

The Endurance of American Democracy

by Richard Robles

America's biggest challenge is one of identity. By the end of the 20th century, America dominated the global scene without question. Communism was isolated to backwater regions of the world and liberal democracies composed the bulk of world powers – with America at its head. The 20th century looked to be but the first American Century, with the 21st becoming the second. That second century is now jeopardized by a rise of authoritarian leaders, a decline in American diplomatic efforts, and the failure of the current administration to uphold modern American ideals. The 21st century is testing America's ability as both a hyperpower and a champion of democracy.

Authoritarian leaders are on the rise. Putin's dismantling of entrenched constitutional laws has provided a model for other authoritarian nations. China is considering rewriting the Chinese Constitution to allow for Xi Jinping to remain at the nation's helm indefinitely. A proposed social credit system will further restrict whatever personal freedom, if any, is left in Chinese society. In the Philippines, a traditional US ally, President Duterte has circumvented the rule of law and has advocated for extrajudicial killings of suspected drug dealers. Turkey has restricted its civil society and oppressed human rights activists ever since the attempted coup d'état in 2016. As the world's moral leader, we have an obligation to actively call out these prominent issues, but instead, American leaders have either ignored such issues, or in some cases, praised the actions of authoritarian leaders. This praise lessens our position as a champion of basic human rights and democratic ideals. The failure to both acknowledge and condemn such blatant disregard signals to the world that we no longer care or monitor other states' failure to respect American values abroad.

Currently, diplomacy has waned in favor of hard power. The military will see its budget increase, while the State Department's budget will decrease. Even though our military must be readily funded, it begs the question why it must be a choice between American diplomacy or military might. American diplomats are leaving the State Department in droves under Secretary Tillerson. Combined with a hiring freeze and rising turnover rates, American diplomacy is weakening as foreign conflicts grow increasingly complex. This lack of diplomatic power is only

worsened by unfilled ambassadorships in key areas in the world, such as South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union. President Trump's failure to find suitable candidates for such posts show a genuine lack of cooperation or even understanding of basic international affairs. To even pursue his basic campaign promises, such as punishing Iran or building a wall along the Mexico-US border, President Trump must be willing to appoint ambassadors to show interest in multilateral negotiations with other states. America First doesn't necessarily mean America alone.

America has long championed free speech, basic human rights, and a respect for the rule of law. It is important to condemn violations of human dignity and free speech. American leaders must practice what we preach so others may emulate our model. But this long-standing policy has been undermined repeatedly by President Trump. He has reiterated a desire to reintroduce torture to suspected terrorists and insurgents. He has shown a fondness to harass news organizations that portray him unfavorably. He has also made statements supporting the use of violence at campaign rallies and on social media platforms. President Trump has also made statements that show absolutely no respect for the rule of law. His careless rhetoric not only goes against ingrained American political culture, but it also shows a tendency for dictatorial-like behavior. Authoritarians perceive Mr. Trump's actions as a sign of a democracy in decline, and they are furthered encouraged to oppress their people without reprimand from the American president.

It is easy to resort to authoritarian tendencies when gridlock occurs, because action is better than inaction to some. But by doing so we forfeit the mantle of American exceptionalism. Democracy, at times, may feel slow and deadlocked. But that's how our founders intended it to be. Democracy is difficult. Democracy is fragile. It is not inherently attractive at times, nor is it natural. The ability to overcome these flaws of American democracy and export it abroad will be our test of strength in the resurgence of authoritarian competitors abroad. America's decline in global standing will not come in some form of civil infighting or intense political gridlock, but by America's failure to protect and uphold the values it preached as the moral leader of the world.