

# On Plato, Donald Trump, and the Ship of State

Plato's most famous work and the foundational text of political philosophy is the *Republic*. Written in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and other real-life Athenians, the book opens with a discussion about the nature of justice and then proceeds into Plato's ideas about what an ideal state and its leader would look like. I will argue how these ideas are still relevant nowadays, especially regarding the disturbing state of American politics in which the American people are considering electing for the first time an openly authoritarian leader who is blatantly unqualified for the job.

Plato, an aristocrat, held a deep antipathy for democracy; he had lived through the defeat of Athens at the hand of Sparta as well as the condemnation of his mentor, Socrates. He blamed democracy for these twin catastrophes. His own ideal state would actually bear strong resemblance to Sparta—a totalitarian state in which a small elite trained for success in battle, the majority were disenfranchised slaves who did all the labor, and all cultural activities were forbidden. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* summarized Plato's *Republic* as follows:

“When we ask: what will Plato's Republic achieve? The answer is rather humdrum. It will achieve success in wars against roughly equal populations, and it will secure a livelihood for a certain small number of people. It will almost certainly produce no art or science, because of its rigidity; in this respect, as in others, it will be like Sparta. In spite of all the fine talk, skill in war and enough to eat is all that will be achieved. Plato had lived through famine and defeat in Athens; perhaps, subconsciously, he thought the avoidance of these evils the best that statesmanship could accomplish.”

Russell goes on in his criticism, answering the question of how and why Plato could have achieved such greatness despite having, frankly, mostly terrible ideas:

“Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the *Republic* without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals. It has always been correct to praise Plato, but not to understand him. This is the common fate of great men. My object is the opposite. I wish to understand him, but to treat him with as little reverence as if he were a contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism.”

## **Plato's Non-Ideal Republic in Practice**

Indeed, the millennia of admiration for Plato's *Republic* came to a sudden end when Russell's *History* and Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* were published in the same year—1945. No coincidence that both were written during the Second World War at the height of the destruction wrought by demented dictators and dangerous ideas. Popper's was perhaps the first, and still most important work, that separates Plato from the humanistic and democratic ideas of Socrates, and shows rather that Plato's ideal state was a totalitarian one. The overriding theme of the book, which follows the thread of totalitarianism from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx, is how all these philosophers relied on historicism, a false theory in which history unfolds according the universal laws, to enable dangerous ideas to follow. He accused all of these thinkers of being partially culpable in leading Europe towards the crisis of leadership and war contemporaneous with the book's publishing. Popper argues instead for a strong defense of the open society, which protects liberal values and institutes reforms without violence. One relevant issue Popper also discusses is the [Paradox of Intolerance](#), which says that

for an Open Society to flourish, we must not be tolerant of intolerance (which include the type of hate speech, bigotry, and violent rhetoric that is becoming normalized in Donald Trump's Republican Party).

The most famous parable from the *Republic* is that of The Cave, whose premise about Plato's theory of ideas most undergraduates would be familiar. Much more useful, in my opinion, however, is the parable of the Ship of State. Imagine the state as a ship, whose captain is a skilled stargazing navigator. The citizens are sailors, who may have many various skills but are not qualified to pilot the ship, especially through rough weather. The sailors mock the captain and try to replace him, but ultimately he is the only one with the ability to lead them. In Plato's view, the captain in a state should be a philosopher-king, wise and trained at birth for his position as total ruler. One sees that democracy and Plato do not mix well—for him, the people were a mob who could not rule themselves.

## **Let's bring these analogies into present day America.**

As far as I can tell, America is the longest running large democracy in history, though a number of smaller polities, such as Iceland or the old Iroquois Confederation, to name two, are certainly older. For a huge and diverse nation of over 300 million people that has the world's largest economy and strongest military, the fact that it has survived 240 years and a bloody civil war without ever deviating from a democratic and peaceful transition of power is quite amazing. Unprecedented actually. It was taken for granted when the Founding Fathers drew up the Constitution that Athenian-style democracy could only ever end in manipulation of the mob, or *demos*, by a demagogue or tyrant. They drew up a system of checks and balances between branches of government in which no

person could amass enough power to take over the government, and through which change would necessarily be slow and conservative. This has often frustrated the ability to pass needed reforms, but has also the greater benefit of preserving the system peacefully.

## **Past American Presidents**

Never in American history, discounting the obvious case of the Civil War, has the original political system drawn up in the Constitution come under threat of being radically altered. Likewise, there has never been a single person in American history who has had the power, or even sought the power, to completely control government in anything even resembling a dictatorship. Out of all the 44 presidents (Grover Cleveland served non-consecutive terms and is counted twice), historians typically agree on Andrew Johnson as the worst. It was certainly Abraham Lincoln's biggest mistake to name him his Vice President for short-sighted and unnecessary electoral reasons before his reelection, and Johnson's horrible term had awful ramifications for the next century regarding the reconstruction of the South. Even so, it is hard to find any American president who was unqualified to hold the office, in the traditional sense of having the ability and experience to operate an executive organization with delegated tasks and many moving parts. This has nothing to do with ideology, or even effectiveness, but of basic qualifications for the job before taking office. Several highly successful generals had either mostly good, mixed, or awful administrations (Eisenhower, Jackson, and Grant, for example), but their qualifications were never questioned despite their success or lack thereof. Herbert Hoover is generally considered an awful president mostly due to the Great Depression beginning on his watch, but he was highly successful in his private career and as the head of the U.S. Food Administration during WWI and Secretary of Commerce under two presidents before being elected, and was thus very qualified. Even George W. Bush,

whom [historians](#) will most likely rank closer to Andrew Johnson than Franklin Roosevelt, governed the second largest state before becoming president. Most presidents have been highly educated and experienced men (obviously all men to date) with military backgrounds and terms as senators, congressmen, or governors. Men who understood something about the world and also how government works at various levels. The most successful presidents have also had temperaments suited for the rigorous stressfulness of this unique position as well as the ability to listen to advisors and learn from mistakes. To have a combination of many of these rare skills is what is wanted in a president, as well as a certain degree of other abstract qualities like intellectual curiosity, integrity, and empathy.

## **The Ideal Leader in a Democracy**

Basically, I would argue that we want the same thing today as Plato wanted, even if we have different ways of going about it. Even if they will not be philosopher-kings, our leaders should be the best among us, and chosen by an informed electorate. They should be highly skilled at steering the large and unwieldy ship of state even in the rough waters of domestic and international politics. Plato, a member of the hereditary aristocracy and an anti-democrat, thought that these leaders should be bred from birth for the role, with the rest of the people having no say in the matter. There is another meaning of aristocracy, which is merely “rule by the best”, not involving genetics or inheritance but pure merit through earned experience, training, and natural character, and selected for by the majority of citizens. In our democracy, even with the two major political parties nominating candidates for the office of president, there has long been a de facto sorting out of the best qualified candidates. Once again, this has nothing to do with ideology but of basic minimum ability to function in a very complex role. Despite differences in ideas by the parties and the

electorate, there has always been a tacit understanding that the winner will uphold the duties of his office and continue to serve in the government for the people.

## The Disqualification of Donald Trump

Thus, we have never before in American history been in the position we are currently in—namely, to have a major party candidate for president who is clearly and without any doubt unqualified and unsuited for the office that he seeks. The Republican Party, once a bastion of principled conservatism, respect for law, and personal responsibility, has become so [radical and reactionary](#) over the last three decades or so that it has nominated a person who would certainly be the most disastrous, irresponsible, and unqualified president in history, and the closest we have yet come to a dictator, however petty. Trump's open disregard for the rule of law, free press, and clear lack of basic knowledge of the world and the government he would operate is a disqualification for president. His [other temperamental flaws](#), his proudly open bigotry (the likes of which has not been seen in a major candidate since there was legal slavery), his shocking, world historical level of narcissism and mendacity (unprecedented even for a would-be politician), and other shallow but toxic policy ideas are almost beside the point—any one of these attributes should easily have disqualified Trump from coming anywhere near being an realistic candidate for president, but the ultimate fact that he has none of the necessary tools to meet the minimum standards for piloting the ship of state is the single most important fact. He is not trained or experienced in anything like running the executive branch of the richest and strongest military power on Earth. He has shown no ability to succeed in anything other than making his own name universally known, however he goes about that. He is not a stargazer who can pilot America through bad storms, nor

is he someone who should have instant control over soldiers' lives and nuclear weapons.

The Republican Party, for the first time in American history, has failed in the basic task of nominating a human who is at a basic level of qualification for the office of president. There is no need to get any more into the details of how and why this happened--[this article](#) gives a brief summary of how the Republican Party began moving rightward three decades ago and cynically cultivating deep distrust of government itself for its own electoral gain, and this is the result. The most important thing is that Trump be defeated at all costs, and that a strong warning is cried out that never again will We the American people tolerate such a denigration of our hallowed tradition for maintaining a functioning democracy, whatever differences of policy and ideology. I disagree with Plato's sentiment that democracy is a bad thing. It is not a perfect system; it is merely less bad than every other possible system. Its strength, and also its only flaw, is that it ultimately depends on an electorate that votes in the best interests of the peaceful and prosperous survival of the state, and not on a single tyrant who manipulates the mob with promises to solve all problems on his own. Let's hope that we can continue for at least another 240 years without such a threat and an affront to our great country.

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**The Bloodiest American War  
Many Americans Have Never**

# Heard Of

The title, which I selected myself, is a trick. Most citizens of the United States of America know their war history. There's even a [popular television brand](#) dedicated to educating US citizens about war, and their country's role in it. So while it may surprise some to learn that the greatest loss of life during a single battle occurred in World War I rather than the Civil War or World War II, it is not as though people are unaware of those three wars, or the basic context: North versus South, Allies versus Germany, Allies versus Nazi Germany.

But “American” refers to the Americas, as a whole. And there’s one war of which few outside South America have heard. A war that occurred during the modern era, and was unlike anything seen during recorded, post-enlightenment history, before or since. While the scope and scale differs from that of the first and second World Wars, the loss of life and culture is comparable in relative terms—even, perhaps, exceeds that inflicted on Germany at the end of that conflict.

This war shares something else in common with World War II—a type of dictator that one sees only occasionally in the world. A visionary tyrant, a leader inspired by some overarching idea that compels everyone around him (or her) to attempt a drastic overhaul of society along moral, ethical, or scientific lines.

The Paraguayan War (or “The War of the Triple Alliance”) pitted Paraguay (substantially larger then than it is today) against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. It was a battle of ideologies—on one side, a group of countries (the Triple

Alliance) made up of what we would now call repressive authoritarian regimes. On the other, Paraguay, which was run by an absolutist dictator. Something that all the participants had in common was that all had recently declared their independence from Spain or Portugal as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, and were coming into their own as nation-states.

Paraguay had a population of 525,000 at the war's outset. The combined population of the Triple Alliance was around 11,000,000. Paraguay was the aggressor, attacking Uruguay, Brazil, and then Argentina in succession until all three nations were united. The war lasted from 1864-1870, and by its end, Paraguay was completely defeated. 70% of the male population of Paraguay died, including its dictator. Paraguay lost large swaths of its territory to Brazil and Argentina, and its population decreased by over half. It took decades for the small country to recover.

This type of destruction is rare in modern warfare—a harrowing of one's enemies so deep that it creates generational disruption. It seems that quite apart from Paraguay's role of aggressor in the war, a source of hatred for Paraguay and unwillingness on the part of the Triple Alliance to negotiate with them was the nature of Paraguay's dictatorship, and its history. The Triple Alliance all had similar forms of government—authoritarian aristocracy-based systems, recently liberated from a similarly aristocratic Europe, run primarily by European elites drawn from the country that had originally colonized them (Spain in Argentina's case, Portugal in the case of Brazil). They all condoned slavery to varying degrees.



Attempted to  
create in  
Paraguay a  
racial utopia  
based on  
Rousseau's  
ideas

Paraguay was different—almost unique in world history. In the wake of its independence from Spain during the Napoleonic wars, Paraguay was ruled by a heavily centralized government that obeyed [the despotic but charismatic progressive leader](#) Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia. De Francia closed Paraguay's borders and instituted a radical set of social and political reforms, ruling until his death in 1840. Following that, his [successor and acolyte \(a nephew\)](#) Carlos Antonio Lopez ruled from 1842 until he died in 1862. While slavery was not abolished until after the fall of the dictatorship in 1870, it operated somewhat differently than in neighboring countries, in that after 1842, children of slaves were automatically emancipated upon reaching the age of 25.

De Francia and his successor, Carlos Antonion Lopez, took long views of Paraguay's development. Under their harsh direction,

Paraguay industrialized, fielded a series of schools that catapulted it to the highest level of education in South America at the time, achieved independence in terms of food production, organized their military along European (Prussian) lines, and created the country's first constitution. They also attempted to create in Paraguay a—wait for it—*real racial utopia* based on enlightenment (Rousseau, specifically) principles, wherein whites could not marry one another, but were compelled to marry darker-skinned people. Paraguay was run by nepotistic despots, but was less nation-state than an aspiration toward just and equal society. Its leadership seemed legitimately to desire a distinct, enlightened culture wherein elitism occurred only through a honest competition. When de Francia died, for example, he'd doubled Paraguay's wealth—furthermore, it was discovered that he had neglected to collect his full salary, several years' worth of which he returned to swell Paraguay's coffers. The nepotistic aspect of the Paraguayan state seemed more a product of access to education and ideological commitment than any egotistical desire on the part of de Francia to perpetuate his blood in leadership roles.

When the dictator's nephew's [son](#) (Francisco Solano Lopez) took over in 1862, he opened the borders and began a serious attempt to organize the smaller South American nations into an alliance that would be capable of resisting larger neighbors like Argentina and Brazil. Lopez also fell in love with the [bad-ass Irish wife](#) of a French officer—this heroine subsequently moved to Paraguay and bore multiple children. The first country Lopez sought to influence was Paraguay's neighbor Uruguay—this country had (at the time) a government friendly to Paraguay's, and enthusiastic about creating a bulwark against South America's traditional powerhouses. Uruguay also controlled access to the Atlantic Ocean, key to expanding trade.

Brazil had other ideas. They succeeded in replacing Uruguay's pro-Paraguay government with a pro-Brazil government, backed by a Brazilian invasion, and Lopez decided the time was right to push back. Despite its small population and relative lack of equipment, Paraguay's militarized society was able to mobilize large portions of its population quickly, and Lopez took the upper hand against its much larger but less-well organized northern neighbor and its Uruguayan puppet. Following a setback against Brazil's superior navy in 1865, and a rebuke from Argentina, Paraguay expanded the war to include its southern neighbor. After this year, the war became a series of catastrophes for Paraguay, punctuated by the occasional defensive victory.

For more details on Paraguay's earliest days of development as an independent nation (which itself offers several fascinating historical lessons and much intellectual food for thought), I recommend the Wikipedia articles that form the backbone of my own research, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Suffice it to say, Paraguay's racial and social utopian dream (or nightmare) was destroyed by Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay working in concert whose superior equipment and population told in the long run. Lopez led a guerilla war but was killed in 1870 in the jungle, his family's dream in ruins. Still, as with many such widespread and creatively ambitious social experiments, the legacy of Paraguay's innovations live on. Paraguay has one of the most homogenous populations in South America—in part a product of that early intermingling of Europeans with black, native, and mixed-race populations—and an unusually long life expectancy (especially given their poverty), along with relatively broad education and literacy rates.

I'm not sure what lesson to draw from the Triple War. On the one hand, I'd like to think that real dialogue between different ideologies and nations should be possible. On the other hand, that "dialogue" always seems to find its purest expression through warfare. And one cannot discount that it's always the purest, most radical believers in progress (the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Lopezs) that seem to initiate these struggles.

We live in a day and age when people casually employ terms like "fascist," "communist," and "dictator," (as I have to a certain extent in this essay), and extrapolate a great deal from those words' associations. Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia lived a frugal life that he seemed unattached to, so much so that his substantial inheritance went to enriching Paraguay. Nevertheless, his nephew's son was a belligerent war-hawk who brought ruin to his neighbors, and, ultimately, to Paraguay itself. I wonder—countries, societies like that of newly-independent, 19th century Paraguay don't attempt to mask their intentions—they telegraph them to the outside world. The tyrant, the dictator, boldly and proudly tells all who will listen: "this is how society should be—this is how *\*all\** society should be." Are there any nations today that can honestly claim to resemble tiny Paraguay, dreaming of dominion?