

TRUTH IN LOVE

Broken People, Not a Broken System: Was Democracy Designed to Fail?

By Parris J. Baker
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The genesis of American democracy from its inception has been a struggle between small self-interested groups of “wealth-accumulating” privileged white men and the rights of free white men (later to include all people; men, women, and children) to participate in free labor.^[1] For democracy to develop and mature, those who govern, whether appointed, elected, or free citizens, must be virtuous. Virtue is defined as conformity to a standard of justice, conduct that is moral and principled; a high moral excellence.^[2] The Revolutionary War and the Civil War were both fought over political ideologies related to free labor, which included who could own and control the resources of land, water, and people. The birth of our governing document, the U.S. Constitution, was conceived and predicated through a repeated series of negotiated compromises between virtuous and iniquitous men.



Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, and the author of *Democracy in America*,^[3] admired the democratic structure of America and how individuals embraced and valued both state and personal independence and freedom. De Tocqueville also feared that the tyranny of the majority would obfuscate the opinions of oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised citizens and become the ruin of American

democracy. The purpose of de Tocqueville's travels to America was two-fold. First, he was commissioned to study penal reform in the United States. Second, de Tocqueville used the opportunity to observe and analyze democracy in action. Unfortunately, what de Tocqueville could not observe while examining U.S. democracy were the hearts of the men entrusted to virtuously administrate and execute the principles of democracy.

The perception that democracy is corrupt, unjust, or evil is not true. Democracy is a system of governing principles that allows for citizen participation, economic freedom, and obedience to the rule of law. The principles promoted in democracy are virtuous. The democratic system is not broken. However, it may, at times, be perceived as corrupt, unjust, and evil because sometimes those who are appointed or elected to administer and execute the principles of democracy **are** broken, corrupt, and depraved people. These privileged executives of the democratic system have modified the design of democracy to function or fail in such a manner that systemic functional failures benefit their political, religious, and economic self-interests.

Potential failures within the system were not a surprise to the architects of our democracy. In fact, they were anticipated. The First and Second Continental Congresses and subsequently the U.S. Constitution were built on the foundation that independence and freedom from British rule and the opportunities for economic freedom and prosperity through free labor were worth the risk of war. The Founding Fathers recognized that morally flawed and imperfect men may administer U.S. democracy, so they built in checks and balances to safeguard against corruption and abuses of power. Due to the political process of negotiation and compromise, system failures were built into our democracy. Built-in or planned obsolescence^[4] is not a new concept, even in government. Manufacturers of cars, copiers, cell phones, and democracy have all profited from the implementation of built-in or planned obsolescence.

The interactive effects of combining virtuous principles with corrupt, depraved personalities have occasionally doomed democracy to failure. In a democratic society, citizens are encouraged to engage in regular, free, and fair elections, primarily to elect officials who will represent their personal or shared interests in local, state, and federal government. Many of the problems that confront Americans, economic challenges, defense of our nation, and protection of civil and human rights have not changed significantly. However, every two years, four years, and six years the cycle of electing representatives who *promise* to fix the failures of the prior elected officials persists. The futility of this "cyclical political madness" is best illustrated when playing the party-favorite game, *Jenga*.



Jenga, licensed by Hasbro/Milton Bradley, was created by Leslie Scott,^[5] a British citizen who was born in Tanzania, Africa. The name *Jenga* comes from the Swahili word “*kujenga*,” which means to build. The rules^[6] of *Jenga* are simple. Taking 54 blocks, three blocks are placed together, long sides touching, to create a platform. The next level of three blocks is placed together, on top of the initial platform, long sides touching and at right angles to the platform below. This design is continued until you

have used all 54 blocks, creating an 18-story tower that can more than double in size during play. If you have played *Jenga* before you know what happens next.

Using only one hand, each player in turn attempts to carefully remove one block from anywhere *below* the highest completed story. When a player successfully removes a block from the stack, the block is placed on the highest completed story three across, at right angles to the foundation below. The game continues, removing and stacking blocks until someone topples the tower. A real pro can build a tower 36 stories high or more! If you are the last player to stack a block without toppling the tower, you win!

Democracy is analogous to *Jenga* in three key areas. First, *Jenga* by definition is similar in purpose to a democratic society; to build upon the strengths of all its constituents. However, according to rule or policy, the only way to determine when the game is over is when the tower is toppled. Failure is built in or planned into the policy. Moreover, the rule or policy for determining when the game is over conflicts with the objective of becoming *a real pro* through the process of building the tower 36 stories or higher. If a player pursues the objective of building a tower 36 stories or higher, that player may not win the game. When there are more than two players, individual effort, skill, or expertise may not contribute to a player’s victory. The winner is not declared when a player successfully stacks a block. The winner is only determined when the tower falls. The tension or conflict is discovered when one collaborates with other players to build the tower while simultaneously competing to win the game.

Third, the rules of *Jenga* foster competitive self-interest. If rewards and penalties are attached to winning and losing, then the competition will become more intense. A player can only win if the tower topples after that player successfully stacks a block. Therefore, if a player wants to win, by rule or policy, the next player *must be* unsuccessful in his or her attempt to stack a block and cause the tower to topple. The player may silently hope for, overtly root for, or maybe even vigorously encourage the next player to fail (Real *Jenga* players understand this)!

If we want to change how one wins *Jenga*, then the rules or policy must be changed. Only the licensees, Hasbro/ Milton Bradley, can formally and legally change the rules of game. Democratic change occurs in like fashion; by changing the rules or policy that govern people. Remember, for democracy or *Jenga* to work, virtuous players must perform it. There is a tension or conflict present when one collaborates to build a democratic society while simultaneously competing to satisfy one's self-interests. Unfortunately, changing the rules or policies is not enough. We must elect virtuous representatives who ardently resist the pursuit of personal interests.

Clearly, democracy will prevail only if we elect virtuous representatives whose hearts beat for maintaining the principles of democracy: citizen participation, public accountability, protection from the abuses of power, protection of violations of civil and human rights, free and fair elections, acceptance of the results of those free and fair elections, and obedience to the rule of law. Current Congressional, Constitutional, and former presidents provide ample examples of the necessity for virtue. Moreover, electing virtuous representatives will not occur if certain citizenry groups continue to abandon their personal conscious, civility, and morality in a shameless pursuit of communal controls over choice, access, and freedom.

The self-evident truth is that, once again, American democracy is in crisis. The crisis is not in the democratic system. The struggle is between men and women who must make a critical choice: pursue party politics or the welfare of our nation?

OK, who wants to play another game of *Jenga*?

[1] Thorpe, F. N. Democracy in America: The evolution of man is the hope of the state. *The Atlantic*. (December 1893 Issue). It can be found [here](#).

[2] Virtue in Merriam-Webster Dictionary: [here](#).

[3] Alexis Charles Henri Clerel comte de Tocqueville was a French philosopher and political leader. In 1831, King Louis-Philippe commissioned Tocqueville and his friend Gustave de Beaumont to study prison conditions in the United States, and the two travelled to America over nine months in 1831 and 1832. Tocqueville drew on this experience to author *Democracy in America* (1835/1840): [here](https://thegreatthinkers.org/tocqueville/biography/).

[4] Planned obsolescence is a policy of planning or designing a product with an artificially limited useful life or a purposely frail design, so that it becomes obsolete. A variation of planned obsolescence is called legal obsolescence, which refers to the undermining of product usability through legislation, as well as the facilitation of buying a new product by offering benefits: [here](#).

[5] Vasquez, E. (March 14, 2018). Meet Leslie Scott: The woman who invented Jenga. Retrieved on May 12, 2023: [here](#).

[6] The complete set of rules for *Jenga* can be found [here](#).

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