

Francis Fukuyama's 'Political Order and Political Decay'

By SHERI BERMAN NYT SEPT. 11, 2014

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/books/review/francis-fukuyamas-political-order-and-political-decay.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%221%22%3A%22RI%3A7%22%7D>

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published an essay in *The National Interest* entitled "The End of History?" that thrust him into the center of public debate. Although often misunderstood and maligned, its central argument was straightforward and sensible: **With the collapse of Communism, liberal democracy stood alone as the only form of government compatible with socio-economic modernity.** Over the years since, Fukuyama has continued to argue the case, and has now summed up his efforts with a **two-volume magnum opus** that chronicles global political development from **prehistory to the present**. A quarter-century on, he remains convinced that **no other political system is viable in the long run, but concludes his survey with a sobering twist: Liberal democracy's future is cloudy, but that is because of its own internal problems, not competition from any external opponent.**

Fukuyama began the **first volume**, "**The Origins of Political Order**," which appeared in 2011, by stating that the **challenge for contemporary developing countries** was how to "get to Denmark" — that is, **how to build prosperous, well-governed, liberal democracies.** This, in turn, required understanding what "Denmark" — liberal democracy — actually involved. Drawing on the insights of his mentor Samuel Huntington, Fukuyama argued that **political order was all about institutions**, and that **liberal democracy** in particular rested on a **delicate balance of three distinct features** — **political accountability**; a **strong, effective state**; and the **rule of law.** **Accountability** required mechanisms for **making leaders responsive to their publics**, which meant regular free and fair multiparty elections. But elections alone were not enough: A true liberal democracy needed to have its **institutions of accountability** supplemented by a **central government that could get things done and by rules and regulations that applied equally to everyone.**

Fukuyama showed how **throughout human history these three factors had often emerged independently or in various combinations.**

China, for example, developed a state long before any existed in Europe, yet did not acquire either the rule of law or political accountability. **India** and **much of the Muslim world**, by contrast, developed something like the rule of law early on, but not strong states (or, in much of the Muslim world, political accountability). It was

only in parts of Europe in the late 18th century, Fukuyama noted, that all three aspects started to come together simultaneously.

“Political Order and Political Decay” picks up the story at this point, taking the reader on a whirlwind tour of **modern development from the French Revolution to the present**. Fukuyama is nothing if not ambitious. He wants to do more than just describe what **liberal democracy** is; he wants to **discover how and why it develops (or does not)**. So in this volume, as in the previous one, he covers a vast amount of ground, summarizing an extraordinary amount of research and putting forward a welter of arguments on an astonishing range of topics. Inevitably, some of these arguments are more convincing than others. And **few hard generalizations or magic formulas emerge, since Fukuyama is too knowledgeable to force history into a Procrustean bed.**

Thus he suggests that **military competition** can push states to modernize, citing ancient China and, more recently, Japan and Prussia. But he also notes many cases where military competition had no positive effect on state building (19th-century Latin America) and many where it had a negative effect (Papua New Guinea, as well as other parts of Melanesia). And he suggests that the **sequencing of political development** is important, arguing that **“those countries in which democracy preceded modern state building have had much greater problems achieving high-quality governance than those that inherited modern states from absolutist times.”** But the cases he gives as examples do not necessarily fit the argument well (since Prussia’s state eventually had trouble deferring to civilian authorities and the early weakness of the Italian state was probably caused more by a lack of democracy than a surfeit of it). In addition, he surely understands that authoritarianism is even more likely to generate state weakness than democracy since without free media, an active civil society and regular elections, authoritarianism has more opportunities to make use of corruption, clientelism and predation than democracies do.

Perhaps Fukuyama’s most interesting section is his discussion of the **United States**, which is used to illustrate the **interaction of democracy and state building**. **Up through the 19th century**, he notes, the United States had a **weak, corrupt and patrimonial state**. From the **end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century**, however, the **American state was transformed into a strong and effective independent actor**, first by the **Progressives** and then by the **New Deal**. This change was driven by **“a social revolution brought about by industrialization, which mobilized a host of new political actors with no interest in the old clientelist system.”** The **American example** shows that **democracies can indeed build strong states**, but that doing so, Fukuyama argues, requires a **lot of effort over a long time by powerful players not tied to the older order.**

Yet if the United States illustrates how democratic states can develop, it also illustrates **how they can decline**. Drawing on Huntington again, Fukuyama reminds us that **“all political systems — past and present — are liable to decay,”** as older

institutional structures fail to evolve to meet the needs of a changing world. **“The fact that a system once was a successful and stable liberal democracy does not mean that it will remain so in perpetuity,”** and he warns that even the United States has no permanent immunity from institutional decline.

Over the past few decades, American political development has gone into reverse, Fukuyama says, as its **state has become weaker, less efficient and more corrupt.** One cause is **growing economic inequality and concentration of wealth,** which has allowed elites to purchase immense political power and manipulate the system to further their own interests. Another cause is the **permeability of American political institutions to interest groups,** allowing an array of factions that **“are collectively unrepresentative of the public as a whole” to exercise disproportionate influence on government.** The result is a vicious cycle in which the American state deals poorly with major challenges, which **reinforces the public’s distrust of the state, which leads to the state’s being starved of resources and authority, which leads to even poorer performance.**

Where this cycle leads even the vastly knowledgeable Fukuyama can’t predict, but suffice to say it is nowhere good. And he fears that America’s problems may increasingly come to **characterize other liberal democracies as well,** including those of **Europe,** where “the growth of the European Union and the shift of policy making away from national capitals to Brussels” has made “the European system as a whole . . . resemble that of the United States to an increasing degree.”

Fukuyama’s readers are thus left with a **depressing paradox. *Liberal democracy remains the best system for dealing with the challenges of modernity, and there is little reason to believe that Chinese, Russian or Islamist alternatives can provide the diverse range of economic, social and political goods that all humans crave. But unless liberal democracies can somehow manage to reform themselves and combat institutional decay, history will end not with a bang but with a resounding whimper.***

POLITICAL ORDER AND POLITICAL DECAY

From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy

By Francis Fukuyama

Illustrated. 658 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$35.