

# The Deceptive Allure of Authoritarianism What Makes Freedom Vulnerable

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Let me begin today with a warning. This program is a departure from my normal assessment of challenges facing leaders in corporate and business settings. Instead, I'm turning my attention in this program to a challenge in the political realm – specifically, the types of leaders we choose and why we choose them.

I'm producing this podcast over the weekend prior to July 4<sup>th</sup>, a mere five weeks after we celebrated Memorial Day. Two national holidays which evoke memories of epoch battles. Yet, two holidays so different in tone.

Given its very purpose, Memorial Day sets a somber mood. A time to decorate tombstones. A time to remember fallen heroes. A time to hear the haunting loneliness of a bugle playing taps. By contrast, July 4<sup>th</sup> is celebratory. It's boisterous. It brims with optimism and bright hopes. It commemorates the history-changing birth of a nation – a nation which, in the words of President Lincoln, was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

In a word, July 4<sup>th</sup> reminds us of the dream which defines us. Memorial Day reminds us of the price which we have paid to keep that dream alive. Yet both remind us of a daunting question that cannot be asked too frequently: how long will this dream flourish?

Liberty is costly. And over the history of mankind globally, few generations have been willing to shoulder that cost. By contrast, we Americans enjoy the unprecedented good fortune of having had a dozen generations in a row who refused to let liberty perish.

Nevertheless, liberty always hangs by a thin thread. As humans, we have an inborn ambiguity about freedom. On one hand we want it. We aspire to it. On the other hand, the price which it extracts from us can be burdensome – so burdensome for some that they are willing to give authoritarianism a try.

Today I want to examine why people who espouse freedom and liberty have been known to surrender both to authoritarian leadership. There's much food for thought in today's program, not just for leaders, but for citizens of every stripe. If you are a leader, however, the perspectives on human nature which we are about to explore are sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

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Repeatedly over the past 80 years, American armed forces have taken the field to war against authoritarian regimes. Naziism. Fascism. Communism. Muslim totalitarianism. We have made ourselves the declared enemy of autocracy.

We chose this path because America's ideals are anchored in the notion of personal liberty and individual freedom. But if history tells us anything, it's that political freedom is difficult to perpetuate. Autocracy and authoritarianism are forever lurking in the wings, ready to upend a free society at some unguarded moment.

As a nation, we, too, are vulnerable. There's no assurance that America's beacon of liberty and freedom will continue to shine brightly.

Some, of course, would argue that I'm needlessly pessimistic. That I'm overstating the threat. That a free society like ours is resilient. Strong. Able to fend off whatever is thrown at it.

But I beg to differ. As a historian by training, I've studied every era of human history in every quarter of the globe. And if there is one recurring pattern in history, it's this: genuine political freedom is rare. And where it does manage to establish itself, it lives a very precarious existence.

That's because authoritarianism has a seductive allure to it. It promises benefits which are so enticing that people sacrifice the privileges of liberty to gain them. For this reason, the threat to a free society is as much internal as external.

To have a free society, you see, we must settle for things which, for lack of a better word, can be described as "messy." We must tolerate political views and social outlooks which are quite foreign to our own. Even some which are completely distasteful to us. We must accept the will of the majority, even though we pointedly disagree with it – or may even feel that it wrongs us unduly.

In this messy world called freedom, we must be as ardent in defending the rights of our political adversaries as we are in championing the rights of our staunchest allies. We must make peace with the fact that change which we fervently desire may take years and years to work its way through the political system.

In a word, we must openly embrace constant tension in public life, times of pronounced social unrest, and an ever-evolving cultural life whose future course is never crystal clear. These are not things which we are naturally inclined to do. We are not by nature patient. We are not by nature selfless. We are not by nature defenders of those whom we don't like. Yet, freedom demands these things of us.

Which is where the allure of authoritarianism enters the scene. Authoritarians promise political stability. Social predictability. A speedy response to troublesome issues. A clear, unchallenged path forward. There will always be people for whom diminished personal freedoms are acceptable tradeoffs to bring stability and predictability into their lives.

Beyond that, genuine freedom mandates self-reliance, which many find discomfiting. Self-reliance requires us to accept full responsibility for the consequences of poor decisions, poor planning, or poor work habits. No big brother stands by to protect us from ourselves

But because self-reliance levies such exacting responsibilities on us, it becomes fertile soil for worry, anxiety, and apprehension. When these become intense enough, many people are eager to rid themselves of this burden. For them, diminished self-accountability found in authoritarianism promises to soothe anxiety and settle apprehension. Can you see why authoritarianism will always be a temptation?

Patriotic holidays remind us of external threats – the bitter reality that hostile powers pose a danger to our way of life. The reminder is both valid and valuable, because democracies have indeed fallen to foreign invaders. But far more have perished because their people willingly acquiesced to authoritarianism.

There's no denying that authoritarianism has a magnetic allure. Otherwise, how do you explain a world in which most people live under heavy-handed governments? True, many autocrats rule by force. But to remain in power at all, dictatorial governments must maintain at least a modicum of loyal popular support. If nothing else, they must retain the backing of the armed forces and powerful elites outside of government. These are not powerless people. They have clout. Why would people with clout acquiesce to an authoritarian leader?

I believe that it's because authoritarianism holds a psychological and emotional appeal for untold millions of people – including large numbers on both the political left and political right in our own country. And for them, the appeal of authoritarianism is strong enough to outweigh whatever benefit that personal or political freedom might yield.

I could argue that authoritarianism has already permeated our political system far more than we realize. It takes the guise, however, of what I call “soft-gloved” authoritarianism. Thus far it has not taken the form of stiff-fisted dictatorship. Instead, it takes the form of supposedly benevolent bureaucracy.

Even though the U.S. Constitution makes no direct provision for bureaucracies, the case can be built that bureaucracy is today the most powerful branch of American government. The twentieth century saw Congress hand the bulk of its inherent rule-making authority to Federal bureaucracies. Very few of the rules and regulations which hold sway over our day-to-day lives were ever enacted through legislation. They were imposed through bureaucratic pronouncement.

As citizens we must abide by these pronouncements or risk severe penalties – even imprisonment. Yet, we have no mechanism for holding bureaucrats accountable or for removing those who ignore or intentionally violate the will of the people.

From my perspective, American bureaucracy has much in common with the kinds of autocrats whom we have expended blood and fortune to defeat. Like those autocrats, bureaucracies are free to be arbitrary in their decision-making. For the most part, they feel answerable to no one. Their agents are assured longevity in office, even when shown to be incompetent. And when their actions, policies, or decisions inflict harm, the victims have little or no recourse – certainly not one that's usually affordable.

How does that differ in substance from tyranny? The only basic difference is that bureaucracies typically make at least a modest attempt to wear a friendly face. Tyrants may not necessarily do so. That's why I call bureaucracy “soft-gloved authoritarianism.”

Why, then, have we allowed the behemoth to emerge? Because bureaucracy promises to ease the burden and discomfort of being self-reliable, self-responsible. Its programs become our ultimate safety net, whatever misfortune life may thrust upon us.

My point is not to launch a diatribe against bureaucracy. Rather, it's to highlight the fact that even in the land of the free, we are not above quietly surrendering personal freedom and liberty to political power that either borders on or crosses over into authoritarianism. – particularly if that power promises to make life less worrisome and less chaotic for us.

The classic description of this human tendency came from the pen of Erich Fromm, who in 1941 wrote *Escape from Freedom*. A psychiatrist by training, Fromm fled to the U.S. from Germany just prior to the holocaust. But he had experienced enough of its prelude to have keen insights into the political, social, and – most importantly – psychological processes which led up to it.

Fromm fled to the U.S. in order to escape *to* freedom. But he saw his fellow countrymen who were seduced by Nazi propaganda as having sought an escape *from* freedom. Hence the title of his book.

Personal freedom, he argued, thrusts a sobering responsibility on us, the responsibility for making our own autonomous choices. And as we face more and more highly consequential choices, personal anxiety begins to rise. What if we make the wrong decision? What if we are unable to fend for ourselves? What if we fail and have nothing to fall back on?

The result is a gnawing sense of uncertainty and insecurity about the future. So long as this insecurity is mild, most people manage it adequately. But as insecurity builds intensity, for some the uncertainty and unpredictability become uncomfortable and unsettling. Even unbearable. Especially when financial distress is added to it.

This is especially true for personalities which have never developed genuine self-confidence and a deep conviction of self-worth. Under stress, people like this long for predictability. Security. A more certain future. As the old saying goes, "Someone who will make the trains run on time."

The rule of thumb is that the greater the economic uncertainty and social polarization, the greater the allure of authoritarianism. Forget the fact that authoritarianism has a dark side. It presents itself initially with a benign face. But once established, it responds to its own anxiety by turning to oppressive measures and intrusions on personal liberty.

And because its power is largely unchecked, authoritarianism easily slips into corruption and exploitation. People may recognize these threats in the back of their minds. But once the anxiety and uncertainty become high enough, these same people will risk the longer-term downside of authoritarianism just to remove the current emotional, psychological, and economic discomfort.

That's why uncertainty and the allure of authoritarianism rise and fall together. As acute uncertainty becomes more prevalent, there is a commensurate increase in the number of people who are open to authoritarian solutions. And heaven knows, uncertainty is currently rampant. Stability and predictability are difficult to find. Anywhere.

It's this underlying dynamic which makes it difficult for democracy to survive long-term. Left to their own devices, many people will prefer the stability of authoritarianism to the responsibilities

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of autonomy. And what we have learned since the French Revolution is that modern revolutions can succeed with support from only a small portion of the total population. Nothing dictates that the vast majority must prefer authoritarian government in order for one to take power.

The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century vividly illustrates how vulnerable democracy is to authoritarian reversals. The century opened with constitutional democracy seemingly in ascendency in much of the world. Then, one by one, fledgling democracies veered back toward authoritarianism. When the U.S. entered the Second World War, there were 195 recognized nations. Of these, only eleven had a democratic system of government. Australia and New Zealand in the south Pacific. Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland on the European mainland. Chile alone in Latin America. The U.S. and Canada in North America. And three island nations clustered in the North Atlantic: the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Iceland.

The Allied victory in the Pacific and Europe turned things around. Nations liberated from Nazi and Japanese domination opted in large numbers for democracy – including Germany and Japan themselves. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, its former vassal states made decided moves in the direction of democracy.

Yet, today democracy is in retreat again. Across Africa and in Eastern Europe, elected governments were so given to corruption that ruling elites amassed more and more power to themselves, rigging elections and using intimidation to remain in authority. In many instances these nations maintain constitutionalism as a thin veneer over the underlying authoritarianism. But there is no true constitutional process. And everyone knows that what passes as constitutional rule is a showpiece and a sham.

To believe that mankind has an irrepressible commitment to liberty goes against the testimony of history. This is not to say that vast majorities have no interest in freedom. They may have a desire for it, but not at the price of being self-responsible in the face of uncertainty and instability.

In other words, they are not so much motivated to escape from freedom (to borrow from Fromm's title) as to escape from the anxiety which attends freedom and personal autonomy. Not everyone who finds the anxiety unbearable opts for authoritarianism. They may simply opt to make their anxiety bearable by dulling the sense of it. Drugs abuse is a common retreat for them. Or alcoholic binges. Or promiscuity and sexual fantasies. Or they may take up daredevil hobbies to let other strong emotions crowd anxiety aside. At least, for the moment. These are all simply different coping mechanism for the same underlying cause.

I'm not suggesting that these people are all ready to rise up in a united front to topple democratic institutions. That doesn't appear to be the case at present. Nevertheless, the appeal of candidates with authoritarian solutions – be they left or right – will always appeal to them. And their vote counts just as much as yours.

The greater threat, I believe, is that "soft-gloved" authoritarianism will become more and more widespread and more intrusive in daily life. It is already becoming more centralized, as Washington takes over government functions long seen as the proper province of local and state governments. How far down this path can we go before authoritarianism no longer feels compelled to wear a soft glove?

We are trending in that direction, as the COVID epidemic clearly revealed. How many of the restrictions which we lived under for nearly two years resulted directly from legislative action?

Why was there so little room in public and media debate for dissenting views on both the science and the implications of the disease? Why were thousands of small businesses permanently destroyed as a by-product of government decrees which never had a moment of Congressional debate – much less a Congressional vote – before they were implemented?

Yet the general public acquiesced to these realities, even though there was broad-based resentment of them. Doesn't that sound like authoritarianism at its best?

Do I expect people to rise up in mass to violently take matters into their own hands? No. Do I anticipate that our current trend toward "soft-gloved absolutism" will continue? Yes. Will it eventually lead to the complete loss of personal rights and freedom whose protection was the founding impetus for America? I pray not.

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