

The Death of Freedom in America

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The Death of the Republic

The deep state's decision in ancient Rome—dominated by a bloated military and a corrupt oligarchy, much like the United States of 2017—to strangle the vain and idiotic Emperor Commodus in his bath in the year 192 did not halt the growing chaos and precipitous decline of the Roman Empire.

Commodus, like a number of other late Roman emperors, and like President Trump, was incompetent and consumed by his own vanity. He commissioned innumerable statues of himself as Hercules and had little interest in governance. He used his position as head of state to make himself the star of his own ongoing public show. He fought victoriously as a gladiator in the arena in fixed bouts. Power for Commodus, as it is for Trump, was primarily about catering to his bottomless narcissism, hedonism and lust for wealth. He sold public offices so the ancient equivalents of Betsy DeVos and Steve Mnuchin could orchestrate a vast kleptocracy.

Commodus was replaced by the reformer Pertinax, the Bernie Sanders of his day, who attempted in vain to curb the power of the Praetorian Guards, the ancient version of the military-industrial complex. This effort saw the Praetorian Guards assassinate Pertinax after he was in power only three months. The Guards then auctioned off the office of emperor to the highest bidder. The next emperor, Didius Julianus, lasted 66 days. There would be five emperors in A.D. 193, the year after the assassination of Commodus. Trump and our decaying empire have ominous historical precedents. If the deep state replaces Trump, whose ineptitude and imbecility are embarrassing to the empire, that action will not restore our democracy any more than replacing Commodus restored democracy in Rome. Our republic is dead.

Societies that once were open and had democratic traditions are easy prey for the enemies of democracy. These demagogues pay deference to the patriotic ideals, rituals, practices and forms of the old democratic political system while dismantling it. When the Roman Emperor Augustus—he referred to himself as the “first citizen”—neutered the republic, he was careful to maintain the form of the old republic. Lenin and the Bolsheviks did the same when they seized and crushed the autonomous soviets. Even the Nazis and the Stalinists insisted they ruled democratic states. Thomas Paine wrote that despotic government is a fungus that grows out of a corrupt civil society. This is what happened to these older democracies. It is what happened to us.

Our constitutional rights—due process, habeas corpus, privacy, a fair trial, freedom from exploitation, fair elections and dissent—have been taken from us by judicial fiat. These rights exist only in name. The vast disconnect between the purported values of the state and reality renders political discourse absurd.

Corporations, cannibalizing the federal budget, legally empower themselves to exploit and pillage. It is impossible to vote against the interests of Goldman Sachs or ExxonMobil. The pharmaceutical and insurance industries can hold sick children hostage while their parents bankrupt themselves trying to save their sons or daughters. Those burdened by student loans can never wipe out the debt by declaring bankruptcy. In many states, those who attempt to publicize the conditions in the vast factory farms where diseased animals are warehoused for slaughter can be charged with a criminal

offense. Corporations legally carry out tax boycotts. Companies have orchestrated free trade deals that destroy small farmers and businesses and deindustrialize the country. Labor unions and government agencies designed to protect the public from contaminated air, water and food and from usurious creditors and lenders have been defanged. The Supreme Court, in an inversion of rights worthy of George Orwell, defines unlimited corporate contributions to electoral campaigns as a right to petition the government or a form of free speech. Much of the press, owned by large corporations, is an echo chamber for the elites. State and city enterprises and utilities are sold to corporations that hike rates and deny services to the poor. The educational system is being slowly privatized and turned into a species of vocational training.

Wages are stagnant or have declined. Unemployment and underemployment—masked by falsified statistics—have thrust half the country into chronic poverty. Social services are abolished in the name of austerity. Culture and the arts have been replaced by sexual commodification, banal entertainment and graphic depictions of violence. The infrastructure, neglected and underfunded, is collapsing. Bankruptcies, foreclosures, arrests, food shortages and untreated illnesses that lead to early death plague a harried underclass. The desperate flee into an underground economy dominated by drugs, crime and human trafficking. The state, rather than address the economic misery, militarizes police departments and empowers them to use lethal force against unarmed civilians. It fills the prisons with 2.3 million citizens, only a tiny percentage of whom had a trial. One million prisoners work for corporations inside prisons as modern-day slaves.

The amendments of the Constitution, designed to protect the citizen from tyranny, are meaningless. The Fourth Amendment, for example, reads: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.” The reality is that our telephone calls, emails, texts and financial, judicial and medical records, along with every website we visit and our physical travels, are tracked, recorded and stored in perpetuity in government computer banks.

The state tortures, not only in black sites such as those at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan or at Guantanamo Bay, but also in supermax ADX [administrative maximum] facilities such as the one at Florence, Colo., where inmates suffer psychological breakdowns from prolonged solitary confinement. Prisoners, although they are citizens, endure around-the-clock electronic monitoring and 23-hour-a-day lockdowns. They undergo extreme sensory deprivation. They endure beatings. They must shower and go to the bathroom on camera. They can write only one letter a week to one relative and cannot use more than three pieces of paper. They often have no access to fresh air and take their one hour of daily recreation in a huge cage that resembles a treadmill for hamsters.

The state uses “special administrative measures,” known as SAMs, to strip prisoners of their judicial rights. SAMs restrict prisoners’ communication with the outside world. They end calls, letters and visits with anyone except attorneys and sharply limit contact with family members. Prisoners under SAMs are not permitted to see most of the evidence against them because of a legal provision called the Classified Information Procedures Act, or CIPA. CIPA, begun under the Reagan administration, allows evidence in a trial to be classified and withheld from those being prosecuted. You can be tried and convicted, like Joseph K. in Franz Kafka’s “The Trial,” without ever seeing the evidence used to find you guilty. Under SAMs, it is against the law for those who have contact with an inmate—including attorneys—to speak about his or her physical and psychological conditions.

And when prisoners are released, they have lost the right to vote and receive public assistance and are burdened with fines that, if unpaid, will put them back behind bars. They are subject to arbitrary

searches and arrests. They spend the rest of their lives marginalized as members of a vast criminal caste.

The executive branch of government has empowered itself to assassinate U.S. citizens. It can call the Army into the streets to quell civil unrest under Section 1021 of the National Defense Authorization Act, which ended a prohibition on the military acting as a domestic police force. The executive branch can order the military to seize U.S. citizens deemed to be terrorists or associated with terrorists. This is called "extraordinary rendition." Those taken into custody by the military can be denied due process and habeas corpus rights and held indefinitely in military facilities. Activists and dissidents, whose rights were once protected under the First Amendment, can face indefinite incarceration.

Constitutionally protected statements, beliefs and associations are criminalized. The state assumed the power to detain and prosecute people not for what they have done, or even for what they are planning to do, but for holding religious or political beliefs that the state deems seditious. The first of those targeted have been observant Muslims, but they will not be the last.

The outward forms of democratic participation—voting, competing political parties, judicial oversight and legislation—are meaningless theater. No one who lives under constant surveillance, who is subject to detention anywhere at any time, whose conversations, messages, meetings, proclivities and habits are recorded, stored and analyzed, who is powerless in the face of corporate exploitation, can be described as free. The relationship between the state and the citizen who is watched constantly is one of master and slave. And the shackles will not be removed if Trump disappears.

[Indeed, the people must decide whether slavery is preferable to Freedom and then remove the shackles themselves. All States remain subject to the will of the people.]

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