

Democracy in decline?

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There's no hurricane coming, but the windows of downtown Washington are covered with plywood. They were initially boarded up due to fear of street violence during the election, but that fear lingers three weeks after the vote because the restaurateurs and shop-owners (whose premises remain open behind the plywood) think the violence could still happen.

They know their town; they may be right. It's clear that President Trump's Infinitely Extendable Last Stand is making people nervous.

Even Judge Matthew Brann, a former Republican Party official, lost his cool. Rejecting Trump's plea for seven million Pennsylvania votes to be set aside last Sunday, he called the case a Frankenstein's monster 'haphazardly stitched together,' which presented only 'strained legal arguments without merit and speculative accusations...unsupported by evidence.'

The view from abroad is scathing, with an undertone of panic. Scathing, because in German or Japanese or even Russian eyes, American democracy is simply falling apart. Panic-stricken underneath, because all of them (even the Russians) secretly see the United States as the flagship democracy. If that goes under, what hope is there for the rest of us?

The anxiety is all the greater because other populist snake-oil salesmen, mini-Trumps, having been coming to power by electoral means in other countries recently: Bolsonaro in Brazil, Johnson in Britain, Orbán in Hungary, Duterte in the Philippines. It's a political pandemic, and we're all doomed!

So, I have been summoned, at considerable expense, to soothe the collective fevered brow. My message is simple, but strangely reassuring. The United States is in deep trouble, but democracy isn't.

The United States is the oldest democracy, but it's a pretty primitive one. Consider the antique and ridiculous Electoral College, or the rudimentary social welfare system, or the fact that it has the most gerrymandered electoral districts on the planet, or that there is literally no limit on how much money American politicians can spend on getting elected or whom they can take it from.

But if somebody came running up and told you that Brazil, Hungary and the Philippines had ultra-nationalist populists in power, would you panic? Thought not.

Adding India would furrow your brow a little, perhaps, but the Chinese regime is a shameless dictatorship and we don't see that as putting democracy in danger.

Britain in the hands of reckless populists would be more worrisome if it were a precedent of some sort, but the UK hasn't been a serious country for quite a while now. Brexit, remember?

When we get right down to it, it's only the fate of democracy in the United States that worries you, isn't it? Well, stop worrying, because the US is neither the custodian nor the guarantor of democracy.

There was a time when the world seemed at risk of being overrun by fascists or communists, that the military and industrial strength of the United States was very important, but the real issue in those Europe-centred confrontations was 'balance of power', not political philosophy.

In Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, the United States has been instrumental in crushing democracy just as often as it has saved it. The US is not evil, but it's just another great power - and when it comes to safeguarding democracy, we're all on our own.

That's no cause for despondency, because democracy is not a fragile flower. It is the default political system of the modern world, spreading relentlessly since the first democratic revolutions more than two centuries ago.

Donald Trump has been defeated, although he continues to deny it. He has done much damage to the United States and he will probably yet do more, because the current charade is designed to set him up as the 'king over the water', the legitimate monarch wrongly exiled (if only to Mar-a-Lago). But he is not immortal, and the country effectively is.

Polarisation of the kind America is experiencing now is disruptive and tenacious, but it tends to be intergenerational (this episode certainly is), and generational turnover usually erases it in ten or twenty years. The 'Sixties' passed, and in all likelihood so will this.