

Why I'm Not Giving Up on American Democracy

By Kati Marton, *The New York Times*, November 30th, 2024

In his dank Budapest prison cell in the mid-1950s, my father imagined he heard Dvorak's "New World" Symphony. Though no one in my family had ever set foot in the actual New World, just knowing it existed brought my father solace during his nearly two-year incarceration. Locked up in Soviet-occupied Hungary's notorious Fo Street fortress, my father
5 was blessedly still unaware that his wife occupied a nearby cell. Their crime was reporting on the show trials and jailing of priests, nuns and dissidents that Stalinist satellites of the postwar era used to clamp down on dissent.

My parents would find it bitterly disappointing that American conservatives, including Donald Trump, have come to admire their small European homeland, with its habit of
10 choosing the wrong side of history, and even to see it as a role model. Prime Minister Viktor Orban has branded Hungary an "illiberal democracy" as he systematically rolls back hard-won freedoms.

In 2002, defeated at the polls after a single term as prime minister, Mr. Orban made sure that he would not be defeated again. Re-elected in 2010, he proceeded to weaken much of
15 Hungary's nascent civil society — its independent judiciary and its independent media. In this way, he began turning the country into a one-party state.

Mr. Trump has evidently been impressed by Mr. Orban's skill at eroding democratic norms and ridding himself of pesky political opponents. Beyond showering praise on him, Mr. Trump has already ripped pages from Mr. Orban's playbook: threatening to revoke the broadcast
20 licenses of news channels he derides as "fake," striving to bypass the Senate's confirmation process and appointing lackeys to high positions. Expect much more along lines that Mr. Orban has followed as he's turned Hungary from a fledgling democracy into one of the world's new authoritarian regimes. Even as American journalists debate whether to take Mr. Trump seriously or literally, I recall Voltaire's warning, "He who can persuade you to believe
25 absurdities can persuade you to commit atrocities."

Neither individuals nor nations escape history for long, and with Mr. Trump's election, history threatens to barge into our American democratic sanctuary with a vengeance.

As much as I miss my parents, these days I am almost relieved that they are not alive to see the current version of the country they considered the greatest on earth, the United
30 States. They would now barely recognize it.

Even though they were victims of the two worst experiments on humankind, Nazism and Communism, my parents did rebuild again, here in the New World.

I recall that America.

In Cold War Budapest, the first American I ever met brought me and my sister unheard-of
35 luxuries: oranges and American-style T-shirts in our foster home. He was Washington's envoy, the face of America, the decent.

Today, I do not contemplate leaving the New World, which allowed us to restart our lives several decades ago. As my parents' daughter, I will not flee into the silence of internal exile, but hold tight to my first glimpse of America: an offering of oranges for a little girl
40 temporarily orphaned by an indecent state.