

America's Pseudo-Democracy

U.S. pundits mock countries, like Iran or China, where candidates are screened before they go on the ballot, but America has a similar approach, with candidates needing approval from plutocrats and special interests. But that's just one problem of U.S. democracy, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Given the dangerous results of the recent election in the United States – one that saw the Republicans, a right-wing party increasingly populated with neocon warmongers, reactionaries and plutocrats take control of both houses of Congress – it might be time to take a sober look at U.S. democracy.

We can begin by taking note of the generic observation made by Winston Churchill: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time." The implication here is that democracy is really not the God-blessed system so many of Americans take it to be.

For instance, the public in a democracy is just as vulnerable to manipulation by various elites and interest groups as are those in non-democratic environments. The difference is that a democracy has a built-in procedure that allows citizens to have second thoughts about past manipulation. Thus they can kick out the bastards they were originally persuaded to kick in – even if it is often only to replace them with a new set of bastards.

This repeated procedure results in a time limit on the damage elected leaders can do. It is, of course, possible that democratically elected politicians can come close to ruining a nation (their own as well as others) even given their limited tenure.

The Recent Election

The recent election results tell us a lot about the weak points of democracy as practiced in the U.S. For instance, there is the fact that, at any particular time, one-half to two-thirds of Americans are paying little or no attention to what is going on in the public realm. They do not know, and maybe they don't care, who is making policy for their community, be it in the mayor's office, the state house or the White House.

Yet, despite this disregard, they can be readily manipulated by their politicians using the media. This is often done through scare tactics involving innuendo and outright lies about things of which the populace is ignorant:

weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, barbarian Russians in the Ukraine, terrorists in Israel/Palestine, and a more recent one, the danger of an allegedly pending Ebola plague in the U.S. The extent to which this sort of misinformation can be used to sway the opinion of an otherwise uncaring public is limited only by how much money candidates and their parties have to spend on media advertising.

Even with millions upon millions of dollars spent on campaigning, moving Americans to the polls, particularly in a mid-term election like the recent one, is like herding cats. In the last election only 36.4 percent of eligible voters turned out, the lowest turnout in 72 years. Such turnouts give an edge to those who have best mobilized their constituency. Both parties certainly do try to do this, but Republicans appear to have an edge.

That edge comes from an ideological orientation that drives many Republicans to actively oppose causes ranging from gun control, to abortion, to the regulatory power of the federal government, all of which is pursued in the name of maximum individual "freedom." To exert such negative influence, hardcore Republican voters will turn out in great numbers, particularly in the U.S. South and Midwest.

There are other unseemly weaknesses as well, such as the gerrymandering of voting districts by whatever party controls a state legislature so as to minimize the number congressional districts controlled by the opposing party. Through gerrymandering you can win most of the congressional seats while losing the overall popular vote. This is actually a form of cheating, but to date it is legal.

And there is a certain level of stupidity that seems particular to the Democratic Party. The Democratic leadership has a real knack for designing platforms and campaigns that ignore the working class, rural poor and much of that part of the U.S. population that is left of center. We know the left-of-center folks are out there and active because during most national elections, a number of progressive local ballot initiatives are passed into law.

In more general terms what does this all tell us of U.S. democracy? Well, it tells us that, just like more authoritarian forms of government, it is a system that is open to officially sponsored deceit. It tells us that this lying and other forms of corruption have been so persistent over time that millions of Americans are alienated from the political process.

And, finally, it tells us that democracies are not immune to the harmful consequences of ideologies that quite often override national needs. One can see this in the influence of those who, for ideological reasons, stand in the way of

rational gun control or seek to prevent the federal government from asserting necessary financial, business and environmental regulation.

Democracy and Foreign Policy

We should also remember Churchill's observation that democracy is not a flawless political system when we consider the dubious claims made for popular government in the realm of foreign policy. For instance, the claim that democracies don't war against each other.

This claim is not well thought through and therefore, at best, an oversimplification. For if democracies do not often wage open war against each other, the stronger ones seem to have no compunction about subverting weaker ones for strategic and/or economic reasons.

This behavior includes frequent efforts to transform independent democracies into compliant dictatorships. The United States has quite a record in this regard – an ironic fact because it proclaims that a central goal of its foreign policy is to spread democracy. If that were true, how would Washington account for the following?

In 1953 the U.S. government destroyed through subversion the democracy in Iran. In 1954 it did the same thing to the democracy in Guatemala. In 1956 the U.S. refused to go along with United Nations-sponsored free elections in Vietnam and instead backed an unpopular authoritarian regime in the south of that country.

In 1958 Washington sent marines onto the beaches of Lebanon to support a minority Christian party's attempt to subvert that country's constitution. In 1973 the U.S. was complicit in the overthrow of the elected government in Chile. Since the late 1990s the U.S. has been engaged in an effort to subvert the democratic government of Venezuela because it disapproved of Hugo Chavez, the elected president, and his successors. And, of course, the U.S. actively subverted the free and fair election held in Palestine in 2006.

There are other examples of this sort of behavior that can be given but these are sufficient to establish the fact that democracies do act with hostility toward one another. Thus, the proposition that if all the world's nations were democracies there would be no armed conflict is very naive.

There is a recent study by researchers at Princeton University that concludes that the U.S. is no longer a democracy of voting citizens. Rather, it is an oligarchy of "rich, well-connected individuals on the political scene [who] now steer the direction of the country, regardless of or even against the will of the majority of voters."

My take on this is only slightly different. Long ago I came to the conclusion that the United States was in fact a “democracy” of competing interest groups whose parochial goals override the national interest and/or those of ordinary citizens.

The average voter is an important constituent of his congressperson, senator, governor, or even mayor only for that short period of time when he or she must be convinced to cast a ballot. When that time is over, the voter recedes into the background and the real constituents are now powerful interest groups with the money to buy political access and influence. Those who control and represent these interest groups are part of this country’s ruling oligarchy.

Such is the pseudo-democracy most Americans hold so dear. It still has its virtues relative to more authoritarian forms of rule. However, these too may be shrinking.

After 9/11 the rule of law and freedom of speech in the U.S. have been compromised. You can still write an essay like this one, but if you work for the government or the mainstream press and divulge the government’s criminal excesses, you are likely to end up in jail or exile. These are precarious times and they don’t show American democracy in a very good light – a sobering picture indeed.

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The Iraq War’s Pricy Ticket

For American taxpayers, the Iraq War is a gift that keeps on taking, with new plans to spend tens of billions of dollars to retrain the Iraqi army whose initial training cost tens of billions before the army collapsed against a few thousand militants, a pricy dilemma cited by ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

Most readers of the media today are too young to have closely followed the slide into the Vietnam War in the early 1960s. We began in 1961 with less than 2,000 “advisers” and even as late as 1965, the estimated cost of the war was going to be only \$100 million.

Four years later, the estimate had grown to almost \$29 *billion*. The war ended up costing America three quarters of a *trillion* dollars and our little band of advisers had grown to half our army. The moral of the story is that even if the price of admission seems cheap staying through the performance can be huge.

So turn to the current venture in Iraq. After we pulled out most of our troops, we spent somewhere between \$25 billion and \$26 billion to train and equip the Iraqi army. That is roughly \$10,000 for each ostensible soldier. So what did we get?

In the first bout of combat, the supposedly best units of the 250,000-man force were routed by less than 5,000 untrained and poorly armed militants. In fact, the debacle was worse than those figures indicate.

First, the 250,000 turns out to include large numbers of "ghosts." Many "soldiers" existed only as names on official reports. They were the Iraqi equivalent of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Gogol's hero, you will remember, wanted their government records. Even though they were actually dead, they were "officially" alive so on their behalf he could claim their benefits.

Keeping the Iraqis' names on the organizational charts similarly has enabled senior officers to draw the pay and rations as though the "ghost" soldiers were still manning their posts. No believable audit has so far been made but some observers guess that perhaps as many as a third of the Iraqi soldiers were like Gogol's "dead souls," just names.

And, second, many of those who actually did exist were effective only in robbing, raping or killing civilians. That was what "our man in Baghdad" used them for – to terrorize his enemies. Their attitude toward performing against those who could fight back was shown by their preparation for combat.

As an American senior officer reported to Congress, even in relatively safe Baghdad, it was not uncommon for a "soldier" to wear civilian clothes under his uniform. Then, if he got into danger, he could strip off the uniform, pretend to be an ordinary civilian and run away.

I started with a mention of Vietnam. Like the Iraqis, the South Vietnamese officers found ways to make away with our money. Many of them sold their ammunition and even arms to the Viet Minh and exercised great care not to get into "harm's way." We learned, at great pain and huge cost, that if our local ally does not care enough to fight for his homeland, we could not "win" for him.

We all know what the result was in Vietnam. South Vietnam's half million man army, trained to world-class standards and equipped with the most lethal weapons then known, was defeated time after time by poorly armed bands of guerrillas.

Even when backed up by the bulk of the American army and air force, it lost.

So now we are being told that what is needed in Iraq is another \$15 billion to \$20 billion to once again arm and train the same Iraqi soldiers (and also, as in Vietnam, add some “stiffening” by American “advisers”). The “entry ticket” is now quite a bit more costly than in the early days in Vietnam. What does it amount to?

Fifteen or twenty billion dollars would fund at least 45 new hospitals (a 320-bed hospital in Massachusetts recently cost \$300 million) or 200 schools (the national average for a school for a thousand students is about \$26 million).

Even such massive projects as the new bridge across the Hudson River in New York is cheap by comparison. For the *additional* costs of the Iraqi venture, we could have built five of them! And, just as in Vietnam, I predict that the cost of the “performance” will be a multiple of the entry ticket and will stretch out for years.

I don't begrudge the Iraqis support, but Vietnam taught me two things: first, support is different from replacement and, second, fighting is seldom the answer. The Iraqis must work out their own answer. Then our help might not even be needed..

William R. Polk is a veteran foreign policy consultant, author and professor who taught Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. President John F. Kennedy appointed Polk to the State Department's Policy Planning Council where he served during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His books include: *Violent Politics: Insurgency and Terrorism; Understanding Iraq; Understanding Iran; Personal History: Living in Interesting Times; Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times; and Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change.*
