



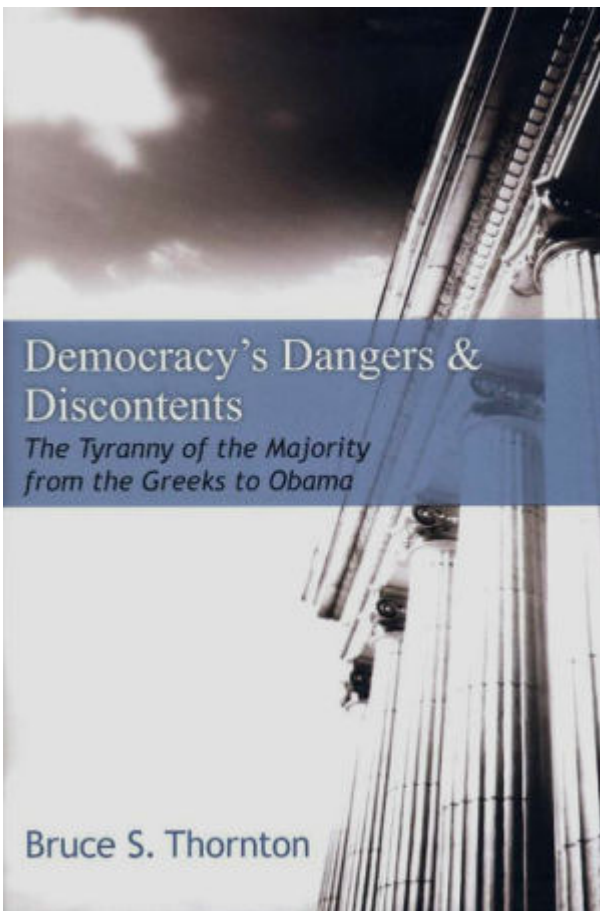
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'Democracy's Dangers' gets high marks

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"Democracy's Dangers and Discontents: The Tyranny of the Majority from the Greeks to Obama," by Bruce S. Thornton. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2014. 191 pages, \$19.95



"As all those have shown who have discussed civil institutions, and as every history is full of examples, it is necessary to whoever arranges to found a Republic and establish laws in it, to presuppose that all men are bad and that they will use their malignity of mind every time they have the opportunity." – Machiavelli

The sentiment expressed by Machiavelli in the early 16th century concisely captures the declaration expressed on nearly every page of "Democracy's Dangers and Discontents: The Tyranny of the Majority from the Greeks to Obama," Bruce S. Thornton's latest effort to warn us about the inherent dangers of the path we have apparently chosen in the United States, particularly since the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"Many of democracy's flaws, from ancient Athens to the modern United States, can be traced to the perennial weaknesses and flaws of human nature that freedom and popular rule unleash," Thornton asserts near the beginning of his new volume. "An uncritical view of democracy, then, is a kind of utopianism that ignores the tragic nature of human

beings, their propensity to be driven by passions and interests rather than reason and the good. As such it can lead to policies doomed to failure because that destructive capacity of human nature is ignored or idealized."

A professor of classics and humanities at California State University in Fresno, Thornton is also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford. He has a B.A. in Latin and a Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of California at Los Angeles.

Thornton is representative of a growing number of critics who feel the United States is allowing an emphasis on democracy and the democratic process to subvert the original vision the founders had when they set up a republican form of government in the late 1700s. Certainly, Thornton is

persuasive and passionate in his criticism of the unrestrained growth of entitlement programs at home as well as our intervention in the affairs of other countries abroad. He sees both as the result of our unquestioning and unrealistic belief in a form of government the 35 delegates who met in Philadelphia beginning in May 1787 specifically sought to avoid.

“Democracy’s Dangers” is a relatively straightforward treatise on the inherent threats embedded in a government that allows the majority to chart its course. It consists of only five chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) and is not meant to be an objective treatment of the subject matter at hand. The author clearly begins with a predetermined point of view that serves as the conceptual framework for his position. Even so, the book is a virtual treasure trove of historical, cultural and political insights that I found refreshing and intrinsically thought-provoking.

For those interested in the origins of the so-called welfare state, Thornton does not disappoint, as evidenced by this excerpt from “Democracy and Leviathan,” the third chapter: “Under the pressures and crises of two world wars and the Great Depression, the expansion of the federal Leviathan through the proliferation of agencies and regulations would be accompanied by the multiplication of social welfare programs that, for all their initial good intentions, would evolve into the modern equivalent of the redistribution of property with which the ancient tyrant bought through the support of the masses. The high price would be the erosion of personal freedom and self-government by coercive federal regulatory power over more and more of private and state business.”

One feature I found especially endearing about “Democracy’s Dangers” was the inclusion of concrete strategies for combating the trends Thornton sees as detrimental to sustaining the form of government originally envisioned by the founders. Whereas many authors focus on raising awareness of the extent of the problem, it is refreshing to run across one who is optimistic that the counterproductive tendencies he so eloquently describes will be effectively arrested before they can do irreversible harm to a way of life most of us deeply cherish.

“Millions of people in the United States still possess the qualities of independence, self-reliance, resistance to tyranny, and love of freedom that have always characterized the American character,” Thornton notes in “Conclusion: Restoring Limited Government,” the final chapter.

“Ordinary citizens now can potentially reach a national audience once reserved for the few-score columnists, network news anchors and magazine writers that three decades ago monopolized and controlled public opinion. The existence of these venues for exercising free speech and reaching a large audience offers an opportunity for mobilizing resistance to the federal Leviathan.”

Although I do not share Thornton’s hypercritical and even cynical view of all federally sponsored social welfare programs, I do feel he presents a convincing argument that we have indeed wandered far afield from the ideals and structures the founders envisioned when they created the original framework for our government – a framework that has obviously served us well for almost two-and-a-half centuries. I also learned a great deal about our country by reading this book; my sense is you would, too. I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*