidential power began to grow.

By the time of Trump’s election, the presidency had become a much more capacious and dominant office than the framers ever envisioned. Certainly the president cannot single-handedly create or repeal laws, as those powers are vested in Congress. But in other respects an aspiring autocrat who occupies the White House would find considerable authority awaiting him. Presidents throughout the 20th





century have expanded the powers of the office, whether through the use of executive orders and proclamations, the administrative state, an enlarged White House staff and creation of the Executive Office of the Presidency, or the presidency's control over foreign policy and national security. Meanwhile, Congress—typically in moments of crisis, whether related to foreign policy crises or domestic travails—has ceded considerable authority to the executive branch and enabled presidents to act unilaterally and often without oversight. As a result, the ordinary checks and balances that the framers intended to ensure democratic accountability have grown weaker.

This process of executive aggrandizement, which has been supported by both parties, fueled the development of what has been called the “imperial presidency.”²⁸ It has afforded presidents near-complete autonomy in foreign policy decisions and allowed them to commit the nation to expensive and risky interventions abroad, only later seeking congressional approval. A vast national security apparatus has grown in tandem. It has secretly conducted

domestic surveillance and political repression, often targeted at immigrants, minorities, and the politically vulnerable.

In the hands of a leader who envisions himself above the law, these tools provide ample means to further the leader's own agenda, at great cost to accountable democratic government.

The Danger and Promise of Democracy

Today, for the first time ever, we face the confluence of all four threats at once. We would be foolhardy to ignore these circumstances, which undeniably make democracy more vulnerable. Polarization has become extreme, prompting members of Congress to act more like members of a team than as representatives or policymakers; their unwillingness to cooperate and compromise makes it impossible to address many major issues. Among ordinary citizens, polarization is prompting a sense of politics as “us versus them,” in which people's political choices are highly motivated by their hostility toward the opposition. Polarization coincides with a sharp divide between an increasingly strident vision of white dominance in American society, on one side, and an increasingly diverse and inclusive coalition, on the other. Economic inequality has skyrocketed, and wealthy Americans and business leaders are highly motivated and organized to protect their interests and expand their riches, whatever the costs to democracy. If the embrace of racist, nativist politics is required to achieve their goals, they are undeterred. And in the face of growing governmental dysfunction and stalemate, a massively powerful presidency has enabled President Trump to pursue much of his agenda by circumventing Congress. In this

context of four threats, all the ingredients for democratic backsliding are in place.

Yet democratic decay is not inevitable. Although this combination of conditions makes democracy more precarious, it does not determine what will unfold, nor does it make the demise of government by the people unavoidable. Rather, it is politics that determines what will ensue. Politics does not adhere to mechanical principles, in which given circumstances foreordain a particular outcome. Rather, politics is driven by human beings who exercise agency and choice, and who can set their sights—if they so choose—on preserving and restoring democracy.

Democracy contains within it many seeds, including some that would hasten its own demise, but they must be selected and nurtured to produce such devastating outcomes. Ambitious political leaders engaged in intense competition can choose to pursue a strategy of political polarization if they wish. Up to a point, polarization can foster positive developments, such as boosting political participation, strengthening political parties, and simplifying voters' choices. But it must not be permitted to grow out of control. Leaders can decide whether to promote and amplify racism and nativism as a polarizing strategy. They can also decide whether to do the bidding of the most affluent, who will willingly support them, or whether to cast their lot with ordinary Americans instead. Finally, they can decide whether to unleash the executive powers of the presidency, or whether to counter an increasingly powerful president by reasserting the representative power of Congress.

Conversely, democracy also contains the seeds of its own regrowth and renewal. Political leaders and citizens can—through politics—rescue democracy, but they must act before it is too late. Responsible public officials need to tend the garden of democracy in such a way that seeds of destruction do not take root, and if those seeds do sprout, leaders must make it

Today, for the first time ever, we face the confluence of all four threats at once.

their first priority to curtail their growth and to find ways to guard against their proliferation. In addition, they must bolster the laws and procedures that ensure free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of the opposition, and integrity of rights. For their part, citizens must demand the preservation of democracy itself over any particular policy issues and seek to foster its revitalization.

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Endnotes

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The Dark Century

by David Brooks

What is the key factor that has made the 21st century so dark, regressive, and dangerous?

In the early 1990s I was a roving correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, based in Europe. Some years it felt as if all I did was cover good news: the end of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians voting for independence, German reunification, the spread of democracy across Eastern Europe, Mandela coming out of prison and the end of apartheid, the Oslo peace process that seemed to bring stability to the Middle East.

I obsess about those years now. I obsess about them because the good times did not last. History is reverting toward barbarism. We have an authoritarian strongman in Russia threatening to invade his neighbor,¹ an increasingly authoritarian China waging genocide on its people and threatening Taiwan, cyberattacks undermining the world order, democracy in retreat worldwide, thuggish populists across the West undermining nations from within.

What the hell happened? Why were the hopes of the 1990s not realized? What is the key factor that has made the 21st century so dark, regressive, and dangerous?

The normal thing to say is that the liberal world order is in crisis. But just saying that doesn't explain why. Why are people rejecting liberalism? What weakness in liberalism are its enemies exploiting? What is at the root of this dark century? Let me offer one explanation.

Liberalism is a way of life built on respect for the dignity of each individual. A liberal order, John Stuart Mill suggested, is one in which people are free to conduct "experiments in living" so you wind up with "a large variety in types of character." There's no one best way

to live, so liberals celebrate freedom, personal growth, and diversity.

Many of America's founders were fervent believers in liberal democracy—up to a point. They had a profound respect for individual virtue, but also individual frailty. Samuel Adams

The genius of the Constitution was in its attempt to move toward democracy while trying to prevent undue concentrations of power.

said, “Ambitions and lust for power . . . are predominant passions in the breasts of most men.” Patrick Henry admitted to feelings of dread when he contemplated the “depravity of human nature.” One delegate to the constitutional convention said that the people “lack information and are constantly liable to be misled.”

Our founders were aware that majorities are easily led by ambitious demagogues.

So our founders built a system that respected popular opinion and majority rule while trying to build guardrails to check popular passion and prejudice. The crimes of the constitutional order are by now well known. It acquiesced to the existence of slavery and prolonged that institution for nearly another century. Early democratic systems enfranchised only a small share of adult Americans. But the genius of the Constitution was in its attempt to move toward democracy while trying to prevent undue

concentrations of power. The founders divided power among the branches. They built in a whole series of republican checks, so that demagogues and populist crazes would not sweep over the land.

“They designed a constitution for fallen people,” the historian Robert Tracy McKenzie writes in his book *We the Fallen People*. “Its genius lay in how it held in tension two seemingly incompatible beliefs: first, that the majority must generally prevail; and second, that the majority is predisposed to seek personal advantage above the common good.”

While the Constitution guarded against abuses of power, the founders recognized that a much more important set of civic practices would mold people to be capable of being self-governing citizens: Churches were meant to teach virtue; leaders were to receive classical education, so they might understand human virtue and vice and the fragility of democracy; everyday citizens were to lead their lives as yeoman farmers so they might learn to live simply and work hard; civic associations and local government were to instill the habits of public service; patriotic rituals were observed to instill shared love of country; newspapers and magazines were there (more in theory than in fact) to create a well-informed citizenry; etiquette rules and democratic manners were adopted to encourage social equality and mutual respect.

Think of it like farming. Planting the seeds is like establishing a democracy. But for democracy to function you have to till and fertilize the soil, erect fences, pull up weeds, prune the early growth. The founders knew that democracy is not natural. It takes a lot of cultivation to make democracy work.

American foreign policy had a second founding after World War II. For much of our history Americans were content to prosper behind the safety of the oceans. But after having been dragged into two world wars, a generation of Americans realized the old attitude wasn't working anymore and America, following the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, would have to help build a liberal world order if it was to remain secure.

The postwar generation was a bit like the founding generation. Its leaders—from Truman to George F. Kennan to Reinhold Niebuhr—championed democracy, but they had no illusions about the depravity of human beings. They'd read their history and understood that stretching back thousands of years, war, authoritarianism, exploitation, great powers crushing little ones—these were just the natural state of human societies.

If America was to be secure, Americans would have to plant the seeds of democracy, but also do all the work of cultivation so those seeds could flourish. Americans oversaw the

It takes a lot of cultivation to make democracy work.

creation of peaceful democracies from the ruins of military dictatorships in Germany and Japan. They funded the Marshall Plan. They helped build multinational institutions like NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund. American military might stood ready to push back against the wolves



who threatened the world order—sometimes effectively, as in Europe, but oftentimes, as in Vietnam and Iraq, recklessly and self-destructively. America championed democracy and human rights, at least when the communists were violating them (not so much when our dictator allies across, say, Latin America were).

Just as America's founders understood that democracy is not natural, the postwar generation understood that peace is not natural—it has to be tended and cultivated from the frailties of human passion and greed.

Over the past few generations that hopeful but sober view of human nature has faded. What's been called the Culture of Narcissism took hold, with the view that human beings should be unshackled from restraint. You can trust yourself to be unselfish! Democracy and world peace were taken for granted. As Robert Kagan put it in his book *The Jungle Grows Back*: “We have lived so long inside the bubble of the liberal order that we can imagine no other kind of world. We think it is natural and normal, even inevitable.”

If people are naturally good, we no longer have to do the hard agricultural work of culti-



vating virtuous citizens or fighting against human frailty. The Western advisers I covered in Russia in the early 1990s thought a lot about privatization and market reforms and very little about how to prevent greedy monsters from stealing the whole country. They had a naïve view of human nature.

Even in America, over the past decades, the institutions that earlier generations thought were essential to molding a democratic citizenry have withered or malfunctioned. Many churches and media outlets have gone partisan. Civics education has receded. Neighborhood organizations have shrunk. Patriotic rituals are out of fashion.

What happens when you don't tend the seedbeds of democracy? Chaos? War? No, you return to normal. The 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries were normal. Big countries like China, Russia, and Turkey are ruled by fierce leaders with massive power. That's normal. Small aristocracies in many nations hog gigantic shares of their nations' wealth. That's normal. Many people come to despise cultural outsiders, like immigrants. Normal. Global affairs resembles the law of the jungle, with big countries

threatening small ones. This is the way it's been for most of human history.

In normal times, people crave order and leaders like Vladimir Putin arise to give it to them. Putin and Xi Jinping have arisen to be the 21st century's paradigmatic men.

Putin has established political order in Russia by reviving the Russian strong state tradition and by concentrating power in the hands of one man. He has established economic order through a grand bargain with oligarch-led firms, with him as the ultimate CEO. As Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy write in their book, *Mr. Putin*, corruption is the glue that holds the system together. Everybody's wealth is deliberately tainted, so Putin has the power to accuse anyone of corruption and remove anyone at any time.

He offers cultural order. He embraces the Russian Orthodox Church and rails against the postmodern godlessness of the West. He scorns homosexuality and transgenderism.

Putin has redefined global conservatism and made himself its global leader. Many conservatives around the world see Putin's strong, manly authority, his defense of traditional values and his enthusiastic embrace of orthodox faith, and they see their aspirations in human form. Right-wing leaders from Donald Trump in the United States to Marine Le Pen in France to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines speak of Putin admiringly.

The 21st century has become a dark century because the seedbeds of democracy have been neglected and normal historical authoritarianism is on the march. Putin and Xi seem confident that the winds of history are at their back. Writing in the *Times* in January 2022, Hill said that

Putin believes the United States is in the same predicament Russia was in during the 1990s—“weakened at home and in retreat abroad.”

Putin, Xi and the other global conservatives make comprehensive critiques of liberalism and the failings of liberal society. Unlike past authori-

What happens when you don't tend the seedbeds of democracy? Chaos? War? No, you return to normal.

tarians they have the massive power of modern surveillance technology to control their citizens. Russian troops are on the border of Ukraine because Putin needs to create the kind of disordered world that people like him thrive in. “The problem Russia has faced since the end of the Cold War is that the greatness Putin and many Russians seek cannot be achieved in a world that is secure and stable,” Kagan writes in *The Jungle Grows Back*. “To achieve greatness on the world stage, Russia must bring the world back to a past when neither Russians nor anyone else enjoyed security.”

Will the liberals of the world be able to hold off the wolves? Strengthen democracy and preserve the rules-based world order? The events of the past few weeks have been fortifying. Joe Biden and the other world leaders have done an impressive job of rallying their collective resolve and pushing to keep Putin within his borders. But the problems of democracy and the liberal order can't be solved from the top

down. Today, across left and right, millions of Americans see US efforts abroad as little more than imperialism, “endless wars” and domination. They don't believe in the postwar project and refuse to provide popular support for it.

The real problem is in the seedbeds of democracy, the institutions that are supposed to mold a citizenry and make us qualified to practice democracy. To restore those seedbeds, we first have to relearn the wisdom of the founders: we are not as virtuous as we think we are. Americans are no better than anyone else. Democracy is not natural; it is an artificial accomplishment that takes enormous work.

Then we need to fortify the institutions that are supposed to teach the democratic skills: how to weigh evidence and commit to truth; how to correct for your own partisan blinders and learn to doubt your own opinions; how to respect people you disagree with; how to avoid catastrophism, conspiracy, and apocalyptic thinking; how to avoid supporting demagogues; how to craft complex compromises.

Democrats are not born; they are made. If the 21st century is to get brighter as it goes along, we have to get a lot better at making them. We don't only have to worry about the people tearing down democracy. We have to worry about who is building it up.

David Brooks is a lecturer at Yale University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is also a columnist for the New York Times, a commentator on PBS NewsHour, NPR's All Things Considered and NBC's Meet the Press. This reprint of “The Dark Century” is from the New York Times. © 2022 The New York Times Company. All rights reserved. Used under license.

Endnote

¹ This article was published prior to the February 24, 2022, Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Why We're Polarized

by Ezra Klein

We give too much attention to national politics and too little to local politics, where our voices can matter much more.

As individuals, we aren't just responsible for changing the political system; we are also being changed by it. The primary way the system gets its hooks into us is by threatening or otherwise activating our political identities and using the catalytic energy to get us to contribute, vote, read, share, or just generally be pissed off. That's not always a bad thing, of course. Politics is a high-stakes enterprise, and there are plenty of times when we should contribute, vote, read, share, and, yes, be pissed off.

But there's a difference between polarization and manipulation. There's a difference between using politics for our purposes and being used for the political purposes of others. So I also want to discuss a few ways we can change our relationship to politics that can be both healthier for us and our country: identity mindfulness and rediscovering a politics of place.

Identity Mindfulness

All politics is influenced by identity. That's not because all politics is literally identity politics. It's because all of human cognition is influenced by identity, and politics is part of human cognition. We cannot sever ourselves from our circumstances. We will never fully know how fully we've been shaped by our contexts. Who we are, where we grew up, whom we've learned to trust and fear, love and hate, respect and dismiss—it's deeper than conscious thought. The slate of mental processes built around the millisecond it takes an identity to activate isn't something we can simply slough off.

But if we can't turn off the power identity holds over us, we can harness it. Remember,

our identities are manifold. “Republican” is an identity, as is “Democrat.” But so is “fair-minded,” or “Christian,” or “curious,” or “New Yorker.” It can be as much an identity to see yourself as an advocate for the poor, for animals, or for children as to be a member of a political

We all inhabit a larger context that shapes our actions.

party. The thing about the organized identities promoted by political coalitions is that there is a massive apparatus for defining, policing, and activating them. If you want to get out of that superstructure, it takes work. But it is possible.

If the beginning of wisdom on identity politics is recognizing that all of us are engaging in it all the time, the path of wisdom on identity politics is to be mindful of which of our identities are being activated, so that we can become intentional about which identities we work to activate. Like a muscle or a neural pathway, the identities we use most grow strongest, the ones that lie fallow weaken. We can wield that to our advantage. Doing so starts with mindfulness.

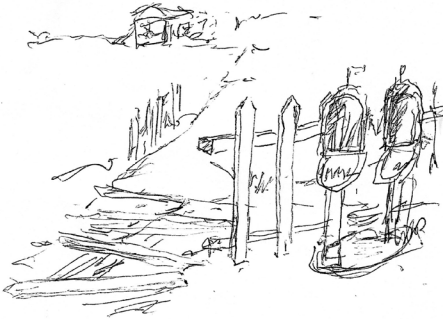
Yeah, I know. Of course, the politics book by the liberal Californian vegan ends with a call to mindfulness. But slowly take 10 breaths, making sure your mind doesn’t wander, and hear me out. Our environments are designed to activate some identities and not others. American life is full of American flags, for instance. Political life is full of reminders of the red-blue

divide and which side of it you’re on. Religious life is meant to pull you in one direction, hipster consumerism drags you in another, and hey, how about that local sports team whose paraphernalia is literally everywhere? There are massive, well-funded efforts strengthening our identities everywhere we turn. It takes work to see this happening within us, in real time. But it’s possible.

The practice of mindfulness is separable from the practice of meditation. Robert Wright, the eminent political journalist and Buddhist scholar, writes, “The word ‘mindful,’ as used around the time of [its] translation, meant ‘taking thought or care of; heedful of; keeping remembrance of.’ In other words: a mindful person is an acutely aware person, a person who proceeds with careful attention to all relevant factors.”¹

In this case, the relevant factor I’m urging you to pay attention to is identity. What identity is that article invoking? What identity is making you defensive? What does it feel like when you get pushed back into an identity? Can you notice when it happens? If you log on to Twitter nine times a day, can you take a couple breaths at the end and ask yourself how differently you feel from before you logged on?

The idea here is to become more aware of the ways that politicians and media manipulate us. There are reams of research showing that our reaction to political commentary and information we don’t like is physical. Our breathing speeds up, our pupils narrow, our hearts beat faster. Trying to be aware of how politics makes us feel, of what happens when our identities are activated, threatened, or otherwise inflamed, is



a necessary first step to gaining some control of the process.

That is not to say we should become afraid of our identities being inflamed or strong emotions being forced forward. It's to say we should be mindful enough of what's happening to make decisions about whether we're pleased with the situation. Sometimes it's worth being angry. Sometimes it's not. If we don't take the time to know which is which, we lose control over our relationship with politics and become the unwitting instrument of others.

The point of this book is that we all inhabit a larger context that shapes our actions. Sometimes that context is difficult to change. But sometimes it is changeable. Our informational environments are one of those things. Once we recognize that we exist amid an omnipresent conspiracy to manipulate our identities, we can begin the hard work of fashioning our environment to shape and strengthen the identities we want to inhabit. And I have a suggestion of where to start.

Rediscovering a Politics of Place

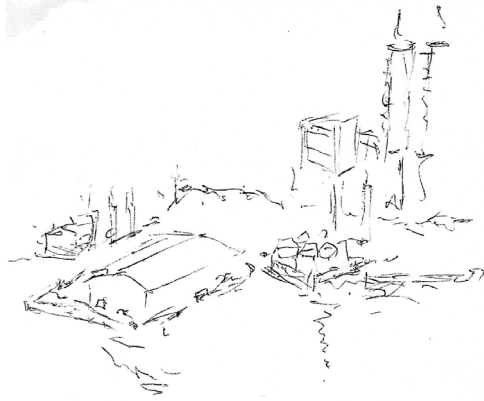
In March 2018, the *New York Times* published an article I think about often. Entitled

“The Man Who Knew Too Little,” it tracked the bizarre world Erik Hagerman had constructed for himself after the election. Depressed by the results, he decided he didn't want to know a thing about Trump. Nothing. “It was draconian and complete,” he said. “It's not like I wanted to just steer away from Trump or shift the conversation. It was like I was a vampire and any photon of Trump would turn me to dust.”²

And so he set off building his bubble. A former Nike executive, he now lives alone on a pig farm in southeastern Ohio. He listens to white noise tapes at the coffee shop. He scolds friends who mention politics. He never looks at the news or social media. He goes to stores early to avoid overhearing talk of current events. When he visited his brother in San Francisco, “strict arrangements had to be made—the Sunday newspaper kept out of sight, the TV switched off, his teenage niece and nephew under special instructions.”

Political life is full of reminders of the red-blue divide and which side of it you're on.

So far, so nuts. But then, at the end, the story changed. Amid his withdrawal, he had focused his time on “a master project, one that he thinks about obsessively, that he believes can serve as his contribution to American society.” He had purchased 45 acres of land that used to sit atop a strip mine. The land became “his life's work.” He is restoring it, protecting it,



turning it into something his community can enjoy. Hagerman, it turns out, hadn't disengaged from civic life. He had simply disengaged from national politics to focus on local change. And he had constructed an informational ecosystem to support that choice. Perhaps he went too far in that project—way, way too far—but most of us are not going far enough.

I saw the article because the internet had erupted in outrage over it. “The *New York Times* managed to find the ultimate beacon of white privilege—and, arguably, the most insufferable person in the world,” read a representative tweet.³ Who did Hagerman think he was? This rich White guy who wasn't going to get deported, who wouldn't be jailed, who probably wouldn't suffer at all under the Trump administration. Who was he to tune out the news the second it made him feel sad?

But then, who did we think we were? Were those of us sending angry missives into the ether really doing more than this guy who was restoring land to gift back to his neighbors?

My point is not that we should all go informationally Galt. But I'll be blunt here in a way

that cuts against my professional interests: we give too much attention to national politics, which we can do very little to change, and too little attention to state and local politics, where our voices can matter much more. The time spent spraying outrage over Trump's latest tweet—which is, to be clear, what he wants you to do; the point is to suck up all the media oxygen so he retains control of the conversation—is better spent checking in with what's happening in your own neighborhood.

“There are over five hundred thousand elected officials in the United States, only 537 of whom serve at the federal level,” writes Daniel Hopkins in *The Increasingly United States*.⁴ The 537 federal officials are the ones we have the least power to influence, if only because they have, on average, the most constituents. But we often don't know the names of the officials nearest to us, even though they'd be glad to meet for coffee.

There's a real reward
from rooting more of
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in the places we live.

This isn't because we're lazy, bad people. It's because media has nationalized, and there's been a particular reaping at the state and local level. I don't have an answer for that—revitalizing state and local journalism is a book unto itself—save to counsel effort. It's possible to make local and in-state news sources a bigger

part of your media diet and thus make your local political identity more powerful. It's just a lift, particularly when those stories aren't being pushed at you by friends on social media or covered by the national publications you love.

But there's a real reward from rooting more of our political identities in the places we live. First, we tend to live among people more like us, so the politics is less polarized. Second, the questions are often more tangible and less symbolic, so the discussion is often more constructive and less hostile. Third, we can have a lot more impact on state and local politics than on national politics, and it feels empowering to make a difference. And fourth, even if your heart lies in national politics—I'm a journalist who covers national politics, I get it—being involved in state and local politics will make you much more effective, both because it's valuable experience and because local officials eventually become federal officials, and they keep in touch with the people they've known along the way. When the next presidential campaign rolls around, the people they're going to want most as volunteers are the folks who already know how to organize in their communities.

Again, I'm not counseling you to abandon national politics. But audit your informational diet and ask what percentage of political stories you read are national versus state or local. Watch yourself for a week and reflect on how much of your political emotion and energy attach to the national stories. If that mix is overwhelmingly tilted toward the national scene, consider tilting it back.

I'll be honest: even writing these suggestions for solutions makes me a little queasy.

I began the book talking about midcentury political scientists desperate for more polarized parties. American politics is complex and unpredictable, and sometimes plans that are heralded as overdue solutions in one age become the defining problems of the next.

But then, that's the point, isn't it? There isn't an end state to American politics. The search for a static answer will always be folly. There is no one best way for the system to work. There is only the best we can do right now. And, if we do a good enough job at it, we will see today's successes ossify into tomorrow's frustrations. What works in one era fails in the next. That's okay. The point is to get to that next era with the most progress and the least violence.

I get asked often whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic about American politics. I think I'm an optimist, but that's because I try to hold to realism about our past. For all our problems, we have been a worse and uglier country at almost every other point in our history.

You do not need to go back to the country's early years—when new arrivals from Europe



drove out and murdered indigenous peoples, brought over millions of enslaved Africans, and wrote laws making women second-class citizens—to see it. Just a few decades ago, political assassinations were routine. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was murdered on the streets of Dallas. In 1965, Malcolm X was shot to death in a crowded New York City ballroom. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, as was Robert F. Kennedy. In 1975, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, standing about arm’s length from President Gerald Ford, aimed her gun and fired; the bullet failed to discharge. Harvey Milk, the pioneering gay San Francisco city supervisor, was killed in 1978. President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981; the bullet shattered a rib and punctured a lung.

For much of the 20th century, the right to vote was, for African Americans, no right at all. Lynchings were common. Freedom Riders were brutally beaten across the American South. Police had to escort young African American children into schools as jeering crowds shouted racial epithets and threatened to attack.

Violence broke out at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Urban riots ripped across the country. Crime was rising. The United States launched an illegal, secret bombing campaign in Cambodia. National Guard members fired on and killed student protesters at Kent State. Richard Nixon rode a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement into the White House, launched an espionage campaign against his

political opponents, provoked a constitutional crisis, and became the first American president driven to resign from office by impeachment proceedings.

This is not a counterintuitive take on American history, by the way. Among experts, it is closer to the consensus. The Varieties of Democracy Project, which has been surveying experts on the state of global democracies since 1900, gave the US political system a 48 on a 1 to 100 scale in 1945 and a 59 in 1965. It was only after the Civil Rights Movement that America began scoring in the 70s and 80s, marking it as a largely successful democracy.⁵

The era that we often hold up as the golden age of American democracy was far less democratic, far less liberal, far less decent, than today. Trump’s most intemperate outbursts, his most offensive musings, pale before opinions that were mainstream in recent history. And the institutions of American politics today are a vast improvement on the regimes that ruled well within living memory. If we can do a bit better tomorrow, we will be doing much, much better than we have ever done before.

Ezra Klein is an American journalist, political analyst, New York Times columnist, and the host of The Ezra Klein Show podcast. This excerpt is from WHY WE’RE POLARIZED by Ezra Klein. Copyright © 2020 by Ezra Klein. Reprinted with the permission of Avid Reader Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.

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Our Founding Ideals of Liberty and Equality Were False When They Were Written. Black Americans Fought to Make Them True. Without This Struggle, America Would Have No Democracy at All

by Nikole Hannah-Jones

As much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance and visions for equality. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but black people did.

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Miss., where black people bent over cotton from can't-see-in-the-morning to can't-see-at-night, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad's youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its near-majority black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad's home county lynched more black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, often for such "crimes" as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping

into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union. My dad's mother, like all the black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people's houses. So in the 1940s, she packed up her few

My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag.

belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of black Southerners fleeing North. She got off the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line.

Grandmama, as we called her, found a house in a segregated black neighborhood on the city's east side and then found the work that was considered black women's work no matter where black women lived—cleaning white people's houses. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age 17, he signed up for the Army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American.

The Army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambition stunted. He would be discharged under murky circumstances and then labor in a series

of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the black men and women in my family, he believed in hard work, but like all the black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn't understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our





people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South—at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island "slave trader." Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the

vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776, proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all.

The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a black man who himself was not free. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new nation in which his own people would not enjoy the liberties laid out in the Declaration

for another century. In every war this nation has waged since that first one, black Americans have fought—today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military.

My father, one of those many black Americans who answered the call, knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie.

is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true “founding fathers.” And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master's beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half brother of Jefferson's wife, born to Martha Jefferson's father and a woman he

owned. It was common for white enslavers to keep their half-black children in slavery. Jefferson had chosen Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people that worked on the forced-labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every com-

When it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word.

fort as he drafted the text making the case for a new democratic republic based on the individual rights of men.

At the time, one-fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status onto their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow white colonists knew that black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their

precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such. As the abolitionist William Goodell wrote in 1853, "If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences."

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised "Negroes for Sale." Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them.

Yet in making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that they were the slaves—to Britain. For this duplicity, they faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer and Tory opposed to American independence, quipped, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By

1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just 33, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue. It is not incidental that 10 of this nation's first 12 presidents were enslavers, and some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.

Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he tried to argue that it wasn't the colonists' fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery, and in the end, they struck the passage.

There is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence. Similarly, 11 years later, when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected



slavery without ever using the word. In the texts in which they were making the case for freedom to the world, they did not want to explicitly enshrine their hypocrisy, so they sought to hide it. The Constitution contains 84 clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Waldstreicher has written, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the “property” of those who enslaved black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of 20 years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge. Like many others, the writer and abolitionist Samuel Byron called out the deceit, saying of the Constitution, “The words are dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used, [and] are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations.”

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system. This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but by racist science and literature, maintained that black people were subhuman, a belief that allowed white Americans to live with their betrayal. By the early 1800s, according to the legal historians Leland B. Ware, Robert J. Cottrol and Raymond T. Diamond, white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of black inferiority." While liberty was the inalienable right of the people who would be considered white, enslavement and subjugation became the natural station of people who had any discernible drop of "black" blood.

The Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, ruling that black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race. This made them



inferior to white people and, therefore, incompatible with American democracy. Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in the "We the People" was not a lie.

On Aug. 14, 1862, a mere five years after the nation's highest courts declared that no black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln called a group of five esteemed free black men to the White House for a meeting. It was one of the few times that black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests.

The Civil War had been raging for more than a year, and black abolitionists, who had been increasingly pressuring Lincoln to end slavery, must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride.

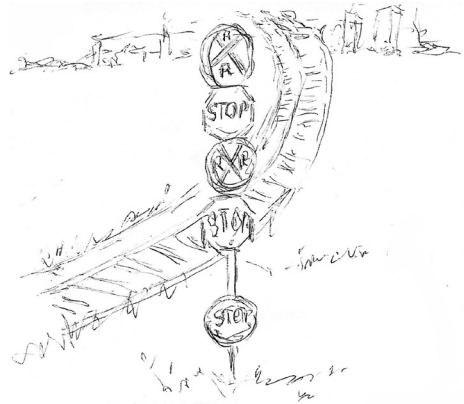
The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was contemplating whether to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf, and Lincoln, unable to draw enough new white volunteers for the war, was forced to reconsider his opposition to allowing black Americans to fight for their own liberation. The president was weighing a

proclamation that threatened to emancipate all enslaved people in the states that had seceded from the Union if the states did not end the rebellion. The proclamation would also allow the formerly enslaved to join the Union army and fight against their former “masters.” But Lincoln worried about what the consequences of this radical step would be. Like many white Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed black equality. He believed that free black people were a “troublesome presence” incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people. “Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?” he had said four years earlier. “My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.”

That August day, as the men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who eight days before had been given the title of a newly created position called the commissioner of emigration. This was to be his first assignment. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln got right to it. He informed his guests that he had gotten Congress to appropriate funds to ship black people, once freed, to another country.

“Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration,” Lincoln told them. “You and we are different races. . . . Your race suffer very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side.”

You can imagine the heavy silence in that room, as the weight of what the president said



momentarily stole the breath of these five black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores, before Lincoln’s family, long before most of the white people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had not entered the war to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off, yet black men had signed up to fight. Enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, which we like to call plantations, trying to join the effort, serving as spies, sabotaging confederates, taking up arms for his cause as well as their own. And now Lincoln was blaming them for the war. “Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other . . . without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence,” the president told them. “It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”

As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation’s chairman, informed the president, perhaps curtly, that they would consult on his proposition. “Take your full time,” Lincoln said. “No hurry at all.”



Nearly three years after that White House meeting, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By summer, the Civil War was over, and four million black Americans were suddenly free. Contrary to Lincoln's view, most were not inclined to leave, agreeing with the sentiment of a resolution against black colonization put forward at a convention of black leaders in New York some decades before: "This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers. . . . Here we were born, and here we will die."

That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln's offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation's founding ideals. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries." Black Americans had long called for universal equality and believed, as the abolitionist Martin Delany said, "that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face

of the earth." Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors as Lincoln and so many other white Americans feared. They did the opposite. During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. With federal troops tempering widespread white violence, black Southerners started branches of the Equal Rights League—one of the nation's first human rights organizations—to fight discrimination and organize voters; they headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats that their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with black Americans elected to local, state and federal offices. Some 16 black men served in Congress—including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first black man elected to the Senate. (Demonstrating just how brief this period would be, Revels, along with Blanche Bruce, would go from being the first black man elected to the last for nearly a hundred years, until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts took office in 1967.) More than 600 black men served in Southern state legislatures and hundreds more in local positions.

These black officials joined with white Republicans, some of whom came down from the North, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodation and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school. Public education

effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education. So black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools—not just for their own children but for white children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, black and white, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts. Just five years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution. In some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, small numbers of black and white children, briefly, attended schools together.

Led by black activists and a Republican Party pushed left by the blatant recalcitrance of white Southerners, the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights this nation would ever see. In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act, the nation's first such law and one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed. It codified black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts and seek redress from courts. In 1868, Congress

ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. The 14th Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection under the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the 14th Amendment in their fights for equality (including the recent successful arguments before the Supreme Court on behalf of same-sex marriage). Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship—the right to vote—to all men regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not.

But it would not last.



Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce white resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-

As the egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings.

scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this unrest, the federal government decided that black people were the cause of the problem and that for unity's sake, it would leave the white South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of black life was so severe

that this period between the 1880s and the 1920 and '30s became known as the Great Nadir, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a quasi slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, "It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes."

Georgia pines flew past the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Isaac Woodard home to Winnsboro, S.C. After serving four years in the Army in World War II, where Woodard had earned a battle star, he was given an honorable discharge earlier that day at Camp Gordon and was headed home to meet his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard got into a brief argument with the white driver after asking if he could use the restroom. About half an hour later, the driver stopped again and told Woodard to get off the bus. Crisp in his uniform, Woodard stepped from the stairs and saw the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, one of the officers struck him in his head with a billy club, beating him so badly that he fell unconscious. The blows to Woodard's head were so severe that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 4½ hours after his military discharge. At 26, Woodard would never see again.

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of sys-

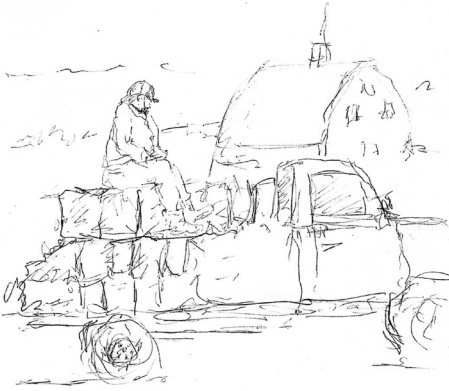
temic violence deployed against black Americans after Reconstruction, in both the North and the South. As the egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings. White America dealt with this inconvenience by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded black people almost entirely from mainstream American life—a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.

Despite the guarantees of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court and no federal will to vindicate black rights, starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying black people political power, social equality and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to keep black people from voting and created all-white primaries for elections. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a white person. South Carolina prohibited white and black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for black and white drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing black people from moving onto a block more than half white and white people from moving onto a block more than half black.



Georgia made it illegal for black and white people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery. Alabama barred black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. Black people were expected to jump off the sidewalk to let white people pass and call all white people by an honorific, though they received none no matter how old they were. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-black schools, operated whites-only public pools and held white and “colored” days at the country fair, and white businesses regularly denied black people service, placing “Whites Only” signs in their windows. States like California joined Southern states in barring black people from marrying white people, while local school boards in Illinois and New Jersey mandated segregated schools for black and white children.

This caste system was maintained through wanton racial terrorism. And black veterans like Woodard, especially those with the audacity to wear their uniform, had since the Civil War



been the target of a particular violence. This intensified during the two world wars because white people understood that once black men had gone abroad and experienced life outside the suffocating racial oppression of America, they were unlikely to quietly return to their subjugation at home. As Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said on the Senate floor during World War I, black servicemen returning to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” Giving a black man “military airs” and sending him to defend the flag would bring him “to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.” Many white Americans saw black men in the uniforms of America’s armed services not as patriotic but as exhibiting a dangerous pride. Hundreds of black veterans were beaten, maimed, shot and lynched. We like to call those who lived during World War II the Greatest Generation, but that allows us to ignore the fact that many of this generation fought for democracy abroad while brutally suppressing democracy for millions of American citizens. During the height of racial terror in this

country, black Americans were not merely killed but castrated, burned alive and dismembered with their body parts displayed in storefronts. This violence was meant to terrify and control black people, but perhaps just as important, it served as a psychological balm for white supremacy: You would not treat human beings this way. The extremity of the violence was a symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve white Americans of their country’s original sin. To answer the question of how they could prize liberty abroad while simultaneously denying liberty to an entire race back home, white Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation’s founding.

This ideology—that black people belonged to an inferior, subhuman race—did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs white people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire justification for how this nation allowed slavery would collapse. Free black people posed a danger to the country’s idea of itself as exceptional; we held up the mirror in which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past.

Just as white Americans feared, World War II ignited what became black Americans’ second sustained effort to make democracy real. As the editorial board of the black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, “We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who will enslave us.” Woodard’s blind-

ing is largely seen as one of the catalysts for the decades-long rebellion we have come to call the civil rights movement. But it is useful to pause and remember that this was the second mass movement for black civil rights, the first being Reconstruction. As the centennial of slavery's end neared, black people were still seeking the

The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle.

rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War: the right to be treated equally by public institutions, which was guaranteed in 1866 with the Civil Rights Act; the right to be treated as full citizens before the law, which was guaranteed in 1868 by the 14th Amendment; and the right to vote, which was guaranteed in 1870 by the 15th Amendment. In response to black demands for these rights, white Americans strung them from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.

For the most part, black Americans fought back alone. Yet we never fought only for ourselves. The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for

every other modern rights struggle. This nation's white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution that excluded women, Native Americans and black people, and did not provide the vote or equality for most Americans. But the laws born out of black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion and ability. It was the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which upended the racist immigration quota system intended to keep this country white. Because of black Americans, black and brown immigrants from across the globe are able to come to the United States and live in a country in which legal discrimination is no longer allowed. It is a truly American irony that some Asian-Americans, among the groups able to immigrate to the United States because of the black civil rights struggle, are now suing universities to end programs designed to help the descendants of the enslaved.

No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it. And to this day,





black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good. We are the most likely to support programs like universal health care and a higher minimum wage, and to oppose programs that harm the most vulnerable. For instance, black Americans suffer the most from violent crime, yet we are the most opposed to capital punishment. Our unemployment rate is nearly twice that of white Americans, yet we are still the most likely of all groups to say this nation should take in refugees.

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but black people did. As one scholar, Joe R. Feagin, put it, “Enslaved African-Americans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced.” For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

Just a few months earlier, they had families, and farms, and lives and dreams. They were free. They had names, of course, but their enslavers did not bother to record them. They had been made black by those people who believed that they were white, and where they were heading, black equaled “slave,” and slavery in America required turning human beings into property by stripping them of every element that made them individuals. This process was called seasoning, in which people stolen from western and central Africa were forced, often through torture, to stop speaking their native tongues and practicing their native religions.

But as the sociologist Glenn Bracey wrote, “Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves.” For as much as white people tried to pretend, black people were not chattel. And so the process of seasoning, instead

of erasing identity, served an opposite purpose: In the void, we forged a new culture all our own.

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated in order to communicate both with Africans speaking various dialects and the

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance.

English-speaking people who enslaved them. Our style of dress, the extra flair, stems back to the desires of enslaved people—shorn of all individuality—to exert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear their hat in a jaunty manner or knot their head scarves intricately. Today's avant-garde nature of black hairstyles and fashion displays a vibrant reflection of enslaved people's determination to feel fully human through self-expression. The improvisational quality of black art and music comes from a culture that because of constant disruption could not cling to convention. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names belong to the white people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of

self-determination. When the world listens to quintessential American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi Delta, we birthed jazz and blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where white Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echoes Africa but is not African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, "mainstream" society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own. As Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, "They'll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed—I, too, am America."



For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the “Negro problem.” They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free.

At 43, I am part of the first generation of black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally “free” for just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution? When I was a child—I must have been in fifth or sixth grade—a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation’s flag. As she turned to write

the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no “African” flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher’s desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people’s ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.

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High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out

by Amanda Ripley

High conflict is the kind that crackled across the country in recent years. It can start small, but it rapidly becomes self-perpetuating and all-consuming. There is an us and a them, and everything becomes very clear, too clear.

A dozen liberal, Jewish New Yorkers traveled to rural Michigan to stay in the homes of a dozen conservative corrections officers, whom they'd never met, to try to understand each other.

It sounds like the opening to a joke, and not a very good one. But for three days, the Michigan conservatives hosted the liberal New Yorkers, driving them in their pickup trucks to a firing range and a prison museum, sitting down for long, hard conversations, asking and answering many questions. Then, a couple months later, the conservatives came to stay with the liberal New Yorkers, attending services at their Upper West Side synagogue wearing borrowed yarmulkes and taking walks in Central Park while arguing about immigration, gay marriage and, of course, Donald Trump.

It was a strange and bewildering exchange to witness, quite unlike the gladiator showdowns we've seen on cable TV, in the White House, and in the streets of America. How did this happen? How, at a time when Americans are more politically segregated than at any period in memory, living in different realities altogether, did these people wind up in each other's kitchens?

I've spent the past four years following people who understand conflict intimately. One thing I've learned is that there are two categories of intense human conflict. *High conflict* is the kind that crackled across the country in recent years. It can start small, but it rapidly becomes self-perpetuating and all-consuming. There is an *us* and a *them*, and everything becomes very clear, too clear. Certain conditions predictably

lead to high conflict—including oversimplified, binary choices and buried grievances that go unaddressed.

In this state, the brain behaves differently. We feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side. When we encounter *them*, in person or on Facebook, we might feel a tightening in our chest, a dread mixed with rage, as we listen to whatever insane, misguided, dangerous thing the other side says.

But there is another kind of conflict—one that is catalytic. *Good conflict* can be stressful and heated, but it doesn't collapse into caricature. It sounds like a fantasy, I know. I was skeptical, too. But I've now seen enough good conflict—in politics, family feuds and even gang rivalries—to know that it's a real thing. There's nothing squishy about it. Good conflict is not about surrender or unity. It's about walking into the fire, not walking away.

That's how those conservatives and liberals ended up in each other's homes in the spring of 2018. They were leaning into good conflict.



But there's a catch: good conflict doesn't occur by default. To understand how this happened means going back in time, when the New Yorkers nearly fell into a high conflict of their own making.

In 2012, B'nai Jeshurun, a prominent Upper West Side synagogue known to all as BJ, almost came undone, torn apart by political controversy. It started when BJ's left-leaning rabbis praised a United Nations vote upgrading Palestine's status, in an email to the congregation. This email set off a chain reaction, enraging many of the synagogue's 2,400 members, who recoiled at their rabbis' support for what they saw as a dangerous affront to Israel's security.

"It was like an earthquake: the hostility, the animosity," said BJ's senior rabbi, José Rolando Matalon. The backlash rippled across the city, landing on the front page of the *New York Times*. People withheld donations. Others left the synagogue forever.

The rabbis were stunned. "People whom I loved and respected and thought respected me were saying terrible things," Matalon said. Like most people who stumble into conflict within their own group, the rabbis apologized and tried to move on. But conflict like this doesn't go away. It just goes underground.

A year later, the rabbis signed onto a letter criticizing New York City's mayor for having pledged loyalty to a pro-Israel lobbying group. And just like that, the conflict roared to life again. Once again, the rabbis were publicly accused of disloyalty to Israel. More people left.

Rabbi Matalon felt attacked and betrayed. He'd lived and studied in Israel. The reason

he'd criticized certain Israeli policies was because he cared so much about Israel. And now he was being called "anti-Israel"? It was mind-boggling.

It had all the makings of a potential high conflict: there was a powerful, reductionist binary, for Israel and against, fueled by an unexplored understory—the thing the conflict was really about, which no one was mentioning.

When people get rejected or ostracized by their own group, they usually withdraw and then become depressed or enraged. For the brain, this kind of "social pain" operates a lot like physical pain (except it's even easier to relive in our own minds), according to research by Purdue University's Kipling Williams. Social pain can be unbearable.

In this case, Matalon considered his options: he could quit and find a new synagogue that aligned with his views; he could carry on fighting with his congregants; or he could keep his mouth shut about taboo topics, which is what most people do. (Almost half of American rabbis said they'd refrained from voicing their views on Israel, according to a 2013 survey.) But none of those three options felt right.

Instead, Matalon decided to lean into the conflict, in a different way—a fourth path, less traveled. To help, the rabbis brought in mediators who had worked with Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Surely BJ's problems would be simpler, right? They decided to excavate the understory of the conflict—to figure out what it was *really* about—which required asking different questions and truly listening.

Melissa Weintraub, a rabbi and the cofounder of the dialogue organization Resetting the Table, sensed the tension on her first visit to the synagogue. "People were sitting with assumptions

about each other, and were no longer speaking to each other," she told me. "It felt like a kind of microcosm for polarization."

In any intense conflict, one of the most powerful disruptive strategies can sound deceptively basic. It's to listen, with genuine curiosity. It rarely happens in real life—because almost no

In any intense conflict, one of the most powerful disruptive strategies can sound deceptively basic. It's to listen, with genuine curiosity.

one knows how to do it. We jump to conclusions. We think we understand when we don't. We tee up our next point, before the other person has finished talking. On average, doctors interrupt patients after only eleven seconds of listening to them explain what ails them.

There are proven ways to listen, and BJ did almost all of them. First, Weintraub surveyed 750 of BJ's members and discovered that nearly half kept their true feelings about Israel to themselves to avoid tension. That was a loss, she knew from experience, preventing people from being challenged and coming out stronger. And it explained why the rabbis were so shocked by their congregants' reactions—and vice versa. They'd long suppressed the conflict, which just made it harden, underground.

Next, the mediators did 50 in-depth interviews, listening even more deeply, getting past

the talking points. Then the congregants listened to each other. For a year, BJ ran 25 different conflict encounters. There were structured workshops, intensive staff trainings, in-depth sessions with the rabbis and the board. The goal was to understand—not to agree (a huge and underappreciated difference). In groups of forty, BJ's congregants haltingly shared personal stories about their connections to Israel, about feeling torn between their sense of justice and their sense of duty.

When people feel heard, researchers Guy Itzhakov and Avraham Kluger have found, they open up to new ideas. They listen. They say less extreme, more interesting things. "I was surprised by how broad the range of thoughts and feelings about Israel are in our community," one congregant said. "I became a little less sure of my routine position," said another.

"There were people whose views I disagreed with pretty profoundly... but when I heard their life stories, I could have some understanding."

In experiments, Palestinians who feel heard by Israelis during brief, online encounters, have more positive attitudes toward Israelis afterward, according to research by Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe. This pattern holds true across many contexts, from offices to divorce courts: workers who feel heard perform better and

like their bosses more. Patients who feel heard are more likely to follow their doctor's orders. Couples who feel understood still have conflict, but it doesn't degrade their relationship satisfaction, psychologists Amie Gordon and Serena Chen found in a series of experiments.

Over time, something shifted. The congregation began to glimpse the under-story—to see that the Israel conflict wasn't just about Israel. "Conflict is a window into something underneath, like an iceberg," says Kyle Dietrich, who leads the Peacebuilding and Transforming Extremism practice at Equal Access International. "Underneath, there are values, beliefs and historical legacies."

The under-story in this case was about loyalty, justice, and fears for the future. One woman explained how, since so many other relatives had been killed in the Holocaust, she'd been raised to believe that any criticism of Israel was sacrilegious. "There were people whose views I disagreed with pretty profoundly," said Irv Rosenthal, a congregant, "but when I heard their life stories, I could have some understanding."

One surprise was that most people wanted the same end goal. They wanted Israel to be stable and secure and for the Palestinians to have independence and dignity. What they disagreed about—profoundly—was how to get there. The other revelation was that there were not just two camps. There rarely are. Some people took extreme positions but most had ambivalent feelings. Their opinions differed from one day to the next, depending on how a question got asked. That's because there was no easy answer.

Eventually, they got to a place where they could express their own views and “tolerate the discomfort of someone else’s opinion,” as Matalon put it. They could hold the tension—in good conflict. It felt exhilarating, but also new, in an unsettling way. What would happen, they wondered, the next time controversy erupted?

We think of conflict as bad, but what I’ve learned is that it can be better than no conflict at all. We need more good conflict in America, to defend ourselves and to be challenged. It’s the only way to get to lasting solutions, the kind that don’t get reversed with each new election or lawsuit. But it’s so easy to slip into high conflict, given the right conditions.

One solution, then, is to build guardrails in our towns, our houses of worship, our families and schools, the kind that lead us into worthwhile conflict but protect us high. There are several ways to do this, but one is to do what BJ did: to develop rituals and routines to incite curiosity *in* disagreement, not in spite of it.

More than anything else, it’s about changing how we think about conflict. “The biggest thing I do when I train people,” says Dietrich, who has worked in Nigeria, the Philippines, and Haiti, “is to help them get comfortable with the mindset that conflict is a creative force

for change—a healthy, important part of life that is fundamentally mismanaged.”

One year after BJ’s experiment ended, the next controversy flared up—this time over whether to perform interfaith marriages. Once again, the situation felt volatile. There were two camps forming. So BJ brought the mediators

Conflict is a creative force for change.

back, and for one year, everyone leaned into the conflict again.

This time, it felt different. Less like a battle, more like an inquiry. The rabbis ultimately decided to allow interfaith marriages under certain conditions. No one left the congregation, not even those who thought the rabbis were dead wrong. The conflict strengthened the community, rather than splintering it.

The greatest test came in 2016. Trump was elected president, shocking the synagogue’s members, most of whom had voted for Hillary Clinton. This felt unique from the other conflicts, out of reach: how could they lean into conflict with people they’d never met? “I didn’t know anybody I could have had a conversation with,” said Martha Ackelsberg, a BJ member. “They were only stereotypes to me.”

It took two years, but eventually, BJ found a way. Led by Simon Greer, an organizer with ties to BJ and the Michigan Corrections Organization, the union for the conservative corrections officers, agreed to a sort of domestic exchange program. This would not be a one-off dialogue



session or kumbaya workshop; it would be a home stay, with everyone fully immersed.

Both groups had grave doubts about this idea. The New Yorkers had trouble sleeping the night before their flights. In Michigan, the conservatives wondered if they were nuts to open their homes to a bunch of left-wing New Yorkers.

It was striking to hear both groups say they felt afraid. Both expected intolerance and maybe aggression. The New Yorkers seemed mostly afraid they'd run into a wall of ignorance or hate, or that just by going there, they would betray their ideals. They expected bigotry. The Michigan participants seemed mostly wary of being misunderstood, belittled, or mocked. "I was afraid they were going to judge me and my lifestyle," Mindi Vroman told me. They expected condescension. It would have been less nerve-racking for both groups to host actual foreigners, rather than fellow Americans.

I joined both trips, watching as the two groups shared stories, argued, and marveled at how much they'd misunderstood—and



how differently they still saw the world. It was notable how bad almost everyone was at anticipating each other's positions. The Michiganders kept assuming the New Yorkers wanted to take away their guns. The New Yorkers kept saying they didn't.

We can keep torching our own society, one institution at a time. Or we can do controlled burns, the kind we set on purpose, which still get plenty hot but leave us all a lot safer, in time.

There were flashes of agreement. "We both think Trump should not have Twitter," Vroman said, gesturing to herself and a rabbi. The New Yorkers agreed it was important for the country to have a border, to the surprise of the Michiganders.

And there were oceans of disagreement, like when Caleb Follett, from Michigan, tried to explain his support for Trump. "He's not really racist. He's not any of these things!" he said smiling at the absurdity of taking Trump so literally. "He's like a wrecking ball. He blows through political correctness." The New Yorkers did not smile, nor did they storm out of the room. They pushed back on each point.

Despite everything, in defiance of all the forces keeping them in conflict, these Americans

wanted to make sense of each other. “It’s hard to explain,” Vroman said, “but I’m really starting to like these people.” The conversations have not ended, even now. One week after the January 6th riot at the Capitol, the group held a Zoom reunion, which was somber and too short, but better than nothing at all. They held another one in March.

To thrive in the modern world, we need to understand how two dozen strangers from Michigan and New York were able to do something that members of Congress rarely accomplish—and how places like BJ intentionally conjure up good conflict, again and again. We need to bring that wisdom to our public squares: good-faith questions, generosity without capitulation.

Good conflict is the exception right now, it’s true. But that’s by design. Too many of our institutions, media platforms, and norms intentionally incite high conflict, instead of good. There are ways to redesign our world to do something else, if we choose. We can keep torching our own society, one institution at a time. Or we can do controlled burns, the kind we set on purpose, which still get plenty hot but leave us all a lot safer, in time.

Amanda Ripley is a New York Times best-selling author and an investigative journalist. This essay is from HIGH CONFLICT: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out by Amanda Ripley. Copyright © 2021 by Amanda Ripley. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.

Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality

by Danielle Allen

The Declaration of Independence makes a cogent philosophical case for political equality, a case that democratic citizens desperately need to understand.

The Declaration of Independence matters because it helps us see that we cannot have freedom *without* equality. It is out of an egalitarian commitment that a people grows—a people that is capable of protecting us all collectively, and each of us individually, from domination. If the Declaration can stake a claim to freedom, it is only because it is so clear-eyed about the fact that the people's strength resides in its equality.

The Declaration also conveys another lesson of paramount importance. It is this: language is one of the most potent resources each of us has for achieving our own political empowerment. The men who wrote the Declaration of Independence grasped the power of words. This reveals itself in the laborious processes by which they brought the Declaration, and their revolution, into being. It shows itself forcefully, of course, in the text's own eloquence.

When we think about how to achieve political equality, we have to attend to things like voting rights and the right to hold office. We have to foster economic opportunity and understand when excessive material inequality undermines broad democratic political participation. But we also have to cultivate the capacity of citizens to use language effectively enough to influence the choices we make together. The achievement of political equality requires, among other things, the empowerment of human beings as language-using creatures.

Equality and liberty—these are the summits

of human empowerment; they are the twinned foundations of democracy.

What fragile foundations they are!

Political philosophers have taught us to think that there is an inherent tension between liberty and equality, that we can pursue egalitarian commitments only at the expense of governmental intrusions that reduce liberty. What's more, in the last half century, our public discourse has focused on burnishing the concept of liberty, not equality. Consequently, we understand the former idea better. We have ideas ready-to-hand about the danger posed to personal freedom by excessive governmental regulation and the value that lies in autonomy and self-creation. What do we know any longer about equality?

Because we have accepted the view that there is a trade-off between equality and liberty, we think we have to choose. Lately, we have come, as a people, to choose liberty. Equality has always been the more frail twin, but it has now become particularly vulnerable. If one tracks presidential rhetoric from the last two decades, one will find that invocations of liberty significantly predominate over praise songs for equality. This is true for candidates and presidents from both parties.

Political philosophers have generated the view that equality and freedom are necessarily in tension with each other. As a public, we have swallowed this argument whole. We think we are required to choose between freedom and equality. Our choice in recent years has tipped toward freedom. Under the general influence of libertarianism, both parties have abandoned our Declaration; they have scorned our patrimony.

Such a choice is dangerous. If we abandon



equality, we lose the single bond that makes us a community, that makes us a people with the capacity to be free collectively and individually in the first place. I for one cannot bear to see the ideal of equality pass away before it has reached its full maturity. I hope I am not alone.

Night Teaching

For exactly a decade at the University of Chicago, I taught by day some of the nation's most elite students—many with tousled hair, often rolling from their dorm room beds right into class, one even showing up casually in his boxer shorts. By night I taught adult students who were without jobs or working two jobs or stuck in dead-end part-time jobs, while nearly always also juggling children's school schedules, undependable daycare arrangements, and a snarled city bus service. They should have seemed bone tired when they arrived at class, but they pulsed with energy.

I taught both groups the same books—by Plato, Sophocles, Toni Morrison. We met in the same rooms—sometimes wood-paneled neo-Gothic chambers that heightened for both

sets of students the sense of occasion for our conversations; sometimes in the nondescript, fluorescent-lit boxes of mid-20th-century collegiate campus architecture. Yet there, too, the conversation itself, by the end of our two hours, would inevitably generate the feeling

In both circles, we were making worlds: naming life's constitutive events, clarifying our principles, and testing against one another's wits our accounts of what was happening around us.

that something meaningful had transpired.

In afternoons our heated talk kept traffic noise at bay. On winter evenings our small but ever warmer circle of light rolled back the deepening dark. In both circles, we were making worlds: naming life's constitutive events, clarifying our principles, and testing against one another's wits our accounts of what was happening around us.

Yet if you had peeked in on us, what would you have seen? By and large all we were doing was reading texts closely, and discussing them.

We scrutinized single words. When Antigone, in Sophocles' play from fifth-century Athens, decides to stand up to King Creon and bury her brother, the chorus describes her as making laws for herself. She is autonomous, they say,

which is simply Greek for "making your own laws." This is the first instance of the word *autonomy* in written literature. What does it mean? Is Antigone's autonomy a good or a bad thing? My day students wanted to know what it meant for Antigone, as a woman, to stand up for herself in the male-dominated world of ancient Greece. My night students wanted to know whether Antigone's courage was something they could learn from to stand up for themselves, for instance, with their bosses.

We engaged such mysteries as what Shakespeare means in Sonnet 94 when he writes,

They that have the power to hurt and will do none

.....
They are the lords and owners of their faces.

How does restraint in the use of one's powers lead to the preservation of one's best self? Neither my day nor my night students felt they had much power, yet my day students had some instinctive sense that, to quote the sonnet again, they might well one day "inherit heaven's graces." My night students were more likely to have seen how power corrupts.

Then there was this mystery: Does Toni Morrison want us to believe in the ghosts in *Beloved*? Does she want us to believe there are ghosts in our own worlds? Or are they merely symbols? My night students' lives overran with death—from gunshots and overdoses and chronic disease and battery. They were indeed haunted. My day students, many of them well-heeled and all of them well-insured, were still mostly too young to understand what it means to carry the past around within you.

We listened to music. Again to another Shakespeare sonnet:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against
the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet
birds sang.*

Or Sarah Vaughan singing Rodgers and Hart's "It Never Entered My Mind."¹ Both groups recognized the musicality in sonnet as well as song, but they brought very different reference points to bear in explaining that musicality. The two groups of students were, I found, experts at different kinds of things.

From my students, I also had much to learn, as teachers often do. They showed me things that I had never seen in texts that I thought I knew so well, as when one of my day students pointed out that the biblical story of the warrior Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter is used by several of the most important political philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries to talk about the founding of nations. Jephthah had sworn to God that, if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice the first thing he saw upon his return home. And his daughter ran out to greet him.

My students also taught me things about learning that I had never known, as when one of my night students, after months of mediocre performances, turned in an essay that was light-years beyond what she had been able to do just a week earlier. From then on her performance remained consistently on that new and suddenly exalted level. To this day, I have no

idea what flipped the switch. Now I know that I cannot predict individual learning trajectories and that such inexplicable improvements are among the most fundamental mysteries of human life.

Yet the single most transformative experience I had came from teaching the Declaration of Independence not to my bright-eyed undergraduates but to my life-tested night students. I sometimes taught it as part of the US history unit, sometimes as part of the literature unit, and sometimes as part of the writing unit. Like the huge majority of Americans, few of my day students had ever read its 1,337 words from start to finish. None of my night students had.

I started teaching the text instrumentally. That is, I thought it would be useful. These students with jobs were busy. The Declaration is short. No one would complain about the reading. I could use it to teach history, writing, or political philosophy. And so I began.

My night students generally entered into the text thinking of it as something that did not belong to them. It represented instead institutions and power, everything that solidified a



world that had, as life had turned out, delivered them so much grief, so much to overcome.

As I worked my way through the text with those students, I realized for the first time in my own life that the Declaration makes a coherent philosophical argument. In particular, it makes an argument about political equality. If the pattern of books published on the Declaration is any indication, we have developed the habit of thinking about the Declaration mainly as an event, an episode in the dramatic unfolding of the American Revolution. But it makes a cogent philosophical case for political equality, a case that democratic citizens desperately need to understand.

What exactly is political equality?

The purpose of democracy is to empower individual citizens and give them sufficient

The best way to avoid being dominated is to help build the world in which one lives—to help, like an architect, determine its pattern and structure.

control over their lives to protect themselves from domination. In their ideal form, democracies empower each and all such that none can dominate any of the others, nor any one group, another group of citizens.

Political equality is not, however, merely freedom from domination. The best way to avoid being dominated is to help build the



world in which one lives—to help, like an architect, determine its pattern and structure. The point of political equality is not merely to secure spaces free from domination but also to engage all members of a community equally in the work of creating and constantly recreating that community. Political equality is equal political empowerment.

Ideally, if political equality exists, citizens become cocreators of their shared world. Freedom from domination and the opportunity for cocreation maximize the space available for individual and collective flourishing.

The assertion that the Declaration is about such a rich notion of political equality will provoke skepticism. Is it not about freedom? The text, after all, declares *independence*.

The Declaration starts and finishes, however, with equality. In the first sentence, the Continental Congress proclaims that the time has come for the people, which they now constitute, to take a “separate and equal” place among the powers of the earth. The last sentence of the Declaration finds the members of the

Continental Congress, as representatives of their newly designated “states,” “mutually” pledging to each other their lives, their property, and their sacred honor. They stake their claim to independence—to freedom—on the bedrock of an egalitarian commitment to one another. Only on the basis of a community built with their equality can they achieve their freedom.

And, of course, there is also the all-important second sentence, which begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

As my night students metabolized the philosophical argument and rhetorical art of the Declaration, many of them, and I along with them, experienced a personal metamorphosis. They found themselves suddenly as political beings, with a consciousness that had previously eluded them. They built a foundation from which to assess the state of their political world. They gained a vocabulary and rhetorical techniques for arguing about it.

In reading the document with me, my students in fact regifted to me a text that should have been mine all along. They gave me again the Declaration’s ideals—equality and freedom—and the power of its language. They restored to me my patrimony as well as their own, and ours.

Patrimony

Yes, I claim the Declaration as patrimony, as can anyone. Many people—for diverse reasons—will be skeptical of such a claim, especially when made by a mixed-race (but aren’t we all?) African American woman. Didn’t the Declaration defend the liberty and equality only of white men of property?

That the Declaration is my patrimony I nonetheless insist. Five generations back, not long before the Civil War, a forefather, Sidiphous, came to the United States from the Caribbean on the promise of work. The only trouble was, when he got to Florida, he found that the job was a slave’s. Soon thereafter came

That the Declaration is my patrimony I nonetheless insist.

the Civil War. Four generations of my family’s grave markers lie beneath trees trailing Spanish moss on the headland of an island just north of Jacksonville. Beside their stones lie those of two Black men from Florida who fought for the Union. Two generations later the fight continued. In the 1930s my Baptist preacher grandfather helped found the first NAACP chapter in his north Florida region. And two decades after that my father left Florida because, as he once told me, he was tired of constantly looking over his shoulder, always expecting at any moment to see a posse jump from behind a tree hollering, “Get that nigger.” Is that not wanting to be free?

From the WASP side of my family—my mother’s side—I inherited antiques and china, among other things. My elegant, inquisitive, 1980s supermom mom idolized her suffragette grandmother, and I always connected my mother’s name—Susan, also my middle name—to my great-grandmother’s political hero, Susan B. Anthony, campaigner for women’s right

to vote. When my great-grandmother found herself in the hospital having a baby on a day scheduled for a suffragettes' march, my great-grandfather, an attorney and social worker, went to the parade in her stead. So goes the family lore. That same suffragette great-grandfather served in a Progressive-era Michigan administration—his distinctive ambition being to reduce

I never read the Declaration slowly until I did so with my night students.

juvenile delinquency. During all my growing up, my mother had hanging in her bedroom, as she still does, a framed piece her great-aunt had embroidered that read, "Let me live in the house by the side of the road and be a friend to man."

Equality and freedom. Love of these ideas made my people.

Both sides of my family tied their ideals, these ideas—and their diverse pursuits of freedom, equality, and opportunity—to a love of education. Although I never met my father's mother, a nurse, I've heard from many people that she inspired a love of learning in all around her. The traces of a striking generosity live in the stories her children, my many aunts and uncles, tell about her. She dreamed that my father might go to Harvard. Given where he'd started in life, this was not possible, but he did leave the South for college and earned a doctorate in political science. My mother's side of the family included

women college graduates (the University of Minnesota, Wellesley, and the University of Michigan) beginning in the late 19th century. My mother, a librarian, followed the reading-obsessed path of her own mother, a high school English teacher.

We were, in short, a family steeped in books. We were also a family of *The Book*. In my childhood, at an early point, we twice read the Bible through from start to finish. Before we cleared the dinner table of its dirty dishes, still seated each in our nightly seat, in positions that would remain unchanged for nearly 18 years, my father, mother, brother, and I read a chapter a night, taking our turns verse to verse. It took a couple of years to complete the double cycle.

Slow reading. This too is my patrimony.

Over dinner, my parents often said to my brother and me that when we turned 18, we would be on our own. Independence was a real prospect from an early age. Our education, they said, would be our inheritance, and my parents invested everything they had there. We also talked a lot at dinner about freedom and equality. We even talked pretty frequently about the Declaration of Independence. Sometimes we argued over whether the phrase "all men" could refer to everyone or just white men of property. From that discussion flowed other debates, for instance, about the value of the gender-neutral language emerging in the 1980s.

To my embarrassment, however, I never read the Declaration slowly, the way I had been taught to read, until I did so with my night students. It's a cliché to say that we fell in love, but we did. Its words became necessary for us; they became *our* Declaration. Through reading

them slowly, we came into our inheritance: an understanding of freedom and equality, and of the value of finding the right words.

Loving Democracy

It's not enough, though, to say that I inherited—as if through genes—my love of freedom and equality. These things don't pass in DNA, so figuring out exactly how I came to love democracy demands some further thought.

To my great surprise, I think I may owe these passions to my grandmother, my mother's mother. She was the so-called black sheep in a family of genteel and gentle people, suspended from kindergarten, as one story goes, for treating other children badly or, as another tale tells it, in receipt of failing grades in elementary school for self-control. Very late in her life she was diagnosed with some form of bipolar disorder, was medicated, and became kind. I was glad to get to know her then and find something in her if not to love then at least to feel some affection for. For when I was small, she was not kind.

After my grandfather died, and my grandmother finally decided, I think out of necessity, to overlook the fact that her daughter, my mother, had married a Black man, she began to visit us. I was probably around eight. She insisted on bringing and making us drink Tang because this is, apparently, what the space shuttle astronauts survived on. I recall she generally smelled pretty rank—and she was full of criticisms, particularly of me. I drank too much water. I could be expected, for reasons unspecified, to become an alcoholic. The worst, however, was that I should shave off all my kinky hair and wear a wig; if I chose not to do that, I should expect to

get nothing from life. No love, no job, nothing. She tended to write letters with key words set out in uppercase: NOTHING.

My mother had an inspired way of dealing with this bullying. She changed the table's seating arrangement to seat my grandmother next to me, instead of across from me. Seated beside me, my grandmother could no longer see me. The thought was that perhaps, if she could not see me, she would not criticize me. This turned out to be true. Invisibility brought at least a lessening of affliction.

It was my younger brother, though, who rescued me finally, after a few years, from my torment. One day, in the wake of another tear storm occasioned by my grandmother's harsh words, he said—and he couldn't himself have been more than eight at the time—"It will only bother you if you let it; you just have to ignore it." In this instance, since my grandmother's words were truly only words and had no other material effects, he was right. I found a way to free myself by ignoring my grandmother; by refusing to take her seriously, I established for



myself a platform for agency equal to hers, even if she didn't know it. I could feel for myself how much stronger I was for knowing that my way of seeing the world was equal to hers and that my way, not hers, could be the basis for my life.

I cannot abide seeing someone bullied. Perhaps it is there—in that small but fundamental instinct—that my own driven commitment to egalitarian democracy was born. Even the most intimate relations bring to light how fundamental to human flourishing is equality.

This point, however, simply leads to another question. What seven-league boots can take us from personal to political? How and why does one leap from a concern—which surely we all have—for decency in human relations to a love of democracy? How does one come to understand that these things are connected? And how might this all happen in childhood? Because I did love democracy and, above all, equality before I left youth behind. Working with my night students brought me back to my origins.

My father certainly took up my political education from an early point. The summer I was seven he had me read *Ivanhoe* and—let's go ahead and rehabilitate another repudiated text—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But that can't explain my love of democracy. All I remember of *Ivanhoe* is dark forests; all I got out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the notion that good girls die young. From this I drew the lesson that it was best not to be too good.

I think it was a different story of slavery that moved me: the Hebrew Bible tale of Joseph, who was sold by his envious brothers into slavery in Egypt and there achieved a near equality with the Pharaoh. On the basis of his success and

having reconciled with his family, he brought them too to Egypt, but then Joseph died. Soon “there was a new king of Egypt that knew not Joseph.” Without the accidental protection of a bond between Joseph and the king, the Israelites were enslaved.

And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour:

And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour.

And the Pharaoh commanded that all their sons be killed on birth. I think this is the story that crystallized for me the notion that there is no freedom without political equality. It did not matter how rich, how successful, how powerful Joseph had been. He was still a servant. He could not protect his own. The desire to escape from abusive power was alive in me. Even in my own small circumstances, I had that—a little spit of flame. And somehow I wanted that release for all people. I could free myself



from my grandmother by ignoring her, but this was a far remove from what is necessary for escaping tyrannical power. I started banging my head then, I believe, against the question of how people might slip such bonds.

I worked on that question for years—in an undergraduate degree, two master’s degrees, and two PhDs as well as books I wrote on punishment, on citizenship, on rhetoric. I pursued it by teaching courses on Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; on Du Bois and Ralph Ellison, on Aeschylus, Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle. I sought out the solution through the hell of doing mail order courses about Homer’s *Hades* and Dante’s *Inferno* with my 10-years-imprisoned-only-to-be-murdered-soon-after baby cousin. But I didn’t get my answer until I read the Declaration of Independence with a group of adults struggling to survive, for whom nothing was given but who nonetheless believed in the possibility, the necessity, in fact, of their survival.

Animating the Declaration

After the first year of reading the Declaration with my night students, my teaching mission changed. I no longer wanted to use the text merely instrumentally to teach them about other topics. Now I wanted to teach them the Declaration itself for its own sake. I wanted my students to claim the text. They were so much in need of it. I wanted them to understand that democratic power belonged to them, too, that they had its sources inside themselves. I wanted to animate the Declaration, to bring it to life for them, and perhaps even bring them through it into a different kind of life—as citizens, as thinkers, as political deliberators and decision-

makers; I wanted them to own the Declaration of Independence. I want that for you, too, because the Declaration is also yours.

Our Declaration, then, tries to give that experience of taking possession of the ideal of equality to everyone who cares about democ-

I wanted them to understand that democratic power belonged to them, too, that they had its sources inside themselves.

racy, whether in the United States or in the world at large.

Reaching such an audience is a challenge in our contemporary world. Despite globalization, the globe is more than ever a tower of Babel, and even in the United States our culture is also fragmented. We are not all readers, and the reading habits of those of us who are diverge markedly. Bookstores display novels and self-help books to stoke Mother’s Day sales; they put out history and politics for Father’s Day. History buffs can tell you that George Washington wore clothes made out of North American products for his inauguration; they can tell you he always traveled with seven razors for reasons nobody knows. But other readers don’t know who George Washington, the first president of the United States, was. Nonetheless, wherever we may live, freedom and equality are necessary for effecting our safety and happiness.

I am trying—working against the forces of marketing strategies and our culture—to draw different circles of readers together: the sophisticate and the novice; the frequent and the occasional reader; the history buff and the self-help seeker; the lover of democracy whether

Are we not all democrats? Do we not all need, at some level, to understand what it means to be part of a democratic polity?

at home or abroad. For are we not all democrats? Do we not all need, at some level, to understand what it means to be part of a democratic polity? What concepts, what ideas, do we need to understand the part we play? It is these concepts that I am trying to resuscitate—to renew understanding where the ideas are familiar, to elucidate them for those readers to whom they arrive as new gifts.

The Declaration of Independence makes a coherent philosophical argument from start to finish. It is this: Equality has precedence over freedom; only on the basis of equality can freedom be securely achieved.

That the Declaration is centrally about freedom and equality is clear from two basic facts. The title—a declaration of *independence*—establishes that the text is about freedom. But the first sentence, the most memorable sentence, and the concluding sentence are all about equality. The most important question

to ask about the Declaration, then, is how it helps us understand the relationship between freedom and equality.

Political philosophers have generated the view that equality and freedom are necessarily in tension with each other. As a public, we have swallowed this argument whole. We think we are required to choose between freedom and equality. Our choice in recent years has tipped toward freedom. The vocabulary of presidential candidates routinely places far more emphasis on freedom than on equality. As I said at the start, such a choice is dangerous. If we abandon equality, we lose the single bond that makes us a community, that makes us a people with the capacity to be free collectively and individually in the first place.

What exactly does the Declaration have to say about equality? First of all, the text focuses on political equality. In the 20th century we came to understand political equality as meaning primarily formal civic rights: the rights to vote, serve on juries, and run for elected office. These political rights are, of course, fundamental, but civic rights are only a part of the story about political equality. The Declaration has much more to say.

As it moves from its opening salvo for divorce to its closing recommitment of the colonists to one another, the Declaration first sets its sights on achieving freedom from domination for the polity as a whole, and for individual citizens. It lays out egalitarian access to the instrument of government as crucial to the pursuit of happiness. There we find the familiar emphasis on civic rights. Then the Declaration moves on to argue for an egalitarian cultivation of collective intelligence as well as for an associational

egalitarianism that establishes norms and practices of genuine reciprocity as the baseline for decent interactions with one's fellow citizens. Finally, the Declaration shows us the egalitarianism of cocreation and co-ownership of a shared world, an expectation for inclusive participation that fosters in each citizen the self-understanding that she, too, he, too, helps to make, and is responsible for, this world in which we live together. That rich and expansive notion of political equality is the ground of independence, personal and political.

That the achievement of equality is the sole foundation on which we can build lasting and meaningful freedom is a fundamentally antilibertarian argument. Since libertarianism currently dominates our political imaginations, this first argument runs against the grain of our contemporary culture.

Importantly, the Declaration gives us a reason to believe its argument about human equality and the capacity of all of us to participate in political judgment. If the Declaration is right that all people are created equal—in the sense of all being participants in the project of political judgment—then all people *should* be able to read or listen to the Declaration, understand the work that it is doing, and carry on similar work on their own account, with no more help in unleashing their capacities than can be provided by the example of the Declaration itself. And this, in fact, seems to be true. The Declaration and its import are accessible to any reader or hearer of its words.

My second argument, conveyed through my expression of love for the Declaration, is that I endorse its egalitarian case. I judge it valid and worthy. It is in the hopes of conveying the

Declaration's egalitarian argument as clearly and succinctly as possible that I have written this book.

With my reading of the Declaration, then, I hope to have brought us into awareness of our own democratic powers. I hope to have inspired the conviction that their source is inside us, all of us. I hope I have made visible the democratic art of doing things with words. I hope, in sum, to have brought the Declaration to life and at the same time to have brought all of us together into a different kind of shared life—as citizens and thinkers, as political deliberators and decision-makers, as democratic writers and group artists. I hope that collectively we will reclaim this text as *ours*.

I also, however, understand the limits of words; I understand the entanglements of desire. When articulated in 1776, these words made only modest inroads against the desires of white Americans to dominate Americans of color, whether native or non-native. They made scant inroads against the desires of men



to maintain patriarchal social structures, or against the desires of communitarian monitors to regulate private intimacies.

Yet these words also supported the cultivation of solidarity among people committed to their principles, people who could see new ways of being in a world that more fully embodied these ideals. And in supporting the cultivation of solidarity, the text built roads to action that changed worlds. Hosts of abolitionists were, for instance, inspired by the Declaration. Members of the Indian Congress Party took it as a model when they decided to launch their own independence struggle against Britain in 1930.

In an important way, the Declaration itself acknowledges the complex entanglement of ideals with desire. Human beings, it argues, are masters enough of their own fate to *inch* their

way toward happiness—this is a supremely optimistic document. At the same time, though, it makes clear that the best we all can do is inch in that direction. Humans are long-suffering; evils are long suffered. The Declaration reins in its own optimism. On its own, it admits the halting, partial nature of human progress. This is another reason it is worth reading. The Declaration tells the truth about itself.

Danielle Allen is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University and the director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics. This essay is excerpted from Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality by Danielle Allen. Copyright © 2014 by Danielle Allen. With permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

Endnote

- ¹ I had hoped to provide you four lines from this song from the 1940 musical *Higher and Higher*, but the permissions charges were exorbitant.

A Few Thoughts on Democracy

by Sharon Davies

The Constitution gave voice to the fundamental idea of a democracy: that it is the people, an engaged public, who possess the power to create a constitution, and a government, and the means for governing themselves.

Sharon Davies made these remarks on April 12, 2022, during her first organization-wide meeting as president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation.

It is a pleasure to be able to be with the Dayton Days group for the first time. This is Day Eight as Kettering's new president and CEO for me. The learning curve is steep at the moment, but I am taking some comfort from the fact that Kettering staff who have been here for three years sometimes still describe themselves as "new," which I am interpreting to mean that I have some leeway.

I thought I would share some additional information about myself to convey why the work of the Kettering Foundation has such great meaning to me personally, as a citizen.

As we all know, democracy in the United States has evolved over the course of our nation's history. Indeed, at times, the claim that our system was a democratic one was more of an idea than a reality. An idea that all citizens would enjoy the equal right and opportunity to engage in the shaping of their communities and the equal right and opportunity to hold their representatives accountable to the public will. At the founding of our nation, the power to participate in acts of self-governance was narrowly cabined. Left without if you were a man, but unpropertied. If you were a woman. If you were a person of color. At the time of the nation's founding in 1776, and later the ratification of our Constitution in 1787, the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence and the beginning clause of the Constitution described what a democracy might look like if we lived up to the aspirations they set forth.

All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

If we ignore the express gender constraint in that sentence for the moment, the Declaration at least used the word *all*.

And from the Constitution:

We the People . . . secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

It was “the people,” our Constitution said, who secured those blessings for ourselves and our posterity. Thus, the Constitution gave voice in its beginning paragraph to the fundamental *idea* of democracy: that it is *the people*,

The words *we the people* suggested an inclusiveness to the concept of citizen that didn’t square with the reality of the day.

an engaged public, who possess the power to create a constitution, and a government, and the means for governing themselves. That is a proposition as we all know that sits at the center of the work of the Kettering Foundation.

Those words were a lot to live up to when they were written, and we didn’t live up to them



for a good part of our history because the words *we the people* suggested an inclusiveness to the concept of citizen that didn’t square with the reality of the day. Even so, we can say at least that our founding documents captured the *aspirations* of democracy and put us on a path *toward* it. To borrow a word from the nation’s first African American first lady, Michelle Obama, we were “becoming.”

For many American citizens, however (in fact, *most* citizens), the timeline for our nation moving through that process of becoming a democracy was slow and protracted. Those words were written in 1787, but it wasn’t until 1870, after a bloody civil war, that Congress passed the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, giving Black men the right to vote. Women citizens did not gain suffrage until 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, and many Black women (and men) were prevented from exercising that fundamental voting right of citizenship until decades later when Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The timeline of the US coming into the fullness of its democracy was slow.

I am mindful, of course, that at the Kettering Foundation the concept of citizen-centered democracy goes well beyond the simple act of

voting. But it is reasonable for us to pause to acknowledge that the act of voting for many American citizens for much of our nation's history was not simple at all, before we shift our focus to the much more robust conception of citizenship: an engaged citizenry that does not cede the authority to govern ourselves to our government, but rather retains that authority for ourselves. After all, the right to vote is the sine qua non of democratic citizenship, the without-which-not, and when that fundamental right is limited only to some, or when the exercise of it subjects a citizen to threats of violence or worse, it is fair to question the claim that the nation is a democracy. In such cases it might be more accurate to say that its democracy is becoming.

Many of us can situate ourselves and our families along this timeline of becoming a democracy. For example, my father was born to a Black mother in South Carolina in the 1930s. He would have been in his late 30s by the time the passage of the Voting Rights Act made it safe for him to exercise his right to vote in his home state. And the harsh realities of a childhood for a Black boy in the Jim Crow South impaired his full participation in our democracy in other ways as well, even after that act was passed. I learned early in my childhood that my father went only as far as the sixth grade. When I was young, I thought that was because he grew up in a very rural part of South Carolina and was needed on the farm. It was only later as an adult that I learned that he stopped at sixth grade because, at that time, sixth grade was the highest grade offered to Black children in his county. That reality had a direct impact on him for his entire life. He could read and

write, but with difficulty. I never saw him read a book for enjoyment. He struggled to pass the test that he had to pass when he decided to become a licensed electrician. He would not have made it easily through one of the Kettering Foundation's issue guides.

It is only within the last year that I learned that the school that my father attended was a Rosenwald school. Some of you know about the history of those schools because it involved one of the most impactful acts of philanthropy in the history of the United States. Many people don't know about them. The creation of the Rosenwald schools grew out of a friendship between Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee University, and Julius Rosenwald, the former CEO of Sears, Roebuck. Some of us with gray in our hair remember the Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogues in our households. Those catalogues were filled with beautiful images and descriptions of all kinds of items that people could buy. It was a mail-order business, and was wildly successful—yesterday's version of Amazon. Julius Rosenwald led the Sears, Roebuck and Company in Chicago and made a fortune. He became a generous





philanthropist. Among his greatest gifts was the building of the Rosenwald schools.

Yet it all started with two citizens engaged in a conversation.

Two men, one Black one White, from different regions of the country, and very different lived experiences, whose conversations about a topic that troubled them both—the lack of opportunity for Black citizens in the South—resulted in their decision to do something about it: to improve the conditions for Black children in the South by building them schools.

The only condition for Rosenwald's gift was that the Black (and he hoped White) communities where the schools were to be built would match his funding, because he wanted the communities to feel invested in the education that would happen in the schools. Here at the Kettering Foundation we might call it “community-engaged change.” Citizens in those communities accepted Rosenwald's challenge. Sometimes what those communities provided would be dollars, sometimes it would be in-kind contributions—gifts of land where the schools

were located, or materials, or the labor to build them. It was one of the greatest acts of citizen-led democracy in our nation's history. Before Julius Rosenwald was done, in collaboration with Black and White communities across the South, 4,798 schools were built, over 500 in South Carolina alone. One of them was built in the small farm town where my dad was growing up.

I can't know what my dad's life would have been like but for the sixth-grade education that the actions of Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the Black community that built that school (in that case, the White community declined to contribute). But I do know that all six of his children would receive college degrees, and five of the six earned advanced degrees. So the conversations and work of everyday citizens coming together to strengthen their communities, and thereby our democracy, is deeply personal to me. And that is why the opportunity to lead the Kettering Foundation is a personal and professional privilege of a lifetime.

Now, for a few thoughts about the road ahead.

Last week, I met with all of the Kettering staff, to begin my learning process about the work underway at the foundation and to look ahead. Leadership transitions are important moments of opportunity to take stock of the work we have done, consider the platform that we have created with that body of work, and talk about what it might position us to do in the future.

I noted to the staff on my first day that I have been thinking about a number of important anniversaries that are just ahead of us:

- the 70th anniversary of the landmark

decision *Brown v. Board of Education* two years from now in 2024;

- the 60th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the same year;
- the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, and

I think we can all agree that there is no more important moment for this work than right now.

- the 100th anniversary of the Kettering Foundation in 2027.

These are milestone moments that would invite us to ask ourselves questions about the reach of our work even in the absence of a leadership transition. And they can help contextualize our conversations about the reach of our work on citizen-led democracy in the days and weeks to come.

What does it take to make democracy work as it should? The Kettering Foundation has made this the unifying question and the center of its work. The foundation is known for its devotion to framing questions—engaging everyday citizens in the work of answering those questions, encouraging them to work across lines of difference and disagreement—all to enable public choice-making, community democracy. I think we can all agree that there is no more important moment for this work than right now, and I look forward to participating in it.

Sharon Davies is the president and chief executive officer of the Kettering Foundation. Davies' articles and other writings have been published in some of the nation's leading law journals, including the Duke Law Journal, the Southern California Law Review, the Columbia Law Review, the Michigan Law Review, and Law and Contemporary Problems. In 2010, Davies published Rising Road: A True Tale of Love, Race, and Religion in America with Oxford University Press.

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REVIEW FALL 2022