

# INTRODUCTION

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The riot finally at an end, Officer Harry Dunn looked around the Capitol Rotunda and surveyed the damage. Smoky residue from fire extinguishers hung in the air. Broken glass, empty canisters of pepper spray, and Trump and MAGA signage were all strewn about the floor. That hallowed space, now sullied and slandered. Dunn had just endured what he thought war must be like, with a crowd that was prepared for—itching for—a fight. He recalled the racist taunts he had endured, a Black man surrounded by a very white and very angry crowd. He shuddered at the loss of life, at the comrades who had been gravely injured. He thought about how close it had come to being much, much worse. How close he had come to taking a life. Or to losing his own.<sup>1</sup>

All this violence, this defilement of democracy, carried out by a frenzied mob unwilling to accept that a free and fair election had not gone their way, driven by a president promoting the childish delusion that the election had been stolen.

Dunn turned to his friend and colleague, one of dozens who had struggled vainly to stop the mob of thousands. “Is this America?” he asked.

The answer could only be yes. This *is* America. Reagan's shining city on a hill, Lincoln's last, best hope: with this act, America belied these beliefs and demeaned itself before history and the world.

But is this the America that we are stuck with, that we must acquiesce to? Is America now a place where our opponents are our bitter enemies, where the truth is just someone else's lie, and where winning justifies everything?

2 As Dunn proudly proclaimed, the terrorists didn't win that day. The vote securing the election went ahead that very same evening. Democracy endured. There had been no peaceful transfer of power—hardly—but there had been a transfer.

Yet the questions still linger: Is this America? Were the events of January 6, 2021, a shameful aberration that we have already started to put behind us, or is this just the way things are now? Is democracy something that has been tested and endured, or is it something that we can no longer sustain? Is it something that we even *want* to sustain? Those questions have not yet been answered. Like that smoke in the Rotunda, they still hang in the air.

## Democracy Means Conflict

Democracy begins with this inescapable fact: people disagree. We all have different experiences, interests, objectives, and beliefs, and all this difference leads to disagreement. These disagreements are deep and abiding; we disagree about matters that are extremely important to us. Though a tyrant can try to subdue their expression, they cannot be overcome. And while some disagreements slowly disappear as societies grow and change, many are simply never going away.

Because disagreement is inevitable, so is conflict. We are not just going to disagree—we are going to fight about those disagreements. Unless we are able to manage that conflict, society will eventually descend into violence and civil war. Democracy is the alternative: to tyranny on the one hand, and civil war on the other. Democracy affirms the freedom that makes conflict unavoidable, but it seeks to channel and constrain that conflict so that in spite of it, society can remain at peace.

This midpoint between civil war and tyranny is one very good reason why a person might prefer to live in a democracy. But there

are many more. It is well established that democracies are more likely to be freer, more creative and productive, with citizens experiencing less violence and less government corruption. People living in democracies have higher standards of living, higher levels of health, and higher levels of happiness than those in nondemocracies. There are good reasons why refugees, forced to leave everything behind, strive to come to democracies.

The argument for democracy, though, is not merely practical. It is also, and even primarily, moral. For among the many possible ways of organizing human society, democracy manifests a distinctively high respect for humanity. Simply because we are human beings, we all have the right to rule ourselves, to think and believe what we want, and to make decisions about how we live our lives. Democracy likewise affirms that we all have the capacity to do so. Education makes democracy work better, to be sure, and for this reason democrats have always been deeply interested in education. But simple common sense is sufficient for each of us to find our own way, to evaluate politicians and their platforms, and to decide which one conforms most to our interests and ideals. Whatever capacities we do or do not have, democracy insists that no one is a better position to determine my own interests than I am.

In his poem “Democracy,” Langston Hughes writes that democracy is more than just another way of organizing society. Democracy means that I can “stand / On my two feet / And own the land.” Democracy affords me the freedom, dignity, and accountability that my humanity demands. But that birthright is not merely for me or those like me. Every other citizen—Hughes refers to “the other fellow”—has that very same standing. To acknowledge the rights of others even as I demand my own: all of that is distinctively democratic. To speak of either freedom or equality without the other is to misapprehend democracy.

To be sure, there are those who are unpersuaded by Hughes’s simple yet lofty words. Nor do they share his high opinion of democracy. They see the status quo as evidence not of something that can and must be corrected but of an endemic inadequacy that must be transcended.

Some on the far left argue that democracy as we experience it is not the opposite of authoritarianism; rather, it is just a more discreet form of it. Equality is not an ideal we strive for but a lie that serves to

sustain power even as it masks it. And freedom? That is nothing more than what late-stage capitalism allows it to be. Whatever comes after what we have now is not entirely clear, but it will be more genuinely egalitarian, and it may well have to emerge from the ashes.

4 For many more on the right, democracy is not a lie but a threat. It is the means by which groups with different backgrounds, values, and objectives can exercise their rights and gain power. They fear that such a possibility endangers their status at the top of the cultural, economic, and political food chain. At minimum, these Americans are eager to manipulate the mechanisms of democracy so that it preserves the past and manifests something less than equality and majority rule. For these Americans, any democracy that demands a larger, and for that matter more authentic, measure of equality is not worthy of respect, let alone defense; it is something to be cordoned off.

Neither side is likely to find anything relevant or useful in what follows.<sup>2</sup> I can live with that. For there are many more Americans who feel no such disrespect. On the contrary, they take great pride in American democracy, and they earnestly want to see it endure. These Americans survey the current condition of that democracy and react with grave concern, even dread. Many times over the last few years I have been asked by people who feel this way—students, friends, and people who have found out what I do for a living—“What can I do? What can I do to help our democracy?”

This is the right way to frame the question. Of course it is impossible to ignore the slow-moving train wreck that is all around us. And it is equally difficult to ignore the actions of those whose pursuit of power, money, or status only furthers us along that path. Many argue that the correct response is political reform: changing our political institutions and procedures and electing representatives whose commitment to democracy overrides their rank self-interest. I don't disagree. But structures and procedures can only operate within a primary agreement about what behaviors we can rightfully expect from each other. Likewise, politicians respond to incentives, and right now the incentives line up to preserve and even exacerbate an appalling status quo. In what follows, I argue that the prerequisite to reforming our politics is the reform of our own actions and behaviors.

The late conservative firebrand Andrew Breitbart insisted that “politics is downstream from culture.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, if you want to change the former, you first have to attend to the latter. For Breitbart,

this meant that Republicans should have been more worried about making movies and writing songs than they were about voter registration in some congressional district. My assessment of what is unsatisfactory about our culture, let alone how we should work to restore it, diverges significantly from what Breitbart would and did say. But regarding this one very general point, at least, I agree: politics is downstream from culture. The sorry condition of the former therefore reflects and stems from the sorry condition of the latter. What's more, I agree that restoring that culture is not a job merely or even primarily for politicians. It is a responsibility that falls on all of us as citizens. For all of us, therefore, the appropriate question is the one that comes before questions of political reform: What can I do?

If you have that same question—if you are concerned about the condition of our democracy right now, you want that democracy to endure for yourself and for your children, and you want to know what you can do to help sustain it—then this is my effort to respond. To paraphrase the philosopher Philippa Foot, in the army of democratic virtue, we are all volunteers.<sup>4</sup> If you want to be one of those volunteers, keep reading.

Again, democracy allows human society to accommodate the inescapable fact of disagreement. It provides the means for channeling and constraining conflict, thereby avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of tyranny and civil war. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, conflict will overwhelm our constraints. That ever-looming possibility is why democracies are fragile. This has always been so, but now we all know it to be true.

Tribalism is one basic, inescapable feature of human existence that crystallizes these difficulties. All human beings are driven to form groups, to cooperate within them, and to distrust and disparage outsiders. Now to say “all,” “basic,” and “inescapable” means that tribalism is not a category that defines some subset of human beings. It does not refer specifically or even primarily to a group of people in New Guinea or the Amazon. Nor does it refer to members of the nearly six hundred federally recognized tribes in the United States who use that word to describe themselves. For my purposes, it is a neurological term, reflecting the basic wiring of all human brains. Tribalism is part of our evolutionary blueprint; it manifests itself irrespective of the time, place, or culture in which humans find themselves. No matter who we are or where we live, we are all tribal.

From the very beginning, democracy's critics have argued that tribalism makes democracy unsustainable. And even its most ardent defenders have acknowledged that a democratic society is especially vulnerable to this vice and must find ways to moderate it. But the events of January 6, 2021, are simply the most inescapable illustration of this inescapable fact: tribalism is moderated no longer. It has swamped the banks of our democratic life and turned us into two ever more hostile camps. In this moment, the "other side" is no longer an opponent but an existential threat; norms of behaviors are for suckers; politics has become a zero-sum game. As more partisans—politicians and citizens alike—reflect this attitude, the rhetoric ratchets up, leading to ever more distrust, antagonism, and even enmity. Under such conditions, the future of our democratic society is something we can no longer assume. Tribalism means that fixing our politics is not primarily a political problem. It is a matter of reforming our political culture. If we are to stop the decline and preserve our democracy, we citizens have to recommit to behaviors that work against the most antidemocratic aspects of our humanity. And that means we must all turn (perhaps more accurately, return) to a set of specifically democratic virtues.

For many, the very idea sounds unappealing. Virtues have a "schoolmarm" kind of vibe. Prim and priggish. And it is true that virtues push against our natural inclinations. We are all inclined to eat too much, want what is not ours, lie when it suits our purposes, and so forth. As a result, in every society, virtuous behaviors are never easy. But virtues are also agreements—agreements made within groups, families, and societies. Developed over time, these agreements lay out basic understandings of how we should all behave toward ourselves and each other. By agreeing about their value and desirability, we give these virtues a standing that guides our interactions with each other. This agreement thus makes it possible for us to live together. And, ideally, to thrive.<sup>5</sup>

No matter how humans choose to live together, we always remain human beings. That is why many virtues are universal. All societies value hard work, fairness, and filial loyalty, for example. But societies are also distinctive. They all make different choices about how to organize themselves, and those choices reflect their answers to the most fundamental questions of human existence: How we should live together? What is important and valuable? What is it

that makes us, us? These answers are not always articulated, but they are always there. In fact, they are inevitably implied in whatever ways we choose to organize our shared lives. Paraphrasing Isaiah Berlin, the political philosopher John Rawls wrote, “There is no social world without loss.”<sup>6</sup> Every society favors some ways of life and undermines others, and it cannot be otherwise. A Tibetan monastery, a samurai village, and a modern democracy are all forms of human society, but they answer these questions very differently. The way they understand human virtues, the virtues they highlight, and the way their culture seeks to celebrate and cultivate them will all vary as well.

### **Virtues for a Democracy**

So what virtues are most relevant for a democratic society? What virtues help us live together and even thrive in a democracy? To get at that question, we have to ask a prior one: What are the answers that democratic society gives to those most fundamental questions?

Democracy is a messy and contentious concept (just like its practice), so no set of answers is going to be without controversy. But we have to start somewhere. Any list of virtues implies some set of answers, and so too does the one to follow. It is only fair, then, that I start with mine. So, with no claim of completeness, here it is:

- There is a world out there, a reality, that is the same for all of us, even though we all perceive it differently, and that world exists regardless of whether we understand it or agree about it.<sup>7</sup>
- As citizens, all of us have equal standing, and within wide limits, an equal right to live life the way we want, to believe what we want, and to express those beliefs freely.
- People can disagree deeply, even passionately, about those beliefs and still live together peaceably.
- Our all-too-human commitment to our group identity or self-interest does not wholly overwhelm our commitment to reason, fairness, and the goals of liberty and justice for all.
- Despite the difficulties, it is nevertheless possible to genuinely hear arguments with which we disagree, to debate those arguments productively, and (sometimes) to even find ourselves persuaded.

Of course, there will be those who argue with this list. Is it sufficient? What is missing? And what is the standing of these claims? On what are they grounded? Those are surely arguments worth having.<sup>8</sup> But it is sufficient for my purposes. Moreover, I would argue that without them, or something very much like them, we are left with a conception of democracy that is deeply diminished. In fact, without them, it is hard for me to imagine what living in a democracy even means. Most importantly, it is difficult to sustain the idea that there is any point to framing *any* list of democratic virtues, let alone the account that is to follow.

The same questions about sufficiency or completeness arise with the virtues I list below. There are surely virtues that are important to a democratic society I will not consider. My aim is not to be comprehensive but to lay out the virtues we need right now—virtues that work against our all-too-human inclination toward tribalism, virtues that give us all the opportunity to step away from the abyss and that give us the tools to develop a more perfect union. In what follows, I seek to describe those virtues and show how they can help us—all of us—achieve this daunting but indispensable task.

## What Follows

In chapter 1, referencing experimental work by Henri Tajfel and others, I show that the drive to form groups, to cooperate within them, and to treat our fellow members preferentially is buried deep in our brains and in our genes. This universal and inescapable feature of the human condition is called *tribalism*. We all belong to an astonishing variety of tribes, from those based on gender, race, ethnicity, and faith to those arising from the bands we listen to, the teams we follow, and the products we buy. For most of us, most of the time, these tribes push and pull us in different directions. They connect us with different people, cause us to value different things, and even bring us to speak and act in different ways, even if all of them genuinely reflect a part of ourselves. But tribalism always has a dark side. It inevitably causes us to favor *us* and denigrate *them*.

Chapter 2 reviews recent work by Lilliana Mason that shows that when our tribes align, when all our tribal identities separate into two distinct and antithetical groups, tribalism becomes vicious. It



exacerbates our inclinations to view the other with distrust and even animosity. We come to see them as less worthy, less legitimate, less human versions of ourselves. Alan Abramowitz's analysis of the 2016 election shows that our current division into *us* and *them* turns predominantly on whether one regards dramatic changes in the United States since the 1960s as generally good or generally bad.

Democracy's critics and advocates have always known that tribalism is dangerous to democracies. In chapter 3, I review the writings of one very important American advocate, James Madison. Madison called tribes "factions," and he well understood the danger they represented. His solution was, in part, to expand the republic. The larger the republic, the greater number of tribes—and the smaller chance that they would come into alignment. But Madison, and for that matter just about all the Founders, also insisted that a democratic society required virtuous citizens. The last few years have demonstrated that we cannot rely on procedures to save us from our tribalistic selves. We need to recover a shared commitment to democratic virtue.

I break the democratic virtues down into three categories. Philosophers would call these categories intellectual virtues, moral virtues, and theological virtues. I call them democratic thinking, democratic acting, and democratic belief.

Aristotle split the virtues into two types: moral and intellectual.<sup>9</sup> The intellectual virtues help us understand and articulate the good and the just. Moral virtues identify ways for us to act so that we are more likely to achieve those goals. I am using a similar distinction. Intellectual virtues improve the thinking that being a democratic citizen requires and counter the vice of tribalism. But to call them intellectual virtues makes it sound as though they are reserved for philosophers. In the democratic context, that is exactly the wrong way to understand them. Call them instead the "democratic thinking" virtues.

In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I lay out the democratic thinking virtues of humility, honesty, and consistency.

*Humility* is often presented as merely a religious virtue. The English philosopher David Hume, in fact, called it a "monkish virtue" and argued that it was actually better seen as a vice. But democracy depends on assessing the world and then arguing about it. Tribalism leads to biases that make us see things as we want to see them, rather than how they genuinely are. I use the writings of St. Bernard

of Clairvaux (a monk, as it happens) to argue that Hume was wrong. Humility starts with recognizing the truth about ourselves and our inescapable limitations. Recent research shows that those with high humility are best able to profess their own views while being open to the views of others. Humble people make the best democrats.

10 Tribalistic bias leads us unconsciously, albeit honestly, to believe things that are not true. When we lie, on the other hand, we consciously, deliberately, undermine the truth. Reviewing the actions of politicians from Franklin Roosevelt to Mitch McConnell, I show that while lying in politics is inevitable and sometimes even necessary, it is also sometimes pernicious. Contemporary Russian propaganda from media outlet RT and the falsehoods of Donald Trump show how democracy depends on a commitment to reflect facts honestly. Following the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt, I argue that committing to *honesty*, to the ideal of the truth, means we strive to limit ourselves to those falsehoods we genuinely believe.

Finally, we need to develop ways to mitigate the effects of our biases. We need to affirm that what is true when it affects me is also true when it affects you. Looking at work by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Winston Churchill, I argue that the virtue of *consistency* helps us affirm the classical ideal of justice: treating like things alike and different things differently. And since we are all better at seeing the bias in others than we are at seeing it in ourselves, taking on the perspective of our opponent is one essential means by which we can develop this virtue.

If honesty, humility, and consistency are virtues that improve our democratic thinking, helping us make the right decisions, we can think of moral virtues as helping us improve our actions. Call them “democratic acting” virtues. These action virtues come after the thinking virtues just as action should follow thoughtful consideration. Democratic acting virtues make us more likely to achieve the good. In classical Western philosophy, these virtues are called the *cardinal virtues*—temperance, courage, justice, and prudence. This list thus has a standing in Western ethics that, to say the least, merits our attention. Two of these four virtues are particularly important for understanding how a democrat ought to behave and, especially, how a democrat ought to address the vice of tribalism.<sup>10</sup> Democratic acting requires a distinctively democratic understanding of courage and temperance.

To engage politically at all means that we are expressing our opinions to those whose opinions we do not know and to those who we know do not agree with us. I call this everyday democratic courage. As partisan animosity rises, so too does the courage needed for even these little acts. In chapter 7, I argue that democratic courage demands that we scrutinize our own presuppositions, challenging both ourselves and those in our tribe.

Chapter 8 argues for a democratic notion of temperance. Unlike many ancient philosophers, Aristotle thought that anger could be properly directed and controlled. And when it was, its expression could be wholly legitimate, even virtuous. On the other hand, Aristotle thought hatred was not merely a more extreme version of the former. Hatred is permanent. It consumes us and becomes part of our very identity. Research on those leaving hate groups show the accuracy of Aristotle's description. Democratic temperance falls in the middle. It requires both that we accept anger toward our opponents as inevitable and that we also stop that anger from morphing into hatred. Some of the most basic features of democratic politics, including compromise and collaboration, are impossible without it. I close by showing how we can increase our prospects for temperance.

The theological virtues come from Thomas Aquinas. Writing in the thirteenth century, Thomas agreed with the ancients that the four cardinal virtues were a necessary means for achieving human happiness. They were seen as supreme virtues within the bounds of human reason. Theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—“surpass” that reason. They make it possible for us to achieve a dimension of both happiness and excellence that we cannot achieve otherwise. I am arguing that a nontheological version of these faithful virtues is fundamental in restoring our democracy.

Chapter 9 presents a democratic understanding of charity. For Thomas, charity means the love and care we give to others, a love that begins with, and rests upon, our love for God. For democrats, charity simply means giving all our fellow citizens, even those in the other tribe, the benefit of the doubt. Abraham Lincoln affirmed this idea in his second inaugural address, and Joseph Biden reaffirmed it in his first. But just as it did for Thomas, democratic charity begins elsewhere: in this case, our commitment to others begins with our commitment to democracy. We give others the benefit of the doubt because we are committed to democracy, and we know that democracy

works better when we do so. In the current climate, such charity is extremely difficult. The most pragmatic approach is to adopt a version of the “generous tit for tat” strategy developed in game theory.

Chapter 10 focuses on democratic faith. Thomas defined faith as believing or assenting to truths that are not evident in themselves. Democratic society likewise depends on an affirmation of principles that, to say the least, are less than demonstrable. In fact, work by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels shows that those principles strain against the facts. Our votes are not the product of our careful consideration of the candidates and our self-interest. Rather, they are simply another manifestation of our tribal identity. But democratic society works better when we continue to affirm these principles despite insufficient evidence. The Freedom Riders did that. More recently, so did Greta Thunberg, Alexander Vindman, and Bryan Stevenson. These democrats show that tribalism is not the whole story. Sometimes, at least, people actively listen to and are even persuaded by protest. And sometimes so many join that history is changed, and society ends up more democratic. These acts, and countless others, affirm the ideal of democratic politics as a matter of faith.

Every democratic act depends on and manifests these virtues. They make democracy go. In the conclusion, I argue that by striving to practice them ourselves—and honoring their practice in others—we help keep our tribalism in check and thereby make our democracy better. Committing ourselves to democratic virtues is one political act, one pro-democracy act, that all of us can undertake. Just as importantly, this practice also makes us better human beings. In Aristotelian terms, committing ourselves to democratic virtue is how we achieve democratic excellence.

### **An Opportunity, at Least**

I write on January 20, 2021, the first full day of the new Biden administration. As I reflect on his inauguration address, much that he had to say continues to echo in my head; his words resonate with so much in the pages that follow.<sup>11</sup> President Biden did not dispute the depth of our division. In fact, he referred to it as our “uncivil war.” Moreover, he acknowledged that prospects for changing this reality might strike some as “a foolish fantasy.” But he called on all Americans to

move past the tribalism that divides us and to seek, together, a more perfect union. He said that we, all of us, at this moment, owe it to those who have preserved democracy to work just as hard to preserve it for those who will come after us. For Biden, that work centers on committing ourselves to many of the democratic virtues, including humility, temperance, courage, and faith.

The investiture of a new president is always an opportunity for that work to begin again. And particularly so now. In Biden's words, "And so today, at this time and in this place, let us start afresh. All of us." There are no guarantees. The hateful insurrection that took place days earlier, on the very steps where Biden took his oath of office, showed us just how low our democracy has sunk. It manifested the indifference—even aversion—that so many of our fellow citizens have for it. In the words of Amanda Gorman, who also spoke at the inauguration, there are many Americans who "would shatter our nation rather than share it, / Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy."<sup>12</sup> Biden's words might fall on deaf ears or be overwhelmed by events that we cannot begin to predict. The task is daunting, the prospects by no means assured. We can't know how long this opportunity will remain, nor even how genuine is the possibility of meaningful change. But we have not lost yet. We have this moment. Volunteers in the army of democratic virtue would do well to try to make the most of it.