



Democracy, Original Sin, and the Global War on Terrorism

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All political theory must deal with the central question of the relationship between the state and the citizen. As a Christian in the Lutheran fellowship, I comprehend this relationship in a unique way—through the doctrine of “original sin.”

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE CITIZEN

All politics in every form of government, in any time and in any country, revolves ultimately around one single process—how the ideas in one individual’s mind become the policies of a country. This process is simple to envision in a monarchy or dictatorship. The king wakes up in the morning, has an idea, and decides whether or not to impose it on the country. The king is not entirely free to pursue any idea. He has to fund it. He has to consider how it will cause other power centers to react—either those lesser power elements within the country or neighboring countries. But the central process of politics—taking an idea in his mind and making it the policy of the country—is direct and simple.

This same process is at play in oligarchies, but with understandably more

Democracy is an inherently superior form of government because it best constrains the willful misuse of power—a manifestation of original sin. Our system of checks and balances has broken down in the face of political pressure caused by the so-called “war on terrorism.”

complexity. In an oligarchy, a small cadre of individuals runs the country. The individuals divide the governing tasks. Some form of collective decision-making aggregates the perspective of the ruling clique and resolves disagreements. An idea in the mind of one member of the ruling cadre will become the policy of the country through this process of collective decision-making. Again, the rulers are constrained in what ideas they pursue. As in the case of monarchies or dictatorships, the policies have to be funded, and the reaction of others must be gauged. Unlike dictatorships, oligarchies have the added complexity of needing to resolve different perspectives among the somewhat larger leadership class. But the same process is at play. All ideas start in one individual's mind and become the policy of the country through the political process.

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Democracies are no different, albeit far more complex. In American democracy, there are multiple power centers. The presidency is the most important power center, and the president's ideas carry substantially more weight than others. But he cannot implement any of his ideas by himself. The Congress is an important power center, but no individual representative or senator can dictate the policy of the nation.

American constitutional framers were obsessed with checks and balances, for no small reason. They were the political leaders of the day and had endured an eight-year war because of conditions imposed on them by a distant king who knew little of their circumstances and cared even less for their perspectives. They were determined that their government would not be subject to the perverse wishes of a single individual. So they divided the responsibilities of the government into separate institutions and made those institutions mutually dependent on each other for outcomes. The president could propose a new tax, but only the Congress could enact it. The Congress could pass laws, but these could not enter into force unless the president signed them. The president was the commander-in-chief and would lead the army and navy, but the Congress was responsible for “raising and equipping” the armed forces.

In American democracy, the same political process—converting the ideas in one individual's mind into the policies of the country—is still at play, but with much greater complexity. Any individual—be it a president, a member of Congress, a lobbyist, or a general citizen—can promote his ideas and try to make them national policies. No one individual can impose his or her will on others, and many people can influence the evolution of that policy on its journey to becoming the law of the land.

So much for political theory. Now we turn to the Lutheran theology part.

THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

As a Christian in the Lutheran fellowship, my world view is profoundly shaped by the teachings of the church. For purposes of this article on political theory, the most important teaching in the Lutheran fellowship is that of original sin. As a confirmand, I learned the doctrine of original sin the old-fashioned way—as a derivative of the story of a naked Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. It took me somewhat longer to learn that original sin was not about sex. Instead, the story of Adam and Eve embodies a profound understanding of mankind’s willful nature.

Adam and Eve “rebelled” against God and ate the forbidden fruit as a naked power play to presume God’s power. They did so as a self-conscious attempt to assert their will over nature, and ultimately over others. The story is even more telling because it reveals the central quality of humans compared to other animal creatures. Adam and Eve rationalized their behavior. An animal would not rationalize its desire to eat any food, forbidden or not. Human beings, by contrast, create excuses and rationales for their behavior.

Human political leaders create theories and explanations for their deeds. Most of their policies—and the theories and explanations they use—are honorable. Most governments try to provide food, education, and safety for their citizens. But political leaders all too readily create rationales to explain their darker ambitions. Hitler reasoned that Germans were threatened by the punitive settlement from World War I and needed natural breathing room as a nation. Hutus explained their genocide of Watutsis by recalling years of repression. Milosevic launched four wars in one decade, fueling Serbian nationalism by stoking sentiments of national victimhood and inherent superiority. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, asserting that British colonialists cheated Iraq by splitting off its nineteenth natural province.

THE INHERENT SUPERIORITY OF DEMOCRACIES

Human beings are endlessly inventive in rationalizing their willful deeds. This is an inherent meaning of original sin, and explains why it remains such a powerful doctrine of the church and one that shapes my political philosophy. It also is the reason why I believe democracies are inherently superior forms of government. All human beings are susceptible to original sin. In a monarchy or dictatorship, there are few checks on original sin. If the king or the dictator has an evil idea, there are few impediments in his way. By contrast, a democracy has manifold constraints on the wishes of any individual, including the president. It is frustrating that it takes so long to implement a good idea in American democracy. But this system also protects us from quickly embracing a bad idea.

But even democracies are not immune to flawed decision-making. In our anger and fear following the attack on Pearl Harbor, we rounded up and incarcerated over 140,000 Japanese American citizens. It is undoubtedly the case that some of them were spies and agents; but the vast majority were innocent citizens, victim-

ized by an irrational, if understandable, paranoia. Democracies make mistakes when they act quickly in a climate of fear and loathing.

THE “WAR ON TERRORISM”

America was understandably traumatized by the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. It was a searing day as we started to comprehend the terrible meaning of suicide terrorism. The 9/11 terrorists used America’s very openness to attack the country. The attack transformed our national consciousness, changing our foreign policy and many domestic policies as well. Since that time America has launched a “global war on terrorism.”

I am troubled by this on several counts. First, terrorism is a tactic to achieve goals. It doesn’t make sense to wage war on a tactic. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has written, if we use the logic of a war on terrorism, World War II was a war against blitzkrieg. The undisciplined use of this term and its widespread acceptance in our political discourse have kept us from reasoning clearly how we should proceed with this very serious and long-term struggle. Waging war against a tactic will not solve the problem.

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More importantly, in our anger and fear, we have adopted policies that I believe are alien to our political culture and ultimately counterproductive to our goals. For over two years we have held prisoners from Afghanistan at an American base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. By policy the government has refused to let them see lawyers, contact family members, even make their case before a relatively impartial judge. Among the prisoners are two men over the age of eighty. The Supreme Court recently ruled that our policies of incarceration are in varying degrees unconstitutional. Similarly, we have detained tens of thousands of individuals on immigration violations. These individuals are held in secret facilities, denied access to lawyers, isolated from families, and detained without having any ability to resolve their status. I believe America has every right to apprehend and eject individuals who have violated immigration laws. But I also believe it is wrong for us simply to arrest these individuals, hold them in secret in unknown facilities, and deny them access to lawyers or to family members.

These are the tactics of dictatorships, not democracies. American democracy is built on a profound appreciation that governments can threaten personal freedom and liberty. People can and will impose their will forcefully on others and create rationales to justify their actions. Democracy offers the best protection against

these actions. Democracy is the best system of government to manage the destructive potential of original sin. The heart of democracy is open debate and due process. Even the government must follow objective rules, rules that protect each of us against willful abuse by others in our own society.

In the fear-filled days after 9/11, we spent too little time as a nation thinking carefully through our policies. We are in the middle of a very long and difficult struggle against evil people who are trying to damage our country. Our greatest strength in this long-term struggle is our democracy. We chose inefficient government for the sake of liberty. We did that because our constitutional framers, whether or not they were Lutherans, knew that unrestrained power was easily perverted and ultimately became threatening to the citizens of the state. We will prevail in this struggle if we embrace the essence of constitutional democracy. If we succumb to the tactics of tyrants, we will be twice victims—once at the hands of terrorists and the second time as a consequence of our own actions. ⊕

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