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How Democracies Perish

by Eric Chenoweth

> "Democracy may, after all, turn out to be an historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes." — Jean François Revel, *How Democracies Perish, 1983*

There have been many who prognosticated democracy's doom. It now may seem strange that one of France's most brilliant political theorists, Jean François Revel, an ardent defender of Western liberal democracy, once feared that democracy might not survive the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its disciplined pursuit of world power. While the Soviet threat was not imaginary, democracy survived its most potent post-war adversary. Today, however, we must again wonder: even without such a global threat as Soviet communism, could democracy still perish? Is it vulnerable, as Revel wrote, to internal enemies "seeking to abolish it legally"? Could modern democracy, like ancient democracy before it, end up being a historical anomaly?

These are not frivolous academic questions. We face a clear and present danger. For the first time in American history, an explicitly authoritarian candidate has gained the nomination to the US presidency of one of America's two major parties. Donald Trump, having no qualifications and displaying no capacity or knowledge for being president, has built a mass movement of followers by adopting nationalist and chauvinist slogans and messages, making promises to run the country like an autocratic businessman, and issuing pledges to undermine the country's constitutional foundations, liberal principles, and some of its most basic commitments under international laws and treaties. Trump took full advantage of what Revel called democracy's "paradoxical protections" for anti-democratic political action and speech to win the Republican nomination and now has gained the backing of most of the Republican establishment and broader Republican electorate. Given the rise of anti-democratic political forces around the globe, the consequences for American and global democracy if Donald Trump were to be elected president and attempt to carry out his platform are as terrifying as any previous threat to democracy's existence.

We can hope that the majority of the voters will save American democracy from its grave threat. Certainly, the danger his candidacy poses merits the largest possible repudiation in the general elections (see also my earlier article, "The Authoritarian Temptation"). Yet, hope is no substitute for analysis. For much of the last year, experienced pundits, prognosticators, and

politicians told the public that an anti-democratic politician like Donald Trump would not and could not succeed. Now, the Republican Party's appeasement, together with the neutrality, silence, and capitulation of others in the face of this threat, means Donald Trump has a real chance of winning the presidency. As the nominee of one of the two major parties, Trump consistently now polls 40 or more percent of the vote and in some polls leads the race against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. The susceptibility of public opinion to media coverage and ongoing events — sequential major terror attacks; ongoing violence involving police and civilians; major "revelations" about the opposition candidate — all of this makes more possible the election of the authoritarian candidate. How has such an existential threat arisen in the world's most established democracy? The answer lies in the dominant political behavior of long-standing democratic institutions, their elected representatives, and others claiming the mantle of defenders of American and world democracy. The future explanation for "how democracies perish" is being demonstrated before our eyes.

The Road of Appeasement

From the outset of his candidacy, Trump showed no real allegiance to any ideology or political party. What he possesses is a monomaniacal desire for fame, money, and now power. The pathology is not hidden from view. As Roger Stone, the long-time Republican operative and a close Trump adviser, puts it: "There is only one star in the 'Donald Trump Show,' and that's Donald Trump."

One might expect the elected leadership of a 162-year-old political party would protect that institution from a hostile takeover by an authoritarian megalomaniac. There were a number of conservative writers, publications, and politicians that raised their voices in opposition to Trump. The most responsible tried to organize a "Never Trump" movement. Yet, what became clear as time went on was that no political leadership would emerge to defend the party from an increasingly volatile electorate susceptible to Trump's message. The 16 other candidates for the Republican presidential nomination were unprepared, unwilling or incapable of opposing an anti-democratic politician. As they were sequentially smashed down by Trump's growing political force, they all refused to coalesce around the clearest non-authoritarian alternative, Ohio Governor John Kasich. The rest of the Republican Party's elected leadership stood mostly silent except to occasionally voice that certain Trump statements were out of bounds. When Speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan turned off his election mute button to oppose Trump's anti-constitutional proposal to ban all Muslims from entering the United States, some projected that Ryan was signaling resolve to oppose Trump's candidacy. Neither House Speaker Ryan nor any other current Republican leader, nor any group of candidates, current elected officials, or former leaders organized themselves to oppose consistently or determinedly Donald Trump's candidacy. Former Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney finally spoke out strongly and clearly but without purposeful action or effect.

The stage for appeasement was set. Each day brought fresh evidence that Trump is unfit to be president and poses a danger to American democracy and the world's security, yet the slow and steady accommodation of an authoritarian leader kept bringing greater and greater acceptance. The competitors for the Republican nomination all left the field and most stood by their pledge to support the presumptive Republican nominee. Jeb Bush and the other Bush family members joined Romney among a handful of other elected leaders and former candidates to declare they would not support Trump or attend the Republican nominating convention (Cruz waited until the convention to "non-endorse"). But *all* abstained from organizing any real political opposition. Republican Party Chairman Reince Priebus, House Speaker Ryan, and nearly all other party leaders asserted that Trump "won the vote fairly" and deserved to be the nominee. The "abstainers" also accepted such claims. And so the vast majority of elected Republican Party leaders at the national, state, and local level endorsed Trump or stated they will support him.

Altogether, the Republican leadership displayed a total abdication of political responsibility. The party's elected representatives and leaders should have exerted their authority to protect that institution's democratic integrity and future. Yet, when a group of principled delegates tried to obtain the right to "unbind" their vote on the first ballot at the Republican convention — providing the opportunity to assert actual democratic control over the Republican Party's nomination — the response was an organized intimidation campaign by Republican Party and Trump operatives and general silence on the part of Republican leaders. Trump, having no stake or prior belief in the party (he has changed party registration at least 9 times), completed the transformation of the Republican Party into his own personal instrument.

This appeasement continued despite all reality. Trump praised Saddam Hussein for being "great at dealing with terrorists"; he suggested that ISIS's barbarism be responded to in kind; he defended anti-Semitic messages sent out by his campaign and supporters; he issued threats of retribution towards politicians who refuse to support him. This is a *single day's example* of Trump pronouncements. After these were made, Paul Ryan, refusing to rescind his endorsement of Trump, stated, "Look, we're going to disagree on some things. . . . What we do agree on is we don't want another Democrat in the White House."

Thus, instead of opposing a clear danger to democracy, Ryan is continuing to treat this as a normal election in which only partisan (and tenuous) party affiliations should determine political behavior. Nothing apparently will shake his or the rest of the Republican Party leadership's appeasement of Trump, not the candidate's transformation of the Republican Party away from long-held foreign policy positions, nor his repeated statements that as president he will abandon America's commitment to NATO and other allies, nor other alarming statements that indicate he would serve the interests of and partner with the leader of an aggressive foreign power, Russia. None of this should be surprising: Trump has long praised Vladimir Putin's authoritarian leadership, while his campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, greatly enriched himself by fronting for pro-Putin dictators and oligarchs — a fact that only recently started gaining greater

attention. Yet, as intelligence officials express growing alarm at providing Donald Trump security briefings and some have privately expressed the view that his campaign aides are foreign agents, House Speaker Ryan instead absurdly demands that Hillary Clinton be denied such briefings as the Democratic Party's nominee for president.

There are numerous examples of anti-democratic parties being organized within democracies but only a few historical precedents of appeasement by democratic leaders to dictatorial parties. President Paul von Hindenburg's naming of Adolph Hitler as Chancellor of Germany after his Nazi party won a small plurality in elections is the most consequential. This example should serve as a permanent historical lesson, but clearly it does not. Now we witness an historical first: most of the elected leaders of an established democratic political party, joined by the large majority of the party's membership, are willingly accepting an authoritarian takeover of their own party — whether by complicity, appeasement, or inaction.

The Path of Neutrality

The Republican delegates seeking to vote their conscience at the convention and a number of Republican Party office holders who are either resigning or declaring that they will not vote for Trump show some political courage. They are being attacked publicly and privately and subjected to social media hate campaigns. Their livelihoods and political careers are being threatened.

Such menacing should lead to one conclusion: neutrality is insufficient in the face of authoritarian danger. Yet, most such Republicans and most conservative writers are declaring that the country faces two equally bad "evils" and that they could not possibly vote for either of them. *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol seeks a third-party alternative candidate for Republicans to vote their "conscience." *Commentary* editor John Podhoretz suggests boycotting the election and forsaking one's democratic responsibility as a citizen altogether. Others, like William Voegeli, senior editor at the *Claremont Review of Books*, propose a more ominous course: to rebuild the Republican Party on the basis of the mob constituency Trump has built within the Republican Party. Democracy must be saved by anti-democracy.

Presidential elections in the United States are often characterized as presenting choices between "two evils." That is because America's dominant two-party system leaves many independent voters and also many members within the two political parties without a candidate in the general election representing their specific views or interests. While it is the very essence of democracy that there is *never* an ideal candidate, many people have come to believe that if they do not have such a candidate to vote for, the choices they do have must be "evil." This type of thinking has become embedded in political culture. The "other" in politics has become by definition a political evil. According to a Pew Research Center poll, nearly half of each party's voters believe "the other party to be a grave danger to the future of the country." This belief has been fueled by both side's pundits and politicians, who have written and spoken in increasingly

extreme language about the immoral and dire consequences of political opponents winning elections and determining policies. Ideas on the best ways to govern, differences over policies, and questions over political and personal behavior have become manifestations of political extremism or treason, signs of impending national disaster, and proof of total corruption and illegality. This heightened political rhetoric has helped lay the groundwork for an authoritarian candidate using extreme appeals and language to prey on people's fears and emotions and to delegitimize and demonize all opponents.

Such talk and belief is nonsense — reflecting it seems an active mass intellectual repression of the history of American and world politics. Although the partisan divide has widened in the last two decades, America's two parties until now encompassed the normal political range of beliefs within most democracies, from very liberal to very conservative (in American terminology). There is no democracy that has faced "grave danger" to its existence from this broadly democratic political range. Extremist parties have upset this balance from time to time, yet the vast majority of parties and candidates in democracies do not represent political evils but rather politically competitive constituencies and ideas. Like nearly all of life's circumstances, voters have "less bad" or "more good" choices depending on their viewpoint and needs. While the results in elections have profound and even moral consequences — it is why people do and should engage in politics — they rarely put at risk the future of the country nor constitute choices between actual political evils, either greater or lesser. It is the general advantage of democracy.

The 2016 US presidential election is normal in that there are two realistic choices for president, the Democratic and Republican nominees. However, this is not in any way a normal choice. On one side has emerged a manifest political evil: a volatile authoritarian candidate who threatens the American constitutional system and has transformed a major political party into an anti-democratic personal instrument, who daily assaults the country's political civility and any sense of political morality or justice, and who represents a clear risk to the country's national security and even the world's survival. On the other side is a democratic alternative who reflects the centrist majority viewpoint of the country's liberal party. While falling short in ethical behavior and displaying some serious lapses of professional and political judgment, Clinton's failings are those of a normal politician in a democracy and in no way threaten its foundations. She retains a demonstrated capacity to serve in elected and appointed leadership positions, generally adheres to democratic norms, and has expressed consistent allegiance to the post-war international world order that is essential to protecting American and democratic interests. We have here not a choice between two evils (greater and lesser), or between "less bad" or "more good" candidates, but between a political evil and a democratic, if not ideal or desired, alternative.

The past two decades of ideological shrillness should not deafen the public's ears to the abundant clarion calls of genuine political danger. Anyone who values democracy, whether as a conservative or a social democrat (like Revel, my own viewpoint), has a positive choice in this

election: for the democrat. Neutrality when faced with such an alternative is to choose not to take a stand against political evil. It is a rare instance in a democratic election to actually be able to take such a stand. That so many are choosing neutrality, just as so many are choosing appeasement, seriously enhances the possibilities that an authoritarian might succeed to gain power in the birthplace of modern democracy.

The Sound of Silence

To their credit, the conservative neutralists have not been silent. Most have been accurately describing Donald Trump and his political character: that he is bigoted, racist, ignorant, unqualified, intemperate, unbalanced, unprincipled, unhinged, barbarian, corrupt, a pathological liar, a con man, an egotist, even fascistic. It is all similar to what liberals have been writing. What the neutralists are writing and saying should lead any reasonable person, if not themselves, to make a definitive choice to vote against Trump and for Clinton. There is, however, a strange category of people who have been silent about the danger of Trump: the people who claim the privilege to promote democracy in all other parts of the world.

Since the early 1980s, a whole enterprise has risen with the aim of promoting democracy abroad. The main institution for carrying out that mission has been the publicly funded and privately run National Endowment for Democracy, but it encompasses many other non-governmental institutions as well. An expansion of public funding for such organizations and programs has reflected a consensus around the positive idea that the United States should support the advancement of democracy beyond its shores both for idealistic and practical reasons (American security is enhanced by diminishing the number of authoritarian enemies and increasing the number of democratic allies). One might expect that those engaged in defending and promoting democracy abroad, identifying threats to democracy, and giving grants to organizations struggling against dictatorships would speak out against a significant anti-democratic threat in their own country. The difficulty, though, is that funding for such programs relies on bipartisan political support. Dependent on government and public funds, democracy promoters are cautious not to comment on American politics.

Thus, on May 12, in an annual lecture assessing the state of democracy in the world, the president of the National Endowment for Democracy, Carl Gershman, refers just obliquely to the presidential election. He states that American “greatness will not be restored just by loudly proclaiming that America needs to be great again” or by a “rejection of the idea that democratic values are universal.” While Gershman acknowledges that democracy in the world is in “clear recession” due to “resurgent authoritarianism” and that it faces even a “moral and political crisis” in the West, he expresses “cautious optimism” about democracy’s future and looks to what he calls “the global democracy movement” as the new foundation for its advancement. He says nothing about the threat to American democracy posed by the candidacy of Donald Trump.

Of course, "the global democracy movement" is as threatened as American democracy by Trump and the anti-democratic movement he has built. Democracy in general and the model of American democracy in particular have been severely damaged by the Trump campaign; that damage will now be compounded through the general election. If Trump were to be elected, everything — democratic alliances, US leadership and support for democracy abroad, American democracy itself — would be at risk. The existence of the "global democracy movement" that the NED helps to support would likewise be in peril.

When Senator John McCain, the Republican Party's 2008 presidential nominee and the party's standard-bearer for internationalism and democracy promotion, bows to Donald Trump out of "political necessity" to retain Republicans' voter allegiance in his home state of Arizona, then perhaps it should not be surprising that the principal American promoter of democracy abroad speaks so vaguely about the authoritarian threat posed by Trump. But McCain's appeasement and Gershman's silence speak equal volumes about the inability of America's political class to defend democracy in the face of grave danger.[1]

Normalizing the Abnormal

One institution played a particular role in the rise of an authoritarian candidate: the free media. From the start of Trump's campaign, broadcast, print, and digital media provided full coverage of his press conferences, messages, and rallies and reported all of his uncivil, non-factual, anti-constitutional, incomprehensible, and other statements. Many media personalities expressed outrage at Trump's behavior and messages. All of this coverage served as free advertising to help Trump build his following — estimated by *The New York Times* at $2 billion by the end of the primaries. As his poll numbers grew, a symbiotic relationship developed that revealed a major weakness in another essential democratic institution. Trump "sold." Ratings spiked as coverage became saturated with Trump interviews, Tweets, and mouthpieces. Trump himself realized that the more coverage he could get, the more the news media, especially broadcast media, would become dependent on him for increased ratings and profits. Free media is free generally because it is not owned by the state and operates privately. Yet, the media became prisoner to the very basis of its own independence.

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[1] It should be noted that by contrast the International Republican Institute, one of the core groups of the NED (and chaired for many years by Senator McCain), has taken the unusual path to not be silent. At the Republican Party convention, it organized a major meeting keynoting Ohio Governor John Kasich, who strongly criticized the foreign and domestic policies of Donald Trump as antithetical to Republican principles and democratic ideals. The meeting also featured a full-throated defense of IRI's mission and President Reagan's original call in a 1982 speech for supporting democracy abroad. The National Democratic Institute's chairman, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, acting as an individual, has endorsed Hillary Clinton and is among the most outspoken critics of Donald Trump on foreign policy and national security.

As a result, the news media, instead of treating Trump as a new authoritarian phenomenon that endangered America's and its own freedom, has generally treated the candidate and his constituency as a normal representation of American electoral politics. Trump was considered a legitimate expression of voters' "anger" at Republicans' "betrayal" or as representing white voters' "alienation" resulting from economic hardship or the growing ethnic and cultural diversity of America. While anger in response to political betrayal or a sense of alienation to economic or social distress may be legitimate voter sentiment, authoritarian politics should not be considered a legitimate answer to it.

The capitulation of the news media is nearly complete. Thus, when Trump demonstrates (again) how seriously he would endanger media freedom by barring reporters from the *Washington Post* from his campaign events, not a single other news outlet joined in solidarity to refuse covering those events. CNN now features Trump's former campaign manager as "a news analyst" and includes Trump spokesmen in every election-related panel to maintain "balance" (as if a news station's purpose should be to balance bias). Megan Kelly, the one news host at the conservative Fox News who had asked Trump "hard questions" at a debate and who as a result became the object of obsessive and vituperative Tweet attacks by Trump, "made peace" with the candidate in exchange for a ratings bonanza: a sycophantic one-hour one-on-one interview. Trump, representing an abnormal phenomenon in American politics, was allowed to create a "new normal." And so, the appeasement of the Republican Party to this phenomenon and the neutrality and silence of so many others also now appears quite normal.

Is This How Democracy Perishes?

Others have explored different aspects of how American democracy has reached this point: the increased rigidity of ideological and partisan beliefs; the heightened role of money in politics; the rise of celebrity culture; the degrading of political discourse by mass and social media; the rise of economic inequality and the adverse social effects of harsh economic trends; the resulting decline of democratic institutions like trade unions; all of it merits attention. Well before our time, Jean François Revel analyzed how democracy would "become increasingly volatile and diversified," reducing the ability of an expanding state to function for the general good or of any political party to successfully manage the growing demands of citizens.

We should wish to understand the ideological, social, cultural, and economic forces helping to propel Trump's candidacy. But, as in previous times of peril for democracy, it is perhaps most important to identify the political behavior that has allowed an authoritarian candidate to have a realistic possibility to be president of the United States — the potential consequences of which, as Adam Gopnik writes in the *New Yorker*, could be the end of "the American experiment of modern democracy." Ultimately, when democracies are faced with authoritarian danger, they perish simply: through appeasement, neutrality, silence, and capitulation.

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