

## NEEDED REFORMS IN THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

As a historian, what is discouraging to me is the level of ignorance of history that passes as knowledge in current American politics. Does ignorance count for anything when Americans go to the polls and choose their leaders?

When a person goes through the process of applying for naturalization, to become a citizen of the United States, they must pass a test on American history and government. It is not an easy test. Given the state of current political ignorance, should there be a law to require every candidate for Congress, for president and vice president, and for cabinet appointments and ambassadorships, to take and pass a test at least as rigorous as the test our government requires for any immigrant who wishes to become an American citizen? And the scores and incorrect answers of political candidates who take the test should be public knowledge.

Most of the Founders of the United States would likely be amazed that the United States government they created has lasted over two centuries. Thomas Jefferson felt that, to keep a democracy, a revolution should occur about every twenty years or so. When Benjamin Franklin was asked what kind of government the Constitutional Convention had devised, he famously answered: "A Republic, if you can keep it."

Have we gotten to the point nowadays when it may look like we cannot keep it? As Yale history professor Paul Kennedy wrote, in his book "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers," it seems that any government which attempts to establish itself as an empire inevitably totters to collapse. Most regimes are short, but the few that are more powerful last no more than about 200 to 250 years. Let's see, 2024 minus 1789 equals 235 years. Are we right on schedule, in the road to destruction?

The biggest exception to the length of "Great Powers" is the Roman Empire. Romans divided into sharp factions, had uprisings, insurrections, and civil wars galore, but the Roman Empire lasted almost a thousand years. What was the secret of their longevity? It may have been the fact that an emperor who screwed up was usually stabbed to death by his political enemies. From Julius Caesar onward, most Roman emperors did not live very long.

The US Constitution includes a less messy way to get rid of incompetent presidents: impeachment. The problem is that the impeachment process takes so long that by the time it is enacted the term of the offending president is almost over. That is what saved Andrew Johnson in 1868. He should have been gotten rid of as soon as he pardoned Confederate leaders and undercut Reconstruction of the South by vetoing the civil rights acts passed by Congress.

When Confederate delegates wrote a new constitution for their new government in February 1861, they mostly copied the US Constitution. But the most significant difference is that they changed the term of Confederate presidents to a single term, for a maximum of six years, with no possibility of reelection afterwards. Given how much time a first-term president now spends on trying to get re-elected, that is really not a bad idea.

If we had a one-term presidency, there would have been no Iran-Contra scandal, and no Watergate, to give just two examples.

If critics want term limits to apply for every member of Congress, why not also the presidency? One term of no more than five or six years, and no possibility of re-election, combined with an expedited impeachment process (for members of Congress as well as presidents).

All nominees for federal judgeships and Supreme Court justices should be nominated by a bipartisan establishment like the American Bar Association, and then elected from the list of nominees by both houses of Congress. The president should have nothing to do with choosing the judicial branch.

Along with these reforms, there should also be a better way to choose who the vice president will be, besides just the personal choice of each party's nominee for president. The president has too much power, including his (since we have no female presidents to date) choosing of vice presidents, cabinet members, federal judges, and justices of the Supreme Court.

Here are some ideas to consider: The vice president of the United States should be chosen at the beginning of each year's first session of Congress, for the term of one year, by a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress. The only candidates for the vice presidency must be either a current or former elected member of Congress, and their duties will be to attend all cabinet meetings, presidential meetings with the leaders of other nations, and all high-level executive meetings, primarily to listen and be aware of all matters of government, so that if a president dies or is removed from office, the vice president will be aware of all aspects of public policy. If a vice president is a current member of Congress, they may either resign their seat or appoint a trusted assistant to oversee their duties for the single year. If a vice president assumes the office of the presidency, there will be a special election for another president within a year.

These reforms will reduce the power of the imperial presidency, and lead to a more democratic nation.