

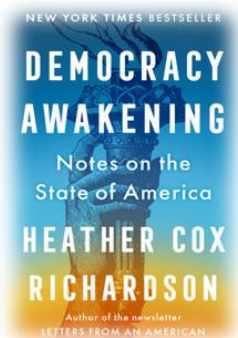
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Can Democracy Be Saved?



A simple question, or two, with, perhaps, very unsimple answers:

Question #1: When did it become anti-American to say that you believe in the Declaration of Independence, in particular its second paragraph, which is sometimes called the “American Creed” (“We hold these truths to be self-evident

...”), that you believe in the U.S. Constitution with all of its creaks and groans, and that you believe in the rule of law?

Question #2: When did it become anti-American to say that you believe in democracy, which is, as Abraham Lincoln said, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

If you’ve ever wondered how we got to now, how America became so culturally and politically polarized, an excellent – maybe *the* – primer on the topic is Heather Cox Richardson’s *Democracy Awakening*. A very readable and an absolutely credible account of how “we got to now,” *Democracy Awakening’s* strength lies in its ability 1) to focus the key issues currently roiling American society within the fabric of America’s two competing meta-narratives; 2) its thorough yet concise telling of American history since the end of the Civil War to today, with a special emphasis on the rise of Movement Conservatism culminating in the presidential administration of former President Donald Trump; and, 3) a short ending chapter on preserving American democracy.

Inhabiting multiple roles, Richardson is particularly well qualified to guide you on that journey. Slated to appear at this fall’s Jefferson Global Summit XVI, Richardson, a professor of history at Boston College, ranks as one of America’s preeminent historians. She is the author of a widely read Substack blog post, “Letters From An American,” which defines itself as “a newsletter that explores the history behind today’s politics, written by a historian and journalist.” [1] The author of seven books, she specializes in examining the socio-cultural and political importance of the American Civil War’s aftermath’s influence on shaping 21st century American culture. Among her books of note are *To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party* (2014), *West from Appomattox* (2007), *How the South Won the Civil War* (2020), and several others. We’ve looked into her *How the South Won the Civil War* in a previous *Book Note* published as long ago as August 2020; it can be found [here](#).

As Richardson says, “This is a book about how a small group of people have tried to make us believe that our fundamental principles aren’t true.” [1] She goes on to add that this isn’t the first time in American history this has happened. An expert on the Civil War, she notes that this was the essential message of the Southern slavocracy – an explicit denial of America’s foundational values. She doesn’t quote him (if she did, I missed it in my notes), but the most explicit statement of that rejection came from Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy in his infamous (some call it famous and therein lies our great divide) “Corner-Stone Speech” in which he said the new Southern government was founded on an explicit rejection of Jefferson’s notions in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. Stephens said they “were fundamentally wrong. They

rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error ... Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man. ..." [3]

He might have added, as the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah, could tell you, that also includes women, any people of any color not white, and other "undesirables." Southern aristocrats, the Grimke sisters rejected the horrors of slavery they witnessed, moved north, joined the Quakers, and became abolitionists. When they realized their opponents ridiculed them simply because they were women, Sarah Grimke wrote her famous "*Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*." If they were alive today, the Grimke sisters might point out to you that Stephens' speech is interesting for other reasons, chief of which is, if one closes one's eyes and listens carefully, one can hear 21st century radical, right-wing reactionaries braying in tune with Stephens against: 1) the notion that equality includes anyone but white males; 2) the federal government's attempt to manage the nation's commerce; 3) any hint that internal improvements (infrastructure) should be a national and not a private undertaking; and, 4) any attempt by the federal government to enact America's foundational values.

Truly, some things never change.

To wit, using different language, Richardson does an excellent job threading together the strands of American history illustrating a thesis I have been promulgating these past six or seven years in my ***The American Tapestry Project***, which can be found [here](#), and in numerous lectures at the Jefferson Educational Society and elsewhere. My thesis argues that the story of America is the tapestry of America's many stories, the threads of which when woven together tell America's story. At first, I argued that there were four primary threads: Freedom's Story at Home and Abroad; Freedom's Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender; Freedom and the American Dream; and, lastly, Seeking Freedom: The Immigrant's Tale. Later, I came to realize that there were two meta-threads dominating that story. The first thread was the story of the American Creed – America's foundational belief in liberty, equality, and opportunity stated in our founding documents ("We hold these truths" and "We the People ..." and the rule of law upon which they rest) and the quest for inclusion by all those first excluded from those blessings – Americans of African ancestry, women, indigenous Americans, and wave after wave of immigrants – who based their appeal for inclusion by appealing to those very values.

The second thread, which is older than the American Creed, rejects, as did Alexander Stephens, those values and uses that rejection to deny the excluded any place in America save a subservient inclusion in American society. It believes America is a patriarchal society of white, Christian, ethno-nationalists. In one of

history's ironies, today, among its most vehement advocates, one finds reactionary Roman Catholics, like several of the six Catholic Supreme Court justices whose immigrant ancestors were once reviled by large swaths of America's Protestant founders' descendants as "the immigrant scum of southern and eastern Europe."

Richardson does an excellent job parsing the sub-themes of those two competing meta-narratives. She begins with the rhetoric of *The Lost Cause* narrative after the Civil War, which attributed Southern defeat in the Civil War to northern malefactors, all the while weaving a tale of trampled Southern virtue. Borrowing heavily from Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (once upon a time the bane of many a high school sophomore English student), Edward Pollard's books on the fall of the South created a mythology of noble, aristocratic white plantation owners, happy slaves, and a church-based southern culture of happy peasants at serious variance with the reality of antebellum southern culture. Its most famous expression in American culture is *Gone With the Wind*, in which, in a complete historical inversion of the facts, the Yankee North is the villain pillaging defiled southern virtue (see the burning of Atlanta and Scarlett O'Hara's plantation Tara).

From the corruption of the Redemption and the false tale of a failed Reconstruction, Richardson traces the back and forth between these two competing meta-narratives through the Gilded Age's plutocratic plundering of America, the creation of the mythic narrative of the cowboy settlement of the West, to the Progressive's Era's Republican Party-led (history is, if nothing else, rife with tantalizing ironies) early 20th century attempt to redress these wrongs. After the second Gilded Age's (you could argue we live in the third) collapse in the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, an interesting pivot occurs in American history. To avoid a socialist triumph, Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal preserves the social order by co-opting in watered-down fashion most of the socialist agenda enabling America to win World War II and usher in a post-war prosperity of unprecedented scope and, for the first time in American history since the colonial era, an increasing economic equality among the people.

During the late 1940s, all of the 1950s, and until the beginning of its unraveling in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the twin pressures of preserving America's epochal prosperity and the Cold War pressure of proving to the world that America really was the land of liberty, equality, and opportunity, a social compact emerged best described as the Liberal Consensus. This was a bipartisan agreement that Roosevelt's New Deal genuinely worked to the betterment of the greatest number of Americans. The Liberal Consensus' essential tenets were a tacit acceptance of most New Deal programs, America's role as the protector of global peace, and the need for enhanced civil rights for minorities. Although weak

on the latter issue, perhaps the greatest president during this period was the aggressively centrist Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower.

But not everyone agreed.

Those disagreeing ranged from principled conservatives (now an endangered species) to crackpot John Birchites to southern racists resistant to any attempts at racial or civil rights progress. Richardson traces the gradual coalescence of these disparate threads into what she calls Movement Conservatism. Always stewing in the background, this reactionary attempt to drag America back to the 19th century Gilded Age if not the antebellum culture of the 1830s and 1840s, re-emerged in the mid 1950s in reaction to the beginning of the civil rights movement and as an explicit rejection of Roosevelt's New Deal. Its foremost ideological prophet was William F. Buckley, founder of **The National Review**, and a clique of similar anti-New Dealers. The movement experienced a tease of success in Barry Goldwater's capture of the Republican presidential nomination in 1964, but its first triumph was Richard Nixon's 1968 southern strategy as he won that year's presidential election. Ironically, campaigning as a born-again racial bigot, Nixon governed as a "liberal consensus" true believer. It is not too fanciful a comment to suggest, to the befuddlement of the right and the horror of the left, that Nixon might have been the last liberal president.

Ronald Reagan understood that insight. Failing to get the nomination in 1968 and again in 1976, and after 12 years in the wilderness, Reagan captured the presidency in 1980 and immediately began to dismantle the liberal consensus and undermine the Rooseveltian New Deal. That process gained traction with the rise of neo-liberalism, which, although it preaches the values of classical liberalism, really seeks a return to America's unequal, uncivil, and unprogressive past. Its adherents ranged from Reagan to a compromising Bill Clinton to George W. Bush. A true liberal, President Barack Obama sought to reaffirm the liberal consensus of the Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson era only to founder on the shoals of Mitch McConnell's rigid (and politically adroit) movement conservatism.

That political environment has now sunk under assault from the non-ideological Trumpian MAGA-ites who threaten the very foundations of American democracy with a neo-European authoritarianism antithetical to the core American values of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Writing contemporary history, Richardson is only partially successful at illustrating how the movement conservatism of Ronald Reagan morphed into a quasi-theocratic, quasi-fascistic rejection of core American values led by the opportunistic Trump, who is actually neither of those things.

The key lies in understanding the two competing meta-narratives, for it is the old white, Christian, ethno-nationalist narrative's adherents who captured Trump in

a mutually symbiotic relationship that colors our current politics. Trump's values, other than his own self-aggrandizement, are hard to fathom. But those who use him as the magician's dummy capturing the crowd's attention as they plunder the culture are not hard to fathom. As Richardson details, they are a strange admixture of plutocrats seeking business deregulation and tax reduction and genuine racists, misogynists, and anti-immigrant bigots who collectively are as old as the republic they fear. They are the Civil War copperheads, the Jim Crow bigots, and the anti-women's rights reactionaries that have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared again repeatedly throughout American history.

Today, they threaten the survival of America's great experiment in "government of the people, by the people, for the people." They have been thwarted before, but can they be thwarted again?

Although Richardson's answer to that question is not as resounding or as reassuring as I might wish, she points out that it begins by understanding our past. The first thing wannabe authoritarians do is try to rewrite history to serve their own purposes. The history wars we have detailed in several previous **Book Notes** are not just squabbles, to borrow a phrase from, of all people, George Wallace, between "pointy-headed professors," but a fight over what is the true story of America. Wannabe authoritarians, whether Adolf Hitler and his Aryan superman or Valdimir Putin and his neo-Czarist fantasies or fill-in the blank despot of your choice, always begin by creating a mythic past for their people of strong, virtuous (read virile) heroes. America has that past, but it is not Barry Goldwater (scion of a retail family fortune, i.e. shopkeeper, albeit on a grand scale) or B-movie actor Ronald Reagan's cowboy fantasies. It is the story of true heroes like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson, who, although scarcely perfect human beings, set in motion a great experiment in secular, self-government based upon liberty, equality, and opportunity. That they set in motion forces greater than they might have imagined is beside the point. The point is they created the American Creed, which anchors a form of government that welcomes all of the world's people to partake in its blessings – liberty, equality, and freedom. Those who reject that story want the freedom for themselves so they can tell you how to live, whether it be Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, who wants everyone to be a hard-right, Roman Catholic (or if not be one, to live according to their dictates) or – well, sadly, there are too many to name.

What to do?

Richardson does not provide an action agenda for how to run a political campaign, but she does have a plan. It begins with recognizing that "a history that looks back to a mythologized past as the country's perfect time is a key tool of authoritarians." [4] She exhorts us to remember that "the true history of American democracy is

that it is never finished. It is the story of people who have honored the idea that a nation can be based not in land or religion or race or hierarchies, but rather the concept of human equality.” [5] It is to understand what Abraham Lincoln understood about the American struggle “that such a struggle was not about who got elected to the White House. It was the story of humanity, ‘the eternal struggle between these two principles – right and wrong – throughout the world.’” [6] The struggle between those who would be free and those who would dictate to them how to live. It’s an old story, for as Lincoln continued, “the one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.” [7]

As in our time, Lincoln understood “that those trying to destroy democracy in his era were not the conservatives they claimed to be but were dangerous radicals whose version of America must be rejected.” [8]

As for me, I’m on the side of Lincoln and Adams, Eisenhower and Teddy Roosevelt, even Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson (who had their flaws), Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dorothy Day, Frances Willard and Ida Wells-Barnett, Alexander Hamilton and, my personal hero, George Washington, all of whom, as Washington of the stilted speech would have said, at “different epocha” in our history realized “the hopes of our Founders have never been proven fully right. And yet they have never been proven entirely wrong.” [9]

So, yes, in 2024 we are being tested again; the answer is to recommit to our foundational values of liberty, equality, and opportunity and to reject those with small, greedy minds who use a clown to distract us as they once again try to plunder the land. What’s the cliché? The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Be vigilant, recommit to our foundational values, and preach the unending value of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Preach it wherever possible to whomever possible so that, like Lincoln, we can ensure that the last best chance of humankind does not perish from the earth.

And, most importantly, VOTE – people have died so that you have that right. Honor them, exercise, as the suffragists said, “the elective franchise.”

Remember, do the one thing that right-wing, radical, reactionaries fear the most – VOTE!

Heather Cox Richardson will be in Erie this fall during Global Summit XVI on Oct. 29. You can register for the event [here](#).



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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“*Democracy Awakening*” at **Penguin Random House** available at [Democracy Awakening by Heather Cox Richardson: 9780593652961 | PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/9780593652961/democracy-awakening-by-heather-cox-richardson/) accessed January 15, 2024.

David Sipress “*Staying Sane*” a **New Yorker Cartoon** available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-to-stay-sane-as-a-cartoonist-in-trumpland> accessed March 30, 2024 – this cartoon has evolved into an internet meme for our time and is all over the web – using Google Lens I identified its legitimate source. “*Heather Cox Richardson*” from her **Facebook** page at [\(2\) Facebook](#) accessed January 15, 2024.

End Notes

1. Richardson, Heather Cox, “*Letters from an American*” at **Substack.com** available at [Letters from an American | Heather Cox Richardson | Substack](https://www.substack.com/home/publishers/heather-cox-richardson) accessed June 16, 2024.
2. Richardson, Heather Co, ***Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*** (New York: Viking, 2023), p. x vii.
3. Stephens, Alexander, “*Corner-Stone Speech 1861*” in **American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War**. (New York: The Library of America, 2006), p. 722.
4. Richardson, ***Democracy Awakening***, p. 251.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 252.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 253.
9. Ibid.

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