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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Nick — In line 105, you do mean the U.S. Constitution and not the Declaration of Independence, right? The former has the preamble that you've quoted. I've cautiously changed it but trust you'll educate me if I've gotten it wrong here. Thanks so much. —Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 Consent of the governed

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

2 The democratic ideal of the Constitution and the elite-
3 centered promise of its preamble — to establish justice and
4 promote the general welfare — have very often clashed and have
5 nearly torn asunder

#####END SUBHED#####

6 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

7 A SMALL GROUP of billionaires, headed by Donald Trump,
8 have captured the federal government. Their authoritarian,
9 hyperpartisan actions make a mockery of democracy. They are

10 breaking the American social contract, which, ironically, is itself
11 an anti-democratic bargain.

12 The United States was founded by rich, white men, the
13 most important of whom — Washington, Jefferson, Madison —
14 were slave owners.

15 Democracy has been a struggle from the founding days
16 of the United States to now. It started as the Boston Tea Company,
17 a rebellion designed by a very rich colonist, Sam Adams, to
18 disrupt the corporate monopoly of the East India Company.

19 England's reaction was to house and quarter British
20 soldiers throughout Boston, an occupation not unlike that which
21 is occurring today in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Los
22 Angeles. Adams and his confrère in the Committees of
23 Correspondence — a network of organizations resisting the
24 monarchy — conspired to incite a war of independence.

25 To that end, they formed the Continental Congress, made
26 up of more rich, white men looking to craft a new future.

27 I'm glad they did so. To this day, I'm proud to be a
28 citizen of the United States.

29 The struggle for democracy, however, is never-ending.

30 * * *

31 THE WELL-EDUCATED ELITES who convened in Boston to
32 craft the Declaration of Independence understood well that they
33 were inciting English colonists from agricultural, artisan, and
34 merchant classes to shed their connection to king and country.
35 They didn't have money to offer. In what was for sure a
36 revolutionary time born of Enlightenment theory, they offered
37 ideals.

38 "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are
39 created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with
40 certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and
41 the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights,
42 Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just
43 powers from the consent of the governed[.]"

44 There is much to love in that small passage, but often the
45 least recognized and perhaps most important phrase is the last —
46 “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just
47 powers from the consent of the governed.” That sounded to most
48 colonists like democracy, and it was enough to galvanize the
49 colonial working classes to war against the mother country and
50 its monarchy.

51 Five years after its proclamation, the 13 states won
52 independence, and a new nation began. At that point, the real
53 meaning of the phrase “deriving their just powers from the
54 Consent of the Governed” became contested.

55 * * *

56 WHILE middle- and working-class colonists fought the
57 Revolutionary War to create democracy, bankers, plantation
58 owners and rich merchants saw it otherwise.

59 A democratic government ruled by the majority of
60 citizens opened the possibility for an equalitarian distribution of
61 taxes and debt. Surely, if given the opportunity, the working and
62 middle classes would vote to place a heavier burden of taxes and
63 debt on the wealthy than on them.

64 When that scenario started to occur in Rhode Island and
65 Massachusetts in 1786, the wealthy delegates of the former
66 Continental Congress conspired to meet again.

67 Gov. Edmund Randolph of Virginia opened the closed-
68 door proceedings to what is now called the Constitutional
69 Convention on May 25, 1787. His judgment was that “our chief
70 danger arises from the democratic parts” of government. In public
71 comments made immediately after the Constitutional
72 Convention, Randolph reiterated:

73 “The general object was to produce a cure for the evils
74 under which the United States labored; that in tracing these evils
75 to their origins, every man had found it in the turbulence and
76 follies of democracy.”

77 Nevertheless, Convention delegates recognized two
78 points. The first was that the majority of citizens and

79 Revolutionary war veterans were certain to react strongly against
80 the Constitution because of the strictures against democracy
81 baked into it. Secondly, delegates had agreed that nine of the 13
82 state legislatures would have to ratify the document for it to
83 become the law of the land.

84 To address these obstacles, the Constitution's delegates
85 offered a new promise to the American people — one quite
86 different from the promise made in the Declaration of
87 Independence. It comes in the preamble:

88 "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a
89 more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility,
90 provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare,
91 and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,
92 do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of
93 America."

94 This is a mouthful and a heady set of ideals to live up to,
95 which was the point. The founders, as they are called, wished to
96 garner the consent of the governed — not democratically, but
97 instead with this promise.

98 The preamble is America's social contract. If "We the
99 People" (e.g., middle and working classes) live peaceably within
100 the laws written by upper-class representatives, they, in turn,
101 promise to enact a unified nation with justice and liberty for all.
102 Think Pledge of Allegiance.

103 Much hinges upon virtue. Of course, as they say, the
104 devil is in the details.

105 The democratic ideal of the U.S. Constitution and the
106 elite-centered promise of its preamble — to establish justice and
107 promote the general welfare — have very often clashed and have
108 nearly torn asunder.

109 The closest the nation came to that outcome was the
110 Civil War, which, at its end, after the Emancipation Proclamation
111 and the Battle of Gettysburg, culminated in the biggest
112 commitment to democracy ever taken in our history when
113 President Abraham Lincoln declared in his Gettysburg Address:

114 "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task
115 remaining before us [...] that this nation, under God, shall have a
116 new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by
117 the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

118 * * *

119 AND THAT, my friends, is what we are doing today:
120 seeking that government of the people, by the people, for the
121 people, shall not perish from the Earth.

122 The brazen behaviors of the current regime — such as
123 kidnapping American citizens in our streets, denying food and
124 medical care to many millions, and speeding climate crisis into
125 ecocide — constitute a complete rupture of the social contract.

126 There is no virtue in this government.

127 Only a renewed commitment of the People to the ideals
128 that inspired the Revolution can turn back the forces of
129 destruction in front of us.

#####END TEXT#####

BIO/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

130 **NICK BIDDLE** is a retired professor of Latin American
131 history who lives in Brattleboro and works with nonprofits in
132 Vermont and Ecuador. He and Tim Kipp, a retired Brattleboro
133 Union High School social studies teacher, will present a
134 discussion, "How Did We Get Here? Democracy in Peril," on
135 Thursday, Dec. 4, at 6 p.m. at 118 Elliot Gallery.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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