

Poetry and Politics: America's Losses and Europe's (Potential) Gain

"The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," Walt Whitman wrote in 1840, reflecting on the urgent and continuous need to craft democracy in such a way that it derived its power from the ability to create a unified whole out of disparate parts. Whitman was reflecting on the United States as a process, a daily commitment, as the Founding Fathers intended, born from the principle of equality in the law and inalienable rights engrained in the singular fact of being human.

The Declaration of Independence, which Americans celebrated on July 4, represents the ideals of European enlightenment made law, liberating the individual from serfdom and tyranny. But 250 years on, the United States is closer to recreating the very tyranny that its courageous forefathers defied. The "poem" emulated by those striving for freedom and equality across the world has lost its rhyme – but perhaps not its necessity.

The implications of the rapid decline in the functionality of American democracy are grave – and not just for the United States itself. Europe now has to contend with the weakening credibility of its own democracies, and the waning of American support that once lent its strength to serving as the arsenal and the protector of democracy. Europe must define greater independence from the U.S. while making a convincing case in favor of liberal democracy, providing physical security, economic growth and a combination of rule of law with open, deliberative systems that secure minority rights and foster innovation. It is a historic challenge precisely because those undermining liberal democracy are as well organized and monetized as they are fast.

In just over 18 months, a well-prepared and skillfully executed campaign has deeply undercut America's founding principles based on individual rights and subjugated these to whims of the Executive. The "second American revolution," as Heritage Foundation CEO Kevin Roberts calls it, is anchored in a reinterpretation of the Constitution in which the word "vested" becomes an absolute edict that massively empowers the White House in novel ways while gutting checks and balances. Redefined institutional power has reduced "We the people" to the very servitude the Founders sought to escape. In practice, this means that Congress has been stripped of its functional budgetary and war powers through impoundment and semantic trickery by the White House, particularly on the Iran war. The country's vaunted balance of power has been voided.

For the most part, Republican lawmakers have failed to stand up for the function of their institution, which only enjoys 11% trust among Americans anyway, choosing instead to ally themselves with the power being vacuumed into the Oval Office. The Supreme Court has delivered important structural victories to the White House – from immunity to absolute oversight of executive institutions, including those whose policy decisions have direct global implications, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission. Where the President has lost ground to the Court – on tariffs and on birthright citizenship – the administration is already at work crafting workarounds that would allow the objectives of these policy ambitions to be realized.

In 1776, the Founding Fathers protested King George III's overreach into the 13 colonies, imposing taxes at will (the tariffs of today), allowing for "standing armies" in the states and militarizing streets (National Guard troops and ICE), rendering the military superior to civil

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powers (Iran war). The President rules largely by decree (Executive Orders) and drags out the implementation of the law where courts have ruled against him, thus “refusing the assent to law” and attempting to make judges “dependent on his will alone,” dismissing hundreds of immigration lawyers and allowing judges and lawyers to be physically targeted in an effort to diminish the function of the law as written and its stringent execution.

At the core of the “success” of this new experiment lies what Thomas Jefferson feared most: that Americans would fail to provide the “eternal vigilance.” If they lost trust in the ability to craft the “democratic republic,” he feared, then subjugation could loom again. That loss is the consequence of almost forty years of institutional weakening, beginning with changes to media laws, deregulation that allowed for tech platforms to mushroom without rules, and searing economic inequality brought on by the kind of globalization, deindustrialization and reliance on fair trade that both Republican and Democratic administrations ascribed to. In short, over the past 40 years, the majority of Americans became less informed, less wealthy and less trusting.

A 2024 study at the University of Illinois found that 45.7% of its American participants could not discern statements of facts from opinion. The strategists of this administration build on the fact that 53% of its electorate define themselves as “low information voters” and leave the rest to the “politics of overwhelm.” The same phenomena are at work in Europe, only slower and, as such, possibly reversible.

History might not repeat itself, but it does rhyme, to paraphrase Mark Twain. Europe has experienced where the erosion of democracy, the rise of surveillance states and the disaggregation of citizens leads, both historically and more recently. Rebuilding full-scale liberal democracy has proven challenging in Poland; Hungary’s new leadership will face a series of structural and legal hurdles as it attempts to do the same. The corruption that has pervaded autocratizing systems like Hungary and Turkey implies that winning back institutional trust is a gargantuan task – especially when two-thirds of the country is struggling economically as a result of government behavior.

Both the Vice President and the Secretary of State in the current U.S. administration have sought to justify their actions and cultural assertions by linking them to “Western civilization,” looking to influence (financially and structurally) nativist, anti-liberal forces across European politics. They have laid down a gauntlet that European leaders – particularly ahead of a historic 2027 election year – must take seriously.

The simultaneous task is urgent. Realizing greater independence from the United States in defense, economic and technological terms while contending with domestic structural weaknesses seems an insurmountable task. Confidence in domestic institutions is on the decline across Europe, and voters are increasingly tempted to take risks with radical parties. Only 8% of Germans believe the next generation will be better off than themselves. Far-right parties are challenging the norms and rules of democratic engagement, often successfully suing for access and political power – in short, using the tools of democracy to destroy it from the inside.

While new global partnerships with middle powers could expand economic and defense-oriented room to maneuver, Europe must realize that its strongest collective asset in the competition of nations now is trust. It is necessary to uphold the functionality of the rule of law while reducing the regulatory burden, thereby creating economic agility while preserving predictability for citizens, companies and investors alike. Reinforcing democratic institutions with rules and legislation rather than leaving them shrouded in normative behavior will protect against the ambitions of the new right as much as it will offer new reasons for the poetry of statecraft – and with that, a valuable reassertion of the principles that presaged American democracy. In short, in redefining itself against the decline of democracy in the United States, Europe might just be able to reinforce its own reasoning for *e pluribus unum*.