George Washington Memorial Luncheon (Estoril, June 24)

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It is somewhat daunting but also a great honor for me to speak at an event dedicated to celebrating the memory of George Washington, Happily, there is no need to remind you of his biography. Suffice it to say that he was the hero of the Revolutionary War, the chairman of the Constitutional Convention, and the first president of the United States. Washington, of course, does not lack for honors: America's capital, the city in which I live, is named after him, and his portrait is as familiar as the dollar bill. Yet I think the late Seymour Martin Lipset, a past participant in this annual International Meeting on Political Studies, was correct in contending that today George Washington is "an underestimated figure," even though his contribution to the success of the American Republic exceeded that of all the other Founders. In fact, I would urge anyone who doubts his importance for the success of the American experiment to read Lipset's wonderful essay "George Washington and the Founding of Democracy," which is based on a lecture that Lipset presented as part of a series sponsored by the Mario Soares Foundation. You can find it in a book entitled *The Democratic Invention* that Professor Espada and I coedited.

Professor Espada has asked me to focus my remarks on the 25th anniversary of the quarterly publication that I edit, the *Journal of Democracy*. My coeditor Larry Diamond and I launched the *Journal* in January 1990, and ever since, especially at five-year intervals, we have been "taking the temperature" of democracy, analyzing its global advances and setbacks. As we approached our twenty-fifth anniversary issue in January of this year, however, we faced a dilemma. We wanted to celebrate this milestone, but while the *Journal* was thriving, it was hard to say the same about democracy. In fact, the mood among supporters of democracy was downright gloomy. So we decided to confront head-on the question that was being raised in many different quarters: "Is Democracy in Decline?"

The answers our authors gave were by no means monolithic. Both in the *Journal* itself and in a panel discussion linked to its publication, there was a spirited debate about whether the underlying facts justified the widespread gloom. As many of the contributors were social scientists, much of the debate revolved around questions of definition and measurement: Which countries can properly be categorized as democracies? How accurate are the numbers issued by organizations that seek to provide quantitative measurements of democracy's annual progress or regress--if we are to accept the findings of Freedom House, for example, democracy in the world has now declined for nine straight years. This debate, in my view at least, was lively and in many ways illuminating, but it did not really get to the core issue.

In fact, though scholars do have significant differences of opinion about the details of the most recent trends, there remains broad agreement among them about the overall trajectory of democracy during the past four decades. What Samuel P. Huntington labeled the Third Wave of democratization began in the mid-1970s with the Portuguese Revolution and then moved from southern Europe to Latin America. It accelerated at a remarkable pace during 1985-95, a period

that witnessed the peaceful demise both of communism in the Soviet Union and its satellites and of apartheid in South Africa. Then the wave began to slow, and made only modest advances during the following decade, with most measures of the spread of democracy peaking at some time in the early 2000s. Since then, the pattern has been one of stasis or of a very slight decline. This can be interpreted as stagnation or, more optimistically, as the successful conservation of earlier gains. There has certainly been nothing like the "reverse wave" that Huntington discerned in the wake of both the First and the Second World Wars.

So the hard evidence does not justify the conclusion that democracy is retreating. And yet there is a pervasive perception, among democracy's friends as well as its foes, that it is in decline. Why?

One answer is poor governance, especially in newer democracies. People generally expect that the coming of democracy will improve the quality of governance in their countries, and it is not uncommon for them to be disappointed with the results, which may sometimes include feeble economic growth, high crime rates, ineffective service delivery, and the like. They then tend to blame these shortcomings on democracy, which can eventually contribute to its erosion or collapse. The road to stable democracy is often a checkered path, with many detours and even reversals along the way. Most countries that are liberal democracies today have experienced at least one failed attempt at democratization. Yet history has shown that if countries persist in trying to establish democracy on firm foundations, there is a good chance that over time they can achieve this goal. The key question is: Will they remain committed to doing so?

The attractiveness of liberal democracy in the post-Cold War era has rested on its being widely regarded as the global standard of political legitimacy and the best system for attaining economic and social progress. Yet today, there is growing doubt about whether democracy still enjoys this privileged position in the eyes of the world. In my view, there are three principal reasons for this alteration in global opinion: The first is the disappointing political and economic performance in recent years of the advanced democracies. The second is the new self-confidence and apparent vitality of some leading authoritarian countries. And the third reason is the signs of an impending shift in the geopolitical balance between the democracies and their rivals.

The domestic problems of the advanced democracies—meaning primarily Europe and the United States—since the 2008 financial crisis are fairly obvious, and need no extensive elaboration here. These countries not only have been experiencing relatively sluggish economic growth and, in much of Europe, continuing high unemployment. They also have had great difficulty in formulating a coherent and effective political response to these problems. The impression that they are floundering was enhanced by the economic surge of the so-called emerging-market countries, which was peaking at around the time of the financial crisis. The consequence, whether fairly or not, has been to undermine the previously dominant view that Western–style democracy goes hand-in-hand with economic success and political effectiveness.

Alongside the apparent debility of the West, there emerged signs of growing strength, political influence, and assertiveness on the part of the world's leading authoritarian regimes--especially China, but also Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. Despite the very real differences and rivalries among them, these regimes are united in their desire to prevent any infringements on their sovereignty in the name of human rights or democracy. China has provided developing-country governments, especially in Africa, with an alternative source of trade partners and development assistance—aid that is not conditional on the recipients' adherence to standards of human rights or government accountability. It is not hard to see why the so-called China model, combining market-based growth with political repression, appeals to authoritarian rulers in Africa and elsewhere. Meanwhile, rich petro-state authoritarians have been able to buy international political influence—think of what Venezuela has done in Central America and the Caribbean, Russia in Europe and Eurasia, or Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world.

The leading authoritarian states are also directly challenging the democracies in the realm of soft power: They are working to undermine democratic norms in international and regional organizations like the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the OAS, and building new clubs of their own, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It had been widely expected that bringing countries into Western-dominated regional organizations would help to lead them in a democratic direction. It now appears, however, that instead the authoritarians have used their membership in these clubs to subvert their democratic character from within. Perhaps the clearest case in point is the way that Azerbaijan has been able to use its membership in the Council of Europe to maintain its international standing despite its increased repression at home.

Soft power was thought to be the sphere in which the democracies were strongest, but in a whole series of soft-power arenas the authoritarian have been improving their game, while the democracies are inattentive or ineffectual. The authoritarians are sending out bogus international election observers to counteract the findings of more reputable groups; they are massively stepping up their efforts in international broadcasting and propaganda; and they are seeking to turn the Internet from an instrument of liberation into a tool that governments can use for repression. In all these endeavors, the authoritarians are taking great care to learn from one another. And in some cases, they are also directly cooperating with one another, turning themselves into a kind of World Movement against Democracy.

In the past year-and-a-half the authoritarian challenge has extended to the realm of hard power as well. This can be seen in the chaos in the Arab world, the rise of the Islamic State, and the inability of Western powers and global organizations to mount an effective response. Even more worrisome has been Vladimir Putin's invasion and annexation of Crimea and instigation of civil war in Eastern Ukraine, with the Kremlin more or less openly avowing that its goal is to undo the post-Cold War settlement. Meanwhile in Asia, China has been displaying a new aggressiveness in the East and South China Seas. Yet despite these threats and the continuing increases in military spending by the authoritarians, the democracies have been reducing their

defense budgets. The United States and its democratic allies not only are less loved than they used to be; they also are less feared.

As the developments in Ukraine show, geopolitical pressures can make the building of democracy vastly more difficult, even where it has strong popular support. Democracy enjoyed a favorable geopolitical climate for most of the past quarter-century. If that continues to erode, the ability of developing and postcommunist countries to choose and to keep following the democratic path will diminish.

As one indication of the drastic change in the way democracy is regarded today, let me quote from a 1996 essay by the Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia: "The greatest victory of democracy in the modern world is that . . . it has become fashionable. To live under autocracy, or even to be an autocrat, seems backward, uncivilized, distasteful, not quite *comme il faut*—in a word, 'uncool.' In a world where democracy is synonymous less with freedom than with civilization itself, nobody can wait to be 'ready' for democracy." Regrettably, that is not a statement that anyone could plausibly make today, in the era of Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, and Xi Jinping.

So after having been an optimist about democracy's global prospects for almost three decades, I am now pessimistic about its future, at least in the short term. If the authoritarian resurgence accelerates, regimes like those in China and Russia are likely to seem more and more attractive to the many nations and individuals who seek above all to be on the winning side. In such a world, democracy will lose much of its luster. Where it breaks down, there will be less demand to restore it. Neither time nor the tide of history would remain on democracy's side.

This unhappy scenario is far from inevitable. The authoritarians have profound weaknesses of their own. Venezuela has become a basket case, and both Iran and Russia are suffering significant economic difficulties. If oil prices stay low, these three countries are likely to run into serious trouble in the years ahead. Even China, by far the strongest of these powers, faces an uncertain future, as its remarkable economic growth of the past three decades inevitably slows, and its political system must cope with a better-educated and more demanding population.

Moreover, democracy has many things going for it. As is shown by public opinion surveys from every region of the world, it continues to be the form of government that most people prefer. It alone can meet human aspirations for individual liberty and self-government. Democracy has gone through difficult periods before. Anyone who lived through the 1970s—the era of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Arab oil embargoes, and Soviet advances in many parts of the world—will recall how dismal the condition of democracy seemed back then. But democracy historically has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for self-correction. It often takes a crisis to waken it from its complacency or its slumber, but when the crisis comes, the democracies have shown that they can rise to the occasion.

So there is no reason for democrats to despair. But I believe that it is essential for us to face up to the gravity of the current situation and the adverse direction in which global trends are tending. I am afraid that our liberal democratic civilization will be severely tested in the next few years, and it will be up to us to meet the challenge.