INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS

No cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny.


On a gray Sunday afternoon two days before the November 2016 U.S. election, I entered the Berkeley Repertory Theatre with twenty Stanford students to see the final performance of a production of *It Can’t Happen Here*. Adapted from the classic 1935 novel by Sinclair Lewis, the play traces the rise of an ultranationalist demagogue who, in the midst of the Great Depression, snatches the 1936 Democratic presidential nomination away from Franklin Roosevelt, wins the presidency, and establishes a dictatorship in the United States.

In the novel, Lewis memorably describes his authoritarian ruler, Buzz Windrip:

Certainly there was nothing exhilarating in the actual words of his speeches, nor anything convincing in his philosophy. His political platforms were only wings of a windmill. . . . There were
two things . . . that distinguished this prairie Demosthenes. He was an actor of genius. . . . He would whirl arms, bang tables, glare from mad eyes . . . [and] in between tricks would coldly and almost contemptuously jab his crowds with figures and facts—figures and facts that were inescapable even when, as often happened, they were entirely incorrect.²

The parallels to Donald Trump, the 2016 Republican candidate for president of the United States, were too stark to ignore. I watched the play with a level of anxiety I hadn’t expected even a few weeks before—and didn’t want to fully share with the students. They were also shaken by the drama, but we reassured ourselves with the obvious facts. The play was a time-bound work of fiction. Roosevelt had been reelected in 1936. The United States wasn’t sunk into anything close to a depression. Trump wasn’t an actual fascist. And in any case, he wasn’t going to win on Tuesday, right?

When the Berkeley Rep began writing its new stage adaptation of the novel in January 2016, no primary election votes had yet been cast. There was no reason to expect that a modern-day demagogue could win the nomination of a major American political party.

Indeed, since Trump had declared his candidacy in 2015, I had spent more than a year reassuring people around the world that it couldn’t happen here in the United States. First I assured them that Trump had no serious chance of winning the Republican nomination. Then I told them that he had scant chance of winning the general election. To democratic activists gathered in Seoul for the World Movement for Democracy Assembly in November 2015, to Vietnamese dissidents who had come to Taiwan to watch the January 2016 presidential election there, to college students and civic activists in Hong Kong who had organized the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests against Chinese repression, to students, professors, journalists, and legislators in Burma and Argentina, I repeated it over and over: It won’t happen in the United States.

Our institutions were too strong, I insisted, to permit a reality-TV
star with no prior government experience to win a major-party nomination for president, much less the Oval Office. Our democratic norms were too resilient to produce a president who crudely demeaned the press, the judiciary, and immigrants; who encouraged his supporters to physically attack protesters and to scream for his opponent to be locked up; who refused to release his tax returns; and who appealed in thinly veiled code to base racist sentiments.

I wasn’t naïve. I knew that lying, race-baiting, and dirty tricks had long played their roles in presidential politics. I knew that unscrupulous men had won the office. But Trump would be a wholly new and almost unimaginable low. Polarized and unsettled though America’s voters were, I didn’t believe they could elect a man who, in the words of The Guardian’s Jonathan Freedland, “mocked opponents for their looks, belittled women, disparaged war heroes, damned ethnic and other minorities in crude, bigoted language, jeered at disabled people, beat his chest with bellicose promises of state-sponsored violence that would trample on the US constitution and trigger a third world war, and told dozens and dozens of lies every day.”

I was wrong. And so were most of my fellow political scientists and scholars of democracy.

It was not simply the shock of Donald Trump’s election that moved me to write this book. It was the anguished knowledge of what his presidency would mean for democracy around the world.

Over forty years of travel to more than seventy countries, I had gained a deep appreciation for the unique importance of the United States to the global struggle for freedom. Even people who resented America for its wealth, its global power, its arrogance, and its use of military force nevertheless expressed a grudging admiration for the vitality of its democracy. Even those who were keenly aware of our tragic history of slavery, racism, inequality, and corporate monopolies marveled at the ability of American democracy to reform and renew itself.
And the fiercest critics I encountered were, I found, often disarmed by an American speaker’s readiness to criticize his government while praising its constitutional system.

Wherever I met people struggling to achieve or build democracy, I heard the same hope: that the United States would somehow support their cause. Wherever I met dissidents risking everything to challenge corruption and oppression, I felt the heavy weight of moral expectation: that the United States would stand behind them and, perhaps as a last resort, give them refuge. And now, we had elected a president whose worldview was “America first,” whose policies were rooted in contempt for immigrants and refugees, and whose rhetoric was suffused with praise for dictators.

The timing of Trump’s rise was particularly worrisome. For the past decade, I had been warning of a gathering tide of political corruption, polarization, and decay that was disillusioning ordinary citizens in many democracies and diminishing and destabilizing previously durable democratic systems. For most of that decade—and most of my career—I had been worried about the emerging or embattled democracies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as the formerly Communist states in Eastern Europe. Of course, I was also deeply concerned about the worsening state of my own democracy, and I had increasingly come to feel an urgent need to repair and reform democracy in the United States. But I never imagined that democracy here could be in danger.

Now everything was in flux. China was relentlessly rising in global power, wealth, and ambition. Another, far weaker autocratic power, Vladimir Putin’s Russia, was increasingly reasserting itself as an aggressive geopolitical bully—and had just intervened with a brazen digital hacking and propaganda campaign to try to tip the American presidential election to an open admirer of Putin with autocratic leanings of his own.

Much as the post–World War II liberal order is rooted in U.S. leadership, so too is democracy worldwide anchored in democracy in America. But the global standing of the world’s leading democracy had been badly
hurt by both the fiasco of President George W. Bush’s war of choice in Iraq and then the financial collapse of 2008. His successor, Barack Obama, had partially restored America’s global image with his inspirational barrier-breaking story, his pursuit of international cooperation, and his rescue of the financial system. But with the United States chastened by Iraq and the financial crisis, Obama had drawn back from vigorous global leadership, and China and Russia were filling the void.

Other worrisome forces were on the march too. In the wake of wars in Syria and elsewhere, an immigration crisis had converged with social and economic stresses to feed a growing wave of illiberal populism across Europe. Far-right, xenophobic leaders were attacking democratic norms and institutions in Hungary and Poland. Britain had recently voted to leave the European Union. A menacing populist who had boasted of personally killing lawbreakers had won the presidency in the Philippines. The ultranationalist bigot Marine Le Pen appeared to have a real chance of winning the French presidency. Things seemed to be unraveling. Karl Marx’s famous phrase from The Communist Manifesto kept ringing in my head: “All that is solid melts into air.” A decade-long democratic recession in the world was giving way to something much worse: a crisis.

Why Democracy?

Why do we care? Why is democracy so important that people continually risk their lives for it? And why have I spent my life studying and trying to advance it? Lord knows it’s not a perfect system. When the people can choose and replace their rulers, they may well embrace bad leaders and shortsighted policies. They may be swayed by money or demagoguery. They may become bitterly divided against one another and undermine their country’s stability. Democracy may fail to function well—or at all. Every generation has its share of skeptics who insist that
“the people” cannot govern themselves as well as an enlightened elite could. And today, we are hearing a new generation of intellectuals proclaim the superiority of “the China model” of autocratic rule combined with capitalist growth.⁵

But here’s the problem: you cannot have freedom without democracy. That may seem obvious, but it’s a point often lost. Philosophers may sing the praises of “benevolent” dictatorships, but there is nothing benevolent about suppressing an individual’s right to speak, publish, think, pray, rally, satirize, criticize, read, and search the internet. Apologists for authoritarianism insist that people have a right to order—but without the rule of law, only the ruled are constrained, not the rulers. This kind of “order” too readily descends into tyranny and brings all of its worst consequences: torture, terror, mass imprisonment, and genocide.

Without constitutional constraints on power, there is only a republic of fear. What saves citizens from the knock on the door in the dead of night, from the risk of being silenced or removed, is a constitution, a robust body of laws, an independent judiciary to enforce them, and a culture that insists on free elections, human rights, and human dignity. Not all democracies do a good job of defending liberty, but all the political systems that protect liberty are democracies. Not all democracies do a good job of controlling corruption and abuse of power, but no dictatorship does a good job of it.

Human nature being what it is, power that is not checked will sooner or later be misused. Virtually all of the world’s least corrupt governments are democracies. And they are less corrupt because their citizens are free to expose abuse and their courts are free to prosecute crimes.

For reasons I cannot fully explain, these things became generally clear to me at an early age. Mine was not a very political family, but from my earliest days in elementary school, I was drawn to politics and moved by the appeal of freedom. As a grandchild of Jewish immigrants to the United States who had fled the pogroms of tsarist Russia, I knew that bigotry begets persecution. I saw that persecution on the tattooed arm...
of a family friend who had survived one of Hitler’s concentration camps. I hated fascism. And I hated communism too, not simply because my country was locked in an existential struggle against it but because I hated any form of overbearing state control.

I grew up inspired by visions of freedom and self-determination: the birth of new African countries, the American civil rights movement, and President John F. Kennedy’s call to wage “a long twilight struggle . . . against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.” Mesmerized and horrified, I read about World War II, the Holocaust, and the mass crimes committed in the name of “the people” in the Soviet Union and China. Frightened and alarmed, I read about the excesses committed in the name of anticommunism by Senator Joe McCarthy, his fanatical followers, and his cowering apologists. I read about the vicious racists of the Ku Klux Klan and the extreme-right anti-Communists of the John Birch Society, which had a strong foothold in my native Southern California. I read the early 1960s political thriller Seven Days in May, about an attempted military coup in the United States, and I worried about the prospect of losing our freedom. In quick succession, I read George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm, and I was seized with dread at the prospect of a world in which liberty could disappear altogether. I didn’t realize it at that time, but for me, defending and extending freedom had become an overarching moral cause.

My enthusiasm for democracy has always been quite personal. I started running for office in elementary school; I lost a race for student-body president in junior high school and won one in high school. But in one respect, my political awareness lagged behind that of my peers: my hatred of communism had blinded me to the folly and escalating immorality of America’s war in Vietnam. Not until I arrived at Stanford to start college in the fall of 1969 did I fully turn against the war and join the peace movement.

In my freshman year, I majored in political activism, working late into many nights mobilizing protests and writing articles against the war. But the opposition I encountered on campus didn’t come from defenders of “the
system.” It came from a small, intense clique of Marxist revolutionaries who thought America was beyond redemption and that violence was the only answer. I was and remain committed to nonviolence in the pursuit of democracy and social justice; the revolutionaries despised me for that and denounced liberal activists like me as naïve fools. Before they faded into well-earned oblivion, they did serious damage. On a warm spring evening in 1970, they provoked a police riot that resulted in numerous arrests and shrouded the core of Stanford’s pastoral campus in tear gas. As the protests peaked, university buildings were damaged and research was destroyed. During the late 1960s and early ’70s, much more serious violence plagued other American campuses and especially the country’s inner cities, even as European democracies faced more intense denunciations and even terrorist violence from the revolutionary left.

While my generation grappled with the roiling public order, an older generation of policy experts feared that something profound had gone wrong. A 1975 report for the Trilateral Commission (which brought together influential elites from the United States, Europe, and Japan) warned that the advanced democracies were losing their capacity to govern. Although the authors worried about common policy challenges such as inflation, economic stagnation, and oil prices, their principal concern was that an excess of democracy was generating “an overload of demands on government.” Rising pressure from protest movements, radical intellectuals, and hypercritical news media had, the report warned, resulted in an “adversary culture” that was relentlessly challenging the authority and eroding the legitimacy of democratic governments.

For the first time since the end of World War II, scholars and commentators were speaking of a broad crisis of democracy due to trouble at its core— the West. Indeed, the resignation of President Richard Nixon over his attempts to subvert the 1972 election and obstruct justice suggested that the rot had been dangerously advanced. Living through the Vietnam and Watergate era taught me two lifelong lessons: that political polarization and intolerance could prove poisonous to democracy, and that
the instruments of democracy—elections, the media, the Congress, the courts—could restore its health.

Because of my political and antiwar activism, I couldn’t find the time to study overseas during college. But I remained intensely interested in political and economic development worldwide and resolved to experience it firsthand after I graduated. With a press credential from The Nation magazine, I set out to spend a month each in Portugal, Nigeria, Egypt, Israel, Thailand, and Taiwan, beginning in November 1974. Each country had a story to tell about political or economic transition, and I was eager to learn.

Over six months of travel and intense interviewing, I began to glean real-world insights into the two questions that had most fascinated me in college: Why do some countries develop while others remain poor? And why do some countries become democratic while others don’t?

Landing in Portugal seven months after the revolution that overthrew a forty-eight-year-old dictatorship, I was captivated. In the smoke-filled offices and cobbled streets of 1970s Lisbon, I found a live political struggle—not just among political parties but between two different visions of political order, democratic and authoritarian. With Soviet support, a powerful Communist Party was bidding for political control. Familiar revolutionary slogans hung in the air, but with the fate of a nation in the balance, not a college campus. Half a century of dictatorship had left Portugal’s political landscape fragmented and underprepared for democracy. But young and middle-aged politicians of extraordinary energy and courage were fighting for a democratic future. And ultimately, with Western support, they prevailed.

In Nigeria, I found a different story. In December 1974, the country was just a few years past a devastating civil war that had claimed roughly a million lives. Although the military regime had worked to heal the
wounds of that conflict, the country remained deeply divided along ethnic lines, particularly among the Hausa in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east (who had attempted to secede and establish an independent state of Biafra). These divisions, along with endemic corruption, had doomed Nigeria’s first attempt at democracy after its independence in 1960. Now the Nigerian people were tired of the military’s venality, which was reaching scandalous proportions as oil wealth began gushing into government coffers.

In Nigeria, I encountered pervasive greed, incompetence, and waste as the get-rich-quick mentality filtered down to the lowest levels of government. But I also met journalists who were defying the country’s generals to press for a return to civilian rule and academics who were reimagining the country’s future. I met women in the markets who were natural entrepreneurs and saw students who demanded a political voice. For the first time in my life, I witnessed on a daily basis unimaginable poverty and squalor alongside uplifting resilience and hope.

Each country taught me something new about why countries develop or stagnate, about why democracies flourish or fail. I was hooked.

**Democracy Under Siege**

I am still learning today. After writing my doctoral dissertation on Nigeria’s failed first attempt at democracy in the 1960s, I spent a year as a Fulbright fellow in Nigeria, witnessing the failure of its Second Republic. Soon thereafter, I wound up back at Stanford and the Hoover Institution. Over the past three decades there, I have explored the ways democracies can survive and succeed—and how they can falter and fall.

I have worked with democratic dissidents from Cuba, Vietnam, and Egypt. I have supported human rights activists from North Korea, China, Russia, and Zimbabwe. I have advised political transitions in Iraq and Yemen. I have lectured in the midst of transitions in South Africa, Kenya, Tunisia, and Ukraine. I have tried to help democrats from Nigeria, Burma, and Venezuela devise strategies to shake off authoritarian rule. I have
worked with politicians and civic leaders trying to improve democracy in Mongolia, Ghana, and Taiwan. These brave people have become not simply my teachers but my friends.

Late in a lifetime spent studying and promoting democracy, I would like to be able to say that things are heading in the right direction. They are not.

And that is why I have felt the need for this book. Trump’s election made me start thinking about a book that offers a comprehensive— and urgent—assessment of the rising danger to democracy in the United States and around the world. After three decades in which democracy was spreading and another in which it was stagnating and slowly eroding, we are now witnessing a global retreat from freedom.

In every region of the world, autocrats are seizing the initiative, democrats are on the defensive, and the space for competitive politics and free expression is shrinking. Established democracies are becoming more polarized, intolerant, and dysfunctional. Emerging democracies are facing relentless scandals, sweeping citizen disaffection, and existential threats to their survival. From Turkey and Hungary to the Philippines, wily autocrats are destroying constitutional checks and balances. And with the global winds blowing their way, authoritarian leaders are becoming more nakedly dictatorial.

These unfavorable gusts are not simply the exhaust fumes of decaying democracies. They are blowing hard from the two leading centers of global authoritarianism, Russia and China. And if the United States does not reclaim its traditional place as the keystone of democracy, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and their admirers may turn autocracy into the driving force of the new century.

Many other analyses are missing this crucial point. The extraordinary progress of democracy from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s was a global phenomenon, heavily facilitated by the strength, idealism, and
ill winds

energetic support of the United States and Western Europe. The gathering retreat of freedom is also a global phenomenon, driven this time from Moscow and Beijing. A reviving autocracy and an emerging Communist superpower are investing heavily— and often effectively—in efforts to promote disinformation and covertly subvert democratic norms and institutions. Their increasingly brazen challenge demands a vigorous global response: a reassertion of global democratic leadership, rooted in Washington’s renewed understanding of its far-reaching responsibilities, and a new worldwide campaign to promote democratic values, media, and civic institutions.

Part of that, I argue, must involve a serious attack on the soft underbelly of these autocracies: kleptocracy. The money being looted from public coffers in corrupt autocracies is not only sustaining abusive rulers; it is also being laundered into the banking and property systems of the world’s democracies, corroding our own rule of law and undermining our will to confront the spread of despotism. We can be the kleptocrats’ foes or their bankers, but not both. By fighting kleptocracy and money laundering, we can help reverse authoritarian trends both at home and abroad.

But as the old saying goes, you can’t beat something with nothing. We cannot defend and renew free government around the world unless we do so at home. Stopping the desecration of democratic norms and institutions by Donald Trump (and budding autocrats elsewhere) is vital but insufficient. The decline of American democracy did not begin with Trump, and it will not end with his departure from the White House. Our republic’s sickness has its roots in decades of rising political polarization that has turned our two parties into something akin to warring tribes, willing to skirt bedrock principles of fairness and inclusion for pure partisan advantage. America’s constitutional order has long been scarred by racism, deep injustices in our criminal justice system, and the soft corruption of our systems of lobbying and campaign finance. Now
these deep-rooted problems are quickening in a society that has forgotten the purpose of civic education and is increasingly in thrall to social media, which privileges the profits of sensationalism and groupthink above the prophets of facts and evidence-based debate.

None of this is a cry of despair; all of it is a call to arms. As I explain in this book’s final chapters, it doesn’t have to go on like this. Promising and viable reforms are available. We can improve, empower, and heal our democracy—and much can be done even while Trump is in power. We can change this. We—democratic societies—must change this. But this effort starts with each of us as an individual.

The Power of the Powerless

In 1978, the Czech playwright Václav Havel—who would go on to become the first president of post-Communist Czechoslovakia—wrote one of the most important dissident treatises ever published. In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel insisted that the oppressed have the power to overcome their powerlessness by “living within truth” and refusing to bend to the will and lies of dictatorship. His key theme is individual responsibility and the ability of citizens, through daily acts of defiance, to make a difference even under tyrannical rule.

In four decades of studying democracy, there is no maxim of which I have become more convinced than this: individuals can determine the fate of democracy. “It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped,” said Senator Robert F. Kennedy in a moving 1966 address to South African students at the University of Cape Town, in the heyday of that country’s apartheid tyranny. At the time, those words became my conviction. After many decades of research and experience, they have become my conclusion. And sometimes, I have found, people in new democracies like today’s South Africa
may remember RFK’s lesson better than the often comfortable, complacent, or even self-pitying citizens of older republics, who have forgotten how quickly liberty can die.

Eager to think of itself as a science, the academic study of politics these days is often dismissive of the role that leaders play in shaping political outcomes. But it is not abstract economic or social forces that bring about democracy or make it work. It is individuals—ordinary and extraordinary citizens—who stake claims, shape programs, form organizations, forge strategies, and move people.

Making a difference involves risk and sacrifice. And when liberty is on the line, the risks may be daunting and the sacrifice may be mortal. But across the continents and the decades, what has most inspired me has been the willingness of people—in the end, just people, like you and me—to risk everything they have in the fight for freedom.

Today, in the United States, it is our turn. And the fate of global democracy rests on all our shoulders.