

The Darkness

Illiberalism is on the march, all over the world
Noah Smith, May 13, 2021



There is a Darkness creeping over our world



“この世界は、暗黒に包まれている。風は止み。海は荒れ。大地は腐っていく。” — Final Fantasy

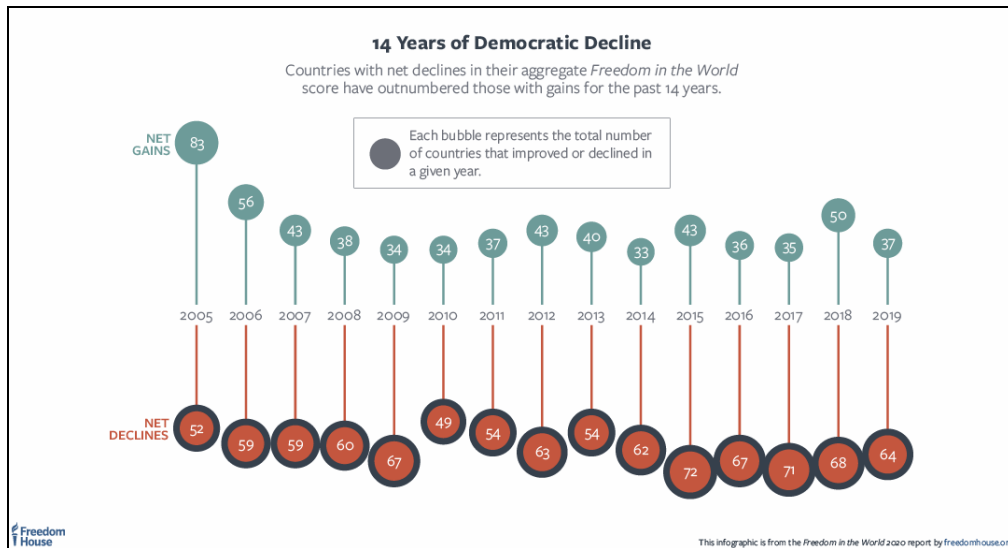
That is a melodramatic thing to say. But when I reach for words to express the profound unease that I feel watching the advance of illiberalism across my planet, the language of fantasy novels, children’s movies, and video games is the only one that seems up to the task. Throughout my youth, I consumed a great many stories that all had the same basic premise — an ancient evil, long ago banished from our world, is now returning, and once again we are called upon to rise up and fight it. Perhaps all those stories shaped my worldview and made me see complex, gritty reality in epic, Manichean terms. Or perhaps the stories were written by people who had themselves lived through a global wave of illiberalism, and were trying to pass down a warning.

There is plenty of darkness in the world even at the best of times. Wars, ethnic cleansing, rights violations, suppression of speech and religion...these things are always, or almost always, happening in some part of the globe. No leader and no country is spotless. And yet observers of comparative government and human rights are able to clearly identify times when respect for the rights and liberties of human beings begins to gutter and wane.

We are now in one of those times. The news headlines from around the world give us a continual stream of dark portents. [Concentration camps](#) and [forced mass sterilization of minorities](#) in China. Millions [rendered stateless](#) by a new law in India amid a [retreat of secularism](#). A [coup attempt](#) and [election denial](#) as a [normalized political strategy](#) in America. Rising authoritarianism in [Turkey](#), in [Hungary](#), in [Brazil](#), in [the Philippines](#), in [Israel](#). Protesters [massacred in Myanmar](#), [massacred in Iran](#), [suppressed in Belarus](#), [suppressed in Hong Kong](#). Mass surveillance everywhere. Internet shutdowns. “Anti-terrorism” laws.

But headlines are just anecdotes. Unfortunately data tells the same story.

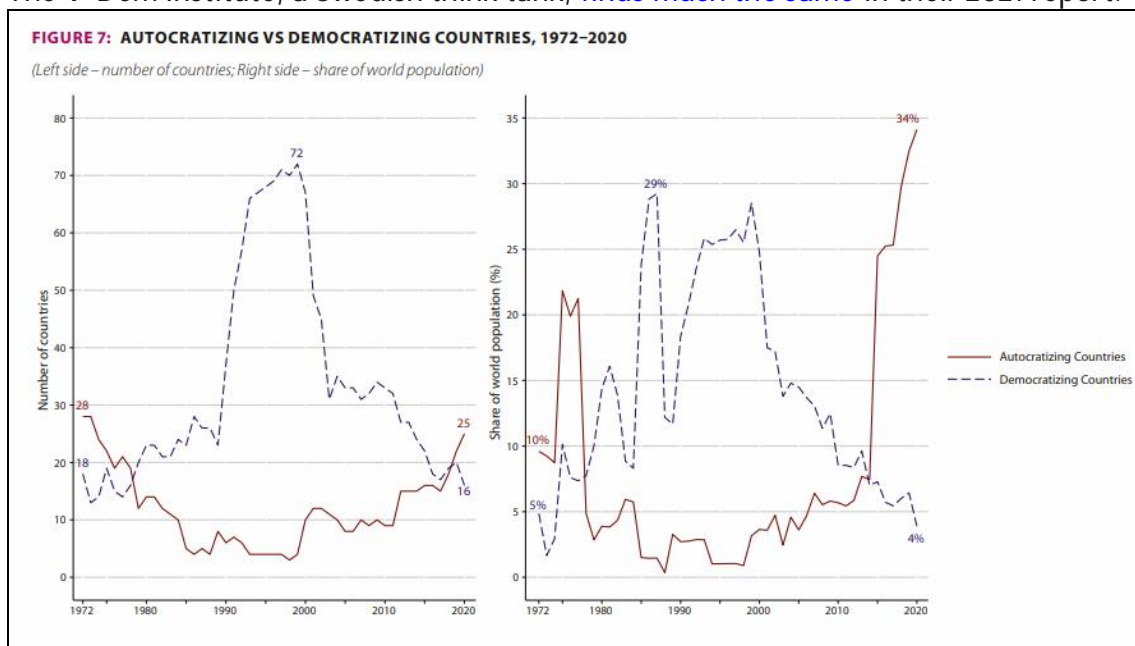
Freedom House, a think tank that tracks political and civil liberties around the world, [warns in its 2020 report](#) that “democracy and pluralism are under assault”. You can quibble with Freedom House’s measurements and definitions, but at least they’re consistent across time, and for a decade and a half now they’ve shown a world inching toward illiberalism:



The Economist's Democracy Index shows [a deterioration in the last two to six years](#):



The V-Dem Institute, a Swedish think tank, [finds much the same](#) in their 2021 report:

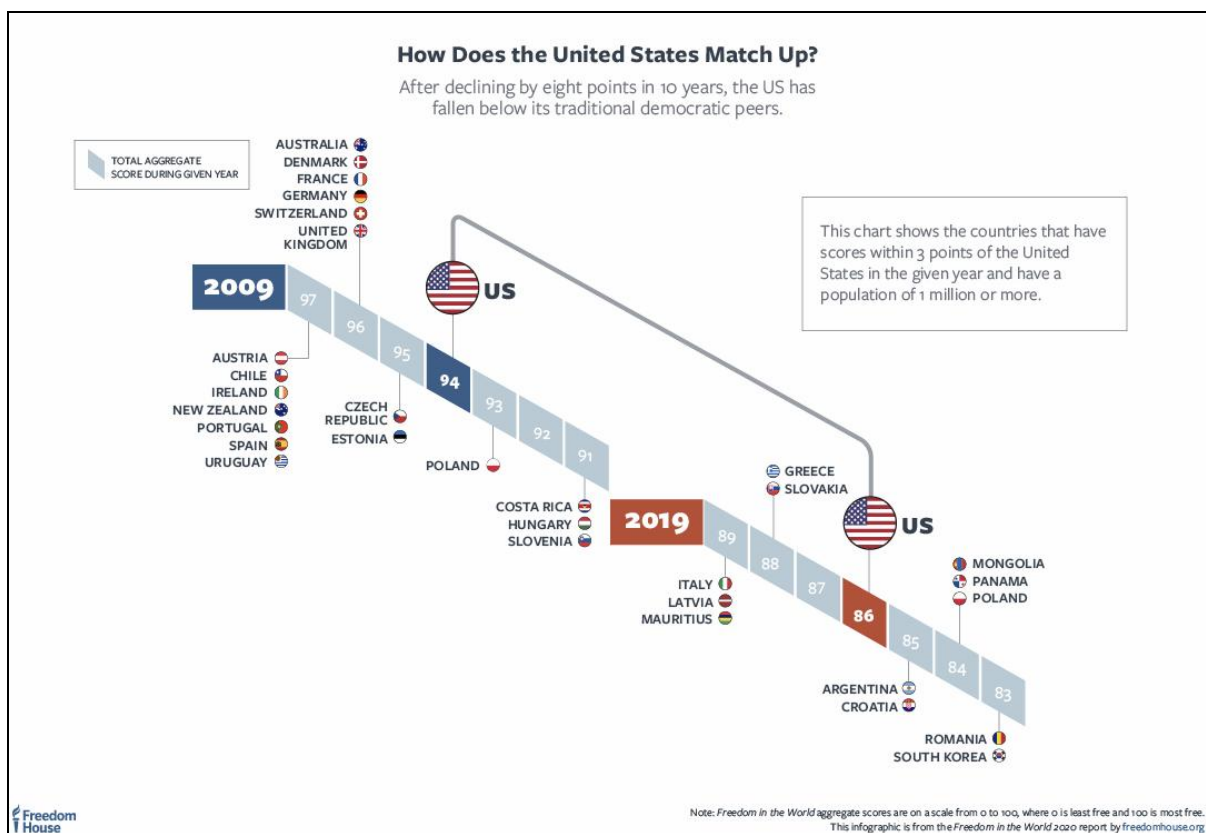


The world is entering its darkest moment at least since the 1970s, when it saw the Cultural Revolution, Indira Gandhi's brief dictatorship, and a resurgence of expansionist Soviet authoritarianism under Brezhnev. The key difference is that this time, as [Freedom House's report warns](#), all of the world's most powerful countries are trending toward illiberalism at the same time.

China is by far the most autocratic of the great powers; however much Trump and Modi have chipped away at democracy, they've created nothing like the massive [surveillance state](#), pervasive [party apparatus](#), and systematic [minority repression](#) that China has built. Its slow but steady territorial expansionism against [multiple neighbors](#) threatens to bring back an era where big countries take what they want, regardless of international rules. It doesn't seek (yet?) to advance a global totalizing ideology like the USSR or seize racial lebensraum like Hitler, but China's neighbors [clearly realize](#) the danger represented by its growing power and aggression.

Even more troubling, however, is America's democratic decline. In the 70s, remember, Nixon failed to become any kind of authoritarian, and social movements forced the U.S. to evolve in a more liberal direction in most respects. That assured that America and its rich and powerful allies in Europe and Asia became bastions of liberalism (more or less) in the later stages of the Cold War.

That is not happening today. The United States is not yet an authoritarian country, but Freedom House catalogues its slow slide in that general direction:



Trump did various nasty things (family separation, using federal agents as cops, etc.). But the biggest threat here by far is the apparent rejection of electoral democracy by the dominant faction of the Republican Party. Trump's attempt to brazenly deny the result of

the 2020 election and use every means short of civil war to overturn the result might not a one-off thing; they provided a blueprint that the GOP now seems to be embracing for the future:



If electoral democracy in America relies on Democrats never losing an election, it's doomed. If the GOP doesn't change its tune and agree that the rules by which Americans choose their leaders are legitimate, the next decade could be one of rolling constitutional crises...or worse.

But beyond America's flirtation with autocracy, the coalition that it assembled to win the Cold War is just much weaker now than it was in the 1980s. China has seen its share of world GDP balloon from less than a fiftieth to almost a fifth; it's now the world's largest manufacturer, and a strong technological rival to the U.S. Not only that, but unlike in the latter half of the cold war, China and Russia appear to be solidly allied. Meanwhile, America's old Cold War allies in West Europe and Japan have are still rich, but they're relatively small countries with aging economies.

Thus, even if America manages to pull out of its downward spiral and become a reliable bastion of democracy again, it faces a much sterner opposition than it did in the 70s and 80s, with generally weaker allies. India, a democracy that will soon overtake China in population, is the one bright spot, but it's trending in an illiberal direction as well, and was showing distinct economic weakness even before it was ravaged by COVID.

We could therefore be looking not at the darkest time since the 1970s, but the darkest time since the 1930s. And anytime someone says "the 1930s", you know it's bad news.

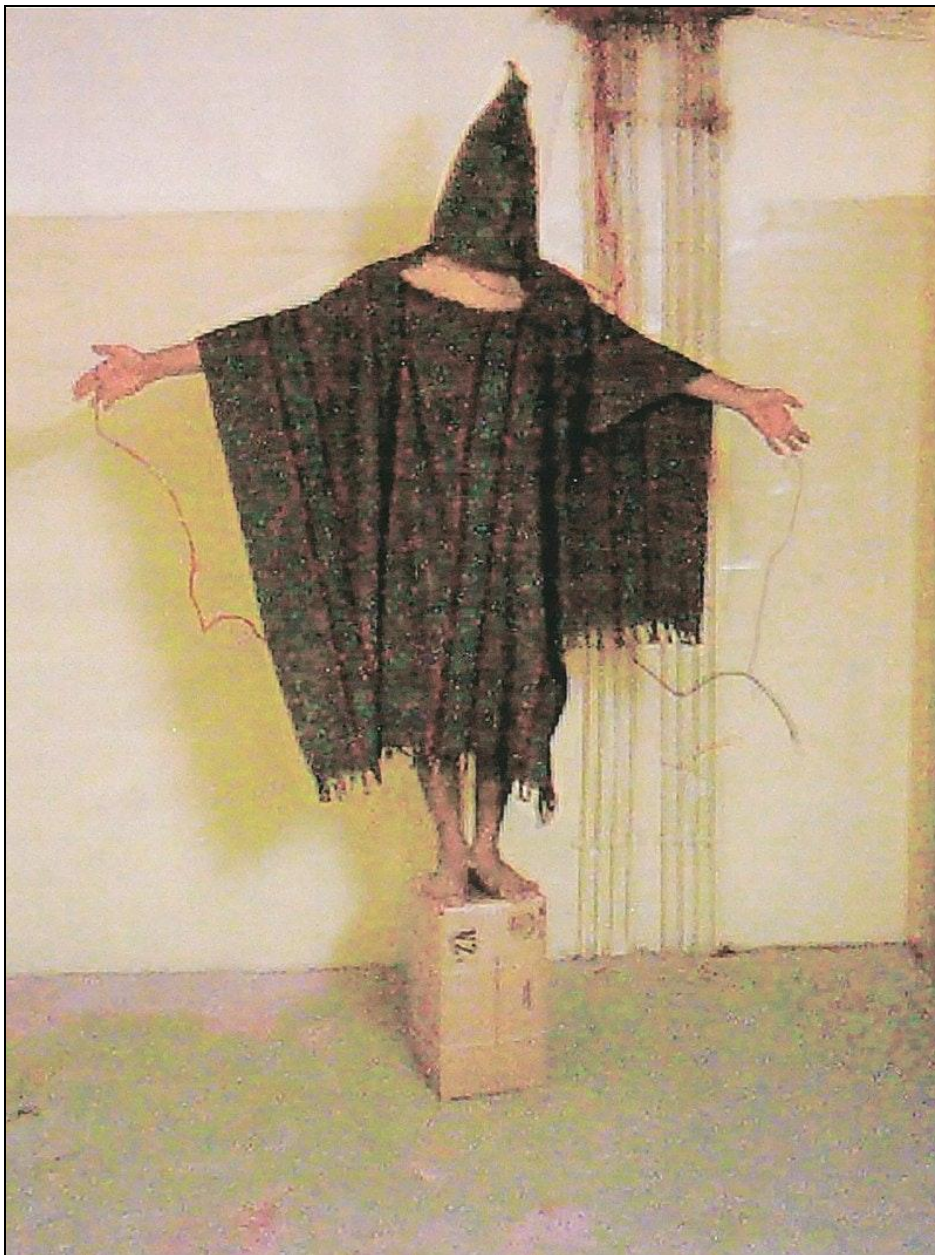
Why has the Darkness broken the seals and returned?

How did our world begin to fall into Darkness? Why did a 25-year trend of increasing human freedom and human rights stall and go into reverse? Everyone is going to have their favorite answer to this question. Those will include the death of the WW2 generation, the rise of social media, new disruptive technologies, economic inequality, the failures of late capitalism, and so on. Any and all of those might well be contributing factors. But while we're here, I might as well tell you *my* answer.

My answer is "fear".

If Freedom House and V-Dem are to be believed, the Darkness began to return right around the mid to late 2000s. Two notable geopolitical events occurred in that decade — the rise of China, and the Iraq War. And both events can be interpreted as being broadly part of the same overarching trend — diminution of the United States of America.

The Iraq War did incalculable damage to the moral standing the U.S. had accumulated since its intercession in World War 2 and its construction of the postwar liberal order. We invaded a non-threatening country on the thinnest of false pretexts (don't deny it), inflaming an entire region of the globe. Hundreds of thousands died. A few of our troops committed well-publicized [atrocities](#). If I had to tell you a single moment when the Darkness was released from the barriers that sealed it beyond the boundaries of the world, it would be this moment:



And the Bush Administration did all this while cynically claiming the cause of “democracy promotion”, sullyng the name of democracy at home and abroad for years to come.

That war [crushed the U.S.’ image across most of the globe](#):

Favorable Views of the U.S.								
	1999/ 2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Britain	83	75	70	58	55	56	51	53
France	62	62	42	37	43	39	39	42
Spain	50	--	38	--	41	23	34	33
Germany	78	60	45	38	42	37	30	31
Poland	86	79	--	--	62	--	61	68
Russia	37	61	37	46	52	43	41	46
Turkey	52	30	15	30	23	12	9	12
Lebanon	--	36	27	--	42	--	47	51
Egypt	--	--	--	--	--	30	21	22
Jordan	--	25	1	5	21	15	20	19
South Korea	58	52	46	--	--	--	58	70
India	--	66	--	--	71	56	59	66
Japan	77	72	--	--	--	63	61	50
Australia	--	--	59	--	--	--	--	46
China	--	--	--	--	42	47	34	41
Indonesia	75	61	15	--	38	30	29	37
Pakistan	23	10	13	21	23	27	15	19
Brazil	56	51	35	--	--	--	44	47
Mexico	68	64	--	--	--	--	56	47
Argentina	50	34	--	--	--	--	16	22
Tanzania	--	53	--	--	--	--	46	65
Nigeria	46	76	61	--	--	62	70	64
South Africa	--	65	--	--	--	--	--	60

1999/2000 survey trends provided by the Office of Research,
U.S. Department of State.

There was a [brief but only partial rebound during the Obama years](#), and then [another collapse under Trump](#). Unlike during the Bush years, foreigners now seem to generally realize that America is a divided country rather than a militaristic monolith, and they sympathized with the slightly more than half of the country that resisted Trump’s encroachments on liberal values. But the fact that America is deeply divided made it clear that it could no longer function as the bastion of democracy that it represented during World War 2 and the latter part of the Cold War.

But at the same time we were flushing our moral leadership down the toilet of an unnecessary war, America was rapidly losing our status as the center of the global economy. China’s spectacular rise — much of which came at the [expense of workers](#) in America and our allied countries — placed it at the center of the Asian economy, which in turn is rapidly becoming [the beating heart](#) of the global economy.

The Great Recession then caused a general loss of faith in America’s finance-and-consumerism-driven model, while China’s manufacturing-based model seemed to shine in comparison. That was always partly an illusion — China’s rapid growth is enabled by the fact that it’s still much poorer than developed countries, while its conquest of recessions [comes at a cost](#) in terms of slowing productivity. But it’s just so dang *big* of a country that to many onlookers, those technicalities may not matter. In economic terms, America was The Big One; now China is The Big One, or will be soon. And economic terms have a way of translating into military terms.

America's simultaneous *relative economic decline* and *absolute moral decline* created a vacuum at the top of the world. The world is not a governed place; what order exists is provided only by hegemonic powers. And when the U.S. forfeited its moral hegemony and lost its economic hegemony, every country in the world suddenly found themselves in a position of not knowing either whose power or which principles were in charge of the planet.

Not knowing who is in charge creates fear. Fear that if you get into [a war with your neighbor](#), there won't be a hegemon to appeal to. Fear that your local regional powers may be able to [slice off bits](#) of your territory and there's nothing you'll be able to do about it. Fear that your government will be able to abuse you without international moral condemnation. Fear that you [won't have a foreign market](#) to sell your goods to. Fear that you won't be able to move your goods freely [by sea](#). Fear that [trade deals will break down](#). Fear of genocide. Twitter is always awash with [genocide threats](#). Occasionally they [become reality](#).

And when you're afraid, you turn to someone to protect you. A strongman politician. A ruthless military. A powerful neighbor, even if it's an autocratic one. An [ethnonationalist movement](#). Any source of strength, of security, of safety. And if necessary, as a last resort, your own two hands.

That is what happened to the world in the 1930s. When Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself", he was talking about a banking crisis, but on some level he already knew that he was really talking about the Darkness. World War 1 had collapsed the old European-centered global power structure, and the U.S. and USSR had not yet taken on their superpower roles. Germans lusted for revenge for World War 1, but that wasn't the only thing that drove them to Hitler — it was fear, of economic devastation, of foreign domination, of permanent instability and decline. A similar process brought the rise of militarism in Japan, and Stalin and Mao leveraged plenty of fear as well.

As Antonio Gramsci said, "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."

How to stand against the Darkness

In [an earlier post](#), I characterized the great global protest wave of 2019 and 2020 as a spontaneous uprising against the Darkness. I wasn't alone; Freedom House [made the same inference](#), even titling its 2020 report "A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy". But while these protests are valiant, they just aren't going to be able to beat this enemy on their own.

The world needs champions against the Darkness, and those champions have to be large and powerful states. Japan, Germany, and some other countries are doing their part, but they're just too small. America and India are going to have to step up. That means restoring both economic power *and* moral leadership. Biden is trying to do both, but he'll fighting an uphill battle.

Restoring economic leadership will be hard when America is on the other side of the globe from the emerging economic center of the world. Our best bet is to continue to dominate in cutting-edge knowledge industries. That means dishing out a lot of [money for scientific](#)

[research](#), as Chuck Schumer and others are now proposing. It also means continuing to take in large numbers of skilled immigrants, so that America dominates the global pool for top technical talent. It means maintaining and building infrastructure. And it means attacking the problem of ruinous costs in the health and construction sectors, which have reached the point where they're dragging the whole nation down. The [successful vaccination effort](#) offers encouragement that the U.S. is more economically robust than many had believed, but at best it's just a good start.

Economic leadership also requires creating dense networks of trade and production between the U.S. and all the countries we want to make into our allies, like we did during the Cold War. This will require doing deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But if economic leadership will be hard, moral leadership will be even harder, especially given the deep hole that Bush and Trump left us in. We'll have to take the lead on tackling international problems like climate change, instead of dragging our feet. We'll have to reduce inequality and poverty here in America, to show the world that the American model can provide for all of our citizens. We'll have to show the world that we're doing something to address the racial inequities that led to the George Floyd protests.

But even more importantly, we've got to address our own democratic deficit — to reverse the slide of the last decade. Before we can defeat the Darkness abroad, we've got to defeat it at home. And realistically, since Democrats will definitely not win an unbroken string of electoral victories from here to infinity, this means Republicans who recognize the threat of the Darkness have to stand up and take their party back from the people who think coups and election denial are good ideas.

In fact, I think what America really needs to do is to rediscover the idea of **democracy as an ideology**, not just as an electoral system. I'll write more about this, but democracy as an organizing principle of society basically emphasizes inclusion and participation in all social institutions — which in turn emphasizes society's respect for the individual. The ideas of classic American philosophers like [John Dewey](#) and modern ones like [Elizabeth Anderson](#) can help. Here's [a quote from Dewey](#) from 1939:

The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions similar to those which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon the Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is accordingly here -within ourselves and our institutions...[it] can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, cooperative intelligence, in the task of making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas.

If you read histories of FDR's presidency, or his speeches, you'll know he conceived of it much the same way.

In the 20th century, democracy — not just the system of holding elections, but the entire package of human rights, minority rights, free expression, civil liberties, and social-democratic welfare protections — was the only system, the only ideology, that managed

to *defeat* totalitarianism instead of *morphing into* totalitarianism. At its most fundamental level, what I've been calling the Darkness is a lack of respect for the value of individual human beings, while democracy (should I capitalize the "D"?) is the elevation of respect for humanity to the status of society's fundamental organizing principle.

Recalling that history teaches us an important lesson — perhaps the most important lesson. Which is that *we've done this before*. Just like in those fantasy stories I used to read when I was a kid, our ancestors faced down the Darkness and threw it back.