

Looking through American history since George Washington was elected as our first president in 1789, it appears that every couple of generations (about 40 years) we face some sort of constitutional crisis. That we have survived these crises is a tribute to the strength of our political system.

For our first 40 years, our presidents were all members of the original aristocrats, founding fathers and Virginia landowners for the most part), with two New Englanders (John Adams and John Quincy Adams). John Quincy Adams, perhaps the best educated and most experienced man to become president, lost his second term election in 1828 to a populist: a tough general named Andrew Jackson. Adams was the only president to step down from the presidency and serve the rest of his life as a U.S. congressman. This was a man born and reared to public service. Jackson, however, was an unashamed slave owner who defied the Supreme Court in an action of genocide against peaceful Cherokee Indians, exiled from their lands.

Jackson transformed the country in a way that pleased the uneducated, adventurous, hard-drinking common men who were moving ever westward in peopling North America. Jackson pushed through new rules for voting: extending voting rights to every adult White man, who then elected the most incompetent legislators and presidents that money could buy. (Free drinks were part of the election-day circus for the next half-century.) He also undid Alexander Hamilton's good work in creating a national bank. From that point on, the economy fluctuated between boom and bust.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 ushered in a crisis that nearly split the United States into two countries. Lincoln winning the Civil War ended that crisis and we were once more the United States of America, one country, with slavery abolished.

The next societal (and constitutional) changes came when Theodore Roosevelt as Vice President, replaced assassinated president William McKinley. Roosevelt, although a long time member of the country's elites, believed that the great millionaires had become robber barons with powers unfitting in a democratic republic. He worked to limit this power and also saved our best federal lands as a heritage for us all through national parks and national monuments.

World War I and the post-war 1920s undid many of Roosevelt's corrections. A completely laissez-faire period overseen by corrupt or indifferent presidents, culminating in the biggest financial crash and depression the country had ever had. We came close to resolving this crisis in the same way that Germany, Italy, Russia, and Japan did: creating totalitarian governments. We were saved from this by a distant cousin of Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who presided over many other changes to the constitution.

Two generations later, another constitutional crisis roiled the country when an otherwise competent president, Richard Nixon, had to be removed from office because of his illegal challenges to the rule of law. His Vice President, Spiro Agnew, had already been disgraced for corruption, followed shortly by Nixon himself, the victim of his own paranoia and insecurity. He had thought that he was above the law. The impeachment hearings at that time made us aware of the quality of many of our elected Congressmen and women, a tribute to our system of checks and balances.

We may again be facing a constitutional crisis with the election of a populist candidate with no political experience, Donald Trump. Controversy swirls about nepotism (family serving in power positions without requisite skills) and financial conflicts of interest involving secrecy (refusal to reveal taxes and refusal to dispense with properties and monies that might be compromising). A probability that his very election was compromised by Russian interference is an issue now being examined by Congress, the Senate, and the FBI, and a competitive and free press.

Such crises are a recurring part of our history. They can serve the function of reminding us all of the system that has propelled us onto the world's stage as the oldest continuing and consequential democracy. Freedom is not free; it requires diligence.

674 words

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