

American Democracy is Stronger Than its Enemies



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So, is democracy in America done? About to be served out like Thanksgiving turkey?

Much of the slew of [commentary](#) around the anniversary of the January 6th storming of the US Capitol takes as its theme, not without elements of smugness and schadenfreude, that the United States is spiraling downwards. But to paraphrase [Mark Twain](#), reports of democracy's demise in our next door neighbour have been greatly exaggerated.

The declinist case boils down to a lament over America's political polarization (rancour and division in American politics is as old as the Republic), its dysfunctional government (by design, the founding fathers set up a system of checks and balances to prevent radical change, as well as a federal system that, like Canada's, relies on a separation of powers), its gun culture (rooted in its revolutionary origins and the Second Amendment to the US Constitution) and the nationwide Republican attacks on voting rights (a serious threat that is being contested in the courts through civic action and the federal Justice Department).

Then there is Trumpism. As historian Jon Meacham argues in his splendid *Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* Donald Trump fits into the type of American "loud mouth" that in the last century included Huey Long, Father Coughlin and Joseph McCarthy.

Meacham points out that American history is littered with moments of democratic crisis. This is what comes of trying to create a pluralistic, multi-ethnic democratic republic across a vast expanse of land with an 18th century constitution. The goal is not perfection but a more perfect union, something with which Canadians should identify.

For Meacham, five elements – the presidency, Congress, the courts, a free press, and a civic-minded people – really matter. As long as two or three row in the right direction, the American experiment will continue.

As for American decline, consider the following: its military remains the most powerful in the world. The US Navy secures the sealanes that have made possible the globalization that lifted billions, most of them in China and the developed world, out of poverty. When there is an earthquake or tsunami or famine or Ebola outbreak the first and best responders are the men and women of the US Armed Forces.

Its deterrent power, the backbone of collective security alliances like NATO and NORAD, has also preserved the general peace for over 75 years. Americans are tired of playing sheriff but when they retire, as we saw in Afghanistan, we don't like the result. Think of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* for a sense of the lonely life of the sheriff.

The US has lots of flaws: excessive individualism, self-indulgence, racism and inequality. Its primary and secondary schools are undernourished. But it continues to educate the world's best. In the latest global rankings [seven of the top 10](#) universities are American. Xi Jinping sent his [daughter](#) to Harvard. The list of Canadian leaders who have studied and worked in the US or for US companies is long and distinguished.

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No other nation comes close in [Nobel laureates](#), especially in the sciences. California alone is home to 10 percent of laureates, part of the reason that the future begins in California, from music and cinema in Hollywood, to the tech and digital world of Silicon Valley.

Then there is American soft power. Its popular culture — in film, music, sports and fashion — has global appeal. To truly appreciate America, you need to immerse yourself in its social history, brilliantly captured, warts and all, in the [filmography](#) of Ken Burns.

The classic account of the spirit of America is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Written after a tour in the 1830s of the still immature Republic, de Tocqueville described a people who were boisterous, bumptious, and disrespectful know-it-alls. They “[seldom take the opinion of their equal](#), a man like themselves, upon trust” and they doubted “the general notion of...intellectual superiority.” At its worst this trait produced the nativist and racist “[Know Nothings](#)”, the [Ku Klux Klan](#), and Donald Trump.

Americans' saving grace, observed de Tocqueville, in contrast to their European counterparts, is that they are ambitious, creative and forward-thinking. Most of all, they were enthused with democracy and the belief that with hard work and luck anyone could succeed. That hasn't changed. Americans are still the best at taking an idea, then making it, growing it and marketing it to the world.

This confidence of forward motion has taken a beating in recent years. How to deal with racial and economic inequality is debated daily. When civil protest takes to the streets or Capitol Hill, it is not pretty. To paraphrase Mark Twain once again, citizenship is what makes a democracy; autocracies can get along without it. What keeps a democracy on its legs is good citizenship.

When it comes to democracy, the commentariat focuses on politics and its reflection in social media. But for most Americans, the ins and outs of politics are not central to their daily lives. Neither is Twitter, As Pew surveys reveal only about [one in five Americans](#) uses Twitter. It's a useful tool for us in the chattering class, but never forget that most tweets come from a small minority of users playing to an echo chamber.

The best definition of American democracy is still the [1943 letter](#) from E. B. White (remembered today as the author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*) responding to the Writer's War Board.

Surely the Board knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the don't in don't shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn't been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad. It's the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee.

Over 40 years ago, as a young diplomat in New York, I got to know Alastair Cooke, the legendary BBC correspondent who for over half a century would deliver a weekly letter from America that I first listened to on my father's shortwave. Cooke had recently hosted a personal history of the United States for PBS.

New York had almost gone broke. Times Square was dirty and dissolute. There were gas lines. Jimmy Carter told us to turn down the heat. I thought then, as others do today, that the US really was [falling off the cliff](#). But Cooke cautioned me with the [words](#) that concluded his series: "America is a country in which I see the most persistent idealism and the blindest of cynicism and the race is on between its vitality and its decadence."

The symptoms of democratic decline in America are readily apparent. But like Cooke, my bet is still on the energy and vitality of the American people and their institutions.

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