

Resisting the Authoritarian Impulse

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The old distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is as pertinent today as when Jeanne Kirkpatrick first drew it in a [now-famous essay](#) more than four decades ago. We can see its relevance in Sen. Bernie Sanders' suspension of his presidential campaign and, at a deeper level, in an internal roiling struggle between both camps for the soul of America.

The essay's most salient point today is that authoritarians accept the pre-existing status quo, in fact often exist to bolster it by force, while totalitarians seek force to burn everything down and recreate society entirely. Kirkpatrick, a little-known academic when she wrote the essay in 1979, caught candidate Ronald Reagan's eye with it and was propelled into his administration.

She was writing about foreign policy, and the main theater today is domestic. They are related, though, as we can see with Sanders.

History will record that praise of Fidel Castro marked the peak of his candidacy. From there on, he slid against his main rival, former Vice President Joe Biden, first slowly, then precipitously.

According to the [RealClearPolitics poll of polls](#), Sen. Sanders led former Vice President Joe Biden by a dozen points and had just won the popular vote in every primary he had faced on Feb. 24, the fateful day he began his pro-Castro self-demolition derby. He suspended his campaign on April 8.

Though Sanders conceded that Castro may be "authoritarian," he praised his literacy campaigns. Many critics indicated that they were just a way to disseminate propaganda. Few, however, pointed that the Cuban dictator very much belongs to the totalitarian camp.

Some progressives are tempted by totalitarians, just as some conservatives are by authoritarians. The reason is simple.

The [Foundation for Economic Education](#) shares the Cato Institute's Arnold Kling's famed "Three-Axis Model," which postulates that progressives see the world in terms of "Oppressor vs. Oppressed," conservatives as a crusade between "Civilization vs. Barbarism," and libertarians as "Liberty vs. Coercion."

Therein lies the issue. Kling himself, in his 2017 book [The Three Languages of Politics](#), uses Castro as the standard, writing: "for example, a progressive might readily concede that Fidel Castro committed oppression, but the progressive might be more reluctant to view Castro as belonging to the category or class of oppressors. On the contrary, some progressives would say that Castro took the side of the oppressed against the oppressors."

And there you have it. But even more important than the news-making event is something happening behind the scenes.

Though totalitarian states have withered down in numbers to the five remaining communist regimes (China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam) and a few other outliers, the battle between authoritarianism and totalitarianism is still raging, though now inside the democracies.

There has been a surge in recent years in interest in completely overhauling the status quo and instituting central planning in the U.S. The popularity of the Marxist magazine Jacobin, and Sanders's own campaign, are two examples. Another is identity politics, whose totalitarian thought-control proclivities are expressed in the language of political correctness and the campaign against "hate speech."

As Kirkpatrick wrote, in seeking to reform society in the light of the "abstract idea of social justice or political virtue," totalitarians "claim jurisdiction over the whole life of the society and make demands for change."

But we have also have home-grown authoritarians. There has been increased interest in positively using the coercive power of government to do the opposite: restore the status quo-ante or a romanticized perception of the past.

The Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule has attracted a great deal of attention with an essay in the Atlantic in which he enunciated the rules of "common-good constitutionalism," which he said should replace among conservatives the "originalism" they have championed for decades.

Shattering the principles of limited government, and flouting the view that individuals are the best judges of their own interests -- both so dear to American conservatives -- Vermeule writes that this new constitutionalism "should be based on the principles that government helps direct persons, associations, and society generally toward the common good, and that strong rule in the interest of attaining the common good is entirely legitimate."

Vermeule finds much to like in authority and hierarchy. His principles "include respect for the authority of rule and of rulers; respect for the hierarchies needed for society to function... authority and hierarchy are also principles of constitutionalism."

All of it would have been familiar to Kirkpatrick. In discussing Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza and the Shah of Iran, two authoritarians the Carter administration abandoned in the late 1970s, she observed that "the blend of qualities that bound the Iranian army to the Shah or the national guard to Somoza is typical of the relationships-personal, hierarchical, non-transferable--that, support a traditional autocracy."

Vermeule has encountered a great deal of backlash from conservatives who, rightly, want government to get out of the way. Virtue implies freedom to choose; it cannot be coerced. My colleague Thomas Jipping writes that Vermeule would "radically transform the power and purpose of government."

America is neither Nicaragua nor Iran, so here we need neither of Kirkpatrick's well-observed foreign options. Americans can, and should, defeat identity politics and socialism without recourse to home-grown authoritarianism.