

# THE LONG ARC

tracing democracy's journey

*The arc of the moral universe is long,  
but it bends toward justice.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.<sup>1</sup>

One evening not long ago, I wandered alone around “old Philadelphia.” As dusk fell, I caught a glimpse of Constitution Hall, the Liberty Bell, and the fine brick home of one of the Constitution’s signers. Nearly two million Americans visit here each year to pay homage to those responsible for the liberty and opportunity we enjoy.<sup>2</sup>

But while many of us may imagine that we have largely our Founders to thank—those august gentlemen who gathered in Philadelphia that hot summer of 1787—our democracy has actually been in a continual process of development for more than two centuries. Our nation’s first black federal judge, William Hastie, nailed it: “Democracy is a process, not a static condition.”<sup>3</sup>

For me, it helps to think of our history as a journey with two competing strains, one pushing democracy forward, one impeding it. To orient us on this journey, here I’ll briefly touch on both.

Remember first that in the eyes of our Founders, only about a tenth of the population—white, male property owners—were fit for democracy.<sup>4</sup> Thus for opportunities to have our voices heard today, we can salute those among our forebears who were willing to stand up against slavery, to march in the street claiming that even women

could be trusted with the vote, and to sit in at lunch counters in Mississippi to secure civil rights protections for black Americans. Democracy has also deepened and become more accountable, more life-enhancing, thanks to those who brought the end of child labor and won the eight-hour workday, those who made public places accessible to people with disabilities, and those who have fought to end second-class citizenship for gays and lesbians.

Each of these citizen movements has widened the circle of people deemed worthy of being heard. Each declares, in effect, that democracy is about *inclusion*, about voice—all of our voices—and about *deliberation*, about citizens themselves coming together, partnering as needed with government and business, to get the job done.

This democratic current is always bubbling, even surging, despite the darkness of the time.

Yet in this moment, the opposing antidemocratic strain is ascending. It has deep roots, too—for many of our forebears profoundly mistrusted democracy.

### **mistrusting democracy**

Over two hundred years ago, Alexander Hamilton, a framer of the Constitution, lay awake worrying about the “imprudence of democracy” and the “turbulent and changing” disposition of the masses.<sup>5</sup> Those fearful of citizen power in real democracy have used all sorts of grand ideas to disenfranchise us.

One can be traced way, way back to the era after Isaac Newton (1643–1727) convinced his contemporaries there were immutable laws governing the physical universe. Soon some began to think, *aha!* there must be parallel laws governing our human interactions. If we could only discover them, what a relief! Human beings could just let these laws decide outcomes, let them determine the shape of our societies. Then we’d be off the hook! (Or, well, powerless, depending on how you look at it.)

And over the centuries, some protagonists in the antidemocratic historical strain have convinced themselves that there are indeed

such “laws”—rules governing property and market exchange that are virtually God-given.

After the late eighteenth century, when Adam Smith (1723–1790) came up with the notion of an “invisible hand” guiding the market, such fixed-rules proponents leapt on it. Smith simplifiers ripped his “invisible hand” metaphor from its context—from his assumption of deep human bonds he called “moral sentiments,” among which he believed our passion for justice to run deepest.<sup>6</sup> Discarding any understanding that a just human society is necessary for a market to work, they put forth the “free market” as a natural state, one that exists automatically—if only humans don’t interfere.

Adam Smith neckties, I understand, were big in the Reagan White House.

Also undermining democracy within this historical current are those who have oversimplified John Locke (1632–1704) in an effort to convince us that property rights—in which corporations wrap themselves—are also sacrosanct, springing up spontaneously and inherently just, rather than a human invention that can be used for good or turned against us.

Three centuries hence, we can trace this suspicion of democracy all the way forward to today’s Far Right.

As the third millennium dawns, we face a stunningly radical assault on democracy’s bedrock values.

One is the rule of law. In 2003, the George W. Bush administration attacked Iraq in defiance of international law and then claimed not to be bound by the Geneva Convention in its treatment of certain international prisoners. And just when we were told that the U.S. use of torture had been limited and its perpetrators punished, early in 2005 new documents forced us to recognize that the horrors committed in our name have been widespread.<sup>7</sup>

Another democratic value under attack is honest dialogue, whether with citizens or within Congress. In George W. Bush’s first term, Democratic members of Congress were given forty-eight hours total reading time to consider key legislation of more than 2,900

pages, authorizing more than \$1 trillion in spending.<sup>8</sup> In an unprecedented breach of congressional protocol, Democrats have been consistently barred from conference rooms where bills are ironed out.<sup>9</sup>

In what unfortunately was not a moment of ironic comedy, the Bush campaign ousted three teachers in Oregon from an October 2004 rally and threatened them with arrest for wearing T-shirts bearing the words "Protect Our Civil Liberties."<sup>10</sup> And in early 2005, we learned how thoroughly the Bush White House had degraded "town hall meetings" from honest give-and-take to rehearsed theater.<sup>11</sup>

Even more basic, perhaps, the Far Right has targeted democracy's core premise that government is citizens' tool to ensure fair opportunities and protection from harm—the bases both of our personal freedom and healthy communities.

George W. Bush's administrations have diluted the Clean Water Act so that it no longer applies to 60 percent of our major waterways, refused to raise the minimum wage so that it continues to lose purchasing power, and cut funding for police and programs helping poor working families. At this writing, the administration seeks to privatize Social Security and to slash funds for affordable housing, child care for low-income working parents, energy assistance, and nutrition.<sup>12</sup>

Doubting that citizens are capable of self government, this strain in our history is peopled by those seeking to transfer as many decisions as possible from the public realm, where decisions are made by deliberation, to the marketplace, where only money talks. Today that means the transfer of vital democratic functions to corporations—from running our public schools to sponsoring our presidential debates.

I've stressed historical continuity, and yet I'm aware that overemphasizing it could shield us from seeing something quite painful: that those at the center of power today are, in their extreme antidemocratic stance, an aberration, not a continuation of Republican or conservative politics. What we're experiencing is not differences, say, about the role of government versus voluntary

activities but a difference between those who live the democratic process and those who do not.

The threat to democracy is especially grave because the anti-democrats' control is virtually unchecked: A small group now dominates the party in control of both houses of Congress and often prevails in the Supreme Court.

President Reagan and the senior President Bush regarded those who form the tight circle around George W. Bush—Paul Wolfowitz in particular—as extremists, reports Ray McGovern, a CIA analyst who served Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Reagan. At the time, he reports, they were even dubbed “crazies.”<sup>13</sup>

The term *neoconservative*, often used to describe this inner circle, is therefore profoundly misleading.

Our government has been taken over not by conservatives but by a “revolutionary” power, warns the Princeton University economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman. In *The Great Unraveling*, he argues that those in control in Washington today regard hard-won social protections that Americans have long seen as essential to a healthy, inclusive democracy—including Social Security, unemployment insurance, and Medicare—as “a violation of basic principle.”<sup>14</sup>

If only we could dismiss Krugman as an alarmist. But he’s a sober-minded academic, and he’s really worried.

The tactics employed by the Far Right reflect an explicit strategy. In 2000, the leading Republican congressman who became majority whip, Tom DeLay, distributed a pamphlet to all his Republican colleagues titled *The Art of Political War: How Republicans Can Fight to Win*. Its author, David Horowitz, writes, “Politics is war conducted by other means. In political warfare you do not fight just to prevail in an argument, but to destroy the enemy’s fighting ability. . . . In political wars, the aggressor usually prevails.”<sup>15</sup>

With the help of courageous social critics, we can now see that the current assault on democracy is intentional.<sup>16</sup>

It is being carried out by those in power who are not playing by rules most of us thought to be America’s foundation.

For me, David Brock's 2002 book *Blinded by the Right* was a jarring wake-up call. Once a Far Right insider himself, Brock recounts his experience of the mean-spirited, ends-justify-means mind-set of this group that is—chillingly—convincing. He depicts people willing to go to any lengths, including deliberately misleading others (as Brock himself did in his character assassination of Anita Hill), to vanquish enemies.<sup>17</sup> His later work makes clear that the Bush administration's payments to news commentators to push its policies are part of a no-holds-barred strategy.<sup>18</sup>

This assault on democratic principles by our elected representatives is, however, only one dimension of the crisis of democracy upon us. Unelected corporate power has grown dramatically in recent decades.

Corporations at the pinnacle fully grasp that their interests lie with the Far Right. Despite the narrow gap in Congress between Republicans and Democrats, in the 2004 presidential election top-giving corporate political action committees favored Republican candidates ten to one.<sup>19</sup> And they have been richly rewarded. The fifth largest contributor to the Bush's two presidential campaigns was the credit card giant MBNA Corporation, which in 2005 prevailed in its eight-year lobbying effort for a law limiting personal bankruptcy relief, even when caused by medical catastrophe.<sup>20</sup>

The lesson? Thin democracy's weakness puts it always at risk of takeover by private interests and extreme minorities, left or right.

### the blinding myths

To grasp why more Americans aren't in open revolt, think of the culture's dominant message—bombarding us through advertising and media portrayals: We humans are nothing but selfish, calculating schemers in the marketplace. "Greed is good," we heard in the Reagan 1980s. And since then, advertising and other media messages have intensified, all telling us we're only capable of looking out for Number One.

Believing this shabby caricature of our nature, of course any thought of coming together to deliberate and choose what's best for all of us—democracy—seems naïve: After all, our selfish little selves will always subvert the process.

It follows then like night follows day that the more of life's choices we let the marketplace decide the better—even the ownership of life itself, including genes and seeds. So what if economic power becomes a bit tight? That's just a necessary trade-off . . . or so goes the theory.

And what theory is that?

It's hard to see it as “theory” because it is now the air we breathe. Ronald Reagan called it “the magic of the market,” and since his time, conservatives (an unfortunate misnomer, since their ideology is not “conserving” our environment and is breaking with our democratic past) have drummed home a clear message: our government is not a tool for citizens to use to express our values and create a society that works for us all. No, the government is our enemy; “the market” is our salvation.

In 2001, Grover Norquist, a powerful voice of the Far Right in Washington's inner circle, said he'd like “to cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”<sup>21</sup>

And many Americans are cheering: Yes, yes, drown that big, bad bogeyman.

Only . . . wait a minute.

### **the antigovernment myth**

The Far Right has certainly perfected antigovernment and pro-market rhetoric, but its actions are something else again. It is *not* against government per se.

The Bush administration has expanded the federal budget—with a huge military buildup benefiting the military-industrial giants (causing Halliburton's profits to double in the last two years alone).

We now spend nearly as much on the military as the rest of the world combined. And a drug benefit in the 2004 Medicare bill gives pharmaceutical companies a \$700 billion bonanza in the coming decade.<sup>22</sup>

*In all, the federal budget has grown twice as fast during the Bush years as it did in the Clinton nineties.*<sup>23</sup>

While proclaiming fierce antigovernment and promarket allegiance, the administration increased spending so much that by 2005 the United States slipped for the first time below the top ten countries in the *Wall Street Journal*–Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom.<sup>24</sup> The index ranked as freer Denmark, for example, which the Far Right here tars as "socialist." The media ignored the U.S. slippage because, I believe, it did not support the prevailing myth.

The Far Right's "get government off your back" language also hides its USA PATRIOT Act initiatives to extend government power, including access to medical histories, library records, school transcripts, bank statements, Internet usage, and travel plans. The government can now wiretap or secretly search anyone's home without probable cause of illegal activity.<sup>25</sup>

While increasing federal spending, the Bush administration has slashed federal revenues with \$276 billion in tax cuts—three-quarters of which went to the wealthiest 20 percent among us.<sup>26</sup> In this way, President Bush has racked up an unprecedented national debt, one so huge that interest alone—three-fourths owed to foreigners, mostly Chinese—eats up each year one-third as much as we spend on a swelling military. The debt burden now amounts to what *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof calls a "birth tax" of \$150,000 on every newborn American.<sup>27</sup>

What a perfect setup.

Increasing expenses but cutting revenue, the Bush administration bankrupts government. So President Bush can now say with a straight face that there is no money for affordable housing, job training, Social Security, environmental protections, or community development.<sup>28</sup>



The Far Right doesn't oppose big government. I hope these numbers make that clear. What they oppose is the democratic premise that citizens use government as our tool to provide basic security for ourselves and express solidarity with our neighbors—through protections against catastrophic job and health loss—and as our means to ensure fair educational and job opportunities. Both are essential to strong communities and thus to freedom itself.

This security-plus-opportunity premise of democracy is what Franklin Roosevelt was getting at when in his 1936 inaugural speech, he quoted an English judge: "Necessitous men are not free men."<sup>29</sup>

### the myth of government versus market

The Far Right's antigovernment, promarket ideology also blinds us to the ways in which a market, or at least a well-functioning one, *needs* democratic government. The market and government aren't enemies; they are essential democratic friends.

In Far Right rhetoric, the market functions freely and efficiently, untainted by interference from the always destructive government. But in capitalism, wealth accrues to wealth; that's just what it does—and in the last twenty years at a virtually unprecedented pace. Left to its own devices, therefore, the market undermines the very competition for which it is so prized.

Jaws dropped at the size of the \$13 billion Standard Oil–Gulf Corporation merger in 1984.<sup>30</sup> Sixteen years later, no one blinked when the merger between America Online and Time-Warner created a \$350 billion company.<sup>31</sup> Today in most major industries, so few companies dominate sales that a truly competitive market is increasingly an illusion.<sup>32</sup>

And at the same time, the tightening grip on individual assets means that more and more Americans are cut out altogether. The top 1 percent control more wealth than the bottom 95 percent put together, and thirty-five million of us are too poor to meet even many of our essential needs through the market.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1980s, on the University of California's Berkeley campus, I had the opportunity to debate the free market's *numero uno* champion, Milton Friedman, author of *Capitalism and Freedom*. "Dr. Friedman," I said, "with all due respect, the market serves human freedom, *but only on one condition*—that we can participate in it! It serves freedom, therefore, in exact proportion to the breadth of the distribution of wealth, and it takes democratic government to ensure that breadth."

But the myths persist, blinding Americans to the fact that a government overpowered by corporate interests cannot maintain a fair marketplace. As Robert Kennedy Jr. has written, "Corporate capitalists don't want free markets, they want dependable profits, and their surest route is to crush the competition by controlling government."<sup>34</sup>

Lest my critique sound extreme, note that we've been warned of precisely the predicament we now face by many esteemed Americans, both Republicans and Democrats.

Thomas Jefferson late in life warned us against the usurpation of citizen power by "the aristocracy of our monied corporations."<sup>35</sup> And by the twentieth century, presidents of both parties awakened to what Jefferson feared. In accepting the Democratic presidential nomination in 1936, Franklin Roosevelt decried giant corporations—what he called "economic royalists"—as the new threat to our freedom because "they had concentrated into their own hands an almost complete control over . . . other people's lives." His call to action was clear: "Our allegiance to American institutions requires the overthrow of this kind of power."

Two and a half decades later, a Republican, President Dwight Eisenhower, warned Americans in his farewell address about the "acquisition of unwarranted influence" within government by the "military-industrial complex." He added, "The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."<sup>36</sup>

Even with his amazing foresight, I doubt that Eisenhower could have imagined a Halliburton today, with billions in no-bid contracts

for work in Iraq, getting caught overcharging taxpayers over a hundred million dollars and still being rewarded with huge bonuses.<sup>37</sup>

### the arc extends

At the same time, this book argues, movements are alive that not only seek to restore the long arc of justice but are potentially extending it to democracy's next historical stage—a more inclusive, pervasive, vibrant democracy.

How can this be?

Given the mighty antidemocratic forces in ascendance, could it be that at the very same time, a more powerful understanding and practice of democracy is emerging in America?

Yes, I believe it is. Here are my best guesses to at least some of the impetus feeding the emergence of Living Democracy.

One is simple: the alarm is sounding. It's harder and harder to block out the bad news of where the thin, anemic understanding of democracy has taken us.

We have only to ponder the multiple assaults on our health and well-being, such as those in the box in Chapter One. Then let sink in the tragedy of eleven million American children facing hunger in a country in which obesity ranks among the greatest health threats and wages are so low that one in four working families faces financial hardship.<sup>38</sup> In the face of all this, a new sense of urgency is enabling many to take new risks and to seek solutions themselves.

Plus, awareness is spreading that is emboldening many Americans. They are now seeing that “those up there”—you know, the folks who are supposed to be “taking care of business”—aren't.

The 1980s savings and loan scandal and the 1990s implosion of corporate giants like Enron and Tyco revealed shocking arrogance and ethical blindness.

Then the current Bush administration convinced Americans to go to war in part by falsely linking Iraq to al-Qaeda terrorists and by relying on “worthless or misleading” intelligence and analyses

“riddled with errors,” according to even the Bush-picked review panel.<sup>39</sup> With no plan to secure the peace, the administration sent our troops into battle, exposing them to U.S.-deployed depleted uranium, while allowing hundreds of tons of Iraqi weapons to fall into the hands of insurgents.<sup>40</sup>

Shocking developments like these have forced Americans to face up to bad faith at the highest levels. Ironically, though, the very failures of those at the top may be empowering the rest of us—as their shortcomings demystify authority.

Perhaps more and more people are asking, Could we—everyday people using our common sense and our own moral grounding—do worse? Maybe we could do better!

Paralleling the demystification of authority at the top is a third development essential to Living Democracy—a deepening appreciation of the capacities of those at the “bottom.” With, as you will see, “regular people” stepping out in their communities—becoming knowledgeable in arcane matters from banking to federal communications policy—our expectations grow as to the legitimate role of those without official authority.

This radical shift in perception is so pervasive, happening on so many levels, that it's hard to identify it for the revolution it is. Some measure it in the explosive growth of citizen organizations, now totaling two million in the United States alone and growing worldwide.<sup>41</sup> In just one decade, the 1990s, they jumped 60 percent.<sup>42</sup> And they're being noticed: More national governments, as well as the United Nations, are inviting citizen representatives to the table.

Other, more subtle changes are making way for democracy to move into a more powerful stage.

A quiet sea change has occurred over at least the last forty years—perhaps its beginning best marked with the 1962 release of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.<sup>43</sup> Ecology is becoming the dominant metaphor of our time—teaching us that the nature of life is relationships and never-ending change. From the ozone hole—now the size of a continent—to the greenhouse effect—already causing

weather mayhem—we experience ecology’s dual lessons of interconnectedness and continual change.

Ecology teaches us that there is no single action, isolated and contained. All actions have ripples—not just up through hierarchical flows but out through webs of connectedness in what we might think of as lateral flows. Scientists for the first time have tools to understand that “all living systems are self-organizing networks,” as physicist Fritjof Capra explained to me.<sup>44</sup>

Beneath our awareness, perhaps, these lessons seep into popular consciousness, telling us that our acts do matter, all of them. How much more motivating is this ecological worldview than the now discredited mechanistic view of society, in which we’re each isolated, encapsulated egos trapped within our own self-created boxes!

Moreover, in piecing together why democracy might be moving into a new historical stage of greater inclusivity and participation—despite frightening signs of regression—we can’t overestimate the communications revolution: computers and the Internet. The layperson’s access to information and knowledge is exploding. It’s tough now for those in power to keep secrets—whether it is details of what the government didn’t do to prevent 9/11, which energy company execs sat down with Vice President Cheney to craft energy policy, or who paid for Tom DeLay’s \$70,000 golfing trip to Scotland’s legendary Saint Andrews links.<sup>45</sup>

“Transparency”—that’s the new buzzword. Citizens are demanding that governments and corporations make visible everything from stockholders’ votes to the chemicals they use in production. But before the era of computers and the Internet, citizens had no practical way to make use of these vast quantities of data.

Not so today.

Consider the impact of the 1984 “right to know” law, passed after thousands died and hundreds of thousands were injured in the chemical release disaster at the Union Carbide factory (now owned by Dow) in Bhopal, India. Under this law, manufacturers and federal facilities must report how much of certain chemicals they release, and the Environmental Protection Agency publishes the data—the

Toxics Release Inventory—on the Internet and elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> Now citizens have critical information to hold polluters accountable. In arguably the most polluted communities in America, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network—thanks to the data—has successfully sued the EPA for not following the Clean Air Act.<sup>47</sup>

We can even click and see what might be harming us. Just visit, for example, <http://www.scorecard.org>, key in your ZIP code, and find out exactly who is polluting your town and what is spewing into your water and air. When I did this, I was in for a shock: I discovered that a company I jog by regularly ranks among my county's top twenty polluters.

The impact of the Toxics Release Inventory has been striking: in the seven years after its launch in 1988, releases of listed chemicals dropped by 45 percent.<sup>48</sup> Citizens' use of those newly usable cold data can take part of the credit.

### **the myth of blue versus red**

Living Democracy's emergence has yet another source of energy.

Even as the pundits keep drumming into us that we're a nation deadlocked—red states versus blue states—the many openings as well as the threats I've just described tell another story. They are generating significant common passion for change among a majority of Americans.

We often hear that Americans' moral concerns focus on the rights of gays to marry and of women to obtain abortions—two matters that often divide. Actually, reports a 2005 poll, we're twice as likely to cite greed, materialism, and poverty as the country's most urgent moral crises—matters that could unite.<sup>49</sup>

In an extensive national survey in 2000, doing "whatever it takes to protect the environment" was important to Americans in both red and blue states—64 and 70 percent, respectively.<sup>50</sup> In early 2005, fifty-one evangelical Christian groups released an impassioned call for government and citizen action to avert global warming and save the environment.<sup>51</sup>

Exactly the same proportion of Republicans and Democrats (61 percent) said in a 2004 poll that lowering health care costs should be a top priority for the country. Fully 72 percent of us agree that “the government should provide universal health care, even if it means repealing most tax cuts passed since Bush took office,” according to a 2003 Pew poll.<sup>52</sup>

Another survey found that neither red nor blue state residents place a high priority on increasing defense spending.

That survey also reveals almost the same proportion of red and blue staters (62 and 64 percent) agreeing that corporations wield too much power.<sup>53</sup> Another survey shows almost 90 percent of us think that corporations hold too much sway in Washington.<sup>54</sup> A lot of common ground there!

Beyond any specific issues, most Americans, whether red or blue, would be appalled, I believe, by the antidemocratic tactics of the Far Right—if they knew.

So let’s ditch notions of an unbridgeable divide. Widely shared perceptions about deep, systemwide problems open possibilities for dialogue and unified action among tens of millions of now disaffected Americans.

I opened this chapter with Martin Luther King’s evocative words, reminding us that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. And I’ll bet ours isn’t the only era in which it has been hard to track the arc at all, because history seems to be simultaneously moving in two opposing directions.

Today, one direction, driven by fear and suspicion, is ripping our society apart as wealth concentrates and fair-opportunity guarantees and security protections are under attack—along with the retrenchment of fundamental civil liberties. This book is primarily about the other dynamic—about real, undeniable signs of Living Democracy emerging, democracy practiced by citizens who understand that freedom is possible only in strong communities. To use political philosopher Harry Boyte’s felicitous phrase, they are claiming their voices to define freedom as “the liberation of talents.”<sup>55</sup>

