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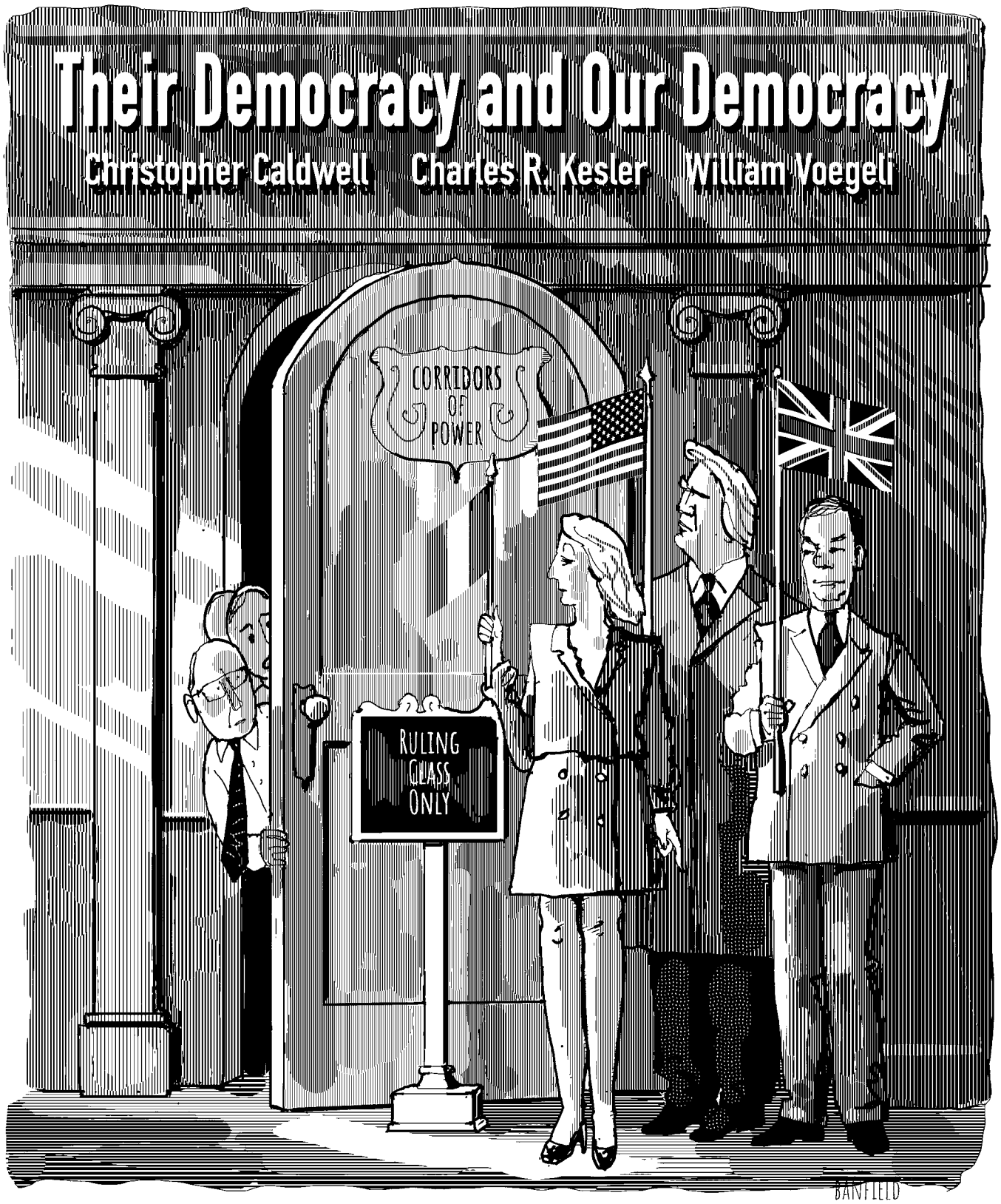

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Essay by William Voegeli

Defending Democracy

It's neither easy nor simple.

In a video statement released on April 25, 2019, announcing his candidacy for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Joe Biden claimed that "[t]he core values of this nation, our standing in the world, our very democracy—everything that has made America *America*—is at stake." On June 28, 2024, the day after a debate performance against Donald Trump that *Politico*'s Jonathan Martin described as simultaneously "catastrophic" and "catatonic," "Joe Biden"—meaning, of course, campaign staffers writing on social media in their boss's name—returned to this theme: "Donald Trump is a genuine threat to this nation," asserted the president's account on X. "He's a threat to our freedom. He's a threat to our democracy. He's literally a threat to everything America stands for." And a month later, on July 24, after Biden had yielded to demands from his party and the press to abandon his re-election campaign, he told the nation in an Oval Office address, "I believe my record as president, my leadership in the world, my vision for America's future all merited a second term, but nothing—nothing—can come in the way of saving our democracy."

You may detect a pattern. As Martin says, "backlash against Trump and Trumpism" has been the key factor in every Democratic victory since 2017, the "single issue" that has held together an otherwise discordant coalition. Indeed, insistence that Trumpism is antithetical to the American way of life and governance has been constant since Trump began his political career in 2015. In May 2016 historian Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, asserted in one of his *Washington Post* columns that the Republican "attempt to treat Donald Trump as a normal political candidate" has turned the GOP into a "singular threat to our democracy." Tolerating such a menace is "how fascism comes to America." In the same vein, *Vox* senior correspondent Zack Beauchamp wrote a long essay, "White Riot," published on January 20, 2017, the day of Trump's inauguration. "Donald Trump is not an accident," Beauchamp warned. "He's a harbinger." Trump's success in capturing the world's most powerful office showed that far-right nationalist parties around the globe "threaten the most cherished values in Western society: our all-too-recent embrace of equality and tolerance."

In time for the 2024 election, Kagan and Beauchamp have each written a book to build out the case that Trumpism threatens democracy and freedom. They take different approaches but agree on the key points. In *Rebellion: How Antiliberalism is Tearing America Apart—Again*, Kagan assesses Trump and Trumpism in the context of American history. *Rebellion* is told forward, in chronological order, but was "written backwards," Kagan explained on the podcast hosted by William Kristol, another erstwhile neoconservative now primarily identified as a Never Trumper. His book is a search, in other words, for the historical antecedents that prefigure Trumpism—that will explain how and why we've arrived at a point where "a very large number of people," as Kagan said in the interview, now want to "change the system that the founders created." In *The Reactionary Spirit: How America's Most Insidious Political Tradition Swept the World*, Beauchamp's subtitle makes clear that the goal is to situate Trumpism across space more than over time. The belief that "moves toward social equality have gone too far and need to be rolled back," Beauchamp writes, "is the beating heart of antidemocratic politics around the world today."

The Demon Spirit

The books work from the same premise about what is at risk. *Rebellion* maintains that the "sole function" of the liberalism the American Revolution gave to the world "was to protect certain fundamental rights of all individuals against the state and the wider community." Kagan's opening claim, and call to arms, is that the 2024 election "is a referendum on whether the liberal democracy born out of the Revolution should continue." *The Reactionary Spirit*'s starting point also sounds like it could have come from a Fourth of July speech: "Democracy's core principle," Beauchamp maintains, "is that no person is inherently better than any other; for that reason, we all deserve an equal say in determining how we're governed."

These precepts sound unobjectionable, but for both Kagan and Beauchamp liberal democracy has been haunted from its inception in the 18th century by an anti-liberal, anti-democratic doppelgänger. Because the egalitarianism at the heart of liberal democracy threatens existing hierarchies, and even the idea of hierarchy, defenders of inequality end up opposing democracy—covertly if they can, overtly if they must.

Kagan traces the origin of this tradition in America to the slaveholding South, which "regarded the very idea of universal equal rights as a sham." According to *Rebellion*, "[a] straight line runs from the slaveholding South to the post-Reconstruction South of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the second Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, to the Dixiecrats of the 1940s and '50s, to Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society of the 1950s and '60s, to the burgeoning Christian nationalist movement of recent decades, to the New Right of the Reagan Era, to the Republican Party of today." Indeed, *Rebellion*'s purpose is to portray Trumpism as the culmination and distillation of every bad thing in American history. "The Trump movement is no freakish aberration," Kagan writes. "Like the demon spirit in a Stephen King novel, it has always been with us, taking different forms over the decades."

The anti-liberal through line Kagan identifies is essentially the same as Beauchamp's villain, the reactionary spirit, "the idea that if democracy threatens existing social hierarchies, it is right and maybe even righteous to overthrow democracy rather than permit social change." According to Beauchamp, America's "authentically democratic" political tradition has, from the beginning, contended with an "authentically authoritarian" one. But authoritarianism took a different form here than in older nations, where pre- and anti-democratic legacies had been in place for centuries. In America, where no alternative to democracy has ever been considered legitimate, the reactionary spirit has had to manifest itself by maintaining what Beauchamp calls a "democratic veneer" whereby American opponents of greater equality cloak their anti-democratic efforts in democratic language. *The Reactionary Spirit* points to the recent Georgia law enacting new voting regulations: the state's Republican governor said its purpose was to make elections "secure, accessible, and fair," but President Biden denounced the law as "Jim Crow 2.0."

As the democratic idea spread rapidly after World War II and pre-democratic legacies came to be discredited and repudiated in much of the world, authoritarians were, in Beauchamp's telling, left with no choice but to follow the American example: invoke democracy for the purpose of curtailing democracy. Hence, as his subtitle claims, America's most insidious political tradition is sweeping the world. Borrowing the concept of "competitive authoritarianism" from political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (who published a book with that title in 2010), *The Reactionary Spirit* devotes separate chapters to Hungary, Israel, and India, arguing that Viktor Orbán, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Narendra Modi, respectively, are each retaining democratic formalities as a tactic to install a regime that, in Beauchamp's assessment, "pretends to be a democracy but obviously isn't."

Books discussed in this essay:

Rebellion: How Antiliberalism is Tearing America Apart—Again,
by Robert Kagan.
Alfred A. Knopf, 256 pages, $26

The Reactionary Spirit: How America's Most Insidious Political Tradition Swept the World, by Zack Beauchamp.
PublicAffairs, 272 pages, $30

Principles and Prerequisites

By arguing that liberal democracy's opponents cynically pretend to go along with it, or insidiously use democratic processes to undermine it, Kagan and Beauchamp tilt the playing field. People who find their arguments plausible will be disposed to believe that critics of these books must have ulterior, anti-democratic motives. I ask such readers to set aside their suspicions long enough to entertain the possibility that, despite the two authors' sincere concern for liberal democracy, their ideas do more to harm than to improve its prospects.

The Kagan/Beauchamp argument treats the preservation of liberal democracy as a difficult, even harrowing, imperative, since democracy's enemies are motivated, resourceful, and implacable. Their argument's chief defect, however, is the implication that because the *only* danger worth discussing comes from democracy's enemies, preserving democracy is a simple, straightforward challenge. There is no place in either book for the need to attend to democracy's civilizational prerequisites. The success of democracy must overcome the fact that these prerequisites are hard to establish, even as the subsequent survival of democracy must contend with the reality that they are not so hard to demolish.

Consider our long, futile nation-building project in Afghanistan. Among the reasons it came to grief is that establishing a regime recognizable to Americans as a species of liberal democracy would have required ignoring rather than respecting the will of Afghanistan's people. A 2013 Pew Research Center report found that 99% of Afghanis wanted sharia law to be the country's official law, 85% favored stoning as a punishment for adultery, 79% supported the death penalty for a Muslim who converted to a different faith, a slight majority (51% to 45%) preferred having a strong leader to a democracy, 39% thought defending Islam by committing suicide bombings that killed civilians was sometimes or often justified, only 24% said that the honor killing of a son or daughter who had engaged in premarital sex is *never* justified, 94% said that wives must obey their husbands, and only 23% of men and 40% of women said women should have the right to choose whether to be veiled in public.

In the First World, what sets conservatives apart from liberals more fundamentally than any policy disagreement is the conviction that liberalism's civilizational prerequisites are not self-sustaining but, rather, eternally tenuous. Charles Kesler warned in these pages that every republic eventually faces what he called the "Weimar problem," the possibility that "the national culture, popular and elite, [has] deteriorated so much that the virtues necessary to sustain republican government are no longer viable" ("Trump and the Conservative Cause," Spring 2016). In a footnote, *Rebellion* mentions a 2012 interview in which Harvard's Harvey Mansfield said that "the principal task of conservatism is to save liberalism from the liberals." Kagan dismisses the idea, insisting that anti-liberal conservatives want to wreck the foundations of liberal democracy, not conserve them. But *why*, according to Mansfield, are conservatives motivated to save liberalism? Because, he said to the editors of *The Point* magazine, they find themselves "threatened by people who want to take away or harm things that deserve to be conserved." And how is it that liberals imperil liberalism? "They misinterpret their own doctrine; pervert it and render it dangerous to freedom and peace alike."

The social conservatives of the late 20th century (then called the "New Right") tried to forge a political response to what they perceived as America's growing Weimar problem. One liberal misinterpretation of liberalism, social conservatives warned, was the belief that all lifestyles are created equal, which they

felt willfully ignored the many ways that some dispositions and habits—pornography, promiscuity, drug use—jeopardize democracy rather than sustain it.

The belief that the health of the republic is inseparable from the health of the family is well founded, which makes it appropriate that social conservatism experienced the frustration known most acutely to parents: wanting something for people you care about more intently than they want it for themselves. Various policy initiatives to promote marriage, reduce divorce, curtail abortion, and shield children from violent, profane, or sexually explicit popular entertainments gained little traction. Social conservatives found that the Gadsden Flag slogan, "Don't Tread on Me," was beneficial to the politics of liberty but sharply limited their ability to catalyze, through government action, social forces that reinvigorated virtue.

We the People

The belief that america is weakening the foundations on which its liberal democracy rests has passed from the 20th century's old New Right to the 21st century's new New Right. The latter addresses different dangers though, pushing against doors it believes to be less securely bolted than the ones that held back the social conservatives. The more recent effort to shore up democracy works from the premise that if its participants must be members of a civilized community, then the terms on which someone becomes a member and remains in good standing are important to deliberate and enforce. The question of what makes us *us*—a people rather than just a bunch of people—is inseparable from the question, central to immigration policy, of who gets in and who doesn't.

One aspect of democracy that imperils democracy is that its fundamental axiom—equality—has come unmoored from any limiting principle. Rectifying one supposed inequality (e.g., straight and gay) only reveals an urgent need to crusade against another (e.g., cis- and trans-). The relentless search for monstrous inequalities to destroy leads, sooner or later, to condemning the inequality between citizens and non-citizens, between people who are members of a particular national community and those who are not but want to be. This conclusion, usually implicit in egalitarian discourse, has been growing increasingly explicit. In the 1990s prominent scholars scorned patriotism in favor of the "worldwide community of human beings" (Martha Nussbaum), deplored "the evil of a shared national identity" (Richard Sennett), and argued that Americans' "primary allegiance" should be to "democratic humanism" instead of to "the United States or to some other politically sovereign community" (Amy Gutmann). More recently, journalist Atossa Araxia Abrahamian, author of *The Cosmopolites: The Coming of The Global Citizen* (2015), wrote a *Nation* magazine article in 2018, "There Is No Left Case for Nationalism," rejecting "the idea that someone arbitrarily born on the wrong side of a line is less deserving of a good life."

In 2019 all the leading candidates for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination—Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Joe Biden—pledged to decriminalize the act of illegally crossing the border into the United States. In the same campaign, the candidates promised to make illegal immigrants eligible for public health insurance benefits on the same basis as U.S. citizens. As of June 2024, Ballotpedia reports, the District of Columbia and 16 municipalities in the blue states of California, Maryland, and Vermont had laws permitting illegal immigrants to vote in at least some local elections.

> The founders understood themselves to be creating a system that supplied the defect of better motives, which sounds far more promising than a system that runs on incessant hectoring.

In a 2019 *Vox* article, Beauchamp took exception to a speech on immigration policy, "The Case for Low and Slow," by law professor Amy Wax. A "shared American identity is essential to maintaining a common sense of purpose, trust, and community," Wax had said. "A large influx of immigrants, especially from nations that do not share our cultural values and understandings, will undermine citizen morale, unity, and solidarity as well as the integrity of our institutions." Beauchamp quoted, at length, Wax's argument that we can expect, and should accept, that an immigration policy shaped by these concerns will have a disparate impact, excluding more people from poor countries than prosperous ones, resulting in a greater number of dark-skinned people being kept out.

"If all this isn't racism," Beauchamp declared, "I have no idea what is." Given only those two options, my vote would be that Beauchamp has no idea what racism is. A better guess, from among the choices not listed, is that he doesn't know, or declines to say, what racism is *not*. Neither *Rebellion* nor *The Reactionary Spirit* endorses open borders, nor do they explicitly reject the possibility that there could be some licit way to advocate stricter restrictions on immigration. But both books pay a good deal of attention to immigration, and in every instance the authors ascribe misgivings about increased immigration to some form of bigotry.

Particularity Is Universal

Kagan and beauchamp are not alone in treating multiculturalism as crucial to, and virtually synonymous with, liberal democracy. At a New York fundraising event for Joe Biden in March, Barack Obama said, "[W]hat has always made America exceptional is this radical idea that you can get people from every corner of the globe—don't look alike, don't have the same name, worship differently, speak different languages, have different cultural traditions—and somehow they're going to come together under a set of rules." That, he continued, is "our creed: that we can live together, self-governing, have a representative government, peacefully transfer power."

Writing about these remarks in an essay for *Tablet* magazine, Michael Lind argued:

> Obama to the contrary, "our creed" is not that "somehow" a coherent national community spontaneously can arise by throwing together linguistic, religious, and cultural groups that share nothing in common other than commitment to a government charter. If the U.S. population were divided three ways among German-speaking Amish, Arabic-speaking Salafist Muslims, and Chinese-speaking secularists, the country would quickly disintegrate, even if the three groups agreed on free elections and minimal civil rights.

Take away the cohesion imparted by a shared language, customs, heritage, and destiny, Lind continued, and "what remains is more likely to be a failed state along the lines of Lebanon or Somalia than a flourishing democracy."

Because a modern liberal democracy is the set of institutions, practices, and norms whereby a nation-state governs itself, it is impossible for a democracy to survive when the nation-state dies, or thrive while the nation-state withers. "Liberalism by itself is

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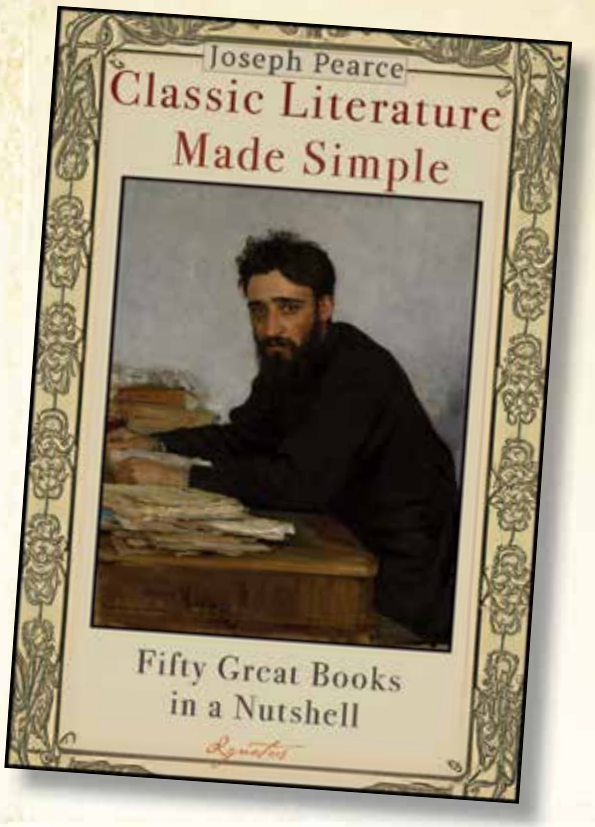

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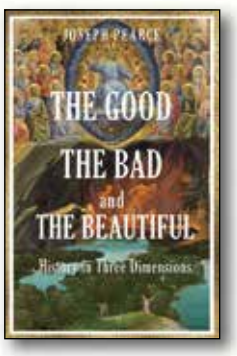

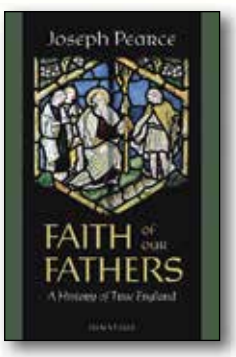

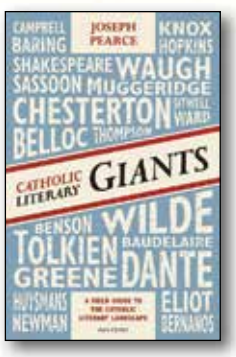

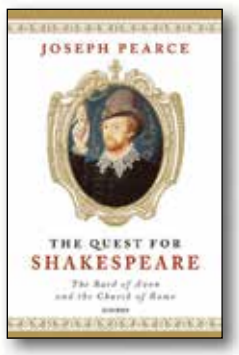

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not enough," Walter Russell Mead told Bari Weiss, founder of *The Free Press*, in a 2023 interview. Rather, he said, liberalism is "like the ivy, but it needs a tree." Liberalism is an attribute that enhances a nation, but an enhancement distinct from and dependent on the nation.

Rather than turtles all the way down, for Beauchamp, Kagan, and Obama it's ivy all the way in. There is no tree. Or it is a detail that should not distract us from the central mission of preserving and improving the ivy. Or it is a generic prop for liberal democracy, so that any discussion of a particular tree's unique needs is a distraction, and to raise the possibility that the ivy must be cultivated in keeping with the tree's defining characteristics is anti-liberal and reactionary.

Beauchamp writes in *The Reactionary Spirit* that the German theorist and Nazi Party member Carl Schmitt "identified a truly difficult intellectual challenge for liberal democracy—how can you square the credo of universal human rights with the inherently limited nature of national citizenship and borders?" Beauchamp dislikes, as he should, Schmitt's use of this dilemma to promote a "seductive brand of authoritarian politics." But *The Reactionary Spirit* has nothing else to say about the tension between the idea of universal rights and the fact of particular nations, which is not just a fascinating puzzle but a matter of great consequence. The book's chapter on India notes that Mahatma Gandhi, believing that "Hindus and Muslims alike could live under a shared and equal state," was opposed to partitioning the post-colonial Indian subcontinent into the nations of India and Pakistan. Beauchamp doesn't argue that Gandhi was right, but he doesn't examine either what Gandhi's mistake tells us about how little democratic inclusiveness can do to make countrymen out of people who do not regard one another as such.

"The United States, as the strongest democracy, should not oppose but welcome a world of pooled and diminished national sovereignty," Kagan wrote in a 2008 article in *Foreign Affairs*. "It has little to fear and much to gain in a world of expanding laws and norms based on liberal ideals and designed to protect them." When discussing *Rebellion* with Bill Kristol, Kagan said that liberalism is "probably more antithetical to human nature than non-liberalism because it really does require a certain selflessness." Selflessness, as he explained it, meant being as concerned for the remote and strange as for the near and familiar. The "truly revolutionary nature of the American experiment," its commitment to universal rights, requires effacing the partiality displayed so reliably throughout human history that we may safely regard it as an aspect of human nature.

That truly is a revolutionary idea—which doesn't mean it's good. But if it's bad, it's more likely Kagan's mistake than the American Founders', who made clear their intent to establish a successful republic by basing it on human nature as it exists, rather than on hopes and wishes about how it might be transformed. "If men were angels, no government would be necessary," *The Federalist* famously declared. And if men were undifferentiated global citizens, no borders would be necessary, nor would it have occurred to anyone to make them. The founders understood themselves to be creating a system that supplied the defect of better motives, which sounds far more promising than a system that runs on incessant hectoring to be more altruistic.

Thousands of years of history, plus everything we can establish about tens of thousands of years of pre-history, argue that particularity has a much stronger claim to being universal than universality. Overwhelming evidence supports the proposition that humans are disposed to divide into numerous subsets, which define themselves by shared attachments to a certain territory, language, religion, heritage, record of civilizational attainments, or resolve borne of collective travails. By contrast, scant evidence supports the idea that humans harbor a latent, deep-seated hunger to graduate from millennia of particularity to a bright, post-sovereign future of universality. Even if leaving sovereignty, national citizenship, and borders behind is a good idea, it is an undemocratic one. Absent a radical change in attitudes, it will have to be imposed by ignoring or manipulating popular sentiment—a curious way to advance liberal democracy's ideals.

Mass migration raises the stakes: can nations where immigrants convey and then nurture their anti-democratic beliefs sustain liberal democracy? In 2004, filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered on the streets of Amsterdam by an assailant who shot him several times, then cut his throat before using the knife to affix a letter to Van Gogh's lifeless body. The letter made clear that the murderer, a dual Dutch-Moroccan citizen and second-generation immigrant to the Netherlands, was infuriated by Van Gogh's documentary movie about Islam and the abuse of women. In the ensuing weeks, other young men of Moroccan origin residing in the Netherlands celebrated the murder, one justifying the act by telling a journalist that Van Gogh had been punished by God. Without "shared norms about the rule of law," one of the country's most prominent liberal writers subsequently argued, "the soothing talk of diversity and dialogue, of respect and reason, no longer works. Tolerance can survive only within clear limits." According to some reports, Theo van Gogh pleaded to his assailant during the fatal attack, "Surely we can talk about this." Does the "multi" in multiculturalism stretch to encompass violently intolerant worldviews? If so, then pluralism sounds like, and will eventually operate as, a suicide pact.

When True Democracy Is False

It is easy to overthink this whole question of defending democracy. The best approach is not only the simplest one but, fittingly, the most democratic: give people reasons to like democracy. To quote Harvey Mansfield once more, this time from a 1988 *New Republic* essay, "Good democrats think democracy can be good, and when they see it is not, they take responsibility for reforming it." If a democratic government acquits itself well, people will respect it, believe that they have a stake in its success, and protect it when it is threatened. Each citizen belongs to a body politic that is both governed and the only source, through consent, whereby the government's power can be made legitimate. As a result, stacking new governmental successes on top of previous ones will cause democratic and patriotic sentiments to reinforce one another, intertwine, and ultimately fuse, as when Americans pledge allegiance to their nation's flag and the republic for which it stands.

By the same token, those who want a democracy to live long and prosper need to work constantly to prevent governance failures that reflect poorly on government by the people. The fact that Benito Mussolini made the trains run on time does not mean that we should disdain governmental competence, much less fear that attending to it is a concession to fascists. Rather, it means that a democratic government that discharges its obligations capably is not only good in itself, but good because it prevents democracy from becoming an object of popular despair and contempt, rather than a source of civic pride. California, for example, has taken the worst possible approach to keep people from complaining about trains that don't run on time: it has spent 16 years and billions of dollars building a high-speed rail system that doesn't run at all.

To the list of threats confronting democracy, other than its enemies, we must add friends who are as dangerous as enemies. Some of these friends claim too little on democracy's behalf. In *Rebellion* Robert Kagan maintains that liberalism "has no teleology, no final resting point toward which it aims." Nor does it have any foundation in self-evident

truths about human nature. It is impossible "to prove that liberal principles are either more 'rational' or more 'just' than the hierarchical worldview that has guided the vast majority of human beings for almost the entirety of recorded history," according to Kagan. "Either one believes in its principles or one does not." If this is so, then it is difficult to see the point of a book attacking anti-liberalism, or any way to judge the validity of its thesis. There is no basis for concluding that liberal democracy is superior to defenses of hierarchy if these alternatives are chosen based on subjective preferences, like baseball versus cricket, or are merely rationalizations for various groups to pursue their particular interests.

Those who claim too much for democracy want to define it in ways that require not merely a political process but also specific political and social outcomes. As evidence that Hungary has become a Potemkin democracy, Zack Beauchamp cites the fact that Fidesz, Viktor Orbán's party, won large parliamentary majorities in 2014 and 2018 despite winning less than half the popular vote. This result looks less scandalous considering the fact, which Beauchamp does not mention, that Fidesz won 54% of the vote in 2022. It looks less scandalous still, given that disparities between popular vote totals and legislative seats are a common feature of many democracies. In the 2024 British elections, for example, Labour Party candidates received 34% of the popular vote and won 63% of the seats in Parliament. The second- and third-place finishers, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, respectively, won 36% of the popular vote between them but ended up with 30% of the legislative seats.

Beauchamp also warns that if Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party were to win a clear majority in India's 2024 elections, as it did in the two preceding elections, BJP would "cement political control over key government functions, giving it a potentially insurmountable advantage in future elections." After *The Reactionary Spirit* went to press, BJP ended up winning a plurality but not a majority, forcing it to enter into a coalition government for Modi to remain as prime minister. This may be a better result for India's democracy than it is for Beauchamp's thesis. There is an unfalsifiable, heads-I-win quality to his accusations about competitive authoritarians pretending to be democrats. If the alleged competitive authoritarian wins an election, it proves how extensively he has rigged the system. If he loses, it proves how the people, in their righteous might, have seen through the facade and rallied to the cause of genuine democracy. There appear to be no clear examples of the third category: elections Beauchamp considers procedurally legitimate but whose results he deeply dislikes.

Last year journalist Nicholas Lemann, writing in *The New Yorker*, took on one of Beauchamp's villains, Benjamin Netanyahu, for reasons that fit perfectly with *The Reactionary Spirit*'s case against competitive authoritarianism. By virtue of serving as Israel's prime minister for 16 years, which resulted from his party assembling majority coalitions in the Knesset after six different elections, Netanyahu would appear to have a strong claim to democratic legitimacy—stronger, at first glance, than Israel's public broadcast system, which Netanyahu wants to curtail or abolish, and which is "governed by an independent and diverse board of distinguished people," in Lemann's description. Supporting the broadcast system against Netanyahu, Lemann argues, is imperative because of "how complicated, how essential, and how fragile true democracy is." Mere democracy calls for "universal voting rights and open, fair elections." *True* democracy also requires, among other things, "strong independent institutions" that put "a measure of state power into the hands of people with training and experience who have the latitude to balance pure majoritarianism with other first principles." Not mincing words, Lemann makes clear that this corrective is elitist, and that elitism is good, a more democratic form of democracy than what we get from officials whose only claim to power is the consent of the governed conferred through elections.

The core problem with *Rebellion* and *The Reactionary Spirit* is that each author claims to reveal the 21st century's nationalist, populist conservatives' hidden agenda, without having first made a good faith attempt to explicate this project as it is understood by people who believe in it. *That* effort would have given serious consideration to the possibility that these conservatives do not regard themselves as democracy's enemies and hierarchy's friends. They believe, rather, that mere democracy is more democratic than Lemann's "true" democracy. Accordingly, stewardship of a democratic experiment—and every democracy is one—requires curtailing true democracy to reinvigorate mere democracy. This means being more rather than less skeptical about granting power to people based on their claims of training and experience. The case for doing so is especially strong when the experts turn out to have the sort of training and experience that results in California's high-speed rail debacle, or the sort of radical identity politics masquerading as expertise that leads them to employ racial criteria when rationing life-saving drugs, as the Food and Drug Administration attempted three years ago during COVID. Relatedly, these conservatives believe that strengthening democracy means strengthening the *nations* that are governed democratically. There may be a day when cosmopolitanism or open borders are majority rather than luxury beliefs. Until then, mere—that is, *real*—democracy should reflect popular support for patriotism and particularity.

These opinions are not unassailable. The New Right may be coming up with dubious answers. But those answers should be debated on their merits, not disqualified by asserting that the questions themselves—about revitalizing both democratic agency and patriotic zeal—are indecent and illegitimate, topics only know-nothings and racists would raise. These attempts to dismiss and delegitimize the populist-nationalists are not only unfair. In practical terms, they are counterproductive, strengthening rather than weakening our era's New Right by confirming the suspicion that the people who claim to be democracy's defenders prefer rigging the system to competing in it.

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