DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE

 The United States of America has proudly lasted since 1776 -- some two-hundred and forty-eight years.

 But -- as anyone who studies history knows -- all empires eventually collapse, due to a combination of internal rot and corruption, coupled with hostile external forces. The sad, final result leads to any nation's ultimate demise. America, unfortunately, is not exempt from this ironclad template.

 Our Founding Fathers were brilliant in crafting a sophisticated system of government that has been the envy of the world. Crucial to that foundation of law and stability has been the right to vote in free and open elections. The Founders knew that the basic survival of our democracy rested upon an educated, involved, and informed citizenry. Civic education was thus encouraged to help enhance and ensure our way of life. Being an engaged American was seen as being both a privilege and a responsibility.

 Yet, what has happened to undermine this ideal?

 Over the last two generations, voter participation has continually declined. Blame whomever or whatever you choose: a lazy popular culture, the lack of teaching civics in our public schools, the numbing pervasiveness of television, time-wasting social media on the internet, the general decline of religion and/or family values in the home, or other factors.

 Many American young people don't even bother to register to vote anymore, figuring "what's the use?" Our two-party system is seen as broken and corrupt on both sides. Our legislatures are widely looked upon as merely self-serving, and frankly ignorant of the real needs of the waning number of people who bother to elect them. A majority of Americans yearn for a Third-Party alternative to the usual Democrat and Republican candidates. But those traditional parties have a virtual lock on the money and the power which is aggressively used to thwart any challenge to their positions. Thus, any shift towards a Third-Party option -- up to now -- is rendered doomed from the start.

 Polling has proved that many people actually vote primarily on the physical height of a candidate (the taller usually wins), or how much hair a candidate has (the more, the better), rather than on the candidate's ideas, values, or oratory skills. The insult, or the glib 'sound bite,' gets our sole attention.

 This is incredible! How can a country survive such ridiculousness? As a result, such an emotion-driven whim now pathetically outweighs any careful, reasonable analysis of a candidate's campaign platform. American politics has devolved into little more than a tawdry celebrity or sports entertainment.

 I believe that my fellow countrymen and countrywomen are yearning for genuine leadership that transcends our current democratic morass. In the 2020 President Election, I voted for neither of the two major candidates. (Instead, in disgust, I wrote in the words: None of the Above.) I recalled at the time some of the lyrics to the song *Mrs. Robinson,* by Simon & Garfunkel:

 "...Sitting on a sofa on a Sunday afternoon

 Going to the candidates debate

 Laugh about it, shout about it

 When you've got to choose

 Every way you look at this, you lose..."

 In the voting booth that day, I kept asking myself: In a nation of 330 million people, is this the best we can offer? These are our only choices? And now, with the 2024 elections coming around in November, we are stuck with the same people again??

 Perhaps democracy only works with a country of a given number of educated citizens -- let's say, a population of 30-35 million. With the United States ten times that amount -- and with our current diversity of cultures but no apparent sense of national unity -- I believe that we are in a democratic 'death spiral.' Our democracy is becoming more and more of a charade, a farce, an illusion -- a dark mockery of our Founding. One can't but ask oneself: does my single, sincere vote even matter anymore?

 Then there is the related aspect of those on the federal welfare rolls, as well as those working for the government on national, state, or local levels: Would anyone willingly vote against the specific political party which currently provides them with their monthly (taxpayer-funded) largess, or vote against the political party which provides them with lasting employment plus many extra benefits?

 Of course not.

 The same goes for those applying for -- or continuing to work while relying upon --government grants, not to mention the huge amount of government-funded 'activist' and special interest groups. The possibility of 'change' or 'reform' under such circumstances obviously becomes moot.

 Mail-in ballot voting was vastly expanded and encouraged in the U.S. during the worldwide Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020-2023. Yet what was meant to a be a temporary feature is now likely to become permanent in America. I believe that, over time, this will lead to a dangerous voting disaster in our country.

 Government-issued photo IDs should be mandatory upon arrival, in person, at the ballot box, in my opinion. (Make Election Day a national holiday, if necessary, so there would be no excuse not to show up and vote, unless under rare circumstances.) Did you know that among the 27 countries in the European Union, fully 63% ban mail-in voting unless living abroad, and that another 22% require a photo ID to obtain a mail-in ballot? Did you also know that every one of the other 16 countries in Europe ban mail-in voting for those living in their country, or also require a photo ID to obtain a mail-in ballot? And, furthermore, that 63% of those same countries prohibit mail-in ballots even for citizens living outside their country?

 The threat of voter fraud -- whether it really happens, or whether there is even a hint of such wrongdoing -- is a serious danger to our democracy. Even if a small amount of voting illegality is suspected or proven, such a charge can cast doubt on the whole integrity of any valid election. A widely-held fear now is that undocumented migrants from south of our border will somehow gain access into our electoral system and receive mail-in ballots to illegally vote.

 Misinformation or disinformation from any media source must likewise be constantly guarded against when it come to voting. The news must be unbiased, evenly presented, and politically neutral. When people don't trust the necessary information they are entitled to, they can easily turn cynical, apathetic, or even violent. Catastrophic civil unrest, and even bloody revolutions, can erupt as a result -- as witnessed in other countries throughout history -- due to fraudulent or 'rigged' elections.

 In summation, here is what I believe we can do to help save our democracy:

 1. Restore faith among the young regarding our system of government. Re-introduce civics in our public schools. Stress the importance of unity and active citizenship over mere diversity.

 2. Return to the practice of in-person voting, with valid government IDs. Make mail-in voting a rare circumstance.

 3. Offer the very best candidates for our elections, and include a viable Third-Party choice when possible.

 4. Ensure that all of the news presented to the American public is unbiased, honest and fair.

 5. Hold our elected officials to the highest standards of ethical and fiscal conduct. Restrict money donations from lobbyists and other donors who lavishly give dubious so-called 'campaign contributions.'

 6. Institute term limits for all politicians. Make it a public service job for 4-8 years, not a career. Then insist on a return to the private sector.

 7. Make our elected leaders accountable to seriously deal with the actual problems we face as a nation, both at home and abroad. Stop wasting precious legislative time on frivolous issues, endless bickering, and wasteful costly projects!

 8.Work on reducing the National Debt, and secure our southern border to help ensure only legal immigration.

 If these steps are followed, I believe we can turn our tragic democratic decline around. Recent polling indicated that 71% of Americans believed that we were seriously heading in the wrong direction as a nation. The challenge, therefore, lies right before our very eyes.

 But if we don't alter our current wounded national trajectory, it's good-bye to what was once the vibrant example and inspiring leader of the free world...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 March 30, 2024