



Was Democracy Just a Moment?

The global triumph of democracy was to be the glorious climax of the American Century. But democracy may not be the system that will best serve the world -- or even the one that will prevail in places that now consider themselves bastions of freedom.

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

IN the fourth century A.D. Christianity's conquest of Europe and the Mediterranean world gave rise to the belief that a peaceful era in world politics was at hand, now that a consensus had formed around an ideology that stressed the sanctity of the individual. But Christianity was, of course, not static. It kept evolving, into rites, sects, and "heresies" that were in turn influenced by the geography and cultures of the places where it took root. Meanwhile, the church founded by Saint Peter became a ritualistic and hierarchical organization guilty of long periods of violence and bigotry. This is to say nothing of the evils perpetrated by the Orthodox churches in the East. Christianity made the world not more peaceful or, in practice, more moral but only more complex. Democracy, which is now overtaking the world as Christianity once did, may do the same.

The collapse of communism from internal stresses says nothing about the long-term viability of Western democracy. Marxism's natural death in Eastern Europe is no guarantee that subtler tyrannies do not await us, here and abroad. History has demonstrated that there is no final triumph of reason, whether it goes by the name of Christianity, the Enlightenment, or, now, democracy. To think that democracy as we know it will triumph -- or is even here to stay -- is itself a form of determinism, driven by our own ethnocentricity. Indeed, those who quote Alexis de Tocqueville in support of democracy's inevitability should pay heed to his observation that Americans, because of their (comparative) equality, exaggerate "the scope of human perfectibility." Despotism, Tocqueville went on, "is more particularly to be feared in democratic ages," because it thrives on the obsession with self and one's own security which equality fosters.

I submit that the democracy we are encouraging in many poor parts of the world is an integral part of a transformation toward new forms of authoritarianism; that democracy in the United States is at greater risk than ever before, and from obscure sources; and that many future regimes, ours especially, could resemble the oligarchies of ancient Athens and Sparta more than they do the current government in Washington. History teaches that it is exactly at such prosperous times as these that we need to maintain a sense of the tragic, however unnecessary it may seem. The Greek historian Polybius, of the second century B.C., interpreted what we consider the Golden Age of Athens as the beginning of its decline. To Thucydides, the very security and satisfactory life that the Athenians enjoyed under Pericles blinded them to the bleak forces of human nature that were gradually to be their undoing in the Peloponnesian War.

My pessimism is, I hope, a foundation for prudence. America's Founders were often dismal about the human condition. James Madison: "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob." Thomas Paine: "Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness." It was the "crude" and "reactionary" philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, which placed security ahead of liberty in a system of enlightened despotism, from which the Founders drew philosophical sustenance. Paul A. Rahe, a professor of history at the University of Tulsa, shows in his superb three-volume

Republics Ancient and Modern (1992) how the Founders partly rejected the ancient republics, which were based on virtue, for a utilitarian regime that channeled man's selfish, materialistic instincts toward benign ends. Man, Benjamin Franklin said in an apparent defense of Hobbesian determinism, is "a tool-making animal."

Democracies Are Value-Neutral

HITLER and Mussolini each came to power through democracy. Democracies do not always make societies more civil -- but they do always mercilessly expose the health of the societies in which they operate.

In April of 1985 I found myself in the middle of a Sudanese crowd that had just helped to overthrow a military regime and replace it with a new government, which the following year held free and fair elections. Sudan's newly elected democracy led immediately to anarchy, which in turn led to the most brutal tyranny in Sudan's postcolonial history: a military regime that broadened the scope of executions, persecuted women, starved non-Muslims to death, sold kidnapped non-Muslim children back to their parents for \$200, and made Khartoum the terrorism capital of the Arab world, replacing Beirut. In Sudan only 27 percent of the population (and only 12 percent of the women) could read. If a society is not in reasonable health, democracy can be not only risky but disastrous: during the last phases of the post-First World War German and Italian democracies, for example, the unemployment and inflation figures for Germany and the amount of civil unrest in Italy were just as abysmal as Sudan's literacy rates.

As an unemployed Tunisian student once told me, "In Tunisia we have a twenty-five percent unemployment rate. If you hold elections in such circumstances, the result will be a fundamentalist government and violence like in Algeria. First create an economy, then worry about elections." There are many differences between Tunisia and its neighbor Algeria, including the fact that Tunisia has been peaceful without democracy and Algeria erupted in violence in 1992 after its first election went awry and the military canceled the second. In Kurdistan and Afghanistan, two fragile tribal societies in which the United States encouraged versions of democracy in the 1990s, the security vacuums that followed the failed attempts at institutionalizing pluralism were filled by Saddam Hussein for a time in Kurdistan and by Islamic tyranny in much of Afghanistan. In Bosnia democracy legitimized the worst war crimes in Europe since the Nazi era. In sub-Saharan Africa democracy has weakened institutions and services in some states, and elections have been manipulated to restore dictatorship in others. In Sierra Leone and Congo-Brazzaville elections have led to chaos. In Mali, which Africa-watchers have christened a democratic success story, recent elections were boycotted by the opposition and were marred by killings and riots. Voter turnout was less than 20 percent. Even in Latin America, the Third World's most successful venue for democracy, the record is murky. Venezuela has enjoyed elected civilian governments since 1959, whereas for most of the 1970s and 1980s Chile was effectively under military rule. But Venezuela is a society in turmoil, with periodic coup attempts, rampant crime, and an elite that invests most of its savings outside the country; as a credit risk Venezuela ranks behind only Russia and Mexico. Chile has become a stable middle-class society whose economic growth rate compares to those of the Pacific Rim. Democratic Colombia is a pageant of bloodletting, and many members of the middle class are attempting to leave the country. Then there is Peru, where, all the faults of the present regime notwithstanding, a measure of stability has been achieved by a retreat from democracy into quasi-authoritarianism.

Throughout Latin America there is anxiety that unless the middle classes are enlarged and institutions modernized, the wave of democratization will not be consolidated. Even in an authentically democratic nation like Argentina, institutions are weak and both corruption and unemployment are high. President Carlos Menem's second term has raised questions about democracy's sustainability -- questions that the success of his first term seemed to have laid to rest. In Brazil and other countries democracy faces a backlash from millions of badly educated and newly urbanized dwellers in teeming slums, who see few palpable benefits to

Western parliamentary systems. Their discontent is a reason for the multifold increases in crime in many Latin American cities over the past decade.

Because both a middle class and civil institutions are required for successful democracy, democratic Russia, which inherited neither from the Soviet regime, remains violent, unstable, and miserably poor despite its 99 percent literacy rate. Under its authoritarian system China has dramatically improved the quality of life for hundreds of millions of its people. My point, hard as it may be for Americans to accept, is that Russia may be failing in part because it is a democracy and China may be succeeding in part because it is not. Having traveled through much of western China, where Muslim Turkic Uighurs (who despise the Chinese) often predominate, I find it hard to imagine a truly democratic China without at least a partial breakup of the country. Such a breakup would lead to chaos in western China, because the Uighurs are poorer and less educated than most Chinese and have a terrible historical record of governing themselves. Had the student demonstrations in 1989 in Tiananmen Square led to democracy, would the astoundingly high economic growth rates of the 1990s still obtain? I am not certain, because democracy in China would have ignited turmoil not just in the Muslim west of the country but elsewhere, too; order would have decreased but corruption would not have. The social and economic breakdowns under democratic rule in Albania and Bulgaria, where the tradition of pre-communist bourgeois life is weak or nonexistent (as in China), contrasted with more-successful democratic venues like Hungary and the Czech Republic, which have had well-established bourgeoisie, constitute further proof that our belief in democracy regardless of local conditions amounts to cultural hubris.

Look at Haiti, a small country only ninety minutes by air from Miami, where 22,000 American soldiers were dispatched in 1994 to restore "democracy." Five percent of eligible Haitian voters participated in an election last April, chronic instability continues, and famine threatens. Those who think that America can establish democracy the world over should heed the words of the late American theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr:

The same strength which has extended our power beyond a continent has also . . . brought us into a vast web of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the "happiness of mankind" as its promise.

The lesson to draw is not that dictatorship is good and democracy bad but that democracy emerges successfully only as a capstone to other social and economic achievements. In his "Author' s Introduction" to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville showed how democracy evolved in the West not through the kind of moral fiat we are trying to impose throughout the world but as an organic outgrowth of development. European society had reached a level of complexity and sophistication at which the aristocracy, so as not to overburden itself, had to confer a measure of equality upon other citizens and allocate some responsibility to them: a structured division of the population into peacefully competing interest groups was necessary if both tyranny and anarchy were to be averted.

The very fact that we retreat to moral arguments -- and often moral arguments only -- to justify democracy indicates that for many parts of the world the historical and social arguments supporting democracy are just not there. Realism has come not from us but from, for example, Uganda' s President Yoweri Museveni, an enlightened Hobbesian despot whose country has posted impressive annual economic growth rates -- 10 percent recently -- despite tribal struggles in the country' s north. In 1986 Museveni' s army captured the Ugandan capital of Kampala without looting a single shop; Museveni postponed elections and saw that they took place in a manner that ensured his victory. "I happen to be one of those people who do not believe in multi-party democracy," Museveni has written. "In fact, I am totally opposed to it as far as Africa today is concerned.... If one forms a multi-party system in

Uganda, a party cannot win elections unless it finds a way of dividing the ninety-four percent of the electorate [that consists of peasants], and this is where the main problem comes up: tribalism, religion, or regionalism becomes the basis for intense partisanship." In other words, in a society that has not reached the level of development Toqueville described, a multi-party system merely hardens and institutionalizes established ethnic and regional divisions. Look at Armenia and Azerbaijan, where democratic processes brought nationalists to power upon the demise of the Soviet Union: each leader furthered his country's slide into war. A coup in Azerbaijan was necessary to restore peace and, by developing Azerbaijan's enormous oil resources, foster economic growth. Without the coup Western oil companies would not have gained their current foothold, which has allowed the United States to increase pressure on neighboring Iran at the same time that we attempt to normalize relations with Iran "on our terms."

Certainly, moral arguments in support of democracy were aired at the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, but they were tempered by the kind of historical and social analysis we now abjure. "The Constitution of the United States was written by fifty-five men -- and one ghost," writes retired Army Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer in *1794: America, Its Army, and the Birth of the Nation* (1994). The ghost was that of Oliver Cromwell, the archetypal man on horseback who, in the course of defending Parliament against the monarchy in the mid-seventeenth century, devised a tyranny worse than any that had ever existed under the English Kings. The Founders were terrified of a badly educated populace that could be duped by a Cromwell, and of a system that could allow too much power to fall into one person's hands. That is why they constructed a system that filtered the whims of the masses through an elected body and dispersed power by dividing the government into three branches.

The ghosts of today we ignore -- like the lesson offered by Rwanda, where the parliamentary system the West promoted was a factor in the murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis by Hutu militias. In 1992, responding partly to pressure from Western governments, the Rwandan regime established a multi-party system and transformed itself into a coalition government. The new political parties became masks for ethnic groups that organized murderous militias, and the coalition nature of the new government helped to prepare the context for the events that led to the genocide in 1994. Evil individuals were certainly responsible for the mass murder. But they operated within a fatally flawed system, which our own ethnocentric hubris helped to construct. Indeed, our often moralistic attempts to impose Western parliamentary systems on other countries are not dissimilar to the attempts of nineteenth-century Western colonialists -- many of whom were equally idealistic -- to replace well-functioning chieftaincy and tribal patronage systems with foreign administrative practices.

The demise of the Soviet Union was no reason for us to pressure Rwanda and other countries to form political parties -- though that is what our post-Cold War foreign policy has been largely about, even in parts of the world that the Cold War barely touched. The Eastern European countries liberated in 1989 already had, in varying degrees, the historical and social preconditions for both democracy and advanced industrial life: bourgeois traditions, exposure to the Western Enlightenment, high literacy rates, low birth rates, and so on. The post-Cold War effort to bring democracy to those countries has been reasonable. What is less reasonable is to put a gun to the head of the peoples of the developing world and say, in effect, "Behave as if you had experienced the Western Enlightenment to the degree that Poland and the Czech Republic did. Behave as if 95 percent of your population were literate. Behave as if you had no bloody ethnic or regional disputes."

States have never been formed by elections. Geography, settlement patterns, the rise of literate bourgeoisie, and, tragically, ethnic cleansing have formed states. Greece, for instance, is a stable democracy partly because earlier in the century it carried out a relatively benign form of ethnic cleansing -- in the form of refugee transfers -- which created a monoethnic society. Nonetheless, it took several decades of economic development for Greece finally to put its coups behind it. Democracy often weakens states by

necessitating ineffectual compromises and fragile coalition governments in societies where bureaucratic institutions never functioned well to begin with. Because democracy neither forms states nor strengthens them initially, multi-party systems are best suited to nations that already have efficient bureaucracies and a middle class that pays income tax, and where primary issues such as borders and power-sharing have already been resolved, leaving politicians free to bicker about the budget and other secondary matters.

Social stability results from the establishment of a middle class. Not democracies but authoritarian systems, including monarchies, create middle classes -- which, having achieved a certain size and self-confidence, revolt against the very dictators who generated their prosperity. This is the pattern today in the Pacific Rim and the southern cone of South America, but not in other parts of Latin America, southern Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa. A place like the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), where the per capita gross national product is less than \$200 a year and the average person is either a rural peasant or an urban peasant; where there is little infrastructure of roads, sewers, and so on; and where reliable bureaucratic institutions are lacking, needs a leader like Bismarck or Jerry Rawlings -- the Ghanaian ruler who stabilized his country through dictatorship and then had himself elected democratically -- in place for years before he is safe from an undisciplined soldiery.

Foreign correspondents in sub-Saharan Africa who equate democracy with progress miss this point, ignoring both history and centuries of political philosophy. They seem to think that the choice is between dictators and democrats. But for many places the only choice is between bad dictators and slightly better ones. To force elections on such places may give us some instant gratification. But after a few months or years a bunch of soldiers with grenades will get bored and greedy, and will easily topple their fledgling democracy. As likely as not, the democratic government will be composed of corrupt, bickering, ineffectual politicians whose weak rule never had an institutional base to start with: modern bureaucracies generally require high literacy rates over several generations. Even India, the great exception that proves the rule, has had a mixed record of success as a democracy, with Bihar and other poverty-wracked places remaining in semi-anarchy. Ross Munro, a noted Asia expert, has documented how Chinese autocracy has better prepared China' s population for the economic rigors of the postindustrial age than Indian democracy has prepared India' s.

Of course, our post-Cold War mission to spread democracy is partly a pose. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, America' s most important allies in the energy-rich Muslim world, our worst nightmare would be free and fair elections, as it would be elsewhere in the Middle East. The end of the Cold War has changed our attitude toward those authoritarian regimes that are not crucial to our interests -- but not toward those that are. We praise democracy, and meanwhile we are grateful for an autocrat like King Hussein, and for the fact that the Turkish and Pakistani militaries have always been the real powers behind the "democracies" in their countries. Obviously, democracy in the abstract encompasses undeniably good things such as civil society and a respect for human rights. But as a matter of public policy it has unfortunately come to focus on elections. What is in fact happening in many places requires a circuitous explanation.

The New Authoritarianism

THE battle between liberal and neoconservative moralists who are concerned with human rights and tragic realists who are concerned with security, balance-of-power politics, and economic matters (famously, Henry Kissinger) is a variation of a classic dispute between two great English philosophers -- the twentieth-century liberal humanist Isaiah Berlin and the seventeenth-century monarchist and translator of Thucydides,

In May of 1953, while the ashes of the Nazi Holocaust were still smoldering and Stalin's grave was fresh, Isaiah Berlin delivered a spirited lecture against "historical inevitability" -- the whole range of belief, advocated by Hobbes and others, according to which individuals and their societies are determined by their past, their civilization, and even their biology and environment. Berlin argued that adherence to historical inevitability, so disdainful of the very characteristics that make us human, led to Nazism and communism -- both of them extreme attempts to force a direction onto history. Hobbes is just one of many famous philosophers Berlin castigated in his lecture, but it is Hobbes' bleak and elemental philosophy that most conveniently sums up what Berlin and other moralists so revile. Hobbes suggested that even if human beings are nobler than apes, they are nevertheless governed by biology and environment. According to Hobbes, our ability to reason is both a mask for and a slave to our passions, our religions arise purely from fear, and theories about our divinity must be subordinate to the reality of how we behave. Enlightened despotism is thus preferable to democracy: the masses require protection from themselves. Hobbes, who lived through the debacle of parliamentary rule under Cromwell, published his translation of Thucydides in order, he said, to demonstrate how democracy, among other factors, was responsible for Athens' decline. Reflecting on ancient Athens, the philosopher James Harrington, a contemporary and follower of Hobbes, remarked that he could think of "nothing more dangerous" than "debate in a crowd."

Though the swing toward democracy following the Cold War was a triumph for liberal philosophy, the pendulum will come to rest where it belongs -- in the middle, between the ideals of Berlin and the realities of Hobbes. Where a political system leans too far in either direction, realignment or disaster awaits.

In 1993 Pakistan briefly enjoyed the most successful period of governance in its history. The government was neither democratic nor authoritarian but a cross between the two. The unelected Prime Minister, Moin Qureshi, was chosen by the President, who in turn was backed by the military. Because Qureshi had no voters to please, he made bold moves that restored political stability and economic growth. Before Qureshi there had been violence and instability under the elected governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. Bhutto's government was essentially an ethnic Sindhi mafia based in the south; Sharif's was an ethnic Punjabi mafia from the geographic center. When Qureshi handed the country back to "the people," elections returned Bhutto to power, and chaos resumed. Finally, in November of last year, Pakistan's military-backed President again deposed Bhutto. The sigh of relief throughout the country was audible. Recent elections brought Sharif, the Punjabi, back to power. He is governing better than the first time, but communal violence has returned to Pakistan's largest city, Karachi. I believe that Pakistan must find its way back to a hybrid regime like the one that worked so well in 1993; the other options are democratic anarchy and military tyranny. (Anarchy and tyranny, of course, are closely related: because power abhors a vacuum, the one necessarily leads to the other. One day in 1996 Kabul, the Afghan capital, was ruled essentially by no one; the next day it was ruled by Taliban, an austere religious movement.)

Turkey's situation is similar to Pakistan's. During the Cold War, Turkey's military intervened when democracy threatened mass violence, about once every decade. But Turkish coups are no longer tolerated by the West, so Turkey's military has had to work behind the scenes to keep civilian governments from acting too irrationally for our comfort and that of many secular Turks. As elected governments in Turkey become increasingly circumscribed by the army, a quieter military paternalism is likely to evolve in place of periodic coups. The crucial element is not the name the system goes by but how the system actually works.

Peru offers another version of subtle authoritarianism. In 1990 Peruvian voters elected Alberto Fujimori to dismantle parts of their democracy. He did, and as a consequence he restored a measure of civil society to Peru. Fujimori disbanded Congress and took

power increasingly into his own hands, using it to weaken the Shining Path guerrilla movement, reduce inflation from 7,500 percent to 10 percent, and bring investment and jobs back to Peru. In 1995 Fujimori won re-election with three times as many votes as his nearest challenger. Fujimori's use of deception and corporatist-style cost-benefit analyses allowed him to finesse brilliantly the crisis caused by the terrorist seizure of the Japanese embassy in Lima. The commando raid that killed the terrorists probably never could have taken place amid the chaotic conditions of the preceding Peruvian government. Despite the many problems Fujimori has had and still has, it is hard to argue that Peru has not benefited from his rule.

In many of these countries Hobbesian realities -- in particular, too many young, violence-prone males without jobs -- have necessitated radical action. In a York University study published last year the scholars Christian G. Mesquida and Neil I. Wiener demonstrate how countries with young populations (young poor males especially) are subject to political violence. With Third World populations growing dramatically (albeit at slowing rates) and becoming increasingly urbanized, democrats must be increasingly ingenious and dictators increasingly tyrannical in order to rule successfully. Surveillance, too, will become more important on an urbanized planet; it is worth noting that the etymology of the word "police" is *polis*, Greek for "city." Because tottering democracies and despotic militaries frighten away the investors required to create jobs for violence-prone youths, more hybrid regimes will perforce emerge. They will call themselves democracies, and we may go along with the lie -- but, as in Peru, the regimes will be decisively autocratic. (Hobbes wrote that Thucydides "praiseth the government of Athens, when . . . it was democratical in name, but in effect monarchical under Pericles." Polybius, too, recommended mixed regimes as the only stable form of government.) Moreover, if a shortage of liquidity affects world capital markets by 2000, as Klaus Schwab, the president of the World Economic Forum, and other experts fear may happen, fiercer competition among developing nations for scarcer investment money will accelerate the need for efficient neo-authoritarian governments.

The current reality in Singapore and South Africa, for instance, shreds our democratic certainties. Lee Kuan Yew's offensive neo-authoritarianism, in which the state has evolved into a corporation that is paternalistic, meritocratic, and decidedly undemocratic, has forged prosperity from abject poverty. A survey of business executives and economists by the World Economic Forum ranked Singapore No. 1 among the fifty-three most advanced countries appearing on an index of global competitiveness. What is good for business executives is often good for the average citizen: per capita wealth in Singapore is nearly equal to that in Canada, the nation that ranks No. 1 in the world on the United Nations' Human Development Index. When Lee took over Singapore, more than thirty years ago, it was a mosquito-ridden bog filled with slum quarters that frequently lacked both plumbing and electricity. Doesn't liberation from filth and privation count as a human right? Jeffrey Sachs, a professor of international trade at Harvard, writes that "good government" means relative safety from corruption, from breach of contract, from property expropriation, and from bureaucratic inefficiency. Singapore's reputation in these regards is unsurpassed. If Singapore's 2.8 million citizens ever demand democracy, they will just prove the assertion that prosperous middle classes arise under authoritarian regimes before gaining the confidence to dislodge their benefactors. Singapore's success is frightening, yet it must be acknowledged.

Democratic South Africa, meanwhile, has become one of the most violent places on earth that are not war zones, according to the security firm Kroll Associates. The murder rate is six times that in the United States, five times that in Russia. There are ten private-security guards for every policeman. The currency has substantially declined, educated people continue to flee, and international drug cartels have made the country a new transshipment center. Real unemployment is about 33 percent, and is probably much higher among youths. Jobs cannot be created without the cooperation of foreign investors, but assuaging their fear could require the kind of union-busting and police actions that democracy will not permit. The South African military was the power behind the regime in the last decade of apartheid. And it is the military that may yet help to rule South Africa in the future.

Like Pakistan but more so, South Africa is destined for a hybrid regime if it is to succeed. The abundant coverage of South Africa's impressive attempts at coming to terms with the crimes of apartheid serves to obscure the country's growing problems. There is a sense of fear in such celebratory, backward-looking coverage, as if writing too much about difficulties in that racially symbolic country would expose the limits of the liberal humanist enterprise worldwide.

Burma, too, may be destined for a hybrid regime, despite the deification of the opposition leader and Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi by Western journalists. While the United States calls for democracy in and economic sanctions against Burma, those with more immediate clout -- that is, Burma's Asian neighbors, and especially corporatoligarchic militaries like Thailand's -- show no compunction about increasing trade links with Burma's junta. Aung San Suu Kyi may one day bear the title of leader of Burma, but only with the tacit approval of a co-governing military. Otherwise Burma will not be stable. A rule of thumb is that governments are determined not by what liberal humanists wish but rather by what business people and others require. Various democratic revolutions failed in Europe in 1848 because what the intellectuals wanted was not what the emerging middle classes wanted. For quite a few parts of today's world, which have at best only the beginnings of a middle class, the Europe of the mid nineteenth century provides a closer comparison than the Europe of the late twentieth century. In fact, for the poorest countries where we now recommend democracy, Cromwell's England may provide the best comparison.

As with the Christian religion (whose values are generally different for Americans than for Bosnian Serbs or for Lebanese Phalangists, to take only three examples), the nominal system of a government is less significant than the nature of the society in which it operates. And as democracy sinks into the soils of various local cultures, it often leaves less-than-nourishing deposits. "Democracy" in Cambodia, for instance, began evolving into something else almost immediately after the UN-sponsored elections there, in 1993. Hun Sen, one of two Prime Ministers in a fragile coalition, lived in a fortified bunker from which he physically threatened journalists and awarded government contracts in return for big bribes. His coup last summer, which toppled his co-Prime Minister and ended the democratic experiment, should have come as no surprise.

"World Government"

AUTHORITARIAN or hybrid regimes, no matter how illiberal, will still be treated as legitimate if they can provide security for their subjects and spark economic growth. And they will easily find acceptance in a world driven increasingly by financial markets that know no borders.

For years idealists have dreamed of a "world government." Well, a world government has been emerging -- quietly and organically, the way vast developments in history take place. I do not refer to the United Nations, the power of which, almost by definition, affects only the poorest countries. After its peacekeeping failures in Bosnia and Somalia -- and its \$2 billion failure to make Cambodia democratic -- the UN is on its way to becoming a supranational relief agency. Rather, I refer to the increasingly dense ganglia of international corporations and markets that are becoming the unseen arbiters of power in many countries. It is much more important nowadays for the leader of a developing country to get a hearing before corporate investors at the World Economic Forum than to speak before the UN General Assembly. Amnesty International now briefs corporations, just as it has always briefed national governments. Interpol officials have spoken about sharing certain kinds of intelligence with corporations. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, is recognizing the real new world order (at least in this case) by building a low-tax district he calls a "multimedia super-corridor," with two new cities and a new airport designed specifically for

international corporations. The world' s most efficient peacemaking force belongs not to the UN or even to the great powers but to a South African corporate mercenary force called Executive Outcomes, which restored relative stability to Sierra Leone in late 1995. (This is reminiscent of the British East India Company, which raised armies transparently for economic interests.) Not long after Executive Outcomes left Sierra Leone, where only 20.7 percent of adults can read, that country' s so-called model democracy crumbled into military anarchy, as Sudan' s model democracy had done in the late 1980s **From the archives:**

Of the world' s hundred largest economies, fiftyone are not countries but corporations. While the 200 largest corporations employ less than three fourths of one percent of the world's work force, they account for 28 percent of world economic activity. The 500 largest corporations account for 70 percent of world trade. Corporations are like the feudal domains that evolved into nation-states; they are nothing less than the vanguard of a new Darwinian organization of politics. Because they are in the forefront of real globalization while the overwhelming majority of the world' s inhabitants are still rooted in local terrain, corporations will be free for a few decades to leave behind the social and environmental wreckage they create -- abruptly closing a factory here in order to open an unsafe facility with a cheaper work force there. Ultimately, as technological innovations continue to accelerate and the world' s middle classes come closetogether, corporations may well become more responsible to the cohering global community and less amoral in the course of their evolution toward new political and cultural forms.

For instance, ABB Asea Brown Boveri Ltd. is a \$36 billion-a-year multinational corporation divided into 1,300 companies in 140 countries; no one national group accounts for more than 20 percent of its employees. ABB' s chief executive officer, Percy Barnevik, recently told an interviewer that this diversity is so that ABB can develop its own "global ABB culture -- you might say an umbrella culture." Barnevik explains that his best managers are moved around periodically so that they and their families can develop "global personalities" by living and growing up in different countries. ABB management teams, moreover, are never composed of employees from any one country. Barnevik says that this encourages a "cross-cultural glue." Unlike the multiculturalism of the left, which masks individual deficiencies through collective -- that is, ethnic or racial -- self-esteem, a multinational corporation like ABB has created a diverse multicultural environment in which individuals rise or fall completely on their own merits. Like the hybrid regimes of the present and future, such an evolving corporate community can bear an eerie resemblance to the oligarchies of the ancient world. "Decentralization goes hand in hand with central monitoring," Barnevik says.

The level of social development required by democracy as it is known in the West has existed in only a minority of places -- and even there only during certain periods of history. We are entering a troubling transition, and the irony is that while we preach our version of democracy abroad, it slips away from us at home.

The Shrinking Domain of "Politics"

I PUT special emphasis on corporations because of the true nature of politics: who does and who doesn' t have power. To categorize accurately the political system of a given society, one must define the significant elements of power within it. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis knew this instinctively, which is why he railed against corporate monopolies. Of course, the influence that corporations wield over government and the economy is so vast and obvious that the point needs no elaboration. But there are other, more covert forms of emerging corporate power.

The number of residential communities with defended perimeters that have been built by corporations went from 1,000 in the early 1960s to more than 80,000 by the mid-1980s, with continued dramatic increases in the 1990s. ("Gated communities" are not an

American invention. They are an import from Latin America, where deep social divisions in places like Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City make them necessary for the middle class.) Then there are malls, with their own rules and security forces, as opposed to public streets; private health clubs as opposed to public playgrounds; incorporated suburbs with strict zoning; and other mundane aspects of daily existence in which -- perhaps without realizing it, because the changes have been so gradual -- we opt out of the public sphere and the "social contract" for the sake of a protected setting. Dennis Judd, an urban-affairs expert at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, told me recently, "It's nonsense to think that Americans are individualists. Deep down we are a nation of herd animals: micelike conformists who will lay at our doorstep many of our rights if someone tells us that we won't have to worry about crime and our property values are secure. We have always put up with restrictions inside a corporation which we would never put up with in the public sphere. But what many do not realize is that life within some sort of corporation is what the future will increasingly be about."

Indeed, a number of American cities are re-emerging as Singapores, with corporate enclaves that are dedicated to global business and defended by private security firms adjacent to heavily zoned suburbs. For instance, in my travels I have looked for St. Louis and Atlanta and not found them. I found only hotels and corporate offices with generic architecture, "nostalgic" tourist bubbles, zoned suburbs, and bleak urban wastelands; there was nothing distinctive that I could label "St. Louis" or "Atlanta." Last year's Olympics in Atlanta will most likely be judged by future historians as the first of the postmodern era, because of the use of social façades to obscure fragmentation. Peace and racial harmony were continually proclaimed to be Olympic themes -- even though whites and blacks in Atlanta live in separate enclaves and the downtown is a fortress of office blocks whose streets empty at dusk. During the games a virtual army was required to protect visitors from terrorism, as at previous Olympics, and also from random crime. All this seems normal. It is both wonderful and frightening how well we adapt.

Universities, too, are being redefined by corporations. I recently visited Omaha, where the corporate community made it possible for the Omaha branch of the University of Nebraska to build an engineering school -- even after the Board of Regents vetoed the project. Local corporations, particularly First Data Resources, wanted the school, so they worked with the Omaha branch of the university to finance what became less a school than a large information-science and engineering complex. "This is the future," said the chancellor of the Omaha campus, Del Weber. "Universities will have to become entrepreneurs, working with corporations *on curriculum* [emphasis mine] and other matters, or they will die." The California state university system, in particular the San Diego campus, is perhaps the best example of corporate-academic synergy, in which a school rises in prestige because its curriculum has practical applications for nearby technology firms.

Corporations, which are anchored neither to nations nor to communities, have created strip malls, edge cities, and Disneyesque tourist bubbles. Developments are not necessarily bad: they provide low prices, convenience, efficient work forces, and, in the case of tourist bubbles, safety. We need big corporations. Our society has reached a level of social and technological complexity at which goods and services must be produced for a price and to a standard that smaller businesses cannot manage. We should also recognize, though, that the architectural reconfiguration of our cities and towns has been an undemocratic event -- with decisions in effect handed down from above by an assembly of corporate experts.

"The government of man will be replaced by the administration of things," the Enlightenment French philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon prophesied. We should worry that experts will channel our very instincts and thereby control them to some extent. For example, while the government fights drug abuse, often with pathetic results, pharmaceutical corporations have worked *through* the government and political parties to receive sanction for drugs such as stimulants and anti-depressants, whose

consciousness-altering effects, it could be argued, are as great as those of outlawed drugs.

The more appliances that middle-class existence requires, the more influence their producers have over the texture of our lives. Of course, the computer in some ways enhances the power of the individual, but it also depletes our individuality. A degree of space and isolation is required for a healthy sense of self, which may be threatened by the constant stream of other people' s opinions on computer networks.

Democratic governance, at the federal, state, and local levels, goes on. But its ability to affect our lives is limited. The growing piles of our material possessions make personal life more complex and leave less time for communal matters. And as communities become liberated from geography, as well as more specialized culturally and electronically, they will increasingly fall outside the realm of traditional governance. Democracy loses meaning if both rulers and ruled cease to be part of a community tied to a specific territory. In this historical transition phase, lasting perhaps a century or more, in which globalization has begun but is not complete and loyalties are highly confused, civil society will be harder to maintain. How and when we vote during the next hundred years may be a minor detail for historians.

True, there are strong similarities between now and a century ago. In the 1880s and 1890s America experienced great social and economic upheaval. The combination of industrialization and urbanization shook the roots of religious and family life: sects sprouted, racist Populists ranted, and single women, like Theodore Dreiser' s Sister Carrie, went to work in filthy factories. Racial tensions hardened as the Jim Crow system took hold across the South. "Gadgets" like the light bulb and the automobile brought an array of new choices and stresses. "The city was so big, now, that people disappeared into it unnoticed," Booth Tarkington lamented in *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

A hundred years ago millionaires' mansions arose beside slums. The crass accumulation of wealth by a relatively small number of people gave the period its name -- the Gilded Age, after a satire by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner about financial and political malfeasance. Around the turn of the century 12 percent of all American households controlled about 86 percent of the country' s wealth.

But there is a difference, and not just one of magnitude. The fortunes made from the 1870s through the 1890s by John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and others were *American* fortunes, anchored to a specific geographic space. The Gilded Age millionaires financed an economy of scale to fit the vast landscape that Abraham Lincoln had secured by unifying the nation in the 1860s. These millionaires funded libraries and universities and founded symphony orchestras and historical societies to consolidate their own civilization in the making. Today' s fortunes are being made in a global economic environment in which an affluent global civilization and power structure are being forged even as a large stratum of our society remains rooted in place. A few decades hence it may be hard to define an "American" city.

Even J. P. Morgan was limited by the borders of the nation-state. But in the future who, or what, will limit the likes of Disney chairman Michael Eisner? The UN? Eisner and those like him are not just representatives of the "free" market. Neither the Founders nor any of the early modern philosophers ever envisioned that the free market would lead to the concentration of power and resources that many corporate executives already embody. Whereas the liberal mistake is to think that there is a program or policy to alleviate every problem in the world, the conservative flaw is to be vigilant against concentrations of power in government only -- not in the private sector, where power can be wielded more secretly and sometimes more dangerously.

Umpire Regimes

THIS rise of corporate power occurs more readily as the masses become more indifferent and the elite less accountable. Material possessions not only focus people toward private and away from communal life but also encourage docility. The more possessions one has, the more compromises one will make to protect them. The ancient Greeks said that the slave is someone who is intent on filling his belly, which can also mean someone who is intent on safeguarding his possessions. Aristophanes and Euripides, the late-eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson, and Tocqueville in the nineteenth century all warned that material prosperity would breed servility and withdrawal, turning people into, in Tocqueville's words, "industrious sheep." In moderate doses, apathy is not necessarily harmful. I have lived and traveled in countries with both high voter turnouts and unstable politics; the low voter turnouts in the United States do not by themselves worry me. The philosopher James Harrington observed that the very indifference of most people allows for a calm and healthy political climate. Apathy, after all, often means that the political situation is healthy enough to be ignored. The last thing America needs is more voters -- particularly badly educated and alienated ones -- with a passion for politics. But when voter turnout decreases to around 50 percent at the same time that the middle class is spending astounding sums in gambling casinos and state lotteries, joining private health clubs, and using large amounts of stimulants and anti-depressants, one can legitimately be concerned about the state of American society.

I recently went to a basketball game at the University of Arizona. It was just a scrimmage, not even a varsity game. Yet the stadium was jammed, and three groups of cheerleaders performed. Season tickets were almost impossible to obtain, even before the team won the national championship. Donating \$10,000 to \$15,000 to the university puts one in a good position to accumulate enough points to be eligible for a season ticket, though someone could donate up to \$100,000 and still not qualify. I have heard that which spouse gets to keep tickets can be a primary issue in Tucson divorce cases. I noticed that almost everyone in the stands was white; almost everyone playing was black. Gladiators in Rome were almost always of racial or ethnic groups different from the Romans. "There may be so little holding these southwestern communities together that a basketball team is all there is," a Tucson newspaper editor told me. "It's a sports team, a symphony orchestra, and a church rolled into one." Since neither Tucson nor any other southwestern city with a big state university can find enough talent locally, he pointed out, community self-esteem becomes a matter of which city can find the largest number of talented blacks from far away to represent it.

We have become voyeurs and escapists. Many of us don't play sports but love watching great athletes with great physical attributes. The fact that basketball and football and baseball have become big corporate business has only increased the popularity of spectator sports. Basketball in particular -- so fluid, and with the players in revealing shorts and tank tops -- provides the artificial excitement that mass existence "against instinct," as the philosopher Bertrand Russell labeled our lives, requires.

Take the new kind of professional fighting, called "extreme fighting," that has been drawing sellout crowds across the country. Combining boxing, karate, and wrestling, it has nothing fake about it -- blood really flows. City and state courts have tried, often unsuccessfully, to stop it. The spectators interviewed in a CNN documentary on the new sport all appeared to be typical lower-middle and middle-class people, many of whom brought young children to the fights. Asked why they came, they said that they wanted to "see blood." The mood of the Colosseum goes together with the age of the corporation, which offers entertainment in place of values. The Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz provides the definitive view on why Americans degrade themselves with mass culture: "Today man believes that there is *nothing* in him, so he accepts *anything*, even if he knows it to be bad, in order to find himself at one with others, in order not to be alone." Of course, it is because people find so little in themselves that they fill

their world with celebrities. The masses avoid important national and international news because much of it is tragic, even as they show an unlimited appetite for the details of Princess Diana' s death. This willingness to give up self and responsibility is the sine qua non for tyranny.

The classicist Sir Moses Finley ended his austere and penetrating work *Politics in the Ancient World* (1983) with these words:

The ideology of a ruling class is of little use unless it is accepted by those who are being ruled, and so it was to an extraordinary degree in Rome. Then, when the ideology began to disintegrate within the elite itself, the consequence was not to broaden the political liberty among the citizenry but, on the contrary, to destroy it for everyone.

So what about our ruling class?

I was an expatriate for many years. Most expatriates I knew had utopian liberal beliefs that meant little, since few of them had much of a real stake in any nation. Their patriotism was purely nostalgic: a French friend would become tearful when her national anthem was played, but whenever she returned to France, she complained nonstop about the French. Increasingly, though, one can be an expatriate without living abroad. One can have Oriental rugs, foreign cuisines, eclectic tastes, exposure to foreign languages, friends overseas with whom one' s life increasingly intertwines, and special schools for the kids-- all at home. Resident expatriatism, or something resembling it, could become the new secular religion of the upper-middle and upper classes, fostered by communications technology. Just as religion was replaced by nationalism at the end of the Middle Ages, at the end of modern times nationalism might gradually be replaced by a combination of traditional religion, spiritualism, patriotism directed toward the planet rather than a specific country, and assorted other organized emotions. Resident expatriates might constitute an elite with limited geographic loyalty beyond their local communities, which provide them with a convenient and aesthetically pleasing environment.

An elite with little loyalty to the state and a mass society fond of gladiator entertainments form a society in which corporate Leviathans rule and democracy is hollow. James Madison in *The Federalist* considered a comparable situation. Madison envisioned an enormously spread-out nation, but he never envisioned a modern network of transportation that would allow us psychologically to inhabit the same national community. Thus his vision of a future United States was that of a vast geographic space with governance but without patriotism, in which the state would be a mere "umpire," refereeing among competing interests. Regional, religious, and communal self-concern would bring about overall stability. This concept went untested, because a cohesive American identity and culture did take root. But as Americans enter a global community, and as class and racial divisions solidify, Madison' s concept is relevant anew.

There is something postmodern about this scenario, with its blend of hollow governance and fragmentation, and something ancient, too. Because of suburbanization, American communities will be increasingly segregated by race and class. The tendency both toward compromise and toward trusting institutions within a given community will be high, as in small and moderately sized European countries today, or as in ancient Greek city-states. Furthermore, prosperous suburban sprawls such as western St. Louis and western Omaha, and high-technology regions such as the Tucson-Phoenix corridor, North Carolina' s Research Triangle, and the Portland-Seattle-Vancouver area will compete with one another and with individual cities and states for overseas markets, as North America becomes a more peaceful and productive version of chaotic, warring city-state Greece.

A continental regime must continue to function, because America' s edge in information warfare requires it, both to maintain and to

lead a far-flung empire of sorts, as the Athenians did during the Peloponnesian War. But trouble awaits us, if only because the "triumph" of democracy in the developing world will cause great upheavals before many places settle into more practical -- and, it is to be hoped, benign -- hybrid regimes. In the Middle East, for instance, countries like Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf sheikhdoms -- with artificial borders, rising populations, and rising numbers of working-age youths -- will not instantly become stable democracies once their absolute dictators and medieval ruling families pass from the scene. As in the early centuries of Christianity, there will be a mess.

Given the surging power of corporations, the gladiator culture of the masses, and the ability of the well-off to be partly disengaged from their own countries, what will democracy under an umpire regime be like?

The Return of Oligarchy?

SURPRISINGLY, the Founders admired the military regime of Sparta. Only in this century has Sparta been seen as the forerunner of a totalitarian state. Why shouldn't men like Madison and George Washington have admired Sparta? Its division of power among two Kings, the elders, and the *ephors* ("overseers") approximated the system of checks and balances that the Founders desired in order to prevent the emergence of another Cromwell. Of course, Sparta, like Athens, was a two-tiered system, with an oligarchic element that debated and decided issues and a mass -- *helots* ("serfs") in Sparta, and slaves and immigrants in Athens -- that had few or no rights. Whether Sparta was a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a limited democracy -- and whether Athens was oligarchic or democratic -- still depends on one's viewpoint. According to Aristotle, "Whether the few or the many rule is accidental to oligarchy and democracy -- the rich are few everywhere, the poor many." The real difference, he wrote, is that "oligarchy is to the advantage of the rich, democracy to the advantage of the poor." By "poor" Aristotle meant laborers, landowning peasants, artisans, and so on -- essentially, the middle class and below.

Is it not conceivable that corporations will, like the rulers of both Sparta and Athens, project power to the advantage of the well-off while satisfying the twenty-first-century servile populace with the equivalent of bread and circuses? In other words, the category of politics we live with may depend more on power relationships and the demeanor of our society than on whether we continue to hold elections. Just as Cambodia was never really democratic, despite what the State Department and the UN told us, in the future we may not be democratic, despite what the government and media increasingly dominated by corporations tell us.

Indeed, the differences between oligarchy and democracy and between ancient democracy and our own could be far subtler than we think. Modern democracy exists within a thin band of social and economic conditions, which include flexible hierarchies that allow people to move up and down the ladder. Instead of clear-cut separations between classes there are many gray shades, with most people bunched in the middle. Democracy is a fraud in many poor countries outside this narrow band: Africans want a better life and instead have been given the right to vote. As new and intimidating forms of economic and social stratification appear in a world based increasingly on the ability to handle and analyze large quantities of information, a new politics might emerge for us, too -- less like the kind envisioned by progressive reformers and more like the pragmatic hybrid regimes that are bringing prosperity to developing countries.

The classicist Sir Moses Finley has noted that what really separated the rulers from the ruled in the ancient world was literacy: the illiterate masses were subject to the elite's interpretation of documents. Analogous gulfs between rulers and ruled may soon emerge, not only because of differing abilities to process information and to master technology but also because of globalization itself. Already, barely literate Mexicans on the U.S. border, working in dangerous, Dickensian conditions to produce our VCRs,

jeans, and toasters, earn less than 50 cents an hour, with no rights or benefits. Is that Western democracy or ancient-Greek-style oligarchy?

As the size of the U.S. population and the complexity of American life spill beyond the traditional national community, creating a new world of city-states and suburbs, the distance will grow between the citizens of the new city-states and the bureaucratic class of overseers in Washington. Those overseers will manage an elite volunteer military armed with information-age weapons, in a world made chaotic by the spread of democracy and its attendant neo-authoritarian heresies. We prevented the worst excesses of a "military-industrial complex" by openly fearing it, as President Dwight Eisenhower told us to do. It may be equally wise to fear a high-tech military complex today.

Precisely because the technological future in North America will provide so much market and individual freedom, this productive anarchy will require the supervision of tyrannies -- or else there will be no justice for anyone. Liberty, after all, is inseparable from authority, as Henry Kissinger observed in *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* (1957). A hybrid regime may await us all. The future of the Third World may finally be our own.

And that brings us to a sober realization. If democracy, the crowning political achievement of the West, is gradually being transfigured, in part because of technology, then the West will suffer the same fate as earlier civilizations. Just as Rome believed it was giving final expression to the republican ideal of the Greeks, and just as medieval Kings believed they were giving final expression to the Roman ideal, we believe, as the early Christians did, that we are bringing freedom and a better life to the rest of humankind.

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