Democracy Incorporated

Managed Democracy and
the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

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tionists, suffragettes, Populists, and Progressives fought to promote and defend demotic power while the political elites—many of whose representatives early on would defect and transfer their loyalties to the Southern pro-slavery cause—worked to professionalize politics and to make governance a technical art.

In past centuries, with their economies of scarcity, the struggle for democracy was often described as a war between "the haves and the have nots." The element of truth in that formula throws into sharp relief the crucial changes in the stakes. In times past democracy struggled against the "old regimes." Today in the United States the status of democracy and the role of its adherents are the opposite of what they have been in the past. Put simply, the early democrats fought for what they did not have. Today the challenge for democrats is to recover lost ground, to "popularize" political institutions and practices that have become severed from popular control. It involves renewing the meaning and substance of "representative democracy" by affirming the primacy of Congress, curbing the growth of presidential power, disentangling the stranglehold of lobbyists, democratizing the party system by eliminating the barriers to third parties, and enforcing an austere system of campaign finance.

Reforming these institutions is not the same as democratizing them: to only a limited extent can the citizenry itself and by itself inject democracy into a political system permeated by corporate power. It can provide the initial impetus but not the sustained will. Or, stated differently, democracy has, first, to find itself, become a self-conscious demos; and, then, it has to reconceive its relationship with its ancient nemesis, elitism.

At the critical moment when a volatile economy and widening class disparities require a government responsive to popular needs, government has become increasingly unresponsive; and, conversely, when an aggressive state stands most in need of being restrained, democracy proved an ineffectual check. A public fearful of terrorist attacks and bewildered by a war based on deceit is unable to function as the rational conscience of the American state, capable of checking the impulse to adventurism and the systematic evasion of constitutional constraints. A politics of dumbed-down public discourse and low voter turnout combines with a dynamic economy of stubborn inequalities to produce the paradox of a powerful state and a failing democracy.

But is it only democracy that is failing? Every day brings fresh evidence that American power is being challenged throughout the world, that its imperial sway is weakening, that its global economic hegemony is a thing of the past, and that it has been sucked into an unwinnable and interminable "war against terrorism." Is failing empire the opportunity for a democratic revival, or does that failure leave intact the tendencies toward inverted totalitarianism?

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**Chapter Thirteen**

Democracy's Prospects: Looking Backwards

Generally when I ride it is the one time when I feel alone, even though I know people are behind me. I ask people a lot of times not to be in my line of vision because all I can see straight ahead is, you know, space.

—President George W. Bush

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A democracy failing in what ways? What was democracy supposed to bring into the world that was not there before? A short answer might
be this: democracy is about the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs. What is at stake in democratic politics is whether ordinary men and women can recognize that their concerns are best protected and cultivated under a regime whose actions are governed by principles of commonality, equality, and fairness, a regime in which taking part in politics becomes a way of staking out and sharing in a common life and its forms of self-fulfillment. Democracy is not about bowling together but about managing together those powers that immediately and significantly affect the lives and circumstances of others and one’s self. Exercising power can be humbling when the consequences are palpable rather than statistical—and rather different from wielding power at a distance, at, say, an “undisclosed bunker somewhere in northern Virginia.”

What is at stake today is the choice between the two forms of politics, Superpower and democracy. The contrasting nature of those two forms was best revealed by the invasion of Iraq. Beyond those stark and familiar facts about the war—the poor planning that preceded it, the hapless attempts to administer the country following the fall of Saddam, the sacrifice of American lives to a shameful cause, and the incalculable harm done to the country and its inhabitants—there was the political loss of nerve among Democrats, the press, and the punditry, a failure so profound as to call into question the health of the political system as a whole. That failure extended to all but a minority of the citizenry; the vast majority waved an occasional flag and then, when possible, heeded the advice of their leader to “fly, consume, spend.”

While there are many lessons to be learned from the war’s debacle, there is one that is crucial to any future which democracy, especially participatory democracy, may have. It concerns the primary importance of truth telling and the destructive effects of lying.

If democracy is about participating in self-government, its first requirement is a supportive culture, a complex of beliefs, values, and practices that nurture equality, cooperation, and freedom. A rarely discussed but crucial need of a self-governing society is that the members and those they elect to office tell the truth. Although lying has figured in all forms of government, it acquires a special salience in a democracy, where the object of deception is the “sovereign people.” Under nondemocratic forms of government, where the people are politically excluded as a matter of principle, lying is typically done by the sovereign or its agents, usually in order to mislead those presumed to be enemies or rivals of the sovereign. In modern dictatorships lying to the public was a matter of systematic policy and assigned to a special ministry (sic) of propaganda. Statecraft as an especially bad joke . . .

Self-government is, literally, deformed by lying; it cannot function when those in office assume as a matter of course that, when necessary or advantageous, they can mislead the citizenry. This is especially true when democracy has been reduced to a form of representative government. Such government is, by its nature, distanced from the citizen. And instead of a representative’s politics representing the citizen, the reverse is true: Beltway politics is re-presented to the citizen. The less viable and flourishing democracy at “home,” the less democratic representative democracy and the more prevalent a “re-presented” politics, a politics lacking directness, authenticity. And never more so than in the age of spin doctors, public relations experts, and pollsters.

In the face of declining political involvement by ordinary citizens, democracy becomes dangerously empty and not only receptive to anti-political appeals to blind patriotism, fear, and demagoguery but comfortable with a political culture where lying, misrepresentation, and deception have become normal practice.

It is only mildly hyperbolic to characterize lying as a crime against reality. Lying goes to the heart of the never-ending questions, what is the world really like? What is in fact happening? Accepting something as true is not the same as agreeing that it is. To witness the role of lying and its consequences, we need look no further than to Iraq and to the death and destruction made possible by misrepresentations. Lying and its variants of deception and misrepresentation are no more simple aberrations than the unprovoked war itself. Lying and irrational decisions
are connected, as are lying and unreasoning popular support for the decision-makers.

In a preliminary way lying can be defined as the deliberate misrepresentation of actuality and the substitution of a constructed "reality." The problem today is that lying is not an isolated phenomenon but characteristic of a culture where exaggeration and inflated claims are commonplace occurrences. For more than a century the public has been shaped by a relentless culture of advertising and its exaggerations, false claims, and fantasies—all aimed at influencing and directing behavior in the premeditated ways chosen by the advertiser. The techniques developed for the marketplace have been adapted by political consultants and their media experts. The result has been the pollution of the ecology of politics by the inauthentic politics of misrepresentative government, claiming to be what it is not, compassionate and conservative, god-fearing and moral.

While the principle of popular participation in decision making is fundamental to democracy—and we shall return to it—thoughtful participation is dependent upon certain commonplaces: first, the availability of knowledge in the form of reliable factual information and, second, a political culture that values and supports the honest effort to reach judgments aimed at promoting as far as possible the best interests of the whole society. There is a third principle, intellectual integrity. One aspect of it is the responsibility of those who, as teachers, publicists, researchers, and scientists, practice truth telling as their vocation. It is not a vocation to which many pundits, talk show hosts, for-sale journalists, and think tank residents are committed. The public vocation of truth telling cannot be consistently practiced without public and private respect for, and defense of, intellectual integrity.

Totalitarian regimes viewed intellectual integrity as subversive and imposed ideological or political orthodoxy upon all intellectual pursuits and professions. Under the Bush administration there have been repeated instances of governmental or corporate attempts to distort or suppress unwelcome expert reports and scientific findings. As President Bush testified, "One of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq with the war on terror." A common thread connects false claims about WMDs with denials of global warming. The one insists that there was evidence; the other denies that there is evidence. Both are denials of actuality; both are irrational decisions of huge consequence; and both are aided by the lack of intellectual and public integrity among our scandal-ridden corporate and governmental leadership.3

I know what the president thinks. I know what I think. And we’re not looking for an exit strategy [from Iraq]. We are looking for victory.
—Vice President Dick Cheney

Lying is more than deception; the liar wants the unreal to be accepted as actuality, so he sets about to establish what is not actually the case, not really real. A lie by a public authority is meant to be accepted by the public as an “official” truth concerning the “real world.” At bottom, lying is the expression of a will to power. My power is increased if you accept “a picture of the world which is a product of my will.” Of course the skilled liar should not be taken in by his own lies; that would be self-deception. Yet the skilled liar might also become a habitual liar, the success of one lie encouraging another with the result that a leader is tempted to try to make untruth into a reality—as with, for example, the vice president’s feverish efforts to press the CIA to dredge up evidence of WMDs where there was little or none.

It is a virtual cliché that in unusual circumstances, and especially in extraordinary ones, it may be necessary for leaders to lie to or mislead or conceal facts from the public when lying serves the broad interests of the nation. Throughout Western history questions of when to lie, what form a lie should take, and whether it is or was justified usually presumed that lying was a dispensation allowed only to elites who, theoretically, are more politically knowledgeable and experienced than ordinary citizens.

It seems, however, paradoxical to say that democracy should deliberately deceive itself. Supposing, nonetheless, that elites, instead of simply enjoying access to greater or more reliable information, claimed for
themselves a special order of rationality that allowed them access to a higher, extra-ordinary Reality and enabled them to see deeper, beyond the actuality experienced by the average citizen. Would that result in a conception in which lying was not a minor deviation but a reconstitution of “reality”? If, for example, the initial reason for invading Iraq (WMDs) was exposed as a lie but the ruling elites then claimed that a higher purpose was to promote democracy in the Middle East, would that justification amount to a claim that elites possessed the substantively superior form of reasoning required by those who contend with problems whose complexity and possible consequences far exceed the experience of the ordinary citizen?

Perhaps the most influential justification for political lying as a higher form of reason, and for lying as the prerogative of a special type of political elites with access to a higher reality unknown to ordinary mortals, was set down by Plato more than two thousand years ago. His justification for lying has contemporary echoes in the systematic lying of the Bush administration, and those echoes have an intellectual genealogy. Plato was awarded canonical status by Leo Strauss, while Straussians and the neocons, who played a decisive role in deceiving the public about the reasons for attacking Iraq, have similarly canonized Strauss. From canon to cannon-fodder...

Rulers, according to Plato, “will have to give subjects a considerable dose of imposition and deception for their good.” Plato’s ideal political system is founded upon sharply defined and enforced political inequalities designed to ensure that a specially educated class of philosophers would monopolize political decision making and the practice of lying. Thus the crucial distinction, one that is cultivated and enforced, is between those whose exceptional mental endowments and subsequent training enable them to glimpse true reality and those who are judged to lack ability and therefore denied “higher” education.

The ideology that sanctions these inequalities is the so-called noble lie. The inhabitants are to be told that although they are all descended from a common “mother,” they are assigned, according to a hierarchical principle, to one of three classes: the ruling, or golden, class of philosopher-guardians, where true knowledge and the ability to rule exclusively reside; the military, or silver, class; and the farmer-artisan, or bronze, class. Political power and authority are reserved to the specially educated golden class, and they alone are allowed the prerogative of lying. Plato’s justification of elite rule is set out in his famous Allegory of the Cave. It contrasts the unreality of the images by which the Many live and the true reality that only the Few can approximate.

Imagine men living in a cave set deep in the ground. From childhood they have been kept immobile by chains; because they can see only what is directly before them, they assume it is reality. Behind them is a fire with a track built along it. Imagine also some persons carrying artificial objects of wood or stone, some resembling human figures or animals, whose shadow images appear on the wall. The “prisoners” cannot see themselves or other prisoners; they see only the shadows cast by the fire on the wall facing them. Such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.

Plato continues: Suppose, however, one of the cave-dwellers is spirited outside the cave and thrust into bright sunlight. Dazzled at first, he believes the “real” world is illusion but, after becoming accustomed to the light, realizes that now he sees the world in the light of true reality—that is, he has knowledge, and what he had formerly believed to be reality was illusion. The vast majority of mankind remain imprisoned in the cave and incapable of grasping the true nature of things. Their best hope is to accept the power of those versed in the true philosophy. Plato darkly concludes: by nature the masses prefer an illusory reality, and so they may turn on the philosopher, making him a martyr to the truth. Thus the masses fear the truth, and their instinct is to cling to the unreal.

But what is real? For Plato it was not the world of tangible objects, of everyday experience, things we touch, sense, and experience: these are too ephemeral or subjective to be true or real. Or perhaps too accessible, for they constitute the everyday world shared by those who are looked down upon as common. The truly real is immaterial idea, intangible, unchanging, and belongs to a different and higher order of being.
Knowledge of it gives privileged access to the meaning of the world and the nature of the Good. The Few alone are capable of grasping reality but only after they have undergone a rigorous intellectual discipline presided over by the true philosophers. Since the Many are incapable of knowing reality, the Few make no effort to elevate the level of common political understanding. Instead the Few divulge what is politically expedient and in a vulgarized (i.e., untrue) form, such as a myth, which the masses can comprehend.

Democracy was, of course, anathema to Plato, not least because it stands for the regime where those who rule tend to be guided by experience of the tangibles of everyday existence, by "common" sense. Although there are no contests for political power in Plato's scheme, in another sense his republic is all about politics, the politics of who defines and controls access to "reality," and what the role of truth and lying is in that politics. Plato assumed that the small scale of his imagined state would make it easier for his elite to control the extent to which, and in what form, the Many would benefit from a reality they could never understand, much less truly know.

To press the point: supposing the elite found themselves in a democracy instead of Plato's Republic. Further, supposing they had been sufficiently influenced by modernity to be somewhat skeptical of the existence of "Reality," might they not go down to the cave and seek control of the images cast on the screen, especially if they could ally with those who were in the business of manufacturing images and determining their content?

A politics that aims at commonality places a high premium on trust among the participants or between representatives and the people they represent. Trust, in turn, requires not only that the participants and representatives convey the considered views of the citizenry, but that they accurately represent the actualities of the political world to the citizenry. Trust is the precondition of an authentic politics. An authentic politics is not univocal; there will always be contested views about actuality, and how it is to be understood and acted upon. But it makes a great deal of difference if the parties concerned can assume that each has made a good-faith effort to speak truthfully.

Although it would be naive to suggest that democracy eliminates lying, arguably its politics tends to encourage authenticity. A smaller political context is more congenial to nurturing democratic values, such as popular participation, public discussion, and accountability through close scrutiny of officeholders. A smaller scale brings with it modest stakes and a consequent scaling down of power, of expectations, and of ambitions. Precisely because public discussion, debate, and deliberation are fundamental to democracy, deliberate misrepresentation is more easily exposed.

Democratic deliberations deepen the political experience of citizens, but they are time-consuming: time is needed for the expression of diverse viewpoints, extended questioning, and considered judgments. When the pace of life is slower, there is "plenty of time" and a greater possibility of considered judgments and the likelihood of durability, of more lasting decisions, of a public memory.

Attuned to slower rhythms once dictated by long distances and slow communications, democracy now struggles against a context where scale is defined and dominated by Superpower, globalizing capital, and empire; by aggrandizing forms of power that are equipped with the means of annihilating the barriers created by distance. And because distance serves to consume time, those powers have succeeded in annihilating conventional time as well, a precious resource of democracy. Decisions, like weapons, are rapid-fire, with the crucial result that while there may be a transcript, there is less likely to be a memory.

Another result, whose political implications will be explored later, is that the nature, indeed the very notion, of actuality—what the public world is really like, what its inhabitants are really experiencing, and what the effects are of response-time measured in instants—becomes virtual at worst, abstract at best. These unprecedented powers and the