

Shackles of Democracy

*Why Democracies Will Deceive Their People
to Survive the Century*

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Introduction

A Quiet Kind of Ending

Let me tell you on the first page exactly what I am going to argue, so you can decide now whether you have the stomach to keep reading. I believe that democracy, as we know it, has no future. Not because I despise it, but because its decline is already measurable, and because the century the West has entered rewards almost everything democracy is worst at and punishes almost everything it was built to do, until a society that wants to remain prosperous, secure, and globally competitive will find itself forced to choose between the old form of its freedom and its own survival, and will, in the end, choose to survive. That is my thesis, and it is a hard one. I will defend it through these pages, with evidence where the evidence reaches and with honest argument where it does not. But I will not soften it here, on the first page, where you have every right to know precisely what you are holding.

Every age believes its own arrangements are permanent, right up until the morning they are not.

I am writing these words in a year that does not feel like the end of anything. The democracies are still standing. Their flags still fly over their capitals, their parliaments still sit, their newspapers still print, their citizens still line up on appointed days to mark their ballots and go home feeling that they have done their part. If you walked through London or Washington or Paris today, you would not see ruins. You would see traffic. The machine is running. And that, precisely, is the difficulty I have to overcome in the pages that follow, because the thing I

want to show you does not look like a catastrophe. It looks like an ordinary day. It looks like the machine running a little slower than it used to, deciding a little later, promising a little more and delivering a little less, until one generation looks up and realizes it is living inside a hollow version of the inheritance it was handed, and cannot quite say when the substance drained out.

This is a book about that draining. It is a book about how the most celebrated form of government in human history, the one the West spent a century and a great deal of blood persuading the rest of us to adopt, has begun to lose its grip, not to an enemy at the gates but to the slow internal failure of its own machinery, in a century that has stopped rewarding the things it is good at and started punishing the things it is bad at. And it is a book that dares to ask the question almost no one in the West will say aloud, even as more and more of them privately suspect it. What if democracy was never the destination we were told it was? What if it was a brilliant instrument for a particular age, an age that is now closing, and what is coming after it is not the darkness we have been trained to fear, but something that could, if we are wise and deliberate, serve people better than the system it replaces?

I know how that sounds. I have spent enough years in American lecture halls to know exactly which muscles in a Western reader tighten at a sentence like that one. So let me say at the very start what kind of book this is and what kind it is not, because I would rather lose you honestly on the first page than keep you under false pretenses.

This is not a polemic for tyranny. I have no love for the secret police, the disappeared dissident, the leader who cannot be removed. The single greatest practical achievement of democracy, the ability to throw out a bad ruler without bloodshed, is something I treasure and something any decent successor must keep. I will say so again and again, because it is true and because it is the part of my argument I least want misunderstood.

This is not a foreigner's sneer at the West. I was educated in the West. I love a great deal about it. I am writing to it as a friend writes to a friend who has fallen into a hard patch and cannot see his own situation clearly, not as an enemy gloating at a rival's decline. My deepest hope is not that the democracies lose. It is that they read their own moment honestly enough to navigate it well.

And this is not a prophecy. I cannot prove the future. The graveyard of political prediction is full of confident men who looked at a trend and drew a straight line through it into ruin, and the trend bent, and they were wrong. In the 1930s, serious people believed liberal democracy was finished and the future belonged to the disciplined dictatorships. In the 1970s, sober scholars wrote that the democracies had become ungovernable and were sliding toward collapse. In the 1980s, the smart money said Japan would bury the American economy, and in the 2000s it said Beijing had cracked a code the West had lost. Every one of them had charts. Every one of them was wrong. I hold their failures in front of me as a warning, and I will not make a single claim grander than the evidence allows. What I am offering is a wager, carefully argued, about where the pressures are pushing and why this time may genuinely be different. Not a verdict. A wager. And before the end I will tell you exactly what would prove me wrong, because an argument that cannot say what would refute it is not an argument at all.

So here is the wager, in its simplest form, so you can see the whole shape before we begin to build it.

Democracy is slowing down. Not collapsing, slowing, and a thing that slows for long enough is, on a long enough horizon, a thing that stops. The slowing is no accident, and no stroke of bad luck, but something structural, built into what a modern democracy has become, a system that consumes its own capacity to govern in the permanent contest for office, that polarizes and paralyzes and cannot hold a course longer than an election cycle. That internal weakness was survivable for as long as the West was so far ahead of everyone else that nothing it did at home could cost it abroad. But the West is no

longer so far ahead. The world has caught up, the road has turned uphill, and the century now rewards exactly the things a shackled democracy can no longer do, decide quickly, plan for decades, and pull a whole society in one direction. That mismatch becomes an economic problem, the economic problem becomes a security problem, and the security problem becomes the lever by which the gravest decisions a state makes quietly migrate out of the people's hands. Democracy does not so much die in this story as transform, the word kept, the forms preserved, the substance hollowed, until what stands is a system that governs in the people's name without being chosen by them. And in the better version of that future, the one I will argue is genuinely possible, what replaces the equal vote is not a strongman but a more competent and more accountable design, one that keeps the rule of law and the honest court and the power to remove a bad ruler, and sheds only the one feature that has become a liability, the demand that every adult, however unequipped, settle every question by a show of hands.

That is the journey. We will start by fixing exactly what we mean by the word democracy, so that no one can move the goalposts later. We will look hard at the evidence that it is in fact declining, the real numbers, including the ones that cut against me. We will find the cause inside the machine rather than in some foreign villain. We will watch the pressure build into a squeeze with only two exits, both of which lead away from government by the people. We will see why this particular century, with its rising rival and its shattered common reality, is the worst possible moment for the democracies to be carrying this weight. And then we will turn toward the light, toward what could come after, and toward a design for it that I will lay out in enough detail that you can argue with it, because arguing with it is the entire point.

I should tell you who is making this argument, because you have a right to know the standpoint from which a thing is being said. I am not a neutral party reporting findings from a great height. I am a man from the Gulf, educated in the American academy, who has spent his life moving between two

worlds and unable to stop comparing them. I have watched democracy up close, at every scale from a school election to a world federation to the most powerful office on earth, and I have watched non-democratic government up close too, in my own region, doing things the textbooks said it could not do. Somewhere in that comparing I lost the faith I was supposed to keep, and these pages are the long account of why. I do not ask you to share my conclusion. I ask you to follow the argument honestly, link by link, and to make up your own mind at the end. If you reach the last page still convinced that the right to choose your rulers is worth more than the comfort of being well ruled, you will not have failed to understand me. You will have weighed the same trade I weighed and come down on the other side of it, and that is a choice about what matters most in a human life, not a mistake in arithmetic.

One last thing before we begin. I called this book *Shackles of Democracy*, and I want you to hear the word shackles correctly, because it is doing careful work. I do not mean that democracy is a prison the people are kept in by some external jailer. I mean something stranger and sadder. I mean that democracy has become shackled to itself, weighed down by its own internal contradictions, chained at exactly the moment the race demands it run free, a magnificent rider carrying a weight it can no longer afford up a mountain it can no longer climb fast enough. The shackles are not on the people. They are on the system. And the question I finally ask is whether the rider can shed the chain, or whether the time has come, gently and deliberately and in daylight, to change the bicycle.

Let us begin.

PART ONE: THE CLAIM AND THE YARDSTICK

Chapter 1

The Weight on the Climb

I will say it plainly from the first page, partly because you will work it out anyway and I would rather you heard it from me. I no longer believe that democracy is the best way to run a country.

I do not say that to shock you. If it stings a little, that is all right. Sit with the sting a moment, because it is the most interesting thing about you right now, and we will come back to it. I say it because I have spent my adult life studying how nations rise, fall, and serve their people, and somewhere along the way the times themselves began making the argument for me. Not that democracy is wicked. Not that it failed. Something gentler and stranger than that. That it has quietly become a kind of weight.

Let me show you what I mean with a bicycle.

Picture the last climb of a Tour de France mountain stage, the road switchbacking up to Alpe d'Huez, turn after turn into the thin Alpine air. Up there, raw strength is not what wins. What wins is power to weight, watts per kilogram. That is why the riders are skeletal and the bikes are shaved down to the very floor the rules allow, every last gram interrogated, drilled out, made to justify itself. On the flat, a few extra kilos cost a rider almost nothing. On the mountain, those same kilos cost him the race.

For most of the last hundred years, the West was such an overwhelmingly powerful rider that the weight simply did not matter. Its engine was so far ahead of the field that it could haul whatever it pleased up any gradient and still ride clean away from everyone. It could afford its luxuries, its slow arguments, its beautiful inefficiencies, because no one was close enough to make it pay for them. That is the twentieth century in a single image: a rider so strong that the weight was invisible.

My subject is what happens when the weight stops being invisible. The road tilts upward, and the other riders, the ones who never agreed to carry what we carry, get strong.

That is how I have come to see democracy. Not as evil. Not as a failure. As mass. Noble, costly, exquisitely engineered mass, bolted to the frame of the state. A handicap a champion could carry with a smile while he was lapping the field, and can no longer afford now that the race has become a mountain stage and the riders beside him are traveling light.

Now, the careful reader is already objecting, and the careful reader is right to. Is not some of that weight actually the engine? Was not the West's power born precisely from its openness, its free argument, its talent for admitting a mistake and changing course, its genius for invention? Hold on to that objection. It is the best one there is, and I promise to give it a fair fight later, because an argument that will not turn and face its strongest opponent is not worth your evening. For now I will only say this. Weight and engine are not the same thing, and the whole question ahead of us is which of the two democracy has become, and on which kind of road.

I did not arrive at that bicycle quickly. I got there the slow way, by accident of biography.

The man with the comparing mind

I was lucky in one specific way. I got to see the world, and I was cursed, or blessed, with a mind that cannot stop comparing.

When you grow up inside the story the West tells about itself, you absorb a particular sequence as though it were the law of gravity. First comes liberal democracy. Then come prosperity, freedom, dignity, the good life. One causes the other. No democracy, no development. Become like us, or stay in the dark.

But I had been to too many places where the sequence simply did not hold. I had seen countries that were orderly, prosperous, advancing, and at peace with themselves, and that had arrived there by roads with no ballot box anywhere on the map. I read history and found the same stubborn fact staring back. Enormous stretches of human progress, whole civilizations of law and learning and commerce, the great law codes of the ancient Near East, the science and medicine and trade of the medieval Islamic world, the vast meritocratic civil service of imperial China that recruited its officials by examination a thousand years before the West dreamed of it, all built long before anyone had the idea that every adult should cast an equal vote for the ruler, and all built without it. The more political science I studied, the clearer it got, because the discipline has a quiet open secret. The institutions that actually do the heavy lifting of a good society, the rule of law, an honest court, a competent bureaucracy, secure property, a state that can deliver, do not list liberal democracy among their prerequisites. They can grow in democratic soil. They can also grow in soil that is nothing of the kind.

So when I heard confident people insist that the rest of the world had to become a copy of them in order to succeed, I did not get angry. I got skeptical. It simply was not rational. Too many things determine whether a nation thrives, geography, cohesion, institutions, luck, leadership, the century you happen to be born into, for the answer to be the single tidy slogan I was being sold. And then I started watching how the slogan actually operated up close, in elections at every level, from national governments down to the committees that run international sport, and what I saw was not the noble clash of ideas. It was a game. An elaborate, expensive, exhausting game whose object was not to govern well but to win, and

then to win again. Why are we still playing this, I kept thinking. What a waste of time.

And I can tell you exactly when I first felt that, years before I had a single word of theory to dress it in. It was a student council election, in my high school. Boys and girls stood up and made their small speeches, and I watched the whole performance with a slowly sinking feeling, because it was already obvious who would win. Not the cleverest student. Not the one with the best idea for the budget or the cafeteria. The popular one, the kid with the biggest circle, the most friends, the widest gang. The student superstar with the followers. I remember watching the room more than the stage, because the room was where the result was actually being written. The speeches were about budgets and fairness and the cafeteria, and not one sentence of them mattered. You could read the outcome in the seating, in who laughed at whose jokes, and in the orbit of friends that turned around one boy like a small solar system. I counted his circle the way a bookmaker counts form, and what I felt was closer to grief than to anger, because the contest was finished before a single vote was cast. And I sat there thinking a thought I had no vocabulary for yet. Is that it? Is the whole thing just a popularity contest? Did you really have to be the most liked person in the building to be handed the decisions, not the most able, the most liked? Every teenager who loses an election thinks some version of that and gets over it by lunch. I never got over it. I carried that exact question, are the popular really the best people to hold the office, across an ocean and into a political science degree at The Citadel, and two more degrees after that, and I am, in a sense, still answering it on this page. The student council never left me. I just kept meeting it again, everywhere I looked, in steadily more expensive suits.

The man on the sidewalk

But none of that, not the theory, not the travel, hit me as hard as a thing I saw with my own eyes, over and over, in the richest country on earth.

People sleeping on the sidewalk.

I would walk through American cities, through the gleaming capitals of the free world, and step around human beings who had nowhere to live. People too sick to care for themselves. People who needed cancer treatment and could not get it. People who needed nothing more exotic than a roof, a meal, a doctor, and the wealthiest society in human history had looked at them and, somehow, decided this was acceptable. And I remember standing there thinking the most naive question in the world, the kind of question you are supposed to grow out of. Is it not somebody's job to make sure this man is not on this sidewalk?

I never grew out of it. To me it is the whole test, and most of what I believe flows from it. A society's first job, before liberty, before the vote, before anything, is to guarantee the floor. Health, housing, food, the basic dignity of not falling through the bottom of the world. Get that right, and then by all means let people fly as high as their talent and their hunger will carry them. I am not against the climb. I love the climb. I am against the fall. And consider what I learned about owning a home in America, which struck me as almost unbelievable when I first understood it. A man can buy his house outright, every brick of it paid for in full, owe no bank a single dollar, and still lose that house to the government if he falls behind on the yearly property tax assessed on it. In some places, over a debt of only a few thousand dollars, the state could take the whole house and keep every cent of its value. This is not a thought experiment. In a case that reached the United States Supreme Court, a ninety four year old woman named Geraldine Tyler fell behind on the property taxes on her small condominium in Minneapolis. The original debt was about 2,300 dollars. Penalties and interest swelled it to roughly 15,000. The county seized the condominium, sold it for 40,000 dollars, and kept the entire sum, the 15,000 it was actually owed and the 25,000 it simply was not. It took a ruling of the Supreme Court, in the year 2023, to decide that a government helping itself to the leftover value of an old woman's home was unconstitutional, and the fact that the question had to climb all the way to the

highest court in the land tells you that until that very year, this was simply how the machine was built to work.¹ Which means that a man in America never truly owns the roof over his head at all. He rents it, in perpetuity, from the state, for exactly as long as he can keep paying, and the day he cannot, it is gone. A system that will turn a paid-for home into a thing that can be seized for a tax bill has, somewhere in its foundations, mistaken a market for a civilization. There was no safety net. For all its freedom, the system had forgotten to catch people. And I could not unsee it.

Three schools, three faiths, one question

I learned to think about all of this in three very different American temples, and each gave me a different god to question.

At The Citadel, just before I graduated, a professor pulled me aside with something close to dread. George W. Bush, he said, had won as the candidate of a humble foreign policy, a man who had openly mocked the idea of using American soldiers as nation builders, who had promised to turn the country inward and away from the endless quarrels of the world, and who had stepped back from the wound of the Israelis and the Palestinians that his predecessor had spent himself trying to heal. The professor thought it was a dangerous promise to have made, and he told me it would come back to haunt all of us. And then I graduated, and the world's calendar turned to the eleventh of September, and I watched in real time as every promise evaporated. The mandate the voters had handed Bush, stay home, stay out, was gone inside a morning. The president who had scorned nation building would invade and occupy two nations and attempt to build them both. The Patriot Act was written. The wars began. Bush himself, years later, would describe the reversal with disarming honesty, writing in his memoir that after that morning he simply changed his mind. It happened not because the man was a liar,

¹ This case is *Tyler v. Hennepin County*, decided by the United States Supreme Court in 2023; it, and the other real examples, are documented in the Note on Sources.

but because the circumstance simply overrode the ballot, the way a flood overrides a fence.

I did not have a name for what I had witnessed yet. I do now. I watched, at the very start of my adult life, the moment a democracy's promises to its own people bent and broke under the weight of an emergency, the vote saying one thing, the world demanding another, and the world winning. Hold on to that image. It drives everything that follows, and I stumbled into it before I owned a single suit.

Then I went to American University, in the heart of Washington, where the faith was the opposite one. Here the world was a family of equals. The United Nations was very nearly a church. Every culture deserved respect, no two friends needed the same kind of government to be friends, the future was cooperation and dignity and the slow brotherhood of nations. It was beautiful, and a part of me still wants it to be true.

And then I went to Claremont, in California, where they would have found American University adorable. At Claremont there was only power. Hard, measurable, quantitative power, who has it, who is gaining it, who is about to lose it. They were so hard nosed they barely believed in soft power. They wanted to see it in the numbers or not at all. The only question worth asking was what is power, and how is it used in the world.

So picture me, a young man from Bahrain, standing in the cross draft of those three convictions, the haunted realist at the Citadel, the idealist in Washington, the cold strategist in California, holding all three in my head at once, and asking the question none of them had quite answered for me. Where, exactly, does liberal democracy fit in this world? Not where we say it fits. Where it actually fits.

A woman on the radio, and a sticker on a wall

Two small things have stayed with me longer than most of my textbooks.

The first I heard on the radio, back in 2008, on the BBC, on a little phone I was absurdly proud of at the time. A woman from one of the old Soviet lands was asked what had really changed when communism gave way to democracy. Her answer has never left me. Before, she said, I had money, but there was nothing to buy. Now there is everything to buy, but I have no money. I do not quote her to defend the commissars. Their cruelties were real. I quote her because in one breath she had said the truest thing in these pages. Ordinary people do not, in the end, grade a government by the elegance of the procedure that chose it. They grade it by what it puts on the table. The shelves filled, the freedom came, the money vanished. To a political theorist that is a triumph. To her it was a trade, and she was not at all sure she had come out ahead.

The second thing I read on a gym wall, around 2001, and I have been quoting it at dinner parties ever since. A diplomat is a person who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip. It makes people laugh, and then I ruin the laugh by telling them it is the most honest description of modern democratic politics I have ever found. Because here is what I have come to believe, and what I will spend these pages showing you. Democracies, again and again, talk their own people into voting cheerfully against their own well being, into decisions that leave them poorer and weaker, and the voters go willingly, even gratefully, because they think they are protecting something they love more than money, and they are never told that is the trade. They are choosing to go to hell, and looking forward to the trip.

What I am claiming, and what I am not

So let me tell you plainly what I am doing here, because I want you with me, not braced against me.

I am not calling for a revolution. I do not believe in them. They tend to eat the very people they were meant to save. I am doing something quieter and, I hope, kinder. I am telling the West that it is going to be all right. That the changes already

underway are not the end of the light and the coming of the dark. That fewer elections does not have to mean less freedom, that a people might, strange as it sounds, end up with more freedom and more well being on the other side of letting go of the idea that every question must be settled by a show of hands. I am holding a door open, not lighting a fire.

Four things have to be clear before we take another step.

The first is the one I have already given you. I do not think liberal democracy is the best system we can build. I am telling you my bias on page one rather than smuggling it in on page two hundred, because you deserve to read the rest knowing exactly where I am standing.

The second is that the end of democracy is not the horror movie the phrase makes you picture. The opposite of the ballot is not the boot. Good government, honest courts, a ruler who answers for himself, these are older than democracy by thousands of years and were never its private property. What is coming, if we build it on purpose, can give people most of what they actually wanted from government all along. I will argue it is light, not darkness. And I will argue it whole, shadows and all.

The third is the most important. This is a projection, not a prophecy. I cannot prove the future, and I distrust anyone who claims he can. Every generation that has buried democracy has so far been proven wrong, and I keep that humbling record in plain sight beside my own argument, not behind my back. I have given my reasons for thinking this time is different. But I will not ask you to believe me. I will ask you to weigh me, and I will even tell you, before the end, exactly what would prove me wrong.

And the fourth. I made it on the first page and it bears repeating. If you finish these pages still convinced that the right to choose your rulers is worth more than the comfort of being well ruled, you will not have failed to understand me. You will have understood me perfectly and chosen the other

side of the wager. That is allowed. That is a decision about what matters most in a human life, and no chart settles it.

And since I am asking you to judge whole systems by their fruits, you deserve my scorecard in advance. When I call a government successful in these pages, I will mean three things and only three. It guarantees the floor, so that no one under it sleeps on a sidewalk or goes untreated or falls through the bottom of the world. It opens the climb, so that what a person can become is bounded by talent and hunger rather than by birth or connection. And it holds the society together well enough to act, to decide, and to move as one when the moment demands it. The floor, the climb, and the cohesion form the whole scorecard, meaning a guaranteed minimum, a variable maximum, and the unity to pursue both. Every judgment I make from here forward runs on those three tests. I set them down now, in the open, so that I cannot quietly move my own goalposts later, any more than I will allow the defenders of democracy to move theirs. And mark that all three are tests of delivery rather than declaration. Every system in history has claimed them, the socialist as loudly as anyone, and the claiming is worth nothing. The woman on the radio has already told you what a promised floor feels like when only the promise arrives.

Here is the thread I will pull all the way through, and it starts with that student council. What makes a government actually serve its people has never really been the election. It is the size of the crowd a ruler has to keep happy to survive. Make him answer to the many, and he builds schools and roads and courts for the many. Let him answer to a few, and he feeds the few and lets the rest rot. The ballot was one way, a recent, blunt, increasingly creaky way, of forcing a ruler to answer to the many. But in our century something else has begun forcing rulers everywhere to answer to the many, ballot or no ballot, a connected, watching, comparing world, where money flees bad government, where talent walks out the door, where every citizen can see how everyone else on earth is living and ask why not me. The thing democracy was prized for is slipping loose of democracy. That is the deep current

under everything that follows, and we will spend these pages learning to read it.

I am writing this for everyone, but most of all for the West, not to mock it, but to help it see the world a little more clearly, and to reassure it that the ground shifting underfoot is not an earthquake but a tide. And I am writing it, above all, for two specific people who will read it long after the rest of you, my children. I would like them to know that their father thought for himself. That he did not run with the crowd because it was the crowd. That he looked at the most confident idea of his age and dared to ask the sixteen year old's question one more time, but is the popular kid really the best one for the job, and followed the answer wherever it went.

Some day, I hope, someone will look back at what is written here and say, he was telling the truth.

Let us find out together whether he was.

