



Book Review: Adam Brandon's 'A Republic, Not a Democracy'

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In their 2020 biography of James A. Baker, *The Man Who Ran Washington*, Peter Baker and Susan Glasser predictably spent a lot of time on the individual Baker most famously served: Ronald Reagan. Somewhat surprisingly, but also happily, they weren't adversarial.

Their reporting on a man they clearly admire in Baker seemingly made them more willing to understand Reagan. In particular, they're clear that while Reagan had a vision for limiting government, doing so "proved harder than Reagan's team had imagined – every program they wanted to cut had a constituency, it seemed, often including fellow Republicans." They didn't blame Reagan; rather they blamed *the system* itself that proved insurmountable. Government that's limited in scope is incredibly difficult to achieve given the basic truth that nearly every politician, regardless of ideology, supports growing at least one aspect of government. That being broadly true, votes are ultimately going to be traded so that everyone's satisfied.

The challenges Reagan faced came to mind while reading Adam Brandon's excellent new book, *A Republic, Not a Democracy: How to Restore Sanity In America*. Full disclosure: Brandon is

president of FreedomWorks, where I'm a vice president. And as anyone who has read my books knows from the acknowledgements, I think the world of Brandon. I think him the best organization head in Washington. Readers can take this a lot or little into account while reading the review.

With disclosures out of the way, we can now pivot to Brandon's well-developed understanding of the political mind. The latter explains why he's so effective in his day job. About this, Brandon's understanding of the *political mind* is a function of his understanding of *economics*. He understands that all economics is *microeconomics*, at which point he recognizes that incentives drive political action in much the same way that they drive commercial activity.

With incentives top of mind, he repeats with needed regularity how it's not enough for the politically focused to watch Fox News, or Newsmax where he hosts a show called *Save the Nation*, and just the same it's not enough to vote. Brandon calls for individual action. He explains to readers that "Every senator has multiple offices spread across his or her state," after which "Every congressmen has at least one office in his or her congressional district." Brandon calls for those who want true change to live up to their expressed desires by visiting those offices. He argues that "we have to make politicians fear our voice." Why is that? "Because first and foremost, they [politicians] care about how their actions might affect their chance at re-election."

All of which explains why Brandon heads a "grass roots" organization. Since politicians are most interested in "how their actions might affect their chance at re-election," his efforts at FreedomWorks are directed at educating and energizing FreedomWorks' millions of activists around the country whom the organization mobilizes in order to affect change. In other words, Brandon's vision for more limited government is rooted in the belief that the latter is only possible insofar as the politically interested across the country are motivated, and willing to make calls, put on events, knock on doors, and yes, visit the offices of politicians. Brandon aims to change the way Washington

works by changing the minds of voters. Politicians listen to voters far more attentively than they do to reason.

Brandon believes the Left in America are successful by virtue of “being involved.” In that case, he wants to energize the majority slice of the electorate possessing the potential to be involved in support of a more limited national government. In his words, “to meet our goals, we need to be talking to 55 percent of the country.” Why 55%? He sees 40 percent of the electorate as part of the “choir,” and while he’s in no way dismissive of the choir, he believes “I need to be talking to at least another 15 percent more routinely to build a community large enough to meet our legislative goals.”

Some may be asking where the Left fits into Brandon’s strategic view. He doesn’t dismiss working with what some may deem the other side, he’s of the view that there “are opportunities to work with the Left,” and if anyone doubts his sincerity, they need only look up the passage of the First Step Act; one that FreedomWorks played a substantial role in passing, and that also enjoyed major support from the Left. This essential Act helped remove all manner of non-violent drug offenders from prison. So yes, there is a chance to work with the other side, but Brandon is first and foremost an economic thinker. Since he is, the economics of spending precious time on a Left that generally doesn’t agree probably doesn’t make a lot of sense.

All of which brings us back to what Reagan was up against when he entered the White House in 1981, and realistically California’s Governor’s mansion in 1967. Brandon quotes Reagan toward book’s end as telling *Reason Magazine* in 1975 that a small libertarianism would be what best defined and informed the actions of a freedom movement that he was increasingly expected to lead. Still, it wasn’t enough that Reagan was clearly right about the freedom and economy enhancing genius of smaller government. He also needed voters to understand *why* he was right.

Consider why this is true in a more expansive light. Politicians aren't just looking out for themselves. They also, in Brandon's words, have "had a dozen chiefs of staff and even more communications directors" while serving. "The next thing you know, you have thirty to forty people with incredibly well-paid jobs who pay for their mortgages and their kids' colleges based on the favors and influence they have through the senator or congressman they used to work for." And then there are family members who oh-so-coincidentally are told *sotto voce* that they'll be "put on some prominent board with a \$100,000 salary" if the senator or congressman votes the right way. Brandon provides clarity for readers looking to understand why politicians enter Washington promising reduced spending and reform, only to be deformed by the very political culture they promise to bring to its knees. He also vivifies what Jim Baker's biographers did about Reagan's ultimately incomplete efforts to truly shrink government while in office.

Figure that most politicians probably get to varying degrees the obvious good that comes from government doing and spending less, but they'll only vote what they understand if their voters similarly see the world in the way that they do. Convince the 55 percent within what Brandon refers to as a "center right nation," and you get at least some of the legislative change desired. If not, there's lots of rhetoric with little to show for it.

None of what's been written should be construed as a dismissal of Reagan. Brandon is clearly of the view that Reagan was rather heroic, at which point it should be made clear that his views are not rooted in partisanship. As he rightly makes plain in Chapter Seven, George W. Bush was a disaster. In Brandon's correct words, "Most Republicans won't admit this, but George W. Bush made Barack Obama possible." Amen to that. Until Republicans fully come to terms with the abject failure of Bush's presidency they'll never understand what happened after; the after being Obama, and if we're being realistic, Donald Trump. Indeed, the corollary I'd add to Brandon's correct assertion about Bush giving us Obama is that in many ways he gave us Trump too. Some Republicans would cheer the latter, some would scoff, some would be saddened, but it's useful to contemplate Bush's coattails beyond the man who followed him. To be clear, this isn't a knock on Trump. Better yet, there's

arguably a *libertarian* argument for Trump. Whatever the answer, a presidency that gave us Obama arguably frustrated an electorate enough for it to eventually go for an outsider altogether.

Brandon clarifies in the acknowledgements section of the *A Republic* that the suddenness of the coronavirus lockdowns led to “many late nights, revisions, and rewriting of chapters.” No doubt what took place surely altered all manner of books being written in 2020, and in profound ways.

This is useful to bring up simply because in Chapter Two Brandon writes that “If we lose our commitment to liberty,” there “are no guideposts for us going forward.” That’s certainly true, and in the spirit of bipartisanship it raises a question that it would be interesting to hear Brandon opine on at length. In particular, did Donald Trump blow it in ways not yet addressed back in March of 2020 when he embraced the lockdowns? To clarify the question, let’s imagine for a moment if Trump truly acts like Trump; as in what if Trump gives a national address in March of 2020 with lines like:

“No great nation remains great by destroying businesses and jobs. And certainly no diseases or viruses have ever been beaten by economic decline. So mark my words that if any LOSER Governors in any of our 50 states lock down, those Governors will soon have a regular visitor with a big, beautiful 747 widebody to deal with: me.”

This is asked with the U.S.’s commitment to liberty in mind. Did a little or a lot of the non-U.S. world die inside in 2020, and did the world become a much less free place precisely because the American people so readily gave up their liberty to politicians of all stripes (lest we forget, Florida and Texas did lock down; albeit relatively briefly) who were rather willing to take it. Looking at this through the counterfactual utterance mentioned above, what if Trump doesn’t panic? Just imagine the cover he gives GOP governors to avoid what made no sense (sorry, but the virus knows no ideology, and spreads without regard to political force), and imagine the cover given to the rest of the world to avoid economy and freedom crushing errors that in no way succeeded in containing a

pathogen that was going to run its course regardless. It's interesting to contemplate. Brandon is so right about the importance of an American commitment to liberty, and what it means well beyond the United States.

Sure enough, he addresses just this point a few chapters later when he writes that "I used to think I joined this fight to do it for the United States, but it has since dawned on me that I'm actually doing it for Western civilization." This clarification is important. It's not just that American economic activity very much informs how well fed and clothed the rest of the world is (never has this been made more abundantly clear than during the tragic lockdowns), it's also true that the rest of the world is a much less free place the more that Americans forfeit it here. All of this is a long way of wondering what Brandon thinks about how Trump comported himself in March of 2020. The conclusion from your reviewer is that Trump didn't just err politically (Trump is still president if doesn't support the lockdowns), but that his panicked embrace of the taking of freedom had global reverberations that are nowhere near over.

Are there disagreements? On occasion. The view here is that the Bush administration's dollar devaluation policies were the source of the economy-sapping housing boom in the 2000s, as opposed to the Federal Reserve's overstated ability to influence the cost of borrowing. And just as the Fed couldn't decree credit "easy" in the early 21st century, it also couldn't make credit "tight" through Paul Volcker in the 1980s. The only closed economy is the world economy, at which point the Fed can't suffocate good ideas with rate machinations any more than it can enable bad ones with rate machinations in the other direction.

On p. 41 Brandon writes with concern that "49 percent of Americans between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three (Generation Z) have a favorable view of socialism." My take is that particularly with young people on the Left, watch what they do, not what they say. Though they claim to embrace all sorts of tragic ideologies like socialism, they tend to work in the most ruthlessly capitalistic of all

industries: films, finance and technology. The speculation here is that in rich countries, and the U.S. is staggeringly rich, there's lots of room to act stupid and say stupid things. Brandon ultimately seems to agree. Late in *A Republic* he cites a Rasmussen poll indicating that "fully 80 percent of those who like socialism also like free markets." Yes! Americans descend from the most freedom-loving people the world has ever known. They descend from those who crossed oceans and borders to taste it. They're not about to go socialist.

Which brings us to the most important part of a very important book: the opening chapter. In it, Brandon writes at length about what all-too-many on the Left and Right have forgotten over the years, which is that the Founders were major skeptics of the majoritarianism that is democracy. As the title of his book makes plain, we're *A Republic, Not a Democracy*. Democracy is useful when it comes to removing a leader who is unhinged. We have a vote for that, after which the U.S. is a *republic* with checks and balances. Per Brandon, the mob is not meant to rule, but as evidenced by all the emotion and money that goes into national elections, Americans increasingly act as though we're a democracy. This is dangerous, which is why Brandon's book is so important. He's clear that tyranny is what follows pure democracy, and that we can't become a democracy. The goal among true lovers of freedom should be to shrink national government in such a way that people – per Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane – start going to bed early on election night.

To the above sentence, Brandon would surely nod his head. *A Republic* is very much a libertarian document, or as he puts it, "I'm me. You're you." It's also a summons for optimism. Which is crucial.

Brandon quotes the late Andrew Breitbart as saying that "If you can't sell freedom and liberty, you suck." *Absolutely*. Anyone truly arguing for freedom (as Brandon is) must be an optimist simply because the freedom argument so easily beats the authoritarian one, plus the freedom path is

logically optimistic simply because anyone who truly understands it knows the personal and economic abundance that flows to those who are free.

Indeed, freedom by its very name is brilliant for the individual. Which means it's brilliant for the world. Read Adam Brandon's excellent book to see why all of this is true, and how to better make a case for what never fails us.