

Political books**The democracy deficit: is the US model still viable?**

With ever-rising inequality and the supremacy of a privileged elite class, American-style democracy is under threat

FT Books Essay

Harvard and Yale university football fans drink champagne before a game at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2014 © Reuters

6 HOURS AGO by: Edward Luce

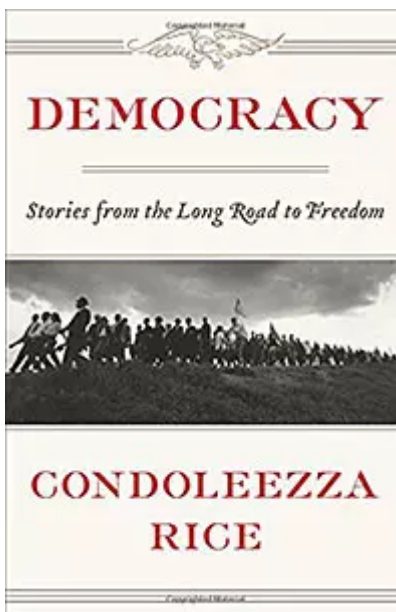
It was only towards the end of Condoleezza Rice's *Democracy* that I noticed a glaring omission. A quick check of the index confirmed my suspicion. The words "Donald Trump" appear nowhere in this tome. Had the former secretary of state's book come out two years ago that would have been fine. But it was published in the US several months into the Trump administration. Moreover, the book is billed as a sort of mission statement — part memoir, part hortatory — for the global spread of democracy. The US is very much the model to which others should aspire. Rice's last chapter is entitled: "They will look to America." Let us hope the world is not looking too hard right now.

Trump's absence is no small oversight, which is a pity because Rice has some valuable things to say. Now back at Stanford University, where she was provost in the 1990s, her experience stretches back to the final decade of the Soviet Union. As a Russian speaker, she had more insights into the Soviet and post-Soviet soul than her colleagues. Some claim that Russia's soil is too flinty for democracy to take root. Rice is right to dismiss the soft bigotry of low expectations — to borrow a phrase coined by her former boss, George W Bush. Rice says: "The Russians are not endowed with some unique anti-democratic DNA."

With the aid of a team of research assistants, Rice has pulled together a solid chronicle of the state of democracy in different parts of the world. There are good chapters on Kenya, Colombia, Ukraine and Poland.

But the pages to which the reader is naturally drawn are on the Middle East — specifically Iraq. Rice insists that the 2003 US-led invasion of the country had nothing to do with exporting democracy. It was solely about preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein's fiefdom. This is true but it is not the whole truth. That was not how she, or her colleagues, sold it at the time. In 2005, when Iraq had long since descended into civil war, Rice uttered her famous phrase: "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region — and we achieved neither," she said. "Now we are taking a different course." A year later, Rice notoriously described the war in Lebanon as the "birth pangs of a new Middle East".

The Arab world's democratic infant was stillborn. But Rice offers little self-reflection on the Bush administration's role in that. To be fair she admits the US Coalition Provisional Authority did make "unforced errors". One such example was the 2003 disbandment of the Iraq army — an edict that fanned the so-called "Saddam Fedayeen", which in turn spawned Isis. The decision, taken by Paul Bremer, Bush's first pick as proconsul to Iraq, took the White House by surprise. They had no say in the decision, says Rice. Yet they did nothing to reverse it. After that, she writes: "It was really difficult to keep them [Iraq Sunnis] engaged in the effort to build a new Iraq." That would be an understatement.



At times, Rice depicts herself as an innocent bystander. Any half-alert Arabist could have told her before 2003 that Ahmad Chalabi, the self-proclaimed leader of the Iraqis in exile, was a charlatan. But it was only years later that Rice found out. "We would eventually learn that Chalabi was both

cunning and dishonest,” she says in another understatement. When asked if knowing what she knows now, she would do it all again, Rice passes the buck to Barack Obama. It is clear she puts most of the blame for the rise of Isis on Obama’s 2011 decision to pull remaining US military forces out of Iraq. “Had I known that we would not be prepared to keep forces in the country — in small numbers — to help the Iraqis find democratic stability, the decision would have been much harder for me,” she writes.

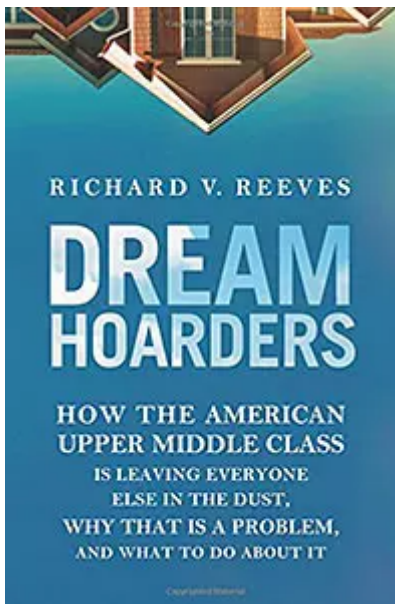
Shortly after the invasion of Iraq, Rice met her European counterparts in Berlin. They told her she was too wide-eyed about prospects for democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq. This annoyed Rice. She writes: “*I’d rather be naive than cynical*, I had thought to myself . . . Returning to my hotel, I felt so American — with a kind of optimism about the rightness of democracy for everyone, everywhere, at all times.”

There, in a nutshell, is the problem with Rice’s worldview. There are plenty of middle courses between naivety and cynicism. One of them is scepticism — to probe actively for knowledge without caving into the world-weariness of the cynic. Alas, Rice saw only a binary choice. She went for naivety. Innocence, as Graham Greene wrote in *The Quiet American*, “is like a dumb leper, who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm”.

Rice’s Stanford colleagues, Larry Diamond and Francis Fukuyama, have each written elsewhere about the world’s “democratic recession”. There are 25 fewer democracies today than there were when the Bush administration took office.

But the greater worry is the health of western democracy itself — nowhere more so than in the US. Had Rice written a chapter on Trump, she would have had to explain how the world’s oldest constitutional democracy could have voted for such a man. Some, including Hillary Clinton, who will publish her latest memoir in September, put it down to bigotry and Russian interference. That, too, is only part of the truth.

As Richard Reeves sets out in *Dream Hoarders* and Mark Lilla in *The Once and Future Liberal*, there are deeper forces at play. America’s system of meritocracy — its founding creed of equality of opportunity — has fallen prey to an “incipient class apartheid”, in the words of the scholar Robert Putnam, and to liberalism’s capture by a “pseudo-politics of self-regard” in Lilla’s words. In very different ways, both books capture essential pieces of the puzzle.



For decades, economists have worried about the western “poverty trap”. But as Reeves shows, the “wealth trap” is every bit as sticky. It is harder to fall out of wealth in the US than it is in almost any other western democracy, Britain included. America’s elites, in other words, are highly efficient at passing on their advantages to their children. A true meritocracy must include “elite circulation”. For others to move up, some must also move down. A society based on genuine merit would be in constant flux. Yet as Reeves shows, America’s wealthiest fifth — those earning more than \$112,000 a year — are particularly good at capturing most of the benefits for their offspring.

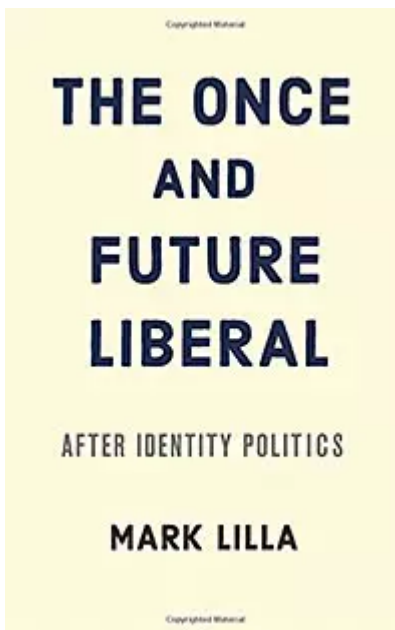
Reeves calls it the “glass floor”. Others call it “affirmative action for the rich”. Some of the advantages Reeves sets out are natural: we all want the best for our children. But the elites have become increasingly skilled at hoarding opportunity. The wealthiest quintile tend to get married and stay married in far higher proportions than other classes. Marriage is a “child-rearing machine for a knowledge economy”, he says. Likewise, “we don’t come home to drink a cocktail”, writes Reeves — as the wealthy might have done a generation ago. “We come home to help with homework: to Mandarin, rather than to a martini.”

All of which is well and good. But the elites cross a line when they rig the market in favour of their children. One such example is legacy places at America’s Ivy League Universities. Children of alumni are between two and three times more likely to be accepted into “HYP” — Harvard, Yale and Princeton — as those who are not. This is hardly “a slight tilt” to the children of former students, as the head of admissions at one Ivy League university put it.

The US remains the only western democracy where its top universities give such preference. But the playing field tilts sharply long before children think about college. A higher-income child who scores badly in eighth grade (aged 12) on maths, reading and social studies is far likelier to reach

college than a poor child who scores well on the same tests. Rich parents cram their children's weekends with tutorials to pass the ubiquitous tests that assess "merit". Reeves calls this system "testocratic".

It is little wonder that those who lack such help feel society is stacked against them. That is without mentioning the leg-up conferred by unpaid internships. Nine out of 10 Goldman Sachs's new hires are former interns. Only the wealthy have the cash to put their children up in New York for the summer to do unpaid work. As a naturalised American, Reeves is "absurdly proud" of his new passport. Yet this one-time adviser to Nick Clegg, Britain's former deputy prime minister, is worried that America's "class system [has] become more rigid than in the United Kingdom". The statistics back him up. It is hard to understand Trump's rise without grasping America's overlooked class resentments.



The Republican party has long since shed Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" for "*No, midnight! Midnight!*" as Lilla puts it. But what happened to the Democrats? Somewhere along the way, they swapped Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal for the politics of personal identity. Lilla, who is a literature professor at Columbia University, is no conservative. Yet it would be hard to find a better skewering of modern American liberalism than in this slim volume.

In 1961, John F Kennedy famously encouraged Americans to ask: "not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country?" That creed, Lilla says, has been replaced with a new one: "What does my country owe me by virtue of my identity?" Lilla is unlikely to make new friends on the left. But his argument is an important counter-weight to the prevailing wisdom. At some point between the notorious 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and Reagan's victory in 1980, Democrats shed the union hall for the university campus, he argues. Class solidarity gave way to the

politics of self-expression. As an example, Lilla points to the Democratic party's website today, which lists all the groups it is targeting in place of a larger philosophy that would bind people together. It reads more like a tour of Lebanon's fragmented politics, he says. "The line between self-analysis and political action is now fully blurred." Lilla's book is a sizzling polemic. He pleads for a return to the politics of "civic liberalism" — a goal he only hazily defines. Yet something in his tone suggests he thinks "the Facebook model of identity" will keep the upper hand.

What ails American democracy? Is it acute inequality or the collapse of the centre? The answer is not simple. But the two are clearly linked. In her book, Rice warns aspiring democrats that the move to a western system can be terrifying and disruptive. "And what follows is hard," she writes. "Really, really hard." Rice is right about that. Perhaps it should be the topic of her next book.

Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom, by Condoleezza Rice, *Twelve*
RRP\$25, 496 pages

Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It, by Richard Reeves, *Brookings Institution* RRP£19.50, 240 pages

The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics, by Mark Lilla, *Harper* RRP£19.07, 176 pages

Edward Luce is author of 'The Retreat of Western Liberalism' (Little, Brown/Grove Atlantic)

Photograph: Reuters

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