

# America at 250: Is our democracy adapting—or gradually committing suicide?

Jim Simon

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026 could be a bit-sweet celebration.

Ideally, the world's oldest democracy should be celebrated as a triumph of principles, ideals, and checks and balances that enabled our government and citizens to successfully adapt to changing times.

More likely, though, is that the president will politicize what should be a transcendent event to glorify himself as the one who "made America great again" while continuing to demonize whoever is on his "hate list" at the time.

About 38 years into our nationhood, John Adams noted in a letter that "Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy yet, that did not commit suicide." When democracies self-destruct, he said, mob behavior emerges and people seek autocratic rulers in the absence of checks and balances and a system of laws designed to protect rights and prevent unchecked power.

Sound familiar? We're now nearly five Trump Term years along, and his mob boss governing style

and relentless efforts to undercut the integrity of our government through power grabs and intimidation tactics, firing of watchdogs in governmental organizations, "flooding the zone" with lies and grossly distorted policies at the expense of truth and justice, and promotion of voter suppression efforts designed to rig the elections system have weakened our republic tremendously.

With the aid of a sycophantic GOP and Congress, Trump and his family have been allowed to brazenly disregard ethics rules and profit from schemes ranging from crypto to "pay to play" moves including outrageous presidential pardons to relatives and friends of major donors.

With accountability mechanisms shockingly missing in the Trump 2.0 administration, are we witnessing the accelerating destruction of American democracy? If so, what can be done to reverse the course?

For starters, voters who may be suffering from fatigue over Trump's firehose governance style must muster the passion to oppose Trump not only at the polls but at the street level in daily interactions with blind loyalists that Trump has empowered.

Returning Congress to Democratic party control in the mid-terms will, of course, be a critical first step to helping strengthen democracy.

But the Dems also must develop (and convincingly communicate) fresh policies that are based on affordability and economic growth. They must not fall back into their previous stances of overregulation, political correctness, opposition to Big Business, and tone deafness to frustrated Main Street voters trying to make ends meet.

In short, Dems must be a better problem-solving party, and one that approaches change both dynamically and thoughtfully.

Given the corrosive impact of social media and disturbingly propagandistic and routinely fact-challenged cable media including Fox, Newsmax and One America, restoring traditional values such as civility, honesty, and respect will take longer. (Sadly, bombast, hate and outrage yield better ratings and more eyeballs than modesty, moderation and civility.)

Although presidential election years typically define America's future, 2026 may be more important because of Trump's increasingly unhinged ways and the impact

of many of his destructive policies.

Conservative columnist and author Victor Davis Hanson wrote that civilizations were undone not only by military defeat but also by gradually relinquishing civic virtues and a belief in the rule of law that has allowed them to flourish.

American democracy is at a tipping point now. Unless we reaffirm our foundational democratic values, we will join the long list of once proud but later failed civilizations.

Let's hope our 250th anniversary is characterized by a recommitment to democratic ideals and not a validation of John Adams' dire prophecy.

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(Jim is also the nephew of Ruth and Alonzo Lambertson, which makes him my first cousin. He spent a number of summers on the farm in his youth and was always a good addition to the Fairview American Legion baseball team. He and his wife Karen live in Columbus, Ohio but spend winters in LA.)

## Here and There

Ray Studer reports that daughter Sara from Mesa, Arizona, visited him in Horton for ten days and they kept busy. In addition to turkey and all the trimmings preparation on Christmas Day they also spent time with Terry Studer McGuire in Sabetha, Karen Haag Scott from Salina, and Natalie Hackler and husband Lyle Wissmann, Hiawatha.

In addition, they traveled to Concordia, Missouri, to break bread with Steve's son Michael, his wife Sarah and Michael's 17 year-old (17!) daughter, Audri

(Photo below of Sara with Michael's crew).



### KDOC Award to Hiawatha Foundation

TOPEKA, Dec. 22 – Lieutenant Governor and Secretary of Commerce David Toland today announced the Office of Rural Prosperity at the Department of Commerce has awarded \$337,833 in Strategic Economic Expansion and Development (SEED) grants, supporting 15 quality-of-life projects across Kansas.

The awards leveraged more than \$744,186 in local contributions, bringing the total investment available for the projects to almost \$1.1 million.

As we noted in our last issue, one of those 15 grants went to Hiawatha:

• Hiawatha Foundation for Economic Development, Brown County, \$25,000: Furnishing the Natchez Street Café with ADA-compliant tables, chairs and booths

The Natchez Street Cafe is to be part of the Community Resource Center of the Northeast Kansas Area Agency on Aging, on Natchez

Street in Hiawatha.

It is intended to provide "nutritious meals and opportunities for social connection in a welcoming space for all ages."

About the NEKAA: Established in 1973 under the Older Americans Act, the Northeast Kansas Area Agency on Aging (NEKAAA) has served as a vital lifeline for aging adults and individuals with disabilities across Northeast Kansas for more than 50 years.

As a community-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization headquartered in Hiawatha, Kansas, NEKAAA was created to advocate for older Kansans and empower them to live independently, with dignity and improved quality of life.

NEKAAA serves the residents of Atchison, Brown, Doniphan, Jackson, Marshall, Nemaha, and Washington Counties, while expanding its role as a regional hub for aging and disability resources, transportation coordination, and innovative community programming.

### The Year

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

What can be said in New Year rhymes, That's not been said a thousand times? The new years come, the old years go, We know we dream, we dream we know. We rise up laughing with the light, We lie down weeping with the night. We hug the world until it stings, We curse it then and sigh for wings. We live, we love, we woo, we wed, We wreath our prides, we sheet our dead. We laugh, we weep, we hope, we fear, And that's the burden of a year.



## Watch Out for People from Tonga

Among the more than 35 or so countries whose citizens the Administration is considering banning from entering the United States, according to press reports last week, is Tonga, a small Pacific Island monarchy with which, it is fair to say, the United States has had a long and friendly relationship.

Tonga, with a population of a little more than 100,000, is the only Pacific Island nation never to have been colonized, although it was for a time a "protectorate" of Britain.

It became fully independent in 1970 and has never caused any problems for anybody, certainly not us.

But somehow, this Administration (let's just say it straight out—White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, Stephen Miller) has thrown Tonga into the "better be careful" hopper.

Why? Could it be that its people have brown, or brown-

ish, skin?

This particular outrage caught my attention because I got to know a citizen of Tonga fairly well a few years ago.

We had a program at KU, in cooperation with Ft. Leavenworth, that enabled wounded US soldiers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to earn graduate degrees and then be assigned to teaching positions within the Army's educational system.

(Naturally, the Pentagon gave it an acronym—AW2EI—Army Wounded Warrior Educational Initiative...)

One of the most outstanding soldiers in the program was Wes Fine, a native of Tonga, a captain in the United States Army—and a wounded veteran.

Wes was awarded a Bronze Star Medal and Army Commendation Medal for his service in Iraq.

He was a platoon leader in Company B, 1st Battalion,



503rd Infantry Regiment, leading a mission in the Habaniya area in April 2005, when his unit was attacked by indirect fire. He received shrapnel to his chest and face, leading to the removal of his left eye.

"This is really meaningful for me," Fine said at an awards ceremony at Ft. Leavenworth. "The Army is the highlight of my life; it still is."

Fine began his graduate studies at Hawaii Pacific University, and by then had

completed his first year in the University of Kansas' international studies master's program.

Wes was, and I'm sure still is, a great guy—and a severely wounded veteran of the United States Army.

He should be treated with respect by our government and he should never have to worry about either himself or his family being barred from entering this country that he loves and that he served.

DL

## A Troubling Track Record

I wrote this five years ago, on the 40th anniversary of John Lennon's death. I can't find it in the Enterprises of that period, so maybe I did not inflict it upon you. Not the greatest thing to write about to start a new year, I suppose, but we're short on content...

John Lennon was shot roughly 45 years ago, December 8, 1980. The killer waited for him at the entrance to his apartment building, the "Dakota," on Manhattan's upper west side.

As it happened, I was living in the Dakota at the time, in a small apartment on the top floor, directly above Lennon and Yoko Ono. (I was assigned temporarily to the US Mission to the UN, and subleased the little place for a price I could afford.)

I wasn't there when the shooting happened, but when I got home later in the evening, police were everywhere and a crowd of mourners had begun to gather. They sang "Give Peace a Chance" almost all night long (directly below my window).

I realized that I had seen and said hello to the killer a few times. He had been hanging around the entrance to the building for several days, casing the joint.

I have a history of crossing paths with prominent people who are later killed.

My list of victims started with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who I met when she visited Indone-

sia in 1969. She was assassinated (many) years later by one of her own bodyguards.

And George Moscone, Mayor of San Francisco, with whom I rode into the city after the arrival at the San Francisco airport of the Prime Minister of Japan in March of 1977. (I remember saying something to Moscone about the drought that California was then suffering; he said "yeh, it's tough, we have to drink our scotch neat.") He was murdered the following year in his office, along with city councilman Harvey Milk.

And Adolph "Spike" Dubs, US Ambassador to Afghanistan. Sacie and I hosted a gathering at our house in Tokyo for him in 1978. He was kidnapped in Kabul by "militants" in early 1979 and killed in a botched rescue attempt, possibly with the connivance of the Soviet KGB.

Then there was Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt and cosigner of the Camp David Agreement with Israel, who I met in Egypt one month before he was assassinated during a military parade in Cairo in 1981.

And Korean Foreign Minister Lee Bum Sook; I knew him well, and he was killed in October of 1983 when North Korean agents set off a bomb in Rangoon, Burma intended for the visiting South Korean president.

As far as I know, I haven't had a similar effect on regular folks. Happy New Year... DL

## Sen Moran on Ukraine

Senator Jerry Moran had this to say on the subject of Ukraine, last week:

"I joined my colleagues in condemning Russia's brutal attacks on Ukrainians as they convened to mark Christmas with their loved ones. It bears repeating that President Zelenskyy agreed to a Christmas truce, but Putin declined—yet he directs soldiers to continue to commit brutal crimes of aggression on one of Christianity's holiest days.

"Even for countries at war, there is a long history of Christmas ceasefires, including notably during World War I. Today's decision by Putin to launch attacks rather than hold fire is a sobering reminder for us all: Putin is a ruthless murderer who has no interest in peace and cannot be trusted. We stand with the people of Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Kherson and Donetsk marking the birth of Christ under the most challenging of circumstances. Ukrainians' faith is a stronger force than the evil unleashed today by the Kremlin."

Good for Senator Moran. As has been noted before in these pages, the President would do well to listen to him.

### DANCING BUG

RUBEN BOLLING

There's been a lot of confusion recently about moral behavior. It's actually a matter of one simple rule: THE MORE A LIVING BEING IS LIKE YOU, THE NICER YOU MUST BE TO IT. Carry around this handy chart, consult it as you come across organisms, and act accordingly.

HUMAN MORALITY MADE SIMPLE		Y = YES, ALWAYS S = SOMETIMES, DEPENDING ON CIRCUMSTANCES M = IF YOU'RE IN THE MOOD N = NO, NEVER					
CATEGORY	EXAMPLE	HOW MUCH LIKE YOU?	APPROPRIATE MORAL RESPONSE	SHOULD YOU HELP IT?	CAN YOU HARM IT?	CAN YOU KILL IT?	CAN YOU EAT IT?
IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS	DAUGHTER	ALMOST EXACTLY LIKE YOU	Must be unbelievably nice and generous. Give it money. Devote your life to its well-being.	Y	N	N	N
EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS	COUSIN	VERY MUCH LIKE YOU	Must be very kind. Help it if not too costly to yourself. Make sure never to harm it.	S	N	N	N
COMMUNITY MEMBERS	FELLOW AMERICAN	SAME CUSTOMS, VALUE SYSTEM, TV SHOWS	May only harm if you can gain by it (e.g., in business deals). No need to help it.	M	S	N	N
OUTSIDERS	FOREIGNER	LOOKS DIFFERENT, ACTS WEIRD	Can be mean to, if necessary. May kill, if wartime.	M	S	S	N
PETS AND PRIMATES	DOG	NOT HUMAN, BUT ANTHROPOMORPHIZED	Can harm, if for research. Can put it to sleep, if necessary. Can't eat it.	M	S	S	N
OTHER MAMMALS	DEER	DIFFERENT	Can kill, can eat. Pat it on the head.	M	S	Y	Y
OTHER ANIMALS	FISH	VERY DIFFERENT	Can kill. Can eat. Don't pat it on the head.	N	Y	Y	Y
INVERTEBRATES	LADYBUG	GROSSLY DIFFERENT	Stomp on it, feel a little guilty.	N	Y	Y	Yech.
PLANTS	RADISH	ABSOLUTELY DIFFERENT	Destroy without a twinge of guilt.	N	Y	Y	Y

