

Reflections on democracy from the largest empire in the history of the world

By Benjamin Waddell

“We are not hated because we practice democracy, value freedom, or uphold human rights. We are hated because our government denies these things to people in Third World countries whose resources are coveted by our multinational corporations. That hatred we have sown has come back to haunt us in the form of terrorism.”

— Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present*

I still remember the first time my second-grade teacher sat us down to explain democracy.

“Our government is a democracy. That means that in our nation the people have the power to decide what their government looks like,” she told us as we looked up at her with our innocent eyes as if she alone defined the shades of grey between right and wrong in the world.

Education is power. This has always been true. And the fact that I still recall my teacher’s thoughts on democracy—three decades later—is reflective of how deep this power cuts.

It was 1990. I was 7, and I was in 2nd grade in Norwood Elementary School in Southwest Colorado. Our teacher taught us important things such as the fact the whole world had already been discovered by 1492, that dinosaurs and lizards were distant relatives of each other, and that a carefully placed ball of peanut butter was capable of curing the most stubborn case of hiccups.

She also taught me about government and war.

She said that the United States was different than other countries.

“We are the land of the free and the brave,” she told us.

This was different than England, where the colonists from Jamestown had come from, escaping religious persecution.

She told us that at that time, in England, kings and queens ruled the land, the eldest sons inherited the wealth of their fathers, and women had no place in place in society.

That’s why our brave soldiers are going to Iraq,” she said. “To defend democracy and freedom.” Later that morning she taught us how to hide under our desks so that, in the case of a bombing, we would be safe. I still remember my gangly legs barely fitting under my desk.

“It won’t happen,” she assured us. “But just in case.”

She’d lived through something called the Cuban missile crisis, which none of us understood but we could tell the hero she spoke of, President Kennedy, was good, and Mr. Castro and Mr. Khrushchev were bad.

She went on to explain how smart missiles work, assuring us that they were so accurate that our good soldiers could pinpoint the exact location of bad guys in Iraq, and “take them out,” as she put it, without hurting good people.

To demonstrate her point, she walked over to the window and guided her hand into the classroom as if it were a missile. Behind her, hung the US flag, which we paid tribute to each morning by reciting the pledge of allegiance.

That’s the first time I remember thinking about the term democracy. I recall feeling proud that my nation fought to support the spread of democracy to the rest of the world.

The second time was in 2000, when the son of the man that was president when I was in second grade ran for office, and lost the vote, but somehow won anyways.

Our teacher never mentioned the electoral college when she told us that democracy empowered the people. But Mr. Nickle, my AP history teacher assured us that it was put into place to insulate our democracy from the populist whims of the masses.

And I believed him because he was one of the most thoughtful men I’d ever met, and when he spoke he did so with genuine conviction.

And thus, after weeks of suspense, when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Mr. Bush, the son of former president Bush, I was convinced they had done the right thing. Strangely, it never occurred to me then that the Bush family was not so different than the kings and queens that my teacher had told us about when she taught us the difference between monarchies and democracies.

The next time I thought of democracy was 2004, I was studying abroad in Managua, Nicaragua. It was early November and I’d just returned from the old US Embassy, where I’d voted for the next president of the United States, George W. Bush.

I voted for Mr. Bush because he ostensibly stood for the values that my teachers and elders taught me to care about such as patriotism and democracy.

I remember Nicaraguans cried the evening when the election results came out and it was clear Mr. Bush had won.

“Y vos, por qué votaste por él?” my host father, Don Luis, asked in search of a better understanding of my decision.

Don Luis was a member of the Sandinista party. In the 1980s Ronald Reagan argued that the Sandinistas were “eager puppets for the Soviets and the Cubans” and that they were part of a broader Communist “cancer.”

In the 1970s Don Luis supported the Sandinistas’ clandestine movement to overthrow the U.S.-backed dictator, Somoza, and he fought against the US-funded Contras in the 1980s.

Despite this, three decades later, Don Luis was kind enough to ignore my ignorance, which was laced with privilege and simplicity. As I stumbled to answer his question, I began to realize that I couldn’t explain why I’d voted for Mr. Bush.

Eventually, I said something to the effect of, “You’d understand better if you knew where I came from” but like so many other things we say when we realize we’ve got nothing to say, I had no idea what I actually meant.

As I finished, Don Luis sat up in his chair and took a long breath of Managua’s thick, sweltering air.

As he began to speak, he did so with a sense of purpose that I’d yet to see in him.

He told me the story of his country. He explained how the U.S. Marines had invaded in 1912 just to make sure that no one else would build a canal to compete with the one the U.S. had built a few years earlier in Panama.

He told me how the much revered FDR had put Somoza, the dictator, in power in 1933.

He said that FDR, referring to Somoza, once said, “He’s a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”

And then he told me about the Contras, who were armed by Ronald Reagan, trained by the U.S. military, and spurred the death of 50,000 Nicaraguans in the 1980s.

When he finished, he turned in his chair and pointed to a fading portrait of a young man with a uniform and an AK-47 in his hands.

“That’s my brother,” he told me. “And your democracy killed him.”

I remember sometime during my first month in Nicaragua I read a quote by Noam Chomsky that goes, “The general population doesn’t know what’s happening, and it doesn’t even know that it doesn’t know.”

This quote wouldn't have made any sense to me prior to living in Managua but it's rang true ever since.

The Contras that killed Don Luis' brother trained in Honduras under the tutelage of U.S. special ops. In 1983 U.S. Congress forbid Reagan from funding the Contras with the passing of the Boland Amendment but his men found creative ways of getting around it.

It was about this time that lieutenant colonel Oliver North began selling missiles to Iran and funneling the proceeds to an off-shore account held by prominent members of the Nicaraguan Contras, who were concurrently smuggling cocaine into the U.S. and using the profits to support their mercenary war against the Sandinistas.

In 1988, Mr. North was convicted of three felonies including accepting illegal gratuity, lying to Congress, and destroying evidence. However, in 1990, his convictions were thrown out on technicalities.

In 1991, one of Mr. North's superiors, former Assistant Secretary of State, Elliott Abrams, was convicted of withholding information from Congress about his efforts to aid the Contras in Nicaragua. Abrams pled guilty, acknowledging that he knew Mr. North was in contact with the Contras, but he never served a day of his sentence, as he was pardoned shortly thereafter by then-president, George H. W. Bush.

Bush Sr. had served as Vice President under Ronald Reagan, and before that, he was the director of the C.I.A.

The Sandinistas were voted out of power in 1990 when the U.S. promised to end the war if Nicaraguans voted for the opposition party, UNO. After the Sandinistas fell at the polls, party members like Don Luis and his wife, Hilda, become unemployable due to their association with the revolution and Sandinista party.

Today, Bush Sr. is revered posthumously as a champion of democracy, and his son spends his days painting portraits of American heroes on his family's 1,500-acre ranch in Central Texas.

And Oliver North? Mr. North is the acting president of the National Rifle Association or NRA, which lobbies Congress to support lenient gun laws, and in doing so, facilitates the licit and illicit sale of guns around the world.

And Elliot Abrams? Mr. Abrams, who served as one of George W. Bush's main advisors in initial years of the 2003 Iraq War, is currently serving in the Trump administration as the United States' Special Representative for Venezuela, where the United States is openly supporting a coup d'etat against dictator, Nicolás Maduro.

And so it is that Mr. Reagan, Mr. Bush, Mr. North, and Mr. Abrams, despite never actually meeting Don Luis' brother, served as the intellectual authors of his death, just as they

have for so many other young men and women who have committed the crime of defending their national sovereignty against the largest empire in the history of the world.

I suppose that the worst crime one can commit doesn't involve breaking legal statutes, but rather, challenging the power of men whose authority has never been defied.

And perhaps this, more than anything, explains how Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016.

Naturally, it's difficult to pinpoint the root causes of our nation's current democratic crisis, but it is fair to assume that it begins with our education system, for the quality of any democracy is not anchored in what we know as citizens, but rather, the unintended consequences of all that that we have been taught that upon further examination turns out to be false.

Mr. Trump is not the cause of our democratic decay, rather, he is a symptom of it. He is the cumulative product of a nation that has never told its young people the truth about democracy. And as twilight sets in on the largest empire in the history of the world, whatever dawn brings will depend on what we choose to teach our children today.