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CLASSMATES WRITE....

From Don Morrison

Two hundred forty-seven years ago next month, at a rude bridge in Concord, Mass., embattled farmers fired what Ralph Waldo Emerson immortalized in verse as "the shot heard round the world." The result wasn't just American independence. But also a democratic model that captured the world's imagination.

That model eventually produced our current so-called liberal world order – the rules-based, U.S.-led system of international treaties and institutions that emphasizes democracy and open markets as a path to global stability. Worked pretty well for the past 75 years or so.

Lately, the liberal world order seems to be wobbling, or at least its democratic underpinnings. V-Dem, a Swedish research group, says the number of truly democratic countries peaked a decade ago at 42. It's now down to 34. V-Dem also finds that 70% of the world, or 5.4 billion people, are living in non-democratic states, up from 49% in 2011. Authoritarian regimes are on the march.

Like the one that's now marching through Ukraine, threatening to wipe that democratic country from the map. Russia, along with many dictatorships, does have elections, but they're run by a self-perpetuating cabal of kleptocrats. That model is spreading throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Some of these regimes are military dictatorships, others are the fiefdoms of charismatic leaders who exploit ethnic resentments and xenophobia, a few are the result of rigged elections. They all share a disdain for actual democracy and, in most cases, for global cooperation, human rights, press freedom and the rule of law.

Even in Europe, democracies are under siege from extremist, xenophobic political parties, mostly on the right, that would prefer a more top-down system – with them on top. We've got folks like that in U.S. They're still trying to overturn the 2020 election. A recent Pew Research poll found that 72% of Americans no longer think our democracy is an example for other countries.

Which raises an interesting question: Who are we to lecture the world about forms of government?

Turns out we don't have to: Ukrainians are doing it for us. By putting their lives on the line in defense of democracy, they've captured the world's imagination. Other democracies are coming to their aid, and the entire democratic West has found unaccustomed unity because of Ukraine. The liberal world order seems to be rising from the dead.

That's not because the U.S. itself has been such an inspiring success lately. We've had problems with race, inequality, extremism, violence, partisan division, disastrous overseas adventures.

No, our present moment of cohesion came because the idea of democracy remains powerful. People all over the world, when given a chance, choose that path – as they did in Ukraine in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, and again in 2014 to oust an authoritarian president. Also, as in Ukraine, people are willing to die for democracy.

That poignant reminder has certainly been noticed in the U.S. Our country may not have invented democracy (credit the ancient Greeks, though some neolithic societies got there first), but it implanted democracy's desirability in the minds of the modern world. Now, after years of partisan division, the U.S. seems to be coming together on a consensus that fellow democracies must be supported, and dictators confronted.

Leading Republicans have begun jettisoning their party's recent enthusiasm for Russia and joining Democrats on the need to support Ukraine. A new Decision Desk HQ poll found that 83% of Americans have an unfavorable view of Russia's Vladimir Putin, 70% support sanctions against Russia and 73% favor sending U.S. weapons to help Ukraine – numbers up sharply from earlier polls.

Some commentators see vast shifts in the tectonic plates underlying American politics and, indeed, the entire postwar world. I see something else.

Yuval Noah Harari, the Israeli historian and best-selling author of "Sapiens," explained what's happening in Ukraine in a recent essay for The Guardian: "The president who refused to flee the capital...; the soldiers from Snake Island who told a Russian warship to go f___ yourself; the civilians who tried to stop Russian tanks by sitting in their path. This is the stuff nations are built on. Stories count more than tanks."

American democracy has a good story to tell. It begins at a rude bridge in Concord, Mass. It winds through setbacks and triumphs, mistakes, and the courage to correct them. The story is not over.

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