



DEMOCRACY AWAKENING

Notes on the
State of America

HEATHER COX

RICHARDSON

Author of the newsletter

LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN

DEMOCRACY AWAKENING

Notes on the State of America

Heather Cox Richardson

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*To the people who have joined me in exploring the complex relationship
between history, humanity, and modern politics—this book is yours as
much as it is mine.*

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd.

WALT WHITMAN
DEMOCRATIC VISTAS, 1871

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Foreword

America is at a crossroads.

A country that once stood as the global symbol of democracy has been teetering on the brink of authoritarianism.

How did this happen? Is the fall of democracy in the United States inevitable? And if not, how can we reclaim our democratic principles?

This crisis in American democracy crept up on many of us. For generations of Americans, grainy news footage from World War II showing row upon row of Nazi soldiers goose-stepping in military parades tricked us into thinking that the Adolf Hitlers of the world arrive at the head of giant armies. So long as we didn't see tanks in our streets, we imagined that democracy was secure. But in fact, Hitler's rise to absolute power began with his consolidation of political influence to win 36.8 percent of the vote in 1932, which he parlayed into a deal to become German chancellor. The absolute dictatorship came afterward.^[1]

Democracies die more often through the ballot box than at gunpoint.

But why would voters give away their power to autocrats who inevitably destroy their livelihoods and sometimes execute their neighbors?

In the aftermath of World War II, scholars invested a great deal of energy in trying to explain how, in the 1930s, ordinary Germans whose constitution was one of the most democratic in the world had been persuaded to stand behind a fascist government whose policies led to the destruction of cities, made millions homeless, and created such a shortage of food that Germans were eking by on less than fifteen hundred calories a day. That government also ultimately murdered six million Jews and millions more Slavs, Roma, sexual minorities, disabled individuals, and dissenters.^[2]

Social scientists noted that the economic and political instability in Germany after World War I was crucial for Hitler's rise. But it took writers, philosophers, and historians to explain how authoritarians like Hitler harnessed societal instability into their own service.

The key to the rise of authoritarians, they explained, is their use of language and false history.^[3]

Authoritarians rise when economic, social, political, or religious change makes members of a formerly powerful group feel as if they have been left behind. Their frustration makes them vulnerable to leaders who promise to make them dominant again. A strongman downplays the real conditions that have created their problems and tells them that the only reason they have been dispossessed is that enemies have cheated them of power.

Such leaders undermine existing power structures, and as they collapse, people previously apathetic about politics turn into activists, not necessarily expecting a better life, but seeing themselves as heroes reclaiming the country. Leaders don't try to persuade people to support real solutions, but instead reinforce their followers' fantasy self-image and organize them into a mass movement. Once people internalize their leader's propaganda, it doesn't matter when pieces of it are proven to be lies, because it has become central to their identity.

As a strongman becomes more and more destructive, followers' loyalty only increases. Having begun to treat their perceived enemies badly, they need to believe their victims deserve it. Turning against the leader who inspired such behavior would mean admitting they had been wrong and that they, not their enemies, are evil. This, they cannot do.

Having forged a dedicated following, a strongman warps history to galvanize his base into an authoritarian movement. He insists that his policies—which opponents loathe—simply follow established natural or religious rules his enemies have abandoned. Those rules portray society as based in hierarchies, rather than equality, and make the strongman's followers better than their opponents. Following those "traditional" rules creates a clear path for a nation and can only lead to a good outcome. Failing to follow them will lead to terrible consequences.

Those studying the rise of authoritarianism after World War II believed these patterns were universal. Yet scholars in the United States noted that

while countries around the world were falling to authoritarianism in the 1930s, the United States, sailing between the siren songs of fascism on the one side and communism on the other, had somehow avoided destruction.

This was no small thing. The U.S. was as rocked as any country by economic trouble and the collapse of authority it revealed and, in the 1930s, it had its own strong fascist movement with prominent spokespeople. Things had gone so far that in February 1939, in honor of President George Washington's birthday, Nazis held a rally at New York City's Madison Square Garden. More than twenty thousand people showed up for the "true Americanism" event, held on a stage that featured a huge portrait of Washington in his Continental Army uniform flanked by swastikas.^[4]

And yet, just two years later, Americans went to war against fascism. Within six years the United States was leading the defense of democracy around the world, never perfectly—indeed, often quite badly—but it had rejected authoritarianism in favor of the idea that all people are created equal.

Scholars studying the U.S. suggested that Americans were somehow different from those who had fallen to authoritarianism. They were too practical, too moderate, to embrace political extremes. They liked life in the middle.

It was a lovely thought, but it wasn't true.

America took a different course in the 1930s not because Americans were immune to authoritarianism, but because they rallied around the language of human self-determination embodied in the Declaration of Independence.

They chose to root the United States not in an imagined heroic past, but in the country's real history: the constant struggle of all Americans, from all races, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, to make the belief that we are all created equal and that we have a right to have a say in our democracy come true. People in the U.S. had never lost sight of the promise of democracy because marginalized people had kept it in the forefront of the national experience. From the very first days of the new nation, minorities and women had consistently, persistently, and bravely insisted on their right to equality before the law and to a say in their government.

In the 1930s their insistence translated into a defense of democracy around the world. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt clearly and repeatedly spelled out the difference between a society based on the idea that all people are equal and a society based on the idea that some people are better than others and have a right to rule.

Americans chose a free future by choosing a principled past. But they could have chosen differently.

In the 1930s the struggle between equality and inequality took shape as a fight between democracy and fascism. But while fascism was a newly articulated ideology in that era, the thinking on which it was based—that some people are better than others—had deep roots in the U.S. From the nation’s beginning, the Founders’ embrace of equality depended on keeping women, people of color, and Black Americans unequal.^[5]

That paradox had in it the potential for the rhetoric that authoritarians use, and in the past, those determined to undermine democracy have indeed gone down that road. Whenever it looked as if marginalized people might get an equal voice, designing political leaders told white men that their own rights were under attack. Soon, they warned, minorities and women would take over and push them aside.^[6]

Elite enslavers had done this in the 1850s and had come close to taking over the country. “We do not agree with the authors of the Declaration of Independence, that governments ‘derive their just powers from the consent of the governed,’ ” enslaver George Fitzhugh of Virginia wrote in 1857. “All governments must originate in force, and be continued by force.” There were eighteen thousand people in his county and only twelve hundred could vote, he said, “but we twelve hundred . . . never asked and never intend to ask the consent of the sixteen thousand eight hundred whom we govern.”^[7]

During the Civil War, the majority of Americans worked to defeat the enslavers’ new definition of the United States. Their victory on the battlefields made them think they had made sure that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

But the thinking behind the Confederacy—that people are inherently unequal and some should rule the rest—persisted.

That thinking has once again brought us to a crisis. In the 1950s, business, religious, and political leaders insisted that the federal government's defense of civil rights was an attempt to replace white men with minorities and women. To stay in control, politicians ramped up attacks on their perceived enemies and began to skew the machinery of government to favor their interests. Wealth surged upward.

In the years after 1980, a political minority took over Congress, the state legislatures, the courts, and the Electoral College, and by 2016 the Economist Intelligence Unit had downgraded the U.S. from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy." By 2021, warnings had become more dire. Freedom House, a nonprofit that charts the health of democracies internationally, "urgently" called for reforms after a decade in which "US democracy has declined significantly."^[8]

The election and then the presidency of Donald Trump hastened that decline. When the nation's rising oligarchy met a budding authoritarian, the Republican Party embraced the opportunity to abandon democracy with surprising ease. In the four years of Trump's presidency, his base began to look much like the one post-World War II scholars had identified: previously apathetic citizens turned into a movement based in heroic personal identity. Trump discarded the idea of equality before the law and scoffed at the notion that Americans had the right to choose their government. He and his followers embraced the false past of the Confederates and insisted they were simply trying to follow the nation's traditional principles. Eventually, they tried to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election to stay in power. And even after Trump had tried to undermine the principle of self-government on which the United States was founded, his followers stayed loyal.

Those justifying their embrace of authoritarianism as the future of government in the twenty-first century say that democracy is obsolete. Some argue that popular government responds too slowly to the rapid pace of the modern world and that strong countries need a leader who can make fast decisions without trying to create a consensus among the people.

Critics of liberal democracy say that its focus on individual rights undermines the traditional values that hold societies together, values like religion and ethnic or racial similarities. Religious extremists in the U.S.

have tried to tie their destruction of democracy into our history by insisting that the Founders believed that citizens must be virtuous and that religion alone can create virtue. By this line of thought, imposing religious values on our country is exactly what the Founders intended.

I don't buy it.

The concept that humans have the right to determine their own fate remains as true today as it was when the Founders put that statement into the Declaration of Independence, a statement so radical that even they did not understand its full implications. It is as true today as it was when FDR and the United States stood firm on it. With today's increasingly connected global world, that concept is even more important now than it was when our Founders declared that no one had an inherent right to rule over anyone else, that we are all created equal, and that we have a right to consent to our government.

This is a book about how a small group of people have tried to make us believe that our fundamental principles aren't true. They have made war on American democracy by using language that served their interests, then led us toward authoritarianism by creating a disaffected population and promising to re-create an imagined past where those people could feel important again. As they took control, they falsely claimed they were following the nation's true and natural laws.

This book is also the story of how democracy has persisted throughout our history despite the many attempts to undermine it. It is the story of the American people, especially those whom the powerful have tried to marginalize, who first backed the idea of equality and a government that defended it, and then, throughout history, have fought to expand that definition to create a government that can, once and for all, finally make it real.

Part 1

UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

CHAPTER 1

American Conservatism

Today's crisis began in the 1930s, when Republicans who detested the business regulation in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal began to flirt with the idea of making a formal alliance with two wings of the Democratic Party to stand against it. They turned to southern Democrats, who hated that New Deal programs were not overtly segregationist, and westerners who disliked the idea of the federal government protecting land and water. Those contemplating the alliance used the word *conservative* to signify their opposition to the New Deal. They insisted that a government that answered to the needs of ordinary Americans was a dangerous, radical experiment.

This was not an accurate description of conservatism: it was a political position. In the 1920s, Republicans had taken control of both Congress and the White House from Progressive Era Democrats. They turned the government over to businessmen, believing that they would reinvest their money as only they knew best, providing jobs for workers and exciting products for a new middle class. At first, as the nation's new glossy magazines advertised refrigerators and radios, stockings and speedboats, those policies seemed miraculous.

But then the Great Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed it revealed how poorly distributed the nation's paper prosperity had been. FDR, then the Democratic governor of New York, warned that the Republican system worked only for those at the top. "Democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself," he later explained. "That, in its essence, is Fascism—ownership of Government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power." He told the American people they deserved a "New Deal."^[1]

Desperate to break out of the Depression, Americans embraced FDR's promise to use the federal government to protect ordinary Americans. In 1932 they elected him president and put Democrats in charge of Congress. In place of businessmen, Democrats brought into the government new voices like law professors and economic advisors—a so-called Brain Trust.

Crucially, FDR also turned to Frances Perkins, who brought to the table the idea that the federal government should protect workers and women and children. A well-educated social worker, Perkins was a descendant of a colonial family and had spent significant time in a small town in Maine. In 1911, she had witnessed New York City's horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, in which 146 workers, mostly young women, leaped to their death from a burning building after their bosses had locked the doors to keep them from sneaking breaks on the fire escapes. The catastrophe inspired Perkins to bring the idea of old-fashioned community responsibility to the government, addressing the working conditions in rapidly growing cities, with their immigrant populations and their unregulated industries.

Recognizing the growing power of women in the Democratic coalition and eager to understand the needs of marginalized Americans, FDR named Perkins to his cabinet as secretary of labor. The first woman in a presidential cabinet, she served from 1933 to 1945, making her the longest serving labor secretary in U.S. history.

To get rid of the financial free-for-all that had sparked the Great Crash and the Great Depression, Congress regulated the stock market and limited the ability of bankers to use depositors' money to speculate in stocks. It also set maximum weekly hours and minimum wages for workers—forty-four hours and twenty-five cents an hour—and prohibited child labor. It guaranteed workers the right to join unions. It provided jobs for the unemployed, and it raised tax rates on the wealthy.

Congress also provided jobs programs for workers thrown into the streets by the Depression and created a basic social safety net—the centerpiece of which was Perkins's Social Security Act—for women and children and workers out of a job from unemployment or retirement. Finally, the government invested heavily in infrastructure, bringing to

ordinary Americans new opportunities previously available only to the wealthy.

From the first, FDR's New Deal included—imperfectly, but included—Black Americans and women.

Racist southern Democrats hated the new system. So did a rump group of Republicans, despite the fact that their own utter failure to manage the economy had left people living in packing boxes and eating out of garbage cans. In 1937, after Roosevelt's triumphant reelection, members of these two groups set out to organize against the New Deal. They agreed that the growing power of the federal government threatened what they called "traditional values": individual hard work, private property, a balanced federal budget, and local control of politics.^[2]

In early December 1937, a coalition of anti-New Deal lawmakers of both parties wrote a formal declaration of their principles and quietly circulated it to likely sympathizers. On December 15, 1937, their Conservative Manifesto leaked to the press. Called "An Address to the People of the United States," it rejected the idea of public spending and called private investment the bedrock of the economic health of the nation.

To free up capital, the manifesto demanded tax cuts and cuts to social welfare spending. It called for an end to government support for labor, which, it claimed, "injures all." It called for "states' rights, home rule and local self-government," by which it meant that federal laws must not disrupt southern states' racial codes. It called for an end to public support for able-bodied individuals with a "view to encourage individual self-reliance," trusting "kinship and benevolence" to provide a social safety net. "We propose," the manifesto read, "to preserve and rely upon the American system of private enterprise and initiative. . . ."^[3]

The declaration received little congressional support. Republicans preferred to attack FDR without tying themselves to Democrats, and Democrats criticized those around FDR rather than be seen publicly undermining their president. But the manifesto caught the attention of whites-only citizens' organizations and chambers of commerce, which endorsed it, and business and manufacturing organizations republished and circulated almost two million copies. Anti-New Deal newspapers continued to reprint it. The Conservative Manifesto was a blueprint for

those who stood against FDR's New Deal, and it's this declaration of values that makes today's radicals claim to be "conservatives."^[4]

But this is not the historical meaning of conservatism in America.

The idea of a "conservative" stance in politics emerged during the French Revolution, when Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke recoiled from what was happening on the other side of the English Channel. As revolutionaries in France abolished the traditional hierarchies of government and the church, Burke took a stand against radical change driven by people trying to make the government enforce a specific ideology. Ideologically driven government was radical and dangerous, he thought, because the ideology quickly became more important than the reality of the way society—and people—actually worked.

In 1790, Burke argued that the role of government was not to impose a worldview, but rather to promote stability, and that lawmakers could achieve that stability most effectively by supporting traditional structures: social hierarchies, the church, property, the family. "Conservative" meant, literally, conserving what was already there, without reference to an ideology. Those in charge of government should make changes slowly, according to facts on the ground, in order to keep the country stable. This idea also meant that government could be a positive force in society, rather than a negative one.

That "conservative" political identity did not translate particularly well to America, where, because leaders were still creating the new government out of whole cloth, there was nothing long-standing to conserve. Until the 1840s, the word rarely appeared in the political realm, and when it did, it referred to someone who rejected the "radical" ideas of abolitionists, who wanted to end human enslavement, or of women's rights activists, who wanted to give women the vote.

The word *conservative* began to take on specific political meaning in the U.S. when antislavery northerners refused to honor the Fugitive Slave Act that was part of the Compromise of 1850. That law required federal officials, including those in free states, to return to the South anyone a white enslaver claimed was his property. Black Americans could not testify in their own defense, and anyone helping a "runaway" could be

imprisoned for six months and fined one thousand dollars, which was about three years' income.^[5]

Enslavers and their Democratic colleagues began to call those speaking out against the Fugitive Slave Act “radicals” because they rejected a law. Charges of “radicalism” spread more widely four years later when northerners of all parties organized against the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, under which Congress allowed the spread of slavery into lands that had for more than thirty years been set aside for free labor.

In December 1855, Democratic president Franklin Pierce used his annual message to Congress to accuse Americans who opposed the spread of slavery of trying to overturn American traditions. He described the United States as a white man's republic and claimed that the Founders had believed in a hierarchy of races, in which “free white men” ruled over “the subject races . . . Indian and African.”^[6]

The editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, lawyer and staunch abolitionist Joseph Medill, was outraged. He accused Pierce and his Democratic supporters, not the antislavery men, of attacking American laws. “There are perversions of historical facts, and false statements, in Gen[eral] Pierce's Message, which cannot fail to arrest the attention and shock the feelings of the most conservative among us,” he wrote.

Medill had claimed the word *conservative* for the cause of equality.

The editor called out as “False all through!” Pierce's declaration that the Founders had established “a Federal Republic of the free white men of the Colonies.” In fact, he wrote, the Founders had enshrined the nation's principles in the Declaration of Independence. Where in that document was the discussion of “free white men,” the editor asked. In it, he continued, “Is there an intimation about ‘the subject races,’ whether Indian or African? . . . Their ‘one guiding thought,’ as they themselves proclaimed it, was the inalienable right of ALL men to Freedom, as a principle.”^[7]

As the Republican Party took shape over the next few years, its members worked to undercut charges that they were wild-eyed radicals, “Black Republicans,” and “N****r worshippers.” They embraced the idea that opposing slavery was a conservative stance. When Democratic Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas tried to portray his political opponent

Abraham Lincoln as a “radical abolitionist” in 1858, Lincoln hammered home the idea that it was Douglas and his supporters, not the Republicans, who were radicals. Lincoln claimed to be fighting against slavery “on ‘original principles’—fighting . . . in the Jeffersonian, Washingtonian, and Madisonian fashion.”^[8]

Lincoln did not use the word *conservative* in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but on February 27, 1860, at New York City’s Cooper Union, he claimed the mantle of conservatism for the Republicans. Much as Pierce had done in his controversial 1855 message, Lincoln retold the history of America. In his version, though, that history was one in which the Founders opposed slavery, and the new Republican Party stood on their side.

“You say you are conservative—eminently conservative—while we are revolutionary, destructive, or something of the sort,” he said, addressing Democrats. “What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried? We stick to, contend for, the identical old policy on the point in controversy which was adopted by ‘our fathers who framed the Government under which we live’; while you with one accord . . . spit upon that old policy, and insist upon substituting something new. . . . Not one of all your various plans can show a precedent or an advocate in the century within which our Government originated.”^[9]

When voters elected Lincoln president later that year, his centering of the Declaration of Independence led the Republican Party to create a new, active government that guaranteed poorer men would have access to resources that the wealthy had previously monopolized. They put men onto homesteads, created public universities, chartered a transcontinental railroad, invented national taxation (including the income tax), and, of course, ended Black enslavement in America except as punishment for crime. As Lincoln wrote, “The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities.”^[10]

By 1865 the party of Lincoln had put into practice their conservative position that the nation must, at long last, embrace the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence: that all men are created equal and