

There is a built-in desire among human beings for fairness. In antiquity, leaders were judged by their people as "just" or as "tyrants." An interesting insight into this problem appears in the Old Testament, when the Israelites ask their wisest judge to bring them a king who will lead them in their battles. The judge, Samuel, tells them what it will cost:

I paraphrase: A king will recruit your sons to drive his chariots, be his horsemen soldiers, and to run before his chariots. (Draft them.) He will make himself commander in chief and order his people to plow and reap harvests and to make weapons. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. (Use women as he pleases.) He will reward his servants (toadies) with the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards (establish a nobility) and will tax your fields and vineyards as he pleases and use that money to enhance his power. He will enslave you. And on that day you will cry out to God and he will not hear you. (Too late.)

The people were stupid enough to want a king anyway, and they suffered accordingly, as have all other subjects of most kings. Good kings are rare in history because power corrupts eventually. We still have those among us (happily a minority) who are willing to give a president power to do whatever he likes because he has fooled them into believing he is doing it for them.

Power always corrupts, but a complex system such as our constitutional governance goes a long way to protect us. Dividing power is not efficient, perhaps, but it does hamper those in power from kleptocracy, theft by the powerful. Our Founding Fathers feared tyranny and kleptocracy more than any other element of governance. They established a system of checks and balances that was unlike any other governing system in the world at that time. The majority of the world's people suffered at the hands of absolute rulers who behaved exactly as Judge Samuel predicted. And for a while, the American system produced relatively uncorrupt leadership.

After Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, events converged and overwhelmed the checks and balances for a time, until the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. When he took office, the United States was a genuine kleptocracy, ruled by its rich. The amazing inventions in the 19th century, the railways, electricity, and petroleum, were all in the hands of a few brilliant and ruthless entrepreneurs, known publicly as Robber Barons, funded by a compliant government. Everyone and everything was for sale, and abuse of power was the mode of the day.

Roosevelt cleaned house, but periodically since then, we have had relapses of corruption, such as during the 1920s, and periodic corruption trials and jailing of congressmen, governors, mayors, and judges. Such checks depend upon at least a few decent elected officials leading the process, as we see today in the unfolding hearings into abuse of power and violations of the Emolument Clause, using power for self-enrichment.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, with the hope that its underlying wide-spread corruption would be stopped by the rise of democracy, a handful of former Communist officials, led by KGB operative Vladimir Putin, seized all the state properties and divided them among themselves. Half the nation's wealth now belongs to Putin and his circle. Their inherently weak state, nonetheless, is trying to corrupt the rest of us.

Putin has created a community of autocratic villains around the world, some of them former Soviet colonies in Europe and Central Asia, and now working to destabilize democracies in Western Europe and the US. This is done through judicious uses of money to lure and entrap leaders, through a vast propaganda network that replaces facts with conspiracy theories, and exploiting existing societal fissures through social media.

Is our president beneficiary of an election tainted by Russian machinations? Is he a witting or unwitting asset of Putin? Congress must "follow the money." The United States is now waking from its sleep and we may save ourselves yet.

681 words

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