

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

425

**The
Degradation of the
Democratic Dogma**

By Russell Kirk



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The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma

By Russell Kirk

This year's series of Heritage Lectures is concerned with the somewhat pressing question of whether our American culture will survive the tribulations of our age. In the two previous lectures, I have discussed the ideology called "multiculturalism" as a menace; and whether a civilization that lacks belief in a religion can endure. In my final lecture, in December, I mean to talk about means for combatting cultural decay. Today I have chosen for my subject the degradation of the democratic dogma.

I take my title from the writings of Henry and Brooks Adams. They found American democracy in process of degradation more than a century ago. The decay of the American Presidency from George Washington to Ulysses S. Grant, Henry Adams remarked, refuted altogether Darwin's theory of evolution. To a similar thesis I shall return presently.

But first, indulge me in some observations concerning the present condition of what is called "democracy" near the close of the 20th century. We are informed by certain voices that soon all the world will be democratic. But whether or not, the American mode of democratic government prevails, the abstract ideology called *democratism* that any government which has obtained a majority of votes be received as "democratic." Enthusiasts for unrestricted democracy presumably forget that Adolph Hitler, too, was democratically elected and sustained by popular plebiscites. Alexis de Tocqueville warned his contemporaries against "democratic despotism," 20th century writers discuss "totalist democracy."

I am suggesting, ladies and gentlemen, that *democracy*—literally, "the rule of the crowd"—is a term so broad and vague as to signify everything or nothing. The American democracy, a unique growth although an offshoot from British culture, innocent of ideology's fury—functioned fairly well in the past because of peculiar beliefs and conditions: a patrimony of ordered freedom, and especially, as Tocqueville pointed out, Americans' *mores*, or moral habits. What is called "democracy" today in most of the world—and nearly every regime represents itself as democratic—bears much resemblance to America's political and social pattern as the oar of the boat does to the ore of the mine. All that these regimes maintain in common is a claim that they rule with the assent of the majority of the people. The tyranny of the majority can be more oppressive, and more effectual, than the tyranny of a single person.

Not Readily Transplanted. Neoconservatives' demands nowadays that all the world be thoroughly democratized overnight remind me strongly of a similar enthusiasm not long after the end of the Second World War. Gentlemen such as Chester Bowles then proclaimed that Africa, liberated from European domination, promptly would rejoice in an array of democracies on the American model. The United States took measures, then and later, to accelerate this happy progress—economic restraints upon trade of one sort or another with Portugal, Rhodesia, and latterly the Republic of South Africa. We all know, of course, how blissfully democratic Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) are today; while South Africa's peoples, thanks to the beneficence of American and European liberals, enjoy the prospect of civil war in emulation of what occurred in the Congo three decades ago. America's democracy is not readily

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on November 13, 1992, delivering the third in a series of four lectures asking "Will Our Civilization Survive?"

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1992 by The Heritage Foundation.

transplanted overseas. If anybody emerges alive from the present agony in Somalia, will a peaceful democracy, told by the nose, soon come to pass there? Was the ejection, after the Second World War, of the Italian government from part of Somaliland, and the withdrawal of the British administrators from another portion of that territory, a victory for democracy in Africa? Ask the Somali dead.

My point is this: Merely to shout the word *democracy* is not to bring into being a society endowed with order, justice, and freedom. Those blessings grow but slowly, and by good nurture. The roots of the American democratic republic run back through hundreds of years of American, British, and European experience. While we prate about exporting American democracy to Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia—although, as Daniel Boorstin has written, “the American Constitution is not for export”—our own political institutions seem to be crumbling. We may sink into the Latin American brand of democracy, class against class, the economy periodically ruined by inflation, with a semblance of order restored from time to time by the military.

Recalling 1929. Sinclair Lewis, late in life, wrote an implausible novel entitled *It Can't Happen Here*—a fictional affirmation that a fascist regime might be established in the United States; the book was published in 1935. The novel was more comical than convincing; but it does not follow that the American democratic republic will endure for eternity, as Rome was supposed to last. I may be one of the very few persons present today who remembers clearly the events of the American experience between, and including, the years 1929 and 1933. I find America's social and economic and political circumstances today markedly similar to those of that tumultuous era. Changes still larger than those worked by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal may come to pass during the next four years, say. Economically, the position of the United States is more precarious than it was in 1929: our national debt is astronomical in quantity; personal (family) debt, on the average, is more than four-fifths of a family's annual income; the apparatus of credit is vastly overexpanded; and taxes begin to be crushing. In certain of our cities, ferocious riots far exceed in magnitude the disorders of 1929-1933, and after: those riots really are proletarian risings. This is a time in which, in Yeats's lines, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”



In 1957, at Bruges, during a conference on Atlantic community, I met Amaury de Riencourt, the author of a book entitled *The Coming Caesars*, published that year; the book was very widely discussed then, but now is forgotten. Unless measures of restraint should be taken, Riencourt wrote—and taken promptly—the United States would fall under the domination of 20th century Caesars. Riencourt argued:

Caesarism is not dictatorship, not the result of one man's overriding ambition; not a brutal seizure of power through revolution. It is not based on a specific doctrine or philosophy. It is essentially pragmatic and untheoretical. It is a slow, often century-old, unconscious development that ends in a voluntary surrender of a free people escaping from freedom to one autocratic master....

Political power in the Western world has become increasingly concentrated in the United States, and in the office of the President within America. The power and prestige of the President have grown with the growth of America and of democracy within America, with the multiplication of economic, political, and military emergencies, with the

necessity of ruling what is virtually becoming an American empire—the universal state of a Western civilization at bay....

Caesarism can come to America constitutionally, without having to alter or break down any existing institution. The White House is already the seat of the most powerful tribunician authority ever known to history. All it needs is amplification and extension. Caesarism in America does not have to challenge the Constitution as in Rome or engage in civil warfare and cross any fateful Rubicon. It can slip in quite naturally, discreetly, through constitutional channels.

Just so. Caesarism slipped into the White House constitutionally, if not naturally, with the murder of President Kennedy in 1963. The plebiscitary democracy would elect Lyndon Johnson President in 1964; but Johnson's military failure would undo him, despite his *panem et circenses*; and a rebellious senator would strip him of the purple. If Caesars do not win their battles, they fall. In this, although not in much else, perhaps it was as well that the war in Vietnam was lost.

On a wall of my library hangs a photograph of myself with President Johnson; both of us are smiling; it is well to be civil to Caesar. It might be thought that Russell Kirk would not have been eager to visit Caesar in the Oval office of the Imperial Mansion; indeed I was not. But, in collaboration with James McClellan, I had written not long before a biography of Robert Taft; Johnson, as a senatorial colleague, had delivered a funeral eulogy of the famous Republican; and so I was induced by the patroness of the Robert A. Taft Institute of Government to present the President with a copy of the book, at a little White House ceremony.

A Visit to Caesar. Present for that occasion in the Oval Office were two Democratic Senators who had been on good terms with Senator Taft—Byrd of Virginia and Tydings of Maryland. Lyndon Johnson towered tall and masterful, clearly a bad man to have for an adversary. The Taft book was presented, and the President exchanged some brief remarks with me; photographs were taken while my irrepressible wife strolled behind the presidential desk, examining photographs of Lady Bird, Lynda Bird, and other folk at the ranch.

True to his reputation if to naught else, President Johnson wheeled and dealt with Senator Byrd and Senator Tydings the while. He knew me for a syndicated columnist, but surely never had opened any of my books. "Stay in school! Stay in school!" Johnson had shouted, over television, to the rising generation. Yet this Caesar had no need of books; he had been the vainglorious disciple of Experience, that famous master of fools.

No, Johnson did not open books: with Septimius Severus, he might have said, "Pay the soldiers; the rest do not matter." Had he not Robert McNamara, creator of the Edsel, to counsel him? Power was all, and surely the power of the United States, under Johnson's hand, was infinite. All the way with LBJ! There came into my head, in the Oval Office, a passage from Amaury de Riencourt:

With Caesarism and Civilization, the great struggles between political parties are no longer concerned with principles, programs and ideologies, but with *men*. Marius, Sulla, Cato, Brutus still fought for principles. But now, everything became personalized. Under Augustus, parties still existed, but there were no more *Optimates* or *Populares*. No more conservatives or democrats. Men campaigned for or against Tiberius or Drusus or Caius Caesar. No one believed any more in the efficacy of

ideas, political panaceas, doctrines, or systems, just as the Greeks had given up building great philosophic systems generations before. Abstractions, ideas, and philosophies were rejected to the periphery of their lives and of the empire, to the East where Jews, agnostics, Christians, and Mithraists attempted to conquer the world of souls and minds while the Caesars ruled their material existence.

All the way with LBJ! *Ave atque vale!*

Consequences of *Hubris*. Every inch a Caesar LBJ looked; he might have sat for Michelangelo for the carving of a statue of a barracks emperor. Experience, nevertheless, had not taught this imperator how to fight a war. To fancy that hundreds of thousands of fanatic guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars, supplied by Russia and China, might be defeated by military operations merely defensive—plus a great deal of bombing from the air, destroying civilians chiefly, that bombing pinpointed by Johnson himself in the White House! The American troops in Vietnam fought admirably well—how well, my old friend General S. L. A. Marshall described unforgettably in his books—but their situation was untenable. “Imagination rules mankind,” Bonaparte had said—Napoleon, master of the big battalions. Had Johnson possessed any imagination, he would have sealed Haiphong, as Nixon did later. Only so might the war have been won.

Afflicted by *hubris*, Johnson Caesar piled the tremendous cost of the war—a small item was the immense quantity of milk flown daily from San Francisco to Vietnam, American troops not campaigning on handfuls of rice—upon the staggering cost of his enlargement of the welfare state at home. One might have thought he could not do sums. He ruined the dollar and bequeathed to the nation an incomprehensible national debt. Both guns and butter! It had been swords and liturgies with earlier emperors.

It is with variations that history repeats itself. Ignoring history, LBJ was condemned to repeat it.

Morally, he was the worst man ever to make himself master of the White House. The corrupt antics of Bobby Baker and Billie Sol Estes did not bring him down, although he had been intimately connected with both.

In June 1961, an agent of the Department of Agriculture, Henry Marshall, had been found shot to death in Texas. Marshall had been about to expose the criminal wheeling and dealing of Billie Sol Estes, and in that wheeling and dealing Lyndon Johnson, then Vice-President, had participated. A justice of the peace declared the murder of Marshall to have been suicide.

But in March 1984, a grand jury in Robertson County would look into the mystery. A federal marshal and Billie Sol Estes would certify before that jury. Estes, under immunity, swore that the killing had been decided upon at a meeting at Vice-President Johnson’s Washington residence; Johnson had given the order and directed a hanger-on of his, Malcolm Wallace, to execute it. The grand jury believed Estes, it appears, and concluded that Marshall’s death had been a homicide. No one was indicted, for the grand jury presumed that the murderers already were dead.

Such frequently is the way of Caesars. Like some other Caesars, Johnson, from small beginnings, accumulated while in public office a large fortune. No one ever accused him of the vice of scrupulosity. An ill man to deal with, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Yet Eugene the Poet, Eugene the Giant-Killer, would fetch Caesar down. I do not think that Eugene McCarthy would have converted himself into a Caesar; nay, American conservatives might have been better content with President McCarthy than they would become with President Bush or will be with President Clinton.

Politics of the Absurd. For the past several months, the American people endured the least edifying of presidential campaigns. No one of the three gentlemen who aspired to the presidential office commanded much respect, and their debates were more concerned with trivia and intemperate accusations than with the great and most difficult public decisions that must be made very soon. The feeblest of the three candidates proposed to refer all of those decisions to the electorate at large, by electronic means of polling—as if every American voter were able and eager to express a considered judgment on what courses should be undertaken in the conduct of foreign policy, on how the national debt should be reduced, on how civil disorders should be averted, on what to do about the American proletariat, on the improvement of public schooling, on the allocation of priorities in public expenditure, on the afflictions of centralization and bureaucracy, on the question of immigration, on the modes of averting an economic collapse on the scale of what occurred in 1929—on these and innumerable other public issues, it is proposed that we take a hasty popular poll! That way lies democratic madness. Why bother with statesmen? Surely the typical American voter is omniscient. We have entered upon the politics of the absurd.

This year's three presidential aspirants seemed absurd to a great multitude of citizens. How had they been selected for candidacy? Mr. Perot selected himself, soon withdrew (but not from modesty), and then selected himself afresh. Mr. Bush and Mr. Clinton were selected chiefly by primary campaigns, the results of which were determined chiefly by the amount of money they were able to spend, respectively, on television advertising. In the case of President Bush, his being an incumbent of the office, with large benefactions to bestow, saved the day for him. I was general chairman of the Buchanan campaign in Michigan. We Buchanan backers had only ten thousand dollars to spend; while the Bush people spent half a million dollars in Michigan. *Sic transit gloria mundi*; to them that hath shall be given. Certain Roman Caesars bought the imperial purple. Increasingly, our presidential candidates win by purchasing time on the boob-tube.

Not As Framers Intended. The Framers of the Constitution gravely distrusted democratic appetites, as such had been demonstrated by Shays' Rebellion. Also they distrusted arbitrary power in a chief executive. So they endeavored—unsuccessfully, as matters have turned out—to devise a prudent method of selecting presidents, far removed from popular vote. This was the Electoral College. It was assumed by the Framers that within each of the several states there would be chosen (through divers modes) able and conscientious presidential electors, free agents, "men of superior discernment, virtue, and information" (in Senator Thomas Hart Benton's phrases), who would select a strong and good President "according to their own will," regardless of popular sentiment of the hour. This upright intended Electoral College never has functioned as the Framers intended, nevertheless, because with the rise of great coherent political parties came the pledging in advance of electors to the candidacy of some particular individual—Adams, or Jefferson, or Burr, say—and therefore the reduction of the Electoral College to insignificance, except so far as the College preserved the idea of a nation of sovereign states, the presidential electoral vote being cast by the several states according to their representation in the Congress—and not according to the popular vote, nationally regarded.

The Framers of the Constitution conceivably might have revised a different move for the Electoral College that could have survived the rise of great political parties. One such arrangement might have been to make the sitting governors of the several states, if chosen long before the presidential election, the independent choosers of the President, so removing the selection from the ephemeral preferences of the great mass of ill-informed voters nationally. But "the saddest words of tongue or pen are simply these: 'It might have been.'" Now we expect presidential candidates to exhaust themselves, and their supporters' fund, by *two* overwhelming national campaigns—one the primaries and conventions held in every state, the other the frantic struggle on the eve of the November election, every four years. This method is supposed to ascertain the popular will; but in effect it blurs distinctions between parties, the candidates promising to be all

thing, to all men—and women; and commonly this method gives us demagogues or else bladders of vanity as party candidates. All too possibly it may give us more Caesar-presidents; President Bush endeavored to be one such, causing the deaths of a quarter of a million people in Iraq; but the popularity of that exploit rapidly evaporated. The more we behave as if the President were the embodiment of the American democracy, and do little about the Congress except to revile senators and representatives, the less genuinely democratic this nation must become.



Electronic technology becomes a tool of plebiscitary democracy. As Mr. James M. Perry put it in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 4, hereafter, having upheld the presidential contest of 1992, “Candidates will build on what they saw this year— 800-telephone number satellite hook-ups, soft Larry King-style interviews, televised town meetings.” It’s a brave new world, with words like “teledemocracy” and “interactive communications” being used by the scholars to describe it. Notions like Mr. Perot’s “electronic town hall,” should they come to pass, would concentrate the national public’s attention upon the presidential candidates merely, sweeping aside the mechanism of parties and in effect reducing the Congress (or, on the level of the several states, the state legislatures) to little more than ratifying bodies, pledged to whatever programs the victorious presidential candidate might advocate and decree. The peril to true representative government, and to America’s old territorial democracy, is too obvious for me to labor this point. The presidential candidates, in such a novel system, necessarily would have to raise enormous quantities of money from such special interests, pressure groups, and ethnic blocs as might expect to profit from the ascendancy of some vigorous demagogue or some persuasive instrument of oligarchy.

Yet a good many Americans fancy that these developments founded upon television and telephone will bring about “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” At our county Republican convention in my state of Michigan, an amiable young candidate for the office of representative in the Michigan legislature—a person who thought himself conservative—declared himself delighted at the prospect of serving the people “in the new direct democracy.” Now direct democracy did not function well in ancient Athens, when the whole electorate—a few thousand men—could assemble in the agora; it would function disastrously, if at all, in the United States of the 20th century, with a population of some two hundred and fifty million people. In any event, the People possessing no unanimous collective will on any question, this virtual abolition of representative government would come down to skillful manipulation of the moment’s public opinion by a circle of electronic-media specialists in the service of the President: an extreme form of plebiscitary democracy. In effect, the Presidency would become a dictatorship achieved without violence and checked only by the necessity of an election every four years. How very democratic!

Plurality President. I speak thus alarmingly only of future possibilities, not of the swiftly approaching reign of Clinton Caesar. For Mr. Clinton achieved a majority of the popular vote merely in his own state of Arkansas; he is a plurality President merely, no popular hero empowered by the Demos to shape the world nearer to his heart’s desire. Moreover, he has promised all things to all men—free medical care; free college education, or virtually free, for all comers; emancipation from the tiresome restraints of bourgeois morality; more lavish entitlements for such minorities as can turn out the vote; Lord knows what all benefits. These promises cannot be fulfilled; therefore the reproaches which were heaped upon President Bush these past four years will descend upon President Clinton twofold, not long after his inauguration; and he lacks the rhetorical skill and cunning with which Franklin Roosevelt, in highly similar circumstances, deflected or repelled such criticisms. So feebleness, rather than militancy, is liable to predominate during the Clinton years. And if President Clinton presumes to increase income taxes, as he has

said he will do—why, the new Congress, mindful of the fate of the late Bush Administration, may turn rebellious. *In fine*, Mr. Clinton will not be crowned with laurel.

Clinton's successors, nevertheless, may have more happy opportunities for the concentration of power in their hands. Increasing military involvement in the European continent, or the collapse of the world economy in a fashion more ruinous than what occurred from 1929 to 1992, might whet presidential candidates' eagerness for power, and public willingness to entrust all to the Great White Father.

Circumstances from Siberia to San Francisco strongly resemble political and social and economic circumstances in most of the world between the two World Wars. The coming of immense inflation of currencies—now quite conceivable—might cause such immense public resentment and distress that executive forces and legislative bodies might be swept out of power, in country after country, and by plebiscites might usher in persons not at all scrupulous in their attainment of power. Such radical changes would be accomplished in the name of Democracy, of course, but what would result would be plebiscitary democracy, ruthless enough.

In the name of Democracy, America's representative government, under the Constitution, might be swept aside, and politics might be debased to contests between hypocritical ideologues, every one of them claiming to be more democratic than the others. What's in a name? In Haiti, "democracy" signifies the arbitrary power of deposed President Aristide to have rubber tires slung round the necks of his opponents, and they set afire. In South Africa, the apotheosis of democracy, one man one vote on Benthamite principles would end in civil war and general impoverishment. In the United States, the demand for more democracy might lead to the legalized plundering of the hardworking by those who prefer not to work at all. And a line of American Caesars might be required to preserve any sort of order.

Recovering True Representative Government. I am arguing, ladies and gentlemen, that these United States would be only degraded by a submission to an ideological democracy, in either domestic or foreign policy, a Rousseauistic democracy restyled "teledemocracy." What we require is a vigorous recovery of true representative government, one of the principal achievements of our culture, a legacy from centuries of British and colonial experience and from the practical wisdom of the Framers of the Constitution of the United States. Say not the struggle naught availeth, friends. In my concluding lecture of this series, I will endeavor to let some cheerfulness break in, suggesting means for cultural restoration in a diversity of aspects.

