

Democracy Has Fallen: What Can We Do?

By

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Donald Trump campaigned on the audacious claim that if he wasn't elected there would be World War III. Since his election, the wars he promised to end on day one have only worsened and almost every day since has been filled with new stories of the chaos he's causing in the US and around the world. Since last Sunday alone, when we had just learned of his illegal orders to send troops to California to control those protesting his illegal immigration policies; he has threatened to arrest its Democratic Governor for the "primary crime," in his words, of "running for governor because he's done such a bad job";¹ it was revealed that he flat-out lied about having discussed this decision with the Governor in advance (he didn't); a US Senator, also a Democrat, was removed, forced to the ground, and handcuffed while attempting to ask one of Trump's cabinet members a question; full-fledged war has erupted between Israel and Iran; and, just yesterday Trump held a North Korean style military parade for his birthday, the largest protest in modern US history occurred involving more the 5-million people, and an assassin, angry about these "No Kings" protests, walked up to the homes of two democratic lawmakers and shot them both, killing one, along with her husband, and seriously wounding the other and his spouse. I don't know about you, but it's starting to feel like World War III to me.

Civil War is the title of a chilling 2024 film depicting a near-future in which America is torn apart by seceding regions and a fascist President overrunning our once peaceful streets with soldiers, guns, and violence. There's a terrifying scene in it where a group of journalists are captured by a homegrown militia unit threatening to kill them. "We are American," one of the journalists says, to which the militia's sadistic leader asks, "Well what kind of American are you?"—meaning "which state are you from (Red or Blue)?" If they give the wrong answer, they will be executed on the spot. *Civil War* is especially difficult to watch because it's hyper-realistic and feels like a warning about an impending possibility that our Democracy really will fall if we don't change our ways.

Today, this possibility has become our reality. Things aren't yet as bad as depicted in *Civil War*, but I am not exaggerating when I say our Democracy has fallen. The US is being torn apart based on political regions because of an authoritarian Republican President who is behaving like he's King of the world. Since those in charge of our Legislative branches and our partisan Supreme Court are unwilling to do their jobs by maintaining the separation of powers necessary for our government to function as it should, I am most serious when I say our Democracy has fallen. The events of just this past week are proof enough that the rule of law, the freedom to publicly protest and to question our government, the right to due process, having legal status, Congress, the Senate, the Supreme Court, the Oath of Office, the US Constitution, and even science, truth, and reality, don't mean a damn thing anymore! Not if they conflict with the wishes of our unchecked Dictator in Chief.

Now the only question before us is *can our Democracy get back up to fight another round or is she down for the count?* It is of some solace to me to believe she will most likely stand

again and will do so before Trump's official term is over. If she doesn't, it will only be because he has managed to manufacture some national emergency to justify preventing the coming 2026 midterm elections, which is not out of the question, given the real possibility that our legislative and judicial branches of government will do nothing to stop him. Logically speaking, however, I think it is more probable that his damage to our economy, the daily chaos upending our lives because of his incompetence, and his Executive overreach in militarizing law enforcement in our communities, will all result in his political party losing one or both of the Legislative houses in 2026. This will restore some degree of separation between the three powers and hold Trump at bay until his term ends in 2028 and then, hopefully, we will finally be done with this bumbling, very unstable, lunatic.

That's the good news. The bad news is that until then our fragile Democracy will be on the mat undergoing a ten-count that will last for at least another year-and-a-half. If she is unable to stand again by then, it will be over; Democracy will have been permanently defeated in the United States. If she rises again, and I believe she will, I think many Americans will have learned a valuable lesson about taking her for granted, about the seriousness of US elections, and about the absolute necessity of having a functioning democratic government.

During his inauguration day speech in 1980, President Ronald Reagan said, "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." From then on, the Republican party—which has held the White House 54 percent of the time, compared to 46 percent for the Democrats—has worked to weaken the federal government and dismantle many of the programs that have bolstered middle class working Americans for decades. During the same period, the GOP has also worked to reduce the federal deficit solely by cutting taxes, while always, under every Republican administration, passing budgets that increase spending more than ever before, which is why I have long referred to them as the "Don't tax and spend anyway Republicans." But the point not to missed is that since 1980—actually going back to 1968 when Nixon was elected—the GOP has controlled the White House more often than not and also controlled both the House and Senate for longer periods than Democrats have. They are not the underdogs they like to claim they are, and bear at least as much blame for the state of our nation.

During just the first six months of Trump's latest term, he's advanced the goal of destroying federal programs at an unprecedented rate by firing thousands of federal employees, defunding federal programs, violating federal laws, ignoring federal courts, and, worst of all, violating human rights, all while making the federal government a more authoritarian force in our lives and communities, including undermining those State rights that his party claims to value so highly. If our Democracy is unable to comeback from this, and if a greater majority of Americans don't learn from what is happening, the end of Democracy and our three-branched federal government will leave a void in how exactly we are to be governed from now on, and we all know who is first in line to fill it.

But, again, logically speaking, given the relatively short amount of time between now and the midterms, and a Supreme Court that has not always fallen in line with Trump's wishes, it is more probable that the Democrats will gain control of one or both legislative houses in 2026, then hold him at bay for the remainder of his term. I'm also hopeful that his disastrous Presidency will have a lasting impact on our national psyche, preventing something like this from happening again anytime soon. I'm also hopeful that in the meantime the Democratic party will itself rediscover what it's supposed to be about, standing for the freedoms and democratic values this nation is supposed to be founded upon, and for the welfare of all its citizens, including working class Americans not only in its largest cities, but in its breadbasket, rust belt, farming, mining and factory towns.

With this glimmer of hope in mind, what can we do right now to survive Trump and make a difference? Firstly, as stoicism has long taught us, we should focus our minds and efforts on matters we can control, not on those we cannot. We do not have the power to control who occupies the White House for the next 3.5 years. We cannot force those legislators in charge of both Houses to do their jobs. We cannot force the Supreme Court to make rulings based on the Constitution, rather than the shallow and self-serving principles of the political party that appointed its majority. We can't do anything about these current realities, nor much about the detrimental and harmful impacts they are having on our society and lives right now.

Returning to the boxing metaphor, we cannot change the fact that our Democracy has been knocked down, but we can do our best to help her get back up, return to the fight, and win. As one who is very judicious when it comes to involving myself in mass protests these days, yesterday's No Kings Day protests, which included more than 2,000 events across the country and millions of participants, was extremely impressive. That many upset Americans—upset voters—has to make politicians take them and their concerns seriously. So, congratulations to its organizers and thanks to everyone who was able to participate.

During most of my life and ministry, protesting had been my primary means of expressing dissent, but I noticed a shift occurring in them about the same time I noticed it occurring within liberal institutions in general. They have become less peaceful because of a growing willingness among some participants to demonize their opposition, incite conflict, and destroy property. This has become so evident that even the organizers of yesterday's events instructed participants that "If violence breaks out at your protest, SIT DOWN." This is a good way to distinguish yourself as peaceful and cooperative to those policing such events, but it is also a bit contradictory to ask those who have come to stand up to sit down. But, once violence occurs, it stigmatizes the entire event and all protestors, no matter who is standing or sitting.

California's leadership has been quick to point out that the protests there have remained overwhelmingly peaceful, despite those who have set a few vehicles on fire. But such behavior is what the media concentrates on and what others will exploit. Sadly, this is the problem with taking our grievances to the streets these days; there is always the likelihood

that some will engage in violent and destructive disobedience that does not progress our cause, nor that we want to be associated with. Yet, the excuse that “protestors are mostly peaceful” doesn’t work, no more than when it was said about the January 6th insurrection in our nation’s Capital five years ago. So be judicious about protesting and don’t allow yourself to get caught up in any of the hate and violence that even justifiable outrage sometimes leads to.

Protests can help effectively shift public sentiment, especially when the protestors are the ones being unjustly treated, as happened in 1963 when television news showed the police using fire hoses and dogs to disperse Civil Rights protestors in Birmingham, Alabama. These images shocked the nation. But such sentiment can also quickly turn the other direction when it’s the protestors engage in violence, even if it’s only a few of them. Exposing oneself to violence at the hands of the authorities takes great courage, a lot more than does setting fire to Tesla or Waymo vehicles, or breaking into downtown business, or throwing rocks, and so forth.

Civil disobedience is another related approach, which occurs when participants refuse to obey unjust laws. Spokane’s former City Council president, Ben Stuckart, of whom I am a great admirer, did so this past week by attempting to block the departure of a bus containing immigrants who had been arrested and were being removed by ICE without due process, an action for which Ben was himself arrested. From Gandhi’s historic march to the sea to illegally make salt, to Henry David Thoreau’s refusal to pay poll taxes in protest of slavery, to Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat to a white man, to sitting at a lunch counter that refused to serve blacks, to Dr. King’s historic 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, to Julia Butterfly Hill living atop a 1,000 foot redwood tree for two years to prevent it from being cut down, to the ship carrying aid to Gaza just this past week to address the humanitarian crisis there, an action that resulted in the arrest and deportation of Greta Thunberg and eleven other activists—Civil Disobedience has long been a powerful tool in creating greater public awareness, changing sympathies, and putting pressure on political leaders to finally do the right thing.

These examples, however, involved courageous, disciplined, and symbolically appropriate acts of protest and disobedience. History is also littered with examples of protests and disobedience resulting in rioting, destruction, violence, and the indiscriminate beatings and killing of bystanders. This kind of disobedience and disregard for the law can only hurt a just cause by giving those we oppose the very excuses they need to demonize and retaliate against us in the name of law and order. We saw this just this past week in Trump’s response to ICE protestors in Los Angeles, claiming that LA would be “burning to the ground”² if not for his salvific intervention. During a speech at the newly renamed Fort Bragg this past week, Trump also referred to the protestors, most of whom are American citizens, as “animals” and “a foreign enemy” whom he will “liberate” California from.³ Peaceful protesting and courageous civil disobedience are good ways to help revive our Democracy, but it has become increasingly difficult to know if everyone joining with us is as

committed to peace and courage as we are. So, again, be as judicious as you can and walk away if you don't feel you're in the right place.

Protests and civil disobedience are meant to push legislators and politicians to change the rules. But another strategy, and I think the best one, is to work to change the rules ourselves. I have marched miles in protest during my quarter century as a minister, but there are only a handful of accomplishments I've engaged in that have resulted in meaningful change. Before I left Louisville, for example, I was chair of a committee that established a Restorative Justice program there that has been working to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline ever since. It took a couple of years getting up and meeting in the Judges Chamber at the Country Courthouse every Wednesday morning at 8:00 AM; along with working to educate and get everyone we could on board; the police, the courts, the judges, the County Prosecutor and Public Defender, community activists, and so forth. It wasn't easy. It wasn't sexy. There wasn't immediate gratification, and we didn't know if we'd succeed. Few people knew or will ever know that I had anything to do with this now longstanding institution, which is fine. I'm just happy our efforts paid off in such a truly meaningful way.

Louisville is also where I stopped performing weddings until I was free to perform them for everyone, including gay couples. I was fired from my secular job because of this stance, but it helped raise a lot of awareness and support for my cause. After coming to Spokane, I became part of a local clergy group that helped pass marriage equality in Washington state, with our "People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry" campaign. I was also part of the Smart Justice council here several years ago that made some positive changes in how we do criminal justice. I was also among those working with the Spokane Alliance to get a Sick and Safe Leave ordinance and the Quality Jobs ordinance passed in our community, along with helping to secure funding for the WSU medical school. I was the sponsor of a local initiative to stop coal and oil trains from moving through Spokane, without significant changes to safety protocols. It failed to pass, but the safety issues it raised were cited in our Governor's explanation for why he refused to grant a permit to build a proposed coal export terminal on Washington's shores. I'm also very proud to have written a book expressing my concerns about the illiberal turn our religion has taken, and, more importantly, to have had the courage to give it away at the UUA General Assembly that took place here in Spokane in 2019. Although this act of dissent was entirely peaceful, it resulted in a lot of turmoil in my life and the life of our church. Yet, due to this overreaction, my plan to raise awareness about my concerns far exceeded my expectations. These sorts of accomplishments take time and effort and don't always make you feel good, the way marching in the streets then coming home does, but they often have a greater impact.

To summarize what I've said so far, if we want to help revive our Democracy, we must, firstly, maintain our own emotional and mental health by focusing on what we can do rather than obsessing over what we have little to no power over. We do have the power to participate in peaceful protests, engage in courageous acts of civil disobedience, and, best of all, do what we can to change the systems, rules, and laws ourselves.

But the most important strategy, which I have not mentioned yet, is the power of hope. Hope is not a feeling that we either have or don't have. It is something we create for ourselves when we commit to action. It then becomes the very thing that motivates us to act. Erich Fromm once wrote, "Hope is a decisive element in any attempt to bring about social change in the direction of greater aliveness, awareness, and reason."⁴ Thus, hope cannot be passive. We can't sit around hoping things will get better on their own. That's not really hope; just wishful thinking. Fromm says, "To hope is a state of being. It is an inner readiness, that of intense but not-yet-spent activeness."⁵ Hope is believing that it is up to us and that we can make a difference, however, we choose to go about. Hope doesn't mean we *will* succeed, only that we know there's a real possibility we *can* succeed. It is the thing that motivates us to action. Without hope, we will remain passive victims of history longing for a hero or some miracle to come along and fix things for us.

Our Democracy has fallen, but there are many good reasons to believe she should not be counted out just yet. These reasons are the basis of our hope, not only in her, but in ourselves and our power to make a difference.

¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-great-arrest-newsom-stormy-relationship-politics-play/story?id=122655967>

² <https://nypost.com/2025/06/11/us-news/trump-says-la-would-be-burning-to-the-ground-if-he-hadnt-sent-in-the-marines-national-guard/>

³ <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-fort-bragg-6df36485dec1df2350d5b7be0882a703>

⁴ Fromm, Erich. *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* . Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Ibid.