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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**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####

Consent of the governed

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

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

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

A SMALL GROUP of billionaires, headed by Donald Trump, have captured the federal government. Their authoritarian, 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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