

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

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Stephen M. Krason, *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*. Transaction Publishers, 2012. To order visit www.transactionpub.com or call 1-888-999-6778.

American civilization is in the midst of a cultural and political crisis of unprecedented proportions. The crisis is multi-faceted with all its aspects interrelated and mutually shaping. One facet involves the expansion of government, the movement toward statism, and the rise of a gnostic-like class of social engineers.

Another is a radical reconstructionism in the country's constitutional foundations indicative of the spread of subjectivism, a self-centered hyper-individualism, judicial activism, and the replacement of truth with naked power. Another aspect of the crisis is the spread of materialism as the answer to the question of what constitutes the ends of life with the unleashing of sexual constraint as one indicator and with a utilitarian calculus accepted as legitimate means to acquire such ends. There is also the rejection on the part of too many of the concepts of honor, duty, responsibility, hard work, and the idea that the intact family is the basic cell of a successful civilization. And, among yet other considerations, there is the increasing secularization of American society along with the institutionalization of cultural, moral, and religious relativism.

In *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, Stephen M. Krason, the distinguished political scientist from Franciscan University and the President of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, argues that American civilization

has been radically altered from the outlines laid out by the Founding Fathers over two hundred years ago. He traces this transformation through eight historical periods, from 1789 through to the present. They are: 1789-1817, "The Formative Years, the Federalist Party Era, and Jeffersonianism"; 1817-1840, "The Era of Good Feeling and Jacksonian Democracy"; 1840-1877, "Expansion, Sectionalism, the Civil War, and Reconstruction"; 1877-1920, "The Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, and World War I"; 1920-1945, "The 'Roaring Twenties,' the Great Depression, and World War II"; 1945-1960, "Post-World War II America and the Cold War"; 1960-1980, "The Welfare State, Cultural Upheaval, and the Reign and Decline of Liberalism"; and 1980-present, "The Upsurge of Conservatism, Economic Transformation, and Post-Cold War America."

In each stage, Krason addresses two key questions. The first is "to what degree are the principles of the Founding Fathers either maintained or changed?" And the second is "to what degree does the surrounding culture either support or oppose the original vision?"

In large part, the author sees the original political and cultural stance of the Founding as salutary and exceptional. It serves, for Krason, as the baseline for analyzing, both cognitively and normatively, subsequent social change in the civilization. The American democratic republic, as both envisioned and constructed by the Founding Fathers, is one where "the consent of the governed...is at the heart of the American political order, but its force is mitigated by the restraints of representative institutions, the rule of law, and social, cultural, and moral influences." The intent was one in which "the majority's will is not only not abusive...(and)...also that the common good of the political order will be promoted."

A democratic republic can be sustained by certain 1) institutional arrangements, 2) democratic principles and practices, and 3) social conditions. Examples of the first are

to be found in a system featuring a separation of powers, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and federalism. Examples of the second are popular sovereignty, a limitation of the franchise to those who demonstrate some permanent attachment to the nation, ordered liberty, political liberty, respect for private property, and the guarantee of various political and legal rights in the areas of speech, the press, religion, assembly, trial by jury, among others. Examples of the third include a vital presence of religion, education, family life, morality, respect for the law, respect for meritocratic achievement, and a general economic condition of at least moderate prosperity with a middle-class base.

Overall, regarding his evaluation of the Founding period of the American democratic republic, Krason concludes that "it is difficult to say that its principles and ideas for the structuring of a free government were anything but magnificent and had reverberating effects for the entire world over time. It is also difficult to say that the convictions and practices of its culture were, on balance, anything but exemplary in matters of social morality, community, and personal and interpersonal norms."

However, the author by no means views the original vision and reality of the Republic as flawless. Krason is "aware of the shortcomings of that era and like any period and place in human history, it had them, and one of the most evident ones was the existence of slavery." Furthermore, he notes some limitations of the Founding Protestant and Enlightenment vision that contributed to unfavorable political and cultural changes further down the path of American history. Included as a secondary concern in the author's analysis is that the Founding Protestant and Enlightenment influences could profitably incorporate certain features and emphases of the Catholic heritage as correctives.

One would be a philosophically articulate natural law based public philosophy to support the maintenance of the original

American political-institutional arrangements that together comprise the American democratic republic. Another involves a more positive, as compared to constraining, vision of government as an agent to promote the common good. A third entails a more spiritual and less commercial understanding as ultimately definitive of the American experiment. A fourth, following the principle of subsidiarity, would be a greater attention to the development of intermediary institutions in the civil sphere as a check to developments in the American polity. A fifth would involve some provision for an informal consideration of the corpus of Catholic magisterial thought; it doesn't surprise Krason that, given this absence, a secularized Supreme Court would emerge as the ultimate arbiter of social morality in America.

Krason's analysis admits of changes in each era, both positive and deleterious. The engines for that change include, among others, "political, constitutional, and legal developments; economic and technological developments; the role of government and relations among the three branches of the federal government and between the federal government and the states; popular movements; socio-cultural (including religious) developments; demographic developments and relations among social groups; war, foreign affairs, and territorial expansion ; and philosophical perspectives and currents in socio-political thought."

Basically he argues that the most significant transformation away from the basically positive vision of the Founding Era occurred during the periods of 1817-1840; 1877-1920; 1920-1945, and, especially during the 1960s-1970s. A not insignificant (but woefully inadequate) sliver of the author's overall and impressive argument is that Jacksonian democracy eventually weakened the republican character of America with the latter's focus on a "natural aristocracy" promoting societal welfare. This was followed by the corruption and excesses of democracy fueled by a philosophy of materialism

and scientism which arose during the Progressive Era. This, in turn, set the stage for a decisive change in American society starting in the 1930s but sharply accelerating in the 1960s with the growth of a central administrative state.

The contemporary period, in many respects, for the author, has institutionalized even further the degenerative movements of the 1960s-1970s while at the same time evincing signs of an attempt to reverse the historical damage inflicted upon the democratic republic. One nascent indication of the latter, for the author, is the contemporary Tea Party movement, which bears watching regarding its long-term development and impact. Krason is aware that the degeneration of American political and cultural life took many decades to develop and, as such, any solutions are necessarily partial and equally as long term.

For Krason, these piecemeal but very doable solutions involve the strengthening of individual character and moral development with a greater involvement of an educated citizenry into the affairs of everyday political, civil, and religious life. Krason understands well that a healthy civilization requires a citizenry capable of making prudent and courageous decisions aimed at the common good. A just and well-functioning political system presupposes a healthy culture that undergirds it.

Krason admits that "the evidence mustered and the argument made is clear and troubling and all concerned about the American Founding, Our Constitution, and the future course of our political life should examine and ponder it." However, he concludes with the conviction that "it is not inevitable that it remain in its current condition and that the possibility of restoration is foreclosed." The recently emerged Tea Party is but one example of what sociologists would call a "revitalization movement" trying to right the American ship. The question remains as to whether this and other possible attempts are "too little and too late" for the civilization to

escape a “fall and decline” scenario and whether the citizenry still has enough moral and cultural character to sufficiently reform the civilization and, perhaps even further, redress any foundational deficiencies.

In *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, Krason demonstrates a masterly command of the facts of American history and of many complementary academic disciplines used to interpret that empirical reality. Like the good Catholic and natural law scholar that he is, his approach is synthetic and integrative, including, and alternating between, both normative and cognitive analysis. While the volume is thoroughly interspersed with his prudential judgments, the author doesn't confuse his own value orientation or interpretation with historical reality; Krason is a scholar not an ideologue. His accounting of American history is presented as objectively as humanly possible and the educated reader can easily disentangle interpretation from the mere facts of the matter.

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