HOW DEMOCRACY ENDS

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PREFACE

Thinking the unthinkable

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER. At some point democracy was always going to pass into the pages of history. No one, not even Francis Fukuyama – who announced the end of history back in 1989 – has believed that its virtues make it immortal.[1] But until very recently, most citizens of Western democracies would have imagined that the end was a long way off. They would not have expected it to happen in their lifetimes. Very few would have thought it might be taking place before their eyes.

Yet here we are, barely two decades into the twenty-first century, and almost from nowhere the question is upon us: is this how democracy ends?

Like many people, I first found myself confronting this question after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. To borrow a phrase from philosophy, it looked like the *reductio ad absurdum* of democratic politics: any process that produces such a ridiculous conclusion must have gone seriously wrong somewhere along the way. If Trump is the answer, we are no longer asking the right question. But it's not just Trump. His election is symptomatic of an overheated political climate that appears increasingly unstable, riven with mistrust and mutual intolerance, fuelled by

wild accusations and online bullying, a dialogue of the deaf drowning each other out with noise. In many places, not just the United States, democracy is starting to look unhinged.

Let me make it clear at the outset: I don't believe that Trump's arrival in the White House spells the end of democracy. America's democratic institutions are designed to withstand all kinds of bumps along the road and Trump's strange, erratic presidency is not outside the bounds of what can be survived. It is more likely that his administration will be followed by something relatively routine than by something even more outlandish. However, Trump's arrival in the White House poses a direct challenge: What would democratic failure in a country like the United States actually involve? What are the things that an established democracy could not survive? We now know we ought to start asking these questions. But we don't know how to answer them.

Our political imaginations are stuck with outdated images of what democratic failure looks like. We are trapped in the landscape of the twentieth century. We reach back to the 1930s or to the 1970s for pictures of what happens when democracy falls apart: tanks in the streets; tin-pot dictators barking out messages of national unity, violence and repression in tow. Trump's presidency has drawn widespread comparison with tyrannies of the past. We have been warned not to be complacent in thinking it couldn't happen again. But what of the other danger: that while we are looking out for the familiar signs of failure, our democracies are going wrong in ways with which we are unfamiliar? This strikes me as the greater threat. I do not think there is much chance that we are going back to the 1930s. We are not at a second pre-dawn of fascism, violence and world war. Our societies are too different – too affluent,

too elderly, too networked – and our collective historical knowledge of what went wrong then is too entrenched. When democracy ends, we are likely to be surprised by the form it takes. We may not even notice that it is happening because we are looking in the wrong places.

Contemporary political science has little to say about new ways that democracy might fail because it is preoccupied with a different question: how democracy gets going in the first place. This is understandable. During the period that democracy has spread around the world the process has often been two steps forward, one step back. Democracy might get tentatively established in parts of Africa or Latin America or Asia and then a coup or military takeover would snuff it out, before someone tried again. This has happened in places from Chile to South Korea to Kenya. One of the central puzzles of political science is what causes democracy to stick. It is fundamentally a question of trust: people with something to lose from the results of an election have to believe it is worth persevering until the next time. The rich need to trust that the poor won't take their money. The soldiers need to trust that the civilians won't take their guns. Often, that trust breaks down. Then democracy falls apart.

As a result, political scientists tend to think of democratic failure in terms of what they call 'backsliding'. A democracy reverts back to the point before lasting confidence in its institutions could be established. This is why we look for earlier examples of democratic failure to illuminate what might go wrong in the present. We assume that the end of democracy takes us back to the beginning. The process of creation goes into reverse.

In this book I want to offer a different perspective. What would political failure look like in societies where confidence in democracy is so firmly established that it is hard to shake? The question for the twenty-first

century is how long we can persist with institutional arrangements we have grown so used to trusting, that we no longer notice when they have ceased to work. These arrangements include regular elections, which remain the bedrock of democratic politics. But they also encompass democratic legislatures, independent law courts and a free press. All can continue to function as they ought while failing to deliver what they should. A hollowed-out version of democracy risks lulling us into a false sense of security. We might continue to trust in it and to look to it for rescue, even as we seethe with irritation at its inability to answer the call. Democracy could fail while remaining intact.

This analysis might seem at odds with the frequent talk about the loss of trust in democratic politics and politicians across Western societies. It is true that many voters dislike and distrust their elected representatives now more than ever. But it is not the kind of loss of trust that leads people to take up arms against democracy. Instead, it is the kind that leads them to throw up their arms in despair. Democracy can survive that sort of behaviour for a long time. Where it ends up is an open question and one I will try to answer. But it does not end up in the 1930s.

We should try to avoid the Benjamin Button view of history, which imagines that old things become young again, even as they acquire more experience. History does not go into reverse. It is true that contemporary Western democracy is behaving in ways that seem to echo some of the darkest moments in our past – anyone who watched protestors with swastikas demonstrating on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, and then heard the president of the United States managing to find fault on both sides, could be forgiven for fearing the worst. However, grim though these events are, they are not the

precursors of a return to something we thought we'd left behind. We really have left the twentieth century behind. We need another frame of reference.

So let me offer a different analogy. It is not perfect, but I hope it helps make sense of the argument of this book. Western democracy is going through a mid-life crisis. That is not to trivialise what's happening: mid-life crises can be disastrous and even fatal. And this is a full-blown crisis. But it needs to be understood in relation to the exhaustion of democracy as well as to its volatility, and to the complacency that is currently on display as well as to the anger. The symptoms of a mid-life crisis include behaviour we might associate with someone much younger. But it would be a mistake to assume that the way to understand what's going on is to study how young people behave.

When a miserable middle-aged man buys a motorbike on impulse, it can be dangerous. If he is really unlucky it all ends in a fireball. But it is nothing like as dangerous as when a seventeen-year-old buys a motorbike. More often, it is simply embarrassing. The mid-life motorbike gets ridden a few times and ends up parked in the street. Maybe it gets sold. The crisis will need to be resolved in some other way, if it can be resolved at all. American democracy is in miserable middle age. Donald Trump is its motorbike. It could still end in a fireball. More likely, the crisis will continue and it will need to be resolved in some other way, if it can be resolved at all.

I am conscious that talking about the crisis of democracy in these terms might sound self-indulgent, especially coming from a privileged, middle-aged white man. Acting out like this is a luxury many people around the world cannot afford. These are first world problems. The crisis is real but it is also a bit of a joke. That's what makes it so hard to know how it might end.

To suffer a crisis that comes neither at the beginning nor at the end but somewhere in the middle of a life is to be pulled forwards and backwards at the same time. What pulls us forwards is our wish for something better. What pulls us back is our reluctance to let go of something that has got us this far. The reluctance is understandable: democracy has served us well. The appeal of modern democracy lies in its ability to deliver long-term benefits for societies while providing their individual citizens with a voice. This is a formidable combination. It is easy to see why we don't want to give up on it, at least not yet. However, the choice might not simply be between the whole democratic package and some alternative, anti-democratic package. It may be that the elements that make democracy so attractive continue to operate but that they no longer work together. The package starts to come apart. When an individual starts to unravel, we sometimes say that he or she is in pieces. At present democracy looks like it is in pieces. That does not mean it is unmendable. Not yet.

So what are the factors that make the current crisis in democracy unlike those it has faced in the past, when it was younger? I believe there are three fundamental differences. First, political violence is not what it was for earlier generations, either in scale or in character. Western democracies are fundamentally peaceful societies, which means that our most destructive impulses manifest themselves in other ways. There is still violence, of course. But it stalks the fringes of our politics and the recesses of our imaginations, without ever arriving centre stage. It is the ghost in this story. Second, the threat of catastrophe has changed. Where the prospect of disaster once had a galvanising effect, now it tends to be stultifying. We freeze in the face of our fears. Third, the information technology revolution has completely altered the terms

on which democracy must operate. We have become dependent on forms of communication and information-sharing that we neither control nor fully understand. All of these features of our democracy are consistent with its getting older.

I have organised this book around these three themes: coup; catastrophe; technological takeover. I start with coups – the standard markers of democratic failure – to ask whether an armed takeover of democratic institutions is still a realistic possibility. If not, how could democracy be subverted without the use of force being required? Would we even know it was happening? The spread of conspiracy theories is a symptom of our growing uncertainty about where the threat really lies. Coups require conspiracies because they need to be plotted by small groups in secret, or else they don't work. Without them, we are just left with the conspiracy theories, which settle nothing.

Next I explore the risk of catastrophe. Democracy will fail if everything else falls apart: nuclear war, calamitous climate change, bio-terrorism, the rise of the killer robots could all finish off democratic politics, though that would be the least of our worries. If something goes truly, terribly wrong, the people who are left will be too busy scrabbling for survival to care much about voting for change. But how big is the risk that, if confronted with these threats, the life drains out of democracy anyway, as we find ourselves paralysed by indecision?

Then I discuss the possibility of technological takeover. Intelligent robots are still some way off. But low-level, semi-intelligent machines that mine data for us and stealthily take the decisions we are too busy to make are gradually infiltrating much of our lives. We now have technology that promises greater efficiency than anything we've ever seen before, controlled by

corporations that are less accountable than any in modern political history. Will we abdicate democratic responsibility to these new forces without even saying goodbye?

Finally, I ask whether it makes sense to look to replace democracy with something better. A mid-life crisis can be a sign that we really do need to change. If we are stuck in a rut, why don't we make a clean break from what's making us so miserable? Churchill famously called democracy the worst system of government apart from all the others that have been tried from time to time. He said it back in 1947. That was a long time ago. Has there really been nothing better to try since then? I review some of the alternatives, from twenty-first century authoritarianism to twenty-first century anarchism.

To conclude, I consider how the story of democracy might actually wind up. In my view, it will not have a single endpoint. Given their very different life experiences, democracies will continue to follow different paths in different parts of the world. Just because American democracy can survive Trump doesn't mean that Turkish democracy can survive Erdogan. Democracy could thrive in Africa even as it starts to fail in parts of Europe. What happens to democracy in the West is not necessarily going to determine the fate of democracy everywhere. But Western democracy is still the flagship model for democratic progress. Its failure would have enormous implications for the future of politics.

Whatever happens – unless the end of the world comes first – this will be a drawn-out demise. The current American experience of democracy is at the heart of the story that I tell, but it needs to be understood against the wider experience of democracy in other times and other places. In arguing that we ought to get away from our

current fixation with the 1930s, I am not suggesting that history is unimportant. Quite the opposite: our obsession with a few traumatic moments in our past can blind us to the many lessons to be drawn from other points in time. For there is as much to learn from the 1890s as from the 1930s. I go further back: to the 1650s and to the democracy of the ancient world. We need history to help us break free from our unhealthy fixations with our own immediate back story. It is therapy for the middle-aged.

The future will be different from the past. The past is longer than we think. America is not the whole world. Nevertheless, the immediate American past is where I begin, with the inauguration of President Trump. That was not the moment at which democracy came to an end. But it was a good moment to start thinking about what the end of democracy might mean.

INTRODUCTION

20 January 2017

I WATCHED THE INAUGURATION of Donald Trump as president of the United States on a large screen in a lecture hall in Cambridge, England. The room was full of international students, wrapped up against the cold – public rooms in Cambridge are not always well heated and there were as many people in coats and scarves inside the hall as there were on the podium in Washington, DC. But the atmosphere among the students was not chilly. Many were laughing and joking. The mood felt quite festive, like at any public funeral.

When Trump began to speak, the laughing soon stopped. Up on the big screen, against a backdrop of pillars and draped American flags, he looked forbidding and strange. We were scared. Trump's barking delivery and his crudely effective hand gestures – slicing the thin air with his stubby fingers, raising a clenched fist at the climax of his address – had many of us thinking the same thing: this is what the cartoon version of fascism looks like. The resemblance to a scene in a Batman movie – the Joker addressing the cowed citizens of Gotham – was so strong it seemed like a cliché. That doesn't make it the wrong analogy. Clichés are where the truth goes to die.

The speech Trump gave was shocking. He used

apocalyptic turns of phrase that echoed the wild, angry fringes of democratic politics where democracy can start to turn into its opposite. He bemoaned 'the rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation … the crime and gangs and drugs'. In calling for a rebirth of national pride, he reminded his audience that 'we all bleed the same red blood of patriots'. It sounded like a thinly veiled threat. Above all, he cast doubt on the basic idea of representative government, which is that the citizens entrust elected politicians to take decisions on their behalf. Trump lambasted professional politicians for having betrayed the American people and forfeited their trust:

> For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.
>
> Washington flourished – but the people did not share its wealth.
>
> Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed.[2]

He insisted that his election marked the moment when power passed not just from president to president or from party to party, but from Washington, DC back to the people. Was he going to mobilise popular anger against any professionals who now stood in his way? Who would be able to stop him? When he had finished speaking, he was greeted in our lecture hall back in Cambridge by a stunned silence. We weren't the only ones taken aback. Trump's predecessor but one in the presidency, George W. Bush, was heard to mutter as he left the stage: 'That was some weird shit.'

Then, because we live in an age when everything that's been consumed can be instantly re-consumed,

we decided to watch it again. Second time around was different. I found the speech less shocking, once I knew what was coming. I felt that I had overreacted. Just because Trump said all these things didn't make them true. His fearsome talk was at odds with the basic civility of the scene. Wouldn't a country that was as fractured as he said have found it hard to sit politely through his inauguration? It was also at odds with what I knew about America. It is not a broken society, certainly not by any historical standards.

Notwithstanding some recent blips, violence is in overall decline. Prosperity is rising, though it remains very unequally distributed. If people had really believed what Trump said, would they have voted for him? That would have been a very brave act, given the risks of total civil breakdown. Maybe they voted for him because they didn't really believe him?

It took me about fifteen minutes to acclimatise to the idea that this rhetoric was the new normal. Trump's speechwriters, Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, had put no words in his mouth that were explicitly anti-democratic. It was a populist speech, but populism does not oppose democracy. Rather, it tries to reclaim it from the elites who have betrayed it. Nothing Trump said disputed the fundamental premise of representative democracy, which is that at the allotted time the people get to say when they have had enough of the politicians who have been making decisions for them. Trump was echoing what those who voted for him clearly believed: enough was enough.

Watching the speech over again, I found myself focusing less on Trump and more on the people arrayed alongside him. Melania Trump looked alarmed to be on the stage with her husband. President Obama merely looked uncomfortable. Hillary Clinton, off to the side,

looked dazed. The joint chiefs were stony-faced and stoical. The truth is that there is little Trump could have said after taking the oath of office that would have posed a direct threat to American democracy. These were just words. What matters in politics is when words become deeds. The only people with the power to end American democracy on 20 January 2017 were the ones sitting beside him. And they were doing nothing.

How might it have been different? The minimal definition of democracy says simply that the losers of an election accept that they have lost. They hand over power without resort to violence. In other words, they grin and bear it. If that happens once, you have the makings of a democracy. If it happens twice, you have a democracy that's built to last. In America, it has happened fifty-seven times that the losers in a presidential election have accepted the result, though occasionally it has been touch and go (notably in the much-disputed 1876 election and in 2000, when the loser of the popular vote, as with Trump, went on to win the presidency). On twenty-one occasions the US has seen a peaceful transfer of power from one party to another. Only once, in 1861, has American democracy failed this test – when a group of Southern states could not endure the idea of Abraham Lincoln as their legitimate president, and fought against it for four years.

To put it another way: democracy is civil war without the fighting.[3] Failure comes when proxy battles turn into real ones. The biggest single danger to American democracy following Trump's victory was if either President Obama or Hillary Clinton had refused to accept the result. Clinton won the popular vote by a large margin – 2.9 million votes, more than any defeated candidate in US history – and she ended up the loser thanks to the archaic rules of the Electoral College.

On the night of the election, Clinton was having difficulty accepting that she had been beaten, as defeated candidates often do. Obama called her to insist that she acknowledge the outcome as soon as possible. The future of American democracy depended on it.

In that respect, a more significant speech than Trump's inaugural was the one Obama gave on the lawn of the White House on 9 November, the day after the election. He had arrived to find many of his staffers in tears, aghast at the thought that eight years of hard work were about to be undone by a man who seemed completely unqualified for the office to which he had been elected. It was only hours after the result had been declared and angry Democrats were already questioning Trump's legitimacy. Obama took the opposite tack:

> You know, the path this country has taken has never been a straight line. We zig and zag and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forwards and others think is moving back and that's OK … The point is that we all go forward with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy … And that's why I'm confident that this incredible journey that we're on as Americans will go on. And I'm looking forward to doing everything I can to make sure the next president is successful in that.[4]

It is easy to see why Obama felt he had no choice except to say what he did. Anything else would have thrown the workings of democracy into doubt. But it is worth asking: What are the circumstances in which a sitting president might feel compelled to say something different? When does faith in the zig and zag of democratic politics stop being a precondition of progress and start to become a hostage to fortune?

Had Clinton won the 2016 election – especially if she had somehow contrived to win the Electoral College while losing the popular vote – it is unlikely Trump would have been so magnanimous. He made it clear throughout the campaign that his willingness to accept the result depended on whether or not he was the winner. A defeated Trump could well have challenged the core premise of democratic politics that, as Obama put it, 'if we lose, we learn from our mistakes, we do some reflection, we lick our wounds, we brush ourselves off, we get back in the arena'.[5] Licking his wounds is not Trump's style. If the worst-case scenario for a democracy is an election in which the two sides disagree about whether the result holds, then American democracy dodged a bullet in 2016.

It is easy to imagine that Trump might have chosen to boycott the inauguration of Hillary Clinton, had he lost. That scenario would have been ugly, and petty, and it could have turned violent, but it need not have been fatal to constitutional government. The republic could have muddled through. On the other hand, had Obama refused to permit Trump's inauguration, on the grounds that he was still occupying the White House, or that he was planning to install Clinton there, then democracy in America would have been done for, at least for now.

There is another shorthand for the minimal definition of a functioning democracy: the people with guns don't use them. Trump's supporters have plenty of guns and, had he lost, some of these people might have been tempted to use them. Nevertheless, there is a big difference between an opposition candidate refusing to accept defeat and an incumbent refusing to leave office. No matter how much firepower the supporters of the aggrieved loser might have at their disposal, the state always has more. If it doesn't, it is no longer a

functioning state. The 'people with guns' in the minimal definition of democracy refers to the politicians who control the armed forces. Democracy fails when elected officials who have the authority to tell the generals what to do refuse to give it up. Or when the generals refuse to listen.

This means that the other players who had the capacity to deal democracy a fatal blow on 20 January were also sitting beside Trump: America's military chiefs. If they had declined to accept the orders of their new commander-in-chief – for instance, if they had decided he could not be trusted with the nuclear codes – then no amount of ceremony would have hidden the fact that the inauguration was an empty charade. One reason for the air of mild hilarity in our lecture hall in Cambridge was that the rumour quickly passed around that Trump had been in possession of the nuclear football since breakfast time. The joke was that we were lucky still to be here. But none of us would have been smiling if the joint chiefs had decided that the new president was best kept in the dark. Even more alarming than an erratic new president in possession of the power to unleash destruction is the prospect of the generals deciding to keep that power for themselves.

Yet it is worth asking the same questions of the generals as of the sitting president: When is it appropriate to refuse to obey the orders of a duly elected commander-in-chief? Trump came into office surrounded by rumours that he was under the influence of a foreign power. He was certainly inexperienced, likely irresponsible and possibly compromised. American democracy has survived worse – if inexperience and irresponsibility in international affairs were a barrier to the highest office, then the history of the presidency would be very different. It is the knowledge that American democracy

has survived worse that makes it so hard to know how to respond now. In Cambridge, we laughed for a bit, and then we sat in glum silence. In Washington, they did the same.

Trump's inauguration allows us to sketch out three different versions of how a democracy like the United States could fail. The first is more or less unthinkable: Trump wins by the rules, and the American state refuses to recognise his victory. He is denied the keys to the White House by the sitting president and the military reject his authority. That is the route to civil war. Obama ruled it out of bounds almost the moment the result was known. The second is something that could have happened but didn't: Hillary wins and Donald refuses to recognise her victory. Civil war does not necessarily follow. It all depends on how much violence Trump's disappointed supporters are willing both to inflict and to endure. We will never know the answer to that question. My guess is that, for all the angry words, sustained violence was never likely. Some people might be prepared to kill for Trump. But to die for him? That's something else again.

The third scenario is the one that actually happened: Trump wins and the American political establishment decides to grin and bear it. Some reluctantly clamber aboard his administration in the hope of providing a steadying influence. Others grimace and wait for the worst to pass. They believe that Trump's words can be absorbed and tamed by the flexibility of America's democratic institutions. It is a gamble – what if Trump cannot be tamed? – but it is not a reckless one. The alternative – refusing to accept Trump as president – looks far more reckless. It is not the same gamble as the catastrophic one taken by the German political establishment in 1932–3, when politicians who thought they

could tame Hitler ended up consumed by him instead. Twenty-first century America is nothing like Weimar Germany. Its democratic institutions are much more battle-hardened. Its society is much more prosperous. Its population has many better things to do than take up arms against democracy.

As I write, the bet is not yet settled. But the odds still look favourable for the survival of democracy. It is possible to argue that since Trump was elected, American democracy has been working as it is meant to. There has been an ongoing contest between Trump's disruptive menace and a system designed to withstand a lot of disruption, especially when it emanates from demagoguery. The demagogue is discovering the world of difference between words and deeds. He is ensnared by institutions that have pushed back against his demands for personal loyalty.

Congress has not proved as biddable as he might have hoped. The courts have also provided a barrier to executive action. Where vacancies arise, Trump has been relatively successful in filling them with judges sympathetic to his cause, such as it is. This contrasts with his inability, or unwillingness, to re-populate the bureaucracy of the federal government, where many posts remain vacant. Yet there are too many courts and too many judges for such a strategy to be decisive in the short term. As with any American president, the effects of his impact on the judiciary are only likely to be felt long after he is gone. Any populist revolt that seeks to rely on the courts to get things done is likely to be a pretty muted uprising. Trump has his acolytes and his fellow travellers, but so do all presidents. Beyond his narrow circle, which is shrinking all the time, the institutions of American democracy are proving relatively resistant to capture.