**The American Crisis**

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Amid assaults against the press and the rise of technology, democracy is in a fragile state. Can it overcome the challenges it faces?

The [National Constitution Center](https://constitutioncenter.org/), in Philadelphia, is a monument to the benefits of pessimism. The center, which is situated across an open expanse from Independence Hall, is a superior educational institution, but, understood correctly, it is also a warning about the fragility of the American experiment. The 42 Founding Fathers who are celebrated there, life-size and in bronze—the 39 who signed the Constitution, and three who refused—did not believe that men were good. Quite the opposite. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary,” “[Federalist No. 51](https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The%2BFederalist%2BPapers#TheFederalistPapers-51)” states.

The system of government delineated in the Constitution is a concession to the idea that humans are deficient in the science of rational self-governance. Today, during a moment in which truths that seemed self-evident are in doubt—including the idea that liberal democracy is the inevitable end state of human ideological development—a tour of the Constitution Center reminds us that the Founders did not necessarily believe they were bringing about the end of history.

I recently visited the center in the company of its president, Jeffrey Rosen, the legal scholar and an *Atlantic* contributing editor. Rosen has committed to memory great stretches of [*The Federalist Papers*](https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The%2BFederalist%2BPapers), and he recited passages as we toured the center’s collection. (Particularly moving, especially in light of our current president’s anti-press frenzy, is the full text of the Constitution as published, two days after it was signed, in [*The Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*](https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/publishing-the-constitution.htm).)

“The goal in America today,” Rosen said on our walk, “is to resurrect the primacy of reason over passion—what we are watching now is the struggle between logos and pathos. The central question in our democratic age is this: Is it possible to slow down the direct expression of popular passion? The answer to this question is not obvious.”

In some ways, the Constitution Center is the antipode of Facebook’s headquarters, some 3,000 miles away. The leaders of Facebook and its Silicon Valley cousins argue that instantaneous, universal communication is a boon to democracy and freedom. Constitutional scholars such as Rosen argue that the rapid diffusion of all manner of information—the false and the decontextualized, especially—can just as easily expedite the formation of mobs.

Last year, as Donald Trump (who is undeniably talented in the dark art of mob formation) launched his assault on the norms that undergird American democracy, Rosen and I fell into a discussion about James Madison, the fourth president. I asked Rosen to imagine what Madison, the main proponent among the Founders of indirect democracy, would have made of Trump, of Trumpism, and of our coarse and frenzied political age. Rosen’s eloquent answer is contained in his essay, “[Madison vs. the Mob](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/james-madison-mob-rule/568351/),” which is an anchor article in this [special issue](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2018/10/) on democracy in peril.

“Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms have accelerated public discourse to warp speed, creating virtual versions of the mob. Inflammatory posts based on passion travel farther and faster than arguments based on reason,” Rosen writes. “We are living, in short, in a Madisonian nightmare.”

Madison, Rosen goes on to argue, would have found the populist reforms of the Progressive era, and gerrymandering, and political self-sorting all to be significant dangers as well. And then there is the matter of the out-of-control presidency. “Madison feared that Congress would be the most dangerous branch of the federal government, sucking power into its ‘impetuous vortex.’ But today he would shudder at the power of the executive branch,” Rosen writes. “The rise of what the presidential historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. called the ‘imperial presidency’ has unbalanced the equilibrium among the three branches.”

This special issue grew in part out of my conversations with Rosen, but it is also rooted in the traditions and mission of *The Atlantic*, whose founders wanted this magazine to “endeavor to be the exponent of what its conductors believe to be the American idea.” In a manifesto published in the first issue, in 1857, the founders did not define for the reader, or for subsequent generations of editors, what exactly the American idea is; either it was too obvious for them to bother outlining (they were all abolitionists, and they held the ideals of equality and the right to pursue happiness in highest regard), or they wanted each generation of *Atlantic* editors and writers to reason for themselves the nature of the idea.

The writers in this issue are unified in their understanding that democracy faces acute challenges today. Stephen Breyer, the Supreme Court justice, writes in his essay, “[America’s Courts Can’t Ignore the World](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/stephen-breyer-supreme-court-world/568360/)”:

We must convince ordinary citizens … that they sometimes must accept decisions that affect them adversely, and that may well be wrong. If they are willing to do so, the rule of law has a chance. And as soon as one considers the alternatives, the need to work within the rule of law is obvious. The rule of law is the opposite of the arbitrary, which, as the dictionary specifies, includes the unreasonable, the capricious, the authoritarian, the despotic, and the tyrannical.

Because the stories in this issue concern the fate of democracy, by necessity they also concern technology. We find ourselves in the middle of a vast, unregulated, and insufficiently examined experiment to determine whether liberal democracy will be able to survive social media, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence. The historian Yuval Noah Harari—who is not an optimist on this question—argues in his article, “[Why Technology Favors Tyranny](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330/),” that “together, infotech and biotech will create unprecedented upheavals in human society, eroding human agency and, possibly, subverting human desires. Under such conditions, liberal democracy and free-market economics might become obsolete.”

We have tried, with this issue, to give the reader a sense that the problems afflicting America are not America’s alone to bear. We asked Anne Applebaum, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Gulag: A History*, to [take us to Europe](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/poland-polarization/568324/), where the arc of history is bending away from liberalism.

Tribalism is another of our concerns, and so we also asked the Yale Law professors Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld to examine the threat to what could be called American creedal nationalism—the notion that we are bound not by blood, ethnicity, race, or religion, but by respect for a common set of beliefs as articulated in the founding documents. “Americans on both the left and the right now view their political opponents not as fellow Americans with differing views, but as enemies to be vanquished,” Chua and Rubenfeld write. “And they have come to view the Constitution not as an aspirational statement of shared principles and a bulwark against tribalism, but as a cudgel with which to attack those enemies.”

Rosen and many of the other contributors to this issue also explore ways to repair the damage that’s been done. Our ideas editor, Yoni Appelbaum, writes in his article, “Losing the Democratic Habit,” that American polarization is partly a by-product of social atomization, and suggests how the customs and language of democracy might be reintroduced into local culture. “The American system of government functions properly only when embedded in a culture deeply committed to democracy; that culture sustains the Constitution, not the other way around,” he says.

In a powerful essay, “[The Bullet in My Arm](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-bullet-in-my-arm/568369/),” the *Atlantic* staff writer Elaina Plott tells us what she learned about American politics after getting shot.

And, as ever, we examine the gap between American ideals and American reality. Ibram X. Kendi, a professor of history and international relations at American University and the author of the National Book Award–winning *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, argues that racism today is the equivalent of the slavery of yesteryear, which is to say, the issue that keeps America from becoming the more perfect union of our collective hope.

We have tried to make this issue more than just an inquiry into the Trump presidency. Trump is a cause of our democratic deterioration, but he is also a symptom. Nevertheless, we felt it necessary to call upon our staff writer David Frum to assess the recent activities of the 45th president. Last year, we published Frum’s cover story “[How to Build an Autocracy](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/how-to-build-an-autocracy/513872/),” and here he provides an update. Trump, he writes, “has scored a dismaying sequence of successes in his war on U.S. institutions. In this, Trump is not acting alone. He is enabled by his party in Congress and its many supporters throughout the country.”

This issue represents the latest in a series of attempts by *The Atlantic* to understand the trajectory of democracy and the American idea. Our hope is that you find this a useful guide to a perilous moment.