



A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

Is the United States in Danger of Democratic Deterioration?

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MEMO PREPARED FOR CONFERENCE: A REPUBLIC, IF WE CAN KEEP IT

On April 12-13th, 2018, researchers, scholars, journalists, and policymakers came together at New America in Washington D.C. to address questions about the health and resiliency of American democracy. This conference considered questions such as: Can a liberal democracy and representative government persist in the United States? Are we experiencing a breakdown of democracy? Are checks and balances that are built into the political system and the mediating institutions that link citizens and government strong enough to sustain liberal democracy?

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Panel Comments Suzanne Mettler

We have learned from scholars of comparative politics that in the 21st century, a democracy can deteriorate in plain sight but in ways that can easily go unnoticed by many onlookers. If we await an obvious signal of its demise, a coup d'état, tanks in the streets, opposition candidates and journalists thrown in jail, we may assume that all is well...while overlooking the significance of numerous smaller and slower-moving changes.

In the United States, we may also think we can take comfort in the fact that the nation has a long history, and has endured much before. Indeed, of the four conditions that Ken and Tom have discussed that can make nations vulnerable to democratic decay, none are without precedents here.

Certainly we face high partisan polarization today, both teamism among elected officials and behavior that resembles tribalism among party activists and many voters. Yet while this represents a major change from the mid-20th century, it is not new to the United States, which faced considerable polarization off and on over the first century-plus of its existence, most recently in the 1890s.

Economic inequality has been growing in the United States since the mid-1970s, and it has only worsened since the Great Recession. Yet, in the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States confronted similar circumstances.

Executive aggrandizement is nothing new either. For over a century, presidents have been finding ways to grow their powers, through both national security and the administrative state, and Congress has delegated considerable authority to them.

The articulation and sanctioning of overt racism by President Trump, such as in his failure to condemn the white supremacist gathering and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia last August is deeply jarring. But of all four of these conditions, racism has the longest legacy in the United States, shaping its politics from the framing of the Constitution onward.

Yet, what this inventory of historical trends reveals is that the United State today faces an unprecedented **combination** of these circumstances that threaten democratic governance. This confluence has not occurred previously as it does now. During the era from McCarthyism through Watergate, for example, executive power was growing, but economic inequality and partisan polarization were at a low ebb; imagine how things might have turned out for Nixon otherwise. By contrast, over recent decades, we've seen the gradual escalation of polarization, economic inequality, and executive aggrandizement, and in the past handful of years, a resurgence of racism that ignites this toxic mix. These makings of a "perfect storm" indicate to us that the American political system **is** vulnerable to democratic backsliding, more so, arguably, than it has been in over a century.

But now we must segue to historical analysis. As disturbing as this inventory of conditions is, we also know, as scholars of American political development that conditions do not by themselves *create* political change. They may stimulate change, but they neither make it happen nor dictate the form it will take.

Rather, what happens next will depend on whether, how, and which political actors—individuals, reformers, and/or organizations—manage to take advantage of enduring institutional arrangements, in the context of contemporary political circumstances, and chart the way forward.

In order to explore the range of the possible, Rick and Rob and I have been sifting through American political history, selecting moments of political crisis, learning how political

actors responded at those times, and the extent to which democracy—as it had been developed up to that point-- was preserved, or whether instead, backsliding occurred.

Consider this: The president signed into law several controversial provisions that made it harder for immigrants to attain citizenship, permitted the president to imprison or deport immigrants who were considered dangerous or were from a nation deemed hostile to the United States, and made it a crime to speak critically of the federal government, whether through speech, writing, or publication. The year was not 2017, but 1798, and the President was John Adams, signing into law the Alien and Sedition Acts. The measures were defended by their Federalist proponents—anticipating war with France-- as essential for national security, or as one Congressman put it, there was no need to “invite hordes of Wild Irishmen, nor the turbulent and disorderly of all the world, to come here with a basic view to distract our tranquility.” Opponents of the provisions charged that they amounted to bold-faced efforts to weaken their party, the Democratic-Republicans, which happened to include most Americans who were not of English heritage. Acting on the new provisions, the Adams administration began to prosecute newspapers that were critical of the Federalists.

Indeed, no sooner had the new US Constitution been ratified that the young nation embarked on a tumultuous political course, characterized by ardent partisan polarization, vicious infighting, and a stream of repressive measures, each justified as essential to preserving the nation. The lead actors in this era were none other than notable members of the founding generation, generally remembered today for their antipathy to “factions” and desire to forge a government that would hold them at bay. Once they were governing themselves and political differences emerged, they feared that the opposing party presented a fundamental threat to the republic, potentially bordering on treason. That fear prompted them to make some choices that today appear rather authoritarian.

The tumultuous Election of 1800 proved to be a turning point in moving the United States toward acceptance of the idea of a legitimate political opposition. The deadlocked decision was thrown into the Federalist-dominated House of Representatives; remarkably, through a series of votes, Democratic-Republican candidate Thomas Jefferson emerged as President, marking the nation’s first peaceful transition of power. It would take another generation before Americans would come to view political conflict as not only inevitable, but also as something that—carried out through political parties-- could actually be useful, making democracy possible.

Reviewing the 1790s and other periods, Rob and Rick and I are struck by how often in the past the nation has endured deep crises, that could have undermined the American project entirely. We are also struck by how the Constitution, even with its checks and balances and separation of powers, has not by itself provided the safeguards that we may imagine will preserve the republic. More has been required.