

Postscript – The Past, The Present, and The Future

If one wishes a Republic to live long, it is necessary to draw it back often towards its beginning.
—*Niccolo Machiavelli, Discourses on Titus Livy, 1517.*

In thirteen essays, we have endeavored to present a political perspective founded anew on the principles of the Enlightenment and not bound to the worn refrains of the two major parties. We began with statements of principle, followed with arguments for governance, economics, and foreign affairs, and ended with a vision of what mankind may yet achieve. We yearn to see the United States resurgent, renewed as an enlightened Republic, working in concert with other free nations to preserve liberty and defeat tyranny; we desire to see it as a mighty Union that extends beyond the bounds of the Earth, yet in which each man and woman is represented in government and in most affairs is left at liberty to govern him- or herself as he or she sees fit; and we wish to see it as a federation of States, in which the preponderance of affairs that cannot responsibly be left to individual discretion are instead decided at a level of government closest to the people.

If this rhetoric carries a familiar echo, that is because it merely restates what our Union’s Founders, and those who preceded them, intended for our nation.¹ It is no revelation; it is simply a new ordering of venerable ideas. Yet it is the nature of things that these ideas, and the Republic they carry, are perpetually in danger of neglect. Neglect, over decades, causes pillars to crumble; and a damaged house can only endure so many blows from man and fortune till it shall collapse.

These United States have now for several years been assailed by the insidious delusion of ‘illiberal democracy,’ an idea of man that this series of essays was conceived to rebut. The result of that struggle lies undecided ahead of us. Yet our Union is now subjected to another assault, by a disease borne on the winds of fortune and colliding with a house divided and in disrepair.

We cannot offer policy to contain and defeat this virus; that must come from the men and women who have dedicated their lives to the study of medicine, and be implemented with due care by those whom the public has at present entrusted with civic authority. We shall only urge our fellow citizens to keep faith with the cause of liberty. In this trial, some might look with envy on the effort of a foreign government, centralized and totalitarian, to halt the disease; and they, afraid, might wonder whether such a system of government could better shield its citizens from the ravages of fortune. To this, we say that totalitarianism allowed the contagion to spread, for, in keeping with its ordinary mode, it silenced those who were first to speak.

In these United States, which encountered the virus at a more advanced stage, a different pattern has so far emerged; and though it is a very imperfect one, it gives some cause for hope. A federal response, more concerted and coherent than that to date, would be necessary and proper in such a crisis and certainly desired. Yet, in the absence of it, the States and cities have begun to act vigorously and on their own initiative. It will be through their effort, as much as the effort of the center, that our Union shall emerge from the present emergency; and it will be through their effort, likewise, that our Republic may emerge revitalized from its present political turmoil.

¹ “These considerations speak a persuasive language to every reflecting and virtuous mind, and exhibit the continuance of the Union as a primary object of Patriotic desire. Is there a doubt, whether a common government can embrace so large a sphere? Let experience solve it. ... We are authorized to hope that a proper organization of the whole, with the auxiliary agency of governments for the respective Sub divisions, will afford a happy issue to the experiment. 'Tis well worth a fair and full experiment.” George Washington, Farewell Address, September 17, 1796.

For a fundamental flaw in the concentration of power, the defining trait of totalitarianism and centralism, is that, for it to function benignly in times of crisis, it presupposes that the center shall be helmed by a wise and virtuous ruler, yet such an occurrence has throughout history been more exception than rule; whereas a fundamental strength in the diffusion of power, the defining trait of republicanism and federalism, is that among a large body of people there will always be some who are wise and virtuous, and those will obtain at least some power and do good with it.

Indeed, though much may yet intrude between the moment of this writing and the coming presidential election, it appears as if our Union might gain a reprieve. Mr. Biden, as much as we disagree with him on many matters of policy, is no peddler of illiberal democracy. We reckon his accession to the Presidency, should it transpire, shall have a calming effect on the Republic.

Yet if this were to occur, and even if the virus, too, were to subside, it shall nonetheless be imperative on both counts that the citizens of these United States remain vigilant. Just as the virus might find some hidden reservoir amidst humanity, where it may silently dwell and from time to time savagely resurface until it is finally eradicated, likewise has ‘illiberal democracy’ crept into a dark recess in our Union’s consciousness. Each time it rears its head it shall have to be vanquished, or our Republic shall be lost to despotism. Fellow citizens, our country’s trial shall not soon be over; rather, it is just begun.

And that is just as well, for what is needed now is not the promise of an instantaneous resolution, but hard, honest work. None of the ideals presented in this series shall be realized in a day; they might take decades to attain, and some might never be fulfilled entirely. Nor, even if our proposals could by some stroke of luck all be implemented at once, should they be. We are but human. Some of the policies we have put forth may, in the fullness of time, prove to possess some unforeseen flaw; others, which might prove fruitful over years, could nonetheless cause harm if enacted too suddenly or without great care. It is better, then, for them to appear as one argument in our Republic’s civic debate, so that they may be challenged and tested by those skeptical of them, and that they may emerge as law or policy only as the product of compromise.

But the ideas are worthwhile; they shall, in time, produce results far better than those that shall result from autocracy or the dim contradiction of ‘illiberal democracy,’ and thus we believe unwaveringly that a new model of classical federalism is worth striving for. So strive we shall.

This project, in the words of James Madison, is not the offspring of a single brain. It is only begun with these essays, composed over four years of conversation and deliberation with a number of patriotic citizens, and by the time of its fulfillment it will be the work of many heads and many hands.² We call for the formation of a great American political party to rival the two that presently exist, or to claim a place in the two-party system that is today occupied by one of them. We ask for scholars to read, consider, and refine our arguments, for statesmen to guide us through the chambers of government, and for you, fellow citizens, to support this undertaking through the continuous exercise of your fundamental rights of citizenship in the years to come.

—A humble U.S. Citizen, March 29, 2020

² “You give me a credit to which I have no claim, in calling me ‘the writer of the Constitution of the U.S.’ This was not, like the fabled Goddess of Wisdom, the offspring of a single brain. It ought to be regarded as the work of many heads and many hands.” James Madison, in a letter to William Cogswell, March 10, 1834.