

ATTACK ON DEMOCRACY





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Former President Trump is one of the most dangerous individuals to ever hold power in America. I think historians are going to look back on this time and the Trump MAGA movement as one of the first real modern threats to the continuity of our democratic institutions. Whatever you may think of his policies—he may indeed have been right about China, for example and the tax cuts were actually good for the economy—it is hard to ignore his behavior in the final days of his Presidency, when he seemed so willing to undermine our democratic processes.

For me, it has been hard to ignore his behavior since the very beginning. I have never been able to get past the fact that this is an individual who admitted, joked, whatever you want to call it about his habit of sexually assaulting women... and then still got elected President. That just doesn't make any sense to me. When it comes to leadership, you simply cannot ignore something like that, even if you agree completely with every policy stance and plan. Morality is paramount and way more important than policy and ideology when it comes to leadership. For without a moral compass an individual has nothing to defend against the intoxications of power. This is exactly what happened to Trump.

There's this famous moment in our history that demonstrates the point. During the Revolutionary War our nascent government was always struggling financially, so much so that it was often behind on paying the troops. At some point late in

Washington, in his own time, developed a reputation for his moral character and an unwillingness to compromise with truth.

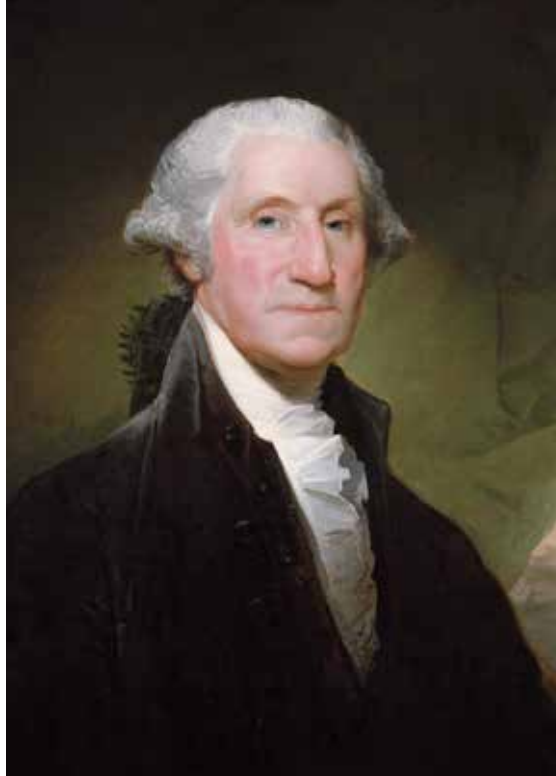
the war, this became such a problem that a movement started among some of the officers in the Continental Army to make General Washington king so that he could fix this pay problem. But clearly they misread Washington. He wasn't just another General playing the perennial game of power. Here was his response:

With a mixture of great surprise & astonishment I have read with attention the Sentiments you have submitted to my perusal. Be assured, Sir, no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed, & I must view with abhorrence, and reprehend with severity—For the present, the communication of them will rest in my own bosom, unless some further agitation of the matter, shall make a disclosure necessary.

I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country. If I am not deceived in the knowledge of myself, you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable—at the same time in justice to my own feeling I must add, that no man possesses a more sincere wish to see ample Justice done to the Army than I do, and as far as my powers & influence, in a constitution[al] way extend, they shall be employed to the utmost of my abilities to effect it, should there be any occasion—Let me [conj]ure you then, if you have any regard for your Country, concern for your self or posterity—or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your Mind, & never communicate, as from yourself, or any one else, a sentiment of the like nature.

Washington is basically saying here: “What could possibly have made you think that I would ever even consider such a thing. Don't ever bring this up again!” We don't need to ask what Trump would've done if presented a similar offer, we know! Going back through history you almost NEVER see this. There's the one famous story of the Roman Cincinnatus but that's about it. Even George III, Washington's great adversary, recognized that this refusal made Washington “a man for the ages.”

Now, I don't want to gloss over the fact that President Washington was morally compromised as well, especially when judged by modern standards. He was indeed a slaveowner. But we know this: Washington, in his own time, developed a reputation for his moral character and an unwillingness to compromise with truth. You don't see this very often. You have to have a special kind of moral character to be judged by your contemporaries in this way. Even with slavery, we know that he really struggled with it, tried to make progress in ending it and ultimately freed his own slaves.



Anyway, after the dramatic events of the attack on the Capitol and the weeks of uncertainty around the transition of power, I found myself drawn again to ancient history. Maybe ten years ago or so, I remember reading in Polybius a theory about the natural evolution of government. Essentially the idea is that governments follow a sort of natural evolutionary arc: from monarchy to oligarchy to democracy and then back around again. Within each form of government there was both a good and a bad manifestation:

- Kingship – Tyranny
- Aristocracy – Oligarchy
- Democracy – Mob-Rule

And as history moved forward through the cycle, the government started off on the good side, then devolved to the bad and it was this process that created the conditions for the next form of government to emerge.

I think the ancients were better able to perceive the existence of a pattern like this because they lived in such volatile times. In some cases, this whole evolutionary arc happened within the span of a few generations so some people were alive to see the whole thing or most of it.

In thinking about this theory and how it relates to our day and age I think there are two interesting points here: 1. The idea that this evolutionary arc is a natural and inevitable process and 2. That this evolution follows this same set path. Our own history seems to be following the pattern—we started off under a monarchy which turned tyrannical, then established an aristocratic republic which turned corrupt and have since

become steadily more and more democratic. If we accept the theory, the next move on the arc is a devolution into mob rule, then chaos followed by the emergence of monarchy. In other words, EXACTLY what happened to the Roman Republic with the rise of Julius Caesar.

I don't think history moves as fast as it did in the ancient world and so, even if this is a true theory (who knows!) we're probably pretty far away from a moment like this. But what happened with Trump definitely gave me pause. For the first time in my life, I at least considered the possibility that an individual could try to usurp the power of our democratic constitution. This has been unthinkable for almost all our history. Maybe there was one moment in time, right when Washington was coming to the end of his second term, where people considered the idea. Many of the European powers probably assumed that Washington would just stay on as President until he died but we know what happened there. Even in the Civil War era, the Confederates preferred secession over any attempt to undo the results of the election of Lincoln or forcibly take power from him.

Now, I don't know if this ancient theory is true or not. How could we really know such a thing anyway? But I do think if you take the idea seriously for a second, it becomes difficult to dismiss it outright. I want to end this article with a quote from Polybius that I found so unbelievably prescient and on-point. If it was written in a different style it would exactly describe something that's happening in our country today. As you read this quote, think about what we've just been

through. Consider seriously the messages of the MAGA movement. Remember the attack on the Capitol. And think about the cult of billionaires we have in our society and how many of them have already run for office...

And as long as any survive who have had experience of oligarchical supremacy and domination, they regard their present constitution as a blessing, and hold equality and freedom as of the utmost value. But as soon as a new generation has arisen, and the democracy has descended to their children's children, long association weakens their value for equality and freedom, and some seek to become more powerful than the ordinary citizens; and the most liable to this temptation are the rich.

So when they begin to be fond of office, and find themselves unable to obtain it by their own unassisted efforts and their own merits, they ruin their estates, while enticing and corrupting the common people in every possible way. By which means when, in their senseless mania for reputation, they have made the populace ready and greedy to receive bribes, the virtue of democracy is destroyed, and it is transformed into a government of violence and the strong hand. For the mob, habituated to feed at the expense of others, and to have its hopes of a livelihood in the property of its neighbors, as soon as it has got a leader sufficiently ambitious and daring, being excluded by poverty from the sweets of civil honors, produces a reign of mere violence. Then come tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments, redivisions of land; until, after losing all trace of civilization, it has once more found a master and a despot.□



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