

# Perspective on Our Democracy

The end is not inevitable for America



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*“A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government. A democracy will continue to exist until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.”*

About the third time this quote made the rounds into my email box, my curiosity about who really wrote it piqued. It seemed almost too insightful considering Alexander Tytler, a Scottish professor who died 200 years ago, wrote it. The quote was attributed to Tytler by Elmer Peterson as part of a 1951 op-ed piece that appeared in *The Daily Oklahoman* titled “Why Democracies Fail.” Whether Tytler actually wrote these words (probably not), it’s an accurate portrayal of his philosophy.

Also widely attributed to Tytler, the following list actually appears to have come from a speech in 1943 by one H.W. Prentis, president of the Armstrong Cork Company. To Tytler’s concepts, Prentis identified the cycle through which democracies progress. To that I have added my own commentary:

**From bondage to spiritual faith**—Early immigrants escape dictatorships and

monarchies for religious and personal freedom and the hope of a better life.

**From spiritual faith to great courage**—From Judeo-Christian principles that our freedom is bestowed upon us from God and not by any government, the founders declared emancipation from Britain.

**From courage to liberty**—Many individual acts of heroism resulted in what has to be the ultimate entrepreneurial startup of all time: an entirely autonomous country created from the ground up. Like a business startup, the process was messy and imperfect, and the long-term outcome was unknown.

**From liberty to abundance**—Freedom and a high work ethic created wealth like no other country ever has. Abundance allowed self-examination and critical expansion of what liberty meant regarding gender and race. Pride in country, personal responsibility and parents sacrificing for the betterment of future generations were the norm.

**From abundance to selfishness**—Egocentric, egotistical, self-indulgent: the result of the “me” generation. Personal greed begets public greed; after all, bureaucrats, elected officials and corporate board members are but individuals.

**From selfishness to complacency**—Government programs begun with the best of intentions as safety nets have evolved into entitlements with costs far beyond the ability

of those paying into the system to sustain. Yet the criteria for entry into the programs are relaxed and lowered to gain popular votes. The government debt soars like never before so we are bankrupting our children, yet the spending continues unabated.

**From complacency to apathy**—Indifferent, uninterested, lethargic, bored: Overall, 30 out of every 100 students drop out of high school; for ethnic minorities it is approaching half. Voting rates hover just above 50 percent, even in presidential elections. Pop culture extols sordid behavior and dishonorable values. Not enough people act like they care.

**From apathy to dependence**—Reliance, habit, need: Once hooked on free money from the government, it’s hard to give it up. One in six people, or 47 million, are receiving some form of government entitlement check. Unemployment benefits have been extended from months to years. We are on track to become totally dependent on the government for our healthcare needs.

**From dependence back to bondage**—Subjugation and repression in the form of dictatorship. Unthinkable? While Tytler declared that the march to decline is a “law of nature to which no experience has ever furnished an exception,” I believe the end is not inevitable. People can change their minds.

In “The Wealth and Poverty of Nations,” David Landes observes, “If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference.” A culture of dependence is the polar opposite of a self-reliant culture. It is human to want more, to think of self first; but we as humans also have a conscience as a counterbalance. We also have free will to choose knowledge and understanding, to invoke self-denial for the sake of a higher purpose, and to vote. Or not; depends on where you see yourself and your country in the continuum. **KCB**

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