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**Saving Our Democracy: The Fight for Truth**

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When the Constitutional Convention, which met for three months in 1787 in Philadelphia, completed its remarkable work of producing the Constitution of the United States, Benjamin Franklin, the 81-year-old delegate from Pennsylvania, was asked by a group of citizens what they had produced, he supposedly responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

Today, we once again face an intensified challenge to our republic, as we did in the Civil War period, and to our “experiment” in government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln put it in his famous “Gettysburg Address.” Contemporary challenges to democracies are actually world-wide. In a 2021 address in Greece, the birthplace of democracy, Pope Francis noted this larger context: “Today and not only in Europe, we are witnessing a retreat from democracy,” which, in contrast to “authoritarianism,” is “complex, requiring participation and involvement” of all and demanding “hard work and patience.”

Recent polls show that a clear majority of Americans think our democracy is at risk. For example, a 2022 NPR/Ipsos poll found that 64% of Americans believe U.S. democracy is “in crisis and at risk of failing,” a view held by a majority of both Republicans and Democrats.

Some of the current threats to our democracy are based on cultural, moral and spiritual factors. The most radical cultural threat to democracy comes from an attack on truth itself. After our 2016 presidential election, Oxford Dictionaries chose “post-truth” as the word of the year, denoting a situation in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In a post-truth world, public officials feel free to tell lies without shame or negative consequences. Politicians resort to emotional appeals rather than reasonable arguments.

Before the 2020 election, President Trump said the only way he could lose was if the election was “rigged” and ever since he actually lost, he has claimed that the election was “stolen” from him. Today, some 35% of Americans believe this claim including almost 70% of Republicans and 26% of Independents. Some scholars see this as an example of the “Big Lie,” a massive fabrication repeated often enough by various media outlets that it gains wide acceptance in the general population. Pro-Trump supporters tend to believe the Big Lie, based not on empirical evidence but on an intuitive sense that something was not right with the election. They cite various points: Trump drew bigger crowds than Biden; mail in ballots could not be trusted; and Trump was ahead late on election night. Trump’s lawyers, Rudy Giuliani and Sydney Powell, came up with a claim that the Dominion voting machines shifted large numbers of Trump votes to Biden, a conspiracy theory that led to a 1.3 billion dollar lawsuit against Trump’s lawyers and Fox News. Today, most Republicans running for office in 2022 have publicly embraced the Big Lie, including J.D. Vance, the Republican candidate for the Ohio senate seat. The Big Lie stands as a striking reminder of the radical threat to democracy lurking in our post-truth culture.

Writing in the tranquil 1950s, the influential Jesuit theologian, John Courtney Murray anticipated the attack on truth. In his book, *We Hold These Truths*, he warns of “barbarians” who do not respect truth and prefer demagoguery to dialogue. They undermine “rational standards of judgment” and “corrupt the inherited intuitive wisdom.” They create a “climate of doubt and bewilderment,” which destroys the “confidence of the people,” leading to an “impotent nihilism.” Beneath the civility of the Eisenhower years, he detected hidden “structures of war,” among citizens with very different worldviews and histories.

Murray’s defense against the barbarian attacks on truth focuses on maintaining a commonly accepted public philosophy based on the self-evident truths articulated by the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and have certain God-given, “inalienable” rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” America is not founded on tradition or geography but on “a body of objective truth, universal in its import, accessible to the reason of man, definite, defensible.” Worked into the “texture of institutions,” this public philosophy enables citizens and their leaders to engage in constructive dialogue, “locked in argument,” as Murray put it, so that citizens can live in freedom, justice and peace.

In our post-truth world, a robust discussion of an American public philosophy would certainly be a step forward, but it does not get at the more radical threat to “factual truth.” In response to the charge that the White House lied about the size of Trump’s inaugural crowd, the president’s senior adviser, Kelly Anne Conway, said they were presenting “alternative facts,” a strategy used to justify the Big Lie. The Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who wrote extensively on truth and politics, emphasized “factual truth” as the basis for political arguments about public policy. She argued that the “whole texture of facts,” that make the discussion of political opinions possible, is always in danger of being “torn to shreds” by the organized lying of groups, nations or classes. She understood that attacks on factual truth can undermine the connections that make living in community possible and can breed distrust of the institutions that provide stability.

Factual truth claims have to be effectively articulated and defended against all types of prevarication. Arendt’s analysis encourages us to recall available evidence against the Big Lie: for example, the courts, including the Supreme Court, rejected at least 63 claims of fraud; the FBI found no coordinated national voter fraud effort by mail or otherwise; the Department of Homeland Security said the election was “the most secure in American history;” Attorney General Willian Barr said the Department of Justice found no fraud that could have “affected a different outcome of the election;” repeated recounts in Georgia and other battleground states reaffirmed Biden’s victory; top election officials around the country did not report any major voting issues; claims that the Dominion voting machines reversed votes have been refuted by experts and were retracted by Sydney Powell, whose defense at the Dominion trial was that no reasonable person would take her outrageous claims of machine voter fraud as a fact.

Reflecting on the Big Lie brings to my mind an inspiring interview I had back on April 27, 1990, with Fr. Vaclav Maly, one of the heroes of the 1989 Velvet Revolution which toppled the communist regime that had ruled Czechoslovakia for 41 years. The year after his ordination in 1976, Maly signed the “Charter 77,” accusing the government of violating human rights. For the next dozen years, he was harassed by the Communist regime; denied the right to priestly ministry and forced to work in a factory doing manual labor; detained and interrogated some 250 times; imprisoned for 7 months and on one occasion brutally tortured.

After the Communist government resigned and the playwright Vaclav Havel was elected president, Maly declined to join his good friend in the government and returned to his priestly ministry, which he still continues to this day as auxiliary bishop of Prague. In my lengthy interview with him in his tiny apartment, he expressed his views on many issues; for example, his admiration for Pope John Paul II, his criticism of Latin American liberation theology and his commitment to daily prayer. What impressed me most, however, were his personal comments on truth. Under prolonged persecution, he came to realize that we must “fight for truth,” that we cannot give in even a little bit to falsehood. As a memorable aside, he suggested that Americans living in a free country must also fight for truth against whatever threatens our freedom. Standing up for truth against the Big Lie will probably not do most of us great harm, although it did cost some incumbents their seats in Congress. It is, however, a moral obligation of high priority that requires steadfast commitment and prudent action to counter the deeply held but unexamined lie that endangers our democracy.

When I asked Vaclav how he withstood such severe torture, he responded that although he was totally alone before brutal guards, he felt the presence of Christ as strength in his own weakness. Throughout years of persecution, it was his commitment to Christ, nourished by daily prayer, that kept him steadfast in his fight for truth and the overthrow of the repressive Communist regime.

As Christians fighting for truth to save our democracy, we can also count on Christ, who is the “Truth” (John 14:6), and who promised that his disciples “will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The crucified and risen Christ sent us the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, to dwell within us as our guide and our strength. The spiritual masters encourage us to tap this inexhaustible inner resource by regular prayer and meditation, which involves shutting down external stimuli, quieting the mind and heart, and being attentive to the promptings of the Spirit.

Fortified and guided by the Holy Spirit, we can look for ways to contribute to the great task of preserving our democracy. Some possibilities. Learn more about what actually happened in the recounts and lawsuits in battleground states. Try to have a civil conversation with a relative or friend who thinks the 2020 election was stolen in order to understand better their position and to look for opportunities to expand their views.

In assessing candidates for office on their character, competence and policy positions, include their view on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election. Join or support an organization dedicated to preserving democracy; for example, Network the social justice lobby founded and run by Catholic nuns. Pray that God will bless all our efforts to maintain our democracy, to keep our republic, and continue our experiment in self-government.