The American Republic and the Authoritarian Challenge

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Since the 1789 adoption in Philadelphia of the Constitution that established the form of government of the United States of America, this country has been committed to democratic, rights-regarding self-governance. "What do we have," a lady asked Benjamin Franklin afterwards, "a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin replied with a quip for the ages: "A republic, madam, if you can keep it."

That American habit of conditionality has persisted. "O say," Francis Scott Key asked in 1814 after watching the British shell Fort McHenry in Baltimore, "does that star-spangled banner yet wave?" And there was Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863, explaining that the Civil War should be seen as a question of whether America, built on principles of liberty and equality, could "long endure."

We keep asking. And so we should, not least to remind ourselves that democratic self-governance is neither automatic nor easy. But some 230 years after Franklin’s impish reply, this much we seem entitled to say about our Republic: We have kept it.

The Arduous Road
The keeping of the American Republic hasn’t been an easy or gentle task. It entailed our willful accommodation of the odious institution of slavery for more than seventy-five years after the ratification of the Constitution, then a Civil War in which more than 2 percent of the country’s population died, then more than a hundred years and counting of regional segregation and nationwide discrimination. Keeping the Republic also entailed our encroachment on what we called a frontier, displacing and decimating the Native American population.

It entailed the struggle to recognize that “all men are created equal” applies to all human beings. It entailed navigating the disruptions of the industrial age and now the digital age, two world wars, assorted lesser wars, and a Cold War against a nuclear-armed superpower convinced of its inevitable
worldwide dominion—not to mention a Great Depression, a Great Recession, the disruptions globalization has wrought, and numerous lesser economic travails. It entailed the creation and, then, the difficulties of managing a vast administrative state meant to reduce the risks attendant on a modern economy far removed from its largely agrarian origins.

Keeping the Republic has entailed coping with not just the advantages but the problems of being first a rising power, then a great power, then a superpower, then a hegemonic power, and now a power facing other rising powers. Moreover, the path hasn’t just been long; it has also been marked by often overheated political moments in which great numbers of Americans viewed their political opponents as morally illegitimate or even worse. In such moments, preservation has entailed the need to cope with the human ambition to have its way whatever the cost.

Through it all, we’ve kept our Republic—our democracy, as we call it today, the ability of free people to govern themselves. The commitment hasn’t wavered for nearly 250 years, through wave after wave of crisis and response. It stands as the longest-lasting such commitment in the world, and there is reason to believe that it will persist.

American Exceptionalism

An intermittent elite disdain for the idea of American exceptionalism has always been part of the mix of American opinion. One need not embrace doctrinal exceptionalism, though, to recognize that the United States is indeed exceptional.

How exceptional? With the ravages of a pandemic, the polarizing figure of President Trump, the digitally promoted tribalism, the coarseness of expression, and the increasing insistence that you’re entitled to a little violence if your side is losing despite its righteousness, 2020 will definitely rank among America’s toughest peacetime years.

But does even this year show that Americans are willing to abandon our constitutional arrangements? In favor of what, exactly? Membership in some upper Midwestern militia? Swearing allegiance to a woke clerisy dedicated to shutting down dissent? A divorce, velvet or otherwise, between red states and blue states?

Even this year, the democratically and legally constituted authorities, with all their equivocations, have not really shown themselves prepared to let hotheads prevail over the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. To put it another way, if “buy low” is generally good advice, 2020 would be an excellent time to invest in American democracy.

Warts and All

The failure of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, and of Orwell’s chilling vision in 1984 of permanent one-party rule to come to pass, reflects the reality that mutually respected freedoms are more in accord with human desire than is total control by one human being or one advantaged group. The conceit of totalitarianism is that with enough force, one can eliminate the possibility of disagreement once and for all. But in fact one cannot do so, even if the force is thoroughgoing and brutal. That is because disagreement over at least some things is inevitable whenever two or more people gather. Even relatively successful exercises in totalitarian control can suppress only the expression of disagreement, not the disagreement itself.

The question of politics, writ large, is how to resolve disagreements. The totalitarian answer is to resolve them by force from the top down—inevitably to the primary advantage of those closer to the top. But the dissatisfaction generated by such an arrangement can never be eradicated, nor can the desire for better arrangements.

Peaceable, rights-regarding, democratic self-governance is simply better than any other form of government at filtering
and satisfying people’s competing desires and disagreements. The United States literally pioneered this form of government; it is the founding member of a club now populated on every continent by democratic states peaceably inclined toward one another.

The condition of the American Republic has never conformed to an ideal type, nor will it. It arose under a particular set of circumstances and has evolved within constitutional limits as circumstances have changed. The result is often unattractive. For an example, take security: The United States had the geographic advantage of maturing politically between two oceans. But beginning in the late 19th century, American security has focused on the development of formidable military capabilities. In fact, these capabilities radiate outward through alliance relationships and less formal understandings to provide security for many other countries, democratic countries most prominent among them. To varying degrees, this security umbrella relieves other countries of much of the burden of providing for their security themselves.

The American ability to take care not only of its own security but also that of others warrants commendation. Unfortunately, it also creates certain democratic debilities that many other democratic countries don’t encounter precisely because of their lesser security responsibilities: the excesses of the surveillance state, for example, and criminal misbehavior in wartime. Some deficiencies of American democracy, in other words, have structural origins.

Others are constitutional. The United States went first in crafting a republican constitution—and today bears the scars of the struggle to bring thirteen states together in one nation. No country setting out on a democratic path today would create a mechanism such as the electoral college. But we have it, and we are stuck with it until such time as there is sufficient support to amend the Constitution (or for some extra-constitutional workaround).

Other democratic deficiencies are entirely of our own making. In the post-Cold War period of American “hyperpower” (hyperpuissance, a coinage of then-French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine in 1999), some U.S. politicians and policymakers became wildly overconfident about their ability to hasten the adoption of democratic, rights-regarding self-governance around the world. American exceptionalism was transformed into a universal principle and mission. That was a mistake: Self-governance advances only against resistance, and it remains a difficult enterprise even when broadly supported. (In fact, American exceptionalism might better be viewed as an alternative to the expectation of universal application of this form of governance.)

Notwithstanding overreach and resistance, however, the example of the United States still stands—and that of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and many more. The hills are now alive with shining cities, though their brightness varies from time to time. Democracies should work singly and together to bolster the case for democratic, rights-regarding self-governance. A little competition among them for bragging rights on aspects of democratic practice is hardly a bad thing. In fact, it’s excellent.

The Authoritarian Challenge
Meanwhile, authoritarians of all kinds, especially those with sufficient resources to support clandestine active measures abroad in addition to the secret police that keep them in power at home, don’t like the power of democratic example. They like even less advocacy on behalf of the superiority of democracy. Worse still are efforts by the United States and others to promote democracy and provide support for democratic forces abroad. So authoritarians use whatever capacity they can muster to undermine the legitimacy of democracy itself.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) today, Putin’s Russia (like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union before it), and
the mullah-ruled theocracy in Iran are quick to point to the faults of the United States as the leading democratic power and our supposed failure to live up to our democratic ideals. The purpose is twofold: secondarily, to persuade others that the American example is not worth following; primarily, to persuade Americans that the American example is fundamentally flawed and not worth advocating for.

How do we respond to this challenge? First, we should note that the CCP, Putin, and the mullahs do not share our republican ideals. Their criticism is insincere. They loathe and fear the United States for its ideals as the most powerful democracy and will do so still more intensely the more fully we live up to them. Russia and Iran, for example, persecute individuals who are not heterosexual. They would prefer a United States with anti-sodomy laws still on the books as justification for their own persecution to a United States that implicitly rebukes this persecution abroad through constitutional protection for same-sex marriage. Similarly, Chinese government media outlets enjoy calling out the United States for racism, while the CCP perpetrates genocide against the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Such persecution is indeed perfectly consistent with these regimes’ authoritarian sensibilities: no hypocrisy there. It’s just that their authoritarian sensibilities are disgusting. The United States can and should accept criticism over its practices from those who share our self-governing ideals. In fact, Americans themselves provide abundant such criticism. The United Kingdom, France, and others among the democratically like-minded have standing to offer criticism. We should take criticism from the likes of China, Russia, and Iran as an invitation to explain the superiority of our political arrangements.

The second response to the challenge from these non-democracies is something of a corollary. We should not confuse two different questions: how the world should be and how it measures up to those ideals. Deficiency on the latter does not refute the normative prescriptions of the former.

If our ideals were truly impossible to achieve, the perpetual failure to measure up or even make progress toward them would be grounds for rethinking their validity. In fact, however, the United States and many other countries have substantially achieved progress toward democratic rights, from self-governance on the political side to individual sufficiency in the face of inevitable scarcity on the economic side. China, Russia, Iran and many others have not. There is no doubt that the United States and others could improve on their performance. Indeed, our normative principles—our ideals about how the world should be—themselves provide the guideposts for improving our practice. For many other countries, their interest in pursuing these ideals consists only in pretending to support them.

There is a third response to these regimes: to push back, with moral clarity as well as humility. It may be true that China would collapse into anarchy without a strong one-party state. If so, that’s sad for the Chinese people (though good for members of the Chinese Communist Party). But our people and the people of other countries practicing democratic, rights-regarding self-governance do not require one-party rule to avoid such a collapse, and that is simply a better position for a government or a society to be in. We should say that when we can, and certainly in response to charges of hypocrisy from autocrats and would-be totalitarians. If they act to undermine systems of self-governance by taking advantage of the freedom of our societies, we should find creative ways to return the favor. We are not without capabilities, and our adversaries have weaknesses—most of them involving their fears for their long-term success and their personal physical security.

We shouldn’t expect the rest of the world to conform anytime soon to principles of democratic, rights-regarding
self-governance. But we can affirm that such a system is the best answer human beings have devised to the problem of politics. Or to tone that claim down a bit, we can put it in Churchillian terms: our system is the worst—except for all the others.

Either way, we’re keeping it; and, where we can, we should help others who aspire to pursue something similar.

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