

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.