

After the Fall

What's in it for me? Discover how post-Cold War America contributed to a rise in authoritarianism around the world.

At the end of the 1980s, it really looked like things were going well for democracy. People were dancing in the streets as the Berlin Wall was torn down, the Soviet empire was collapsing like a house of cards, and Eastern Europe was being liberated. For a moment, it seemed like the US, and much of the world, was moving in a democratic direction. But then that moment passed, and in the 1990s the US was left to face what it really had to offer. Political corruption. Economic inequality. These would be the exports that would come back to haunt America in the decades to come as nationalism and authoritarianism began to rise around the world. In these blinks, you'll learn

the most common steps in the authoritarian playbook; how the US War on Terror encouraged authoritarian regimes abroad; and how American technology helped fuel Chinese oppression.

America's standing took a dive in the post-Cold War era.

People growing up in the US in the 1980s could easily fall victim to a certain narrative about American exceptionalism. Popular movies like *Top Gun* and *Rocky IV* were indoctrinating young minds with the idea that no foreign power stood a chance against the US and its tireless brand of righteous freedom. Real-world signs backed up this idea. The US economy was booming, the Soviet empire was crumbling, and by the end of the decade the Berlin Wall had fallen. The collapse of the wall was as clear a sign as any that America had won the Cold War. In a way, it was a high-water mark for the US. But it also left a gaping hole, as the country asked itself, Where do we go from here? What's our purpose in the world? The key message is: America's standing took a dive in the post-Cold War era. After the Second World War, the US was all about promoting democracy. For many people, including those living under Soviet rule in the Eastern bloc, this was a compelling purpose. But after the Iron Curtain came down, things got murkier. The values America was pushing became less about personal freedoms and democracy, and more about dollars and cents. It became about growing a healthy world economy. In places like Hungary and Russia, this move raised questions about America's specific brand of capitalism. Politics and corruption have always gone hand-in-hand, but in the post-Cold War years, it became clear that the wealth-generating money markets of the US also came with stark economic inequality. There was no escaping the fact that America was promoting a system designed to help the rich get richer. Not only that, but in 2008, when a crippling financial crisis steamrolled its way across Europe, the system was revealed to be a dangerous threat to anyone who wasn't filthy rich. At the same time, the US had spent the start of the twenty-first century in a never-ending nightmare war in the Middle East. After spreading a ruinous version of capitalism, America was flexing some ugly imperialist muscle in the guise of a so-called War on Terror. But instead of reducing acts of terrorism, the war seemed to create more violence and inspire future generations of extremists. Once a symbol of freedom and prosperity, post-Cold War America was now spreading violence and poverty. Oh, how the mighty had

fallen.

Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán shows how nationalism and authoritarianism go hand-in-hand.

Identity politics. You've probably heard the term a lot over the past decade, since it sits at the heart of nationalism, which has also seen a troubling rise in the post-Cold War era. Right-wing politicians are eager to exploit voters' fears about national identity and rail against any possible threat, be it loose Western morals or Muslim refugees. In order to stir a sense of national pride, these politicians also bend reality. They present an uncomplicated version of their nations' histories – one that any voter can enthusiastically embrace. We've seen it in Donald Trump's plea to Make America Great Again, but it's also behind the current politics of Russia, China, and Viktor Orbán's Hungary. The key message here is: Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán shows how nationalism and authoritarianism go hand-in-hand. Since becoming prime minister in 2010, Viktor Orbán has systematically tightened his authoritarian grip on Hungary by taking control of the media and the judicial system, limiting the free press, restricting civil liberties, and chipping away at the basic tenets of democracy. But it wasn't always this way. In fact, Orbán started out as a left-leaning politician in the late 80s and early 90s as Hungary became more democratic. At the time, Orbán railed against corruption and urged his country to move forward, embrace democracy, reject Soviet rule, and work for a free and more open future. But that changed after the financial crisis of 2008. Hungary was hit particularly hard. Having already served four years as prime minister earlier in the decade, Orbán needed something to revitalize his career. So he transformed himself into a nationalistic, populist candidate – a leader who could make Hungary great again. As Orbán explained it, the problem was that Hungary had been too open, too liberated, too Westernized. It needed to tighten its borders and get back to its roots and fundamental Christian values. The identity politics worked so well that Orbán was not only reelected prime minister, but his party, Fidesz, won two-thirds control of parliament. Over a thousand new laws were passed, as Fidesz rewrote the constitution, co-opted major television and media outlets, and changed voting laws – all of which made it harder for opposing voices to be heard. Orbán's plan was nothing unique. It comes straight from the authoritarian playbook, and it's the same basic strategy that's been used to great effect in Russia, China, and the US.

Vladimir Putin's rise to power began after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Ironically enough, while Orbán began his career fighting against corruption and Russian influence, he ended up in a long courtship with Russia. In the US, the Republican party has taken the same strange journey – from demonizing Russia during the Cold War to openly admiring it today. The reason is that few leaders have shown a better grasp of the authoritarian playbook than Russian president Vladimir Putin. And if your aim is to consolidate power and wealth while silencing your opponents, then Putin is certainly someone to look up to. The key message is: Vladimir Putin's rise to power began after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Putin's ascendance also began at the end of the Cold War,

after Boris Yeltsin had stumbled in moving Russia away from Communism in the 1990s. The economy was struggling. Corruption was rampant. Yeltsin had worked with American advisors to open up the economy – but again, it only revealed that the system was set up to benefit the few, not the many. Women were trying to make a living smuggling vodka across the border. It wasn't hard to read the situation as an enduring humiliation brought on by the West. In 1999, Putin was picked as Yeltsin's successor, in part because Putin guaranteed that Yeltsin wouldn't be brought up on corruption charges. And, as Orbán would do years later, one of Putin's first steps was to take control of the media and turn it into channels for pro-government messaging and the stoking of nationalistic fervor. Wealth was divided among friends and cronies, like Igor Sechin, who was handed the Yukos oil company. Meanwhile, those who were seen as a threat, like the independently wealthy Mikhail Khodorkovsky, could end up in prison. In fact, opposing Putin would become a deadly affair. One high-profile dissenting voice was Boris Nemtsov, who was shot dead in Moscow, just blocks from the Kremlin. Another is Alexei Navalny, who spoke extensively with the author in his research before being poisoned and hospitalized in August 2020. Over the past decade, Putin, with his United Russia party, has gradually increased his control over the nation, hand-picking local governors and the judiciary, while amping up the Us versus the West rhetoric. As we'll see in the next blink, America gave Putin plenty of ammunition for his arguments about moral superiority.

In many ways, America provided ammunition for authoritarianism abroad.

America's War on Terror was a direct response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Obviously, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were bound to change the US, but that doesn't mean its reaction was necessarily a good one. What followed was a nationalistic and militaristic response. With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the approval of the PATRIOT Act, civil liberties were eroded. The result was the invasion of countries that had had little to do with the 9/11 attack, and images and reports of the US military torturing people overseas. For leaders like Vladimir Putin, this was useful. It was further proof that the US was a long way from being an upstanding moral authority in the world. The key message is: In many ways, America provided ammunition for authoritarianism abroad. The War on Terror succeeded in giving the US a purpose after the Cold War. But it also succeeded in lowering the bar for what was considered "normal" in the arena of global politics. If the US wasn't going to play by the rules, why should anyone else? If the US was going to invade countries on false pretenses and create laws erasing privacy rights, then that must be the new normal, right? America's actions after 9/11 made it easier for Putin to justify war on his Chechnyan neighbors and to introduce anti-terror laws that strengthened his control. But the US provided even more unwitting help in the form of cheap and powerful social media technology. At first, it seemed that platforms like Facebook and Twitter would be a boon to democracy. These tools were used to help organize pro-democracy protests in Egypt in 2011 and in Ukraine in 2013. But in the years that followed, social media was turned into a weapon against democracy. Russia proved especially skilled, using social media to attack dissidents and political rivals and to promote conspiracy theories, not to mention sowing division in places like the US and the UK. But as we'll see in the next blink, they weren't the masters – because no one

has used technology as an effective tool for social control quite like China.

Today's modern, oppressive China also emerged after the Cold War.

If we look at Hungary, we see a modern, Western version of nationalist authoritarianism. If we look at Russia, we see old-fashioned ideas of sovereignty and aggressive national security. In China, we see what could very well be the future. All three countries bear the influence of the United States, but it's perhaps most evident in China, where late-stage capitalism and technological surveillance have collided to create something else entirely. The key message here is: Today's modern, oppressive China also emerged after the Cold War. If you live in the US, it's highly likely you own something that was made in China. Toward the end of the Cold War, the US lured China away from the Soviet Union and over to the Western side. Since then, the two countries have been in an economic partnership, fulfilling a desire for cheaper and cheaper goods. Massive profits have been made as a result of this partnership, though the only ones benefiting from them are company executives and stock market players. Still, the end of the Cold War left China in an existential predicament. Its leaders didn't want it to collapse in the same way the Soviet Union had, and they knew that meant embracing some form of capitalism. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China opened up through a period of economic reform. But unlike other communist nations, it didn't open up politically. In fact, the Chinese Communist Party was strengthened by both increasing the nationalist spirit and becoming more totalitarian. Of course, becoming more nationalistic generally means becoming more antagonistic toward "others." By the 2000s, China had already pushed Tibetan Chinese people out of the country, but in 2014 an attack by Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province led to what became known as the "people's war on terror." Again taking a page from the US playbook, China orchestrated a vicious crackdown on the Uighur population, placing over a million people in detention camps. In recent years, technology has transformed Chinese society, driving its economy to unprecedented heights and helping to lift people out of poverty. But technology has also been turned against society, as a means of surveillance and oppression. We'll take a closer look at that in the next blink.

China has used American technology for oppressive ends.

China's president Xi Jinping was commenting on the internet when he said, "Freedom is what order is meant for, and order is the guarantee of freedom." If you think that sounds a lot like "Freedom is slavery," which was the slogan for the Party in George Orwell's 1984, you're not alone. Like Russia, China had been observing the possibilities of social media and the new online technologies emerging from the US over the past twenty years, and saw potential. In the case of China, this technology would form the backbone of a new "social credit" system. The key message is: China has used American technology for oppressive ends. Do you want a new job? Do you have your eyes on a good school for your kid? Well, then, you'd better maintain a good social credit score. Whom you communicate with, what you buy, where you go, and whether you pay your bills on time are all monitored and taken into account. A good social credit score means you might get what you want. A bad social credit score could mean you're seen as a

threat and might even end up being detained. The level of technological surveillance in Xinjiang Province extends beyond “social credit.” The whole region is also monitored with cameras, and something as trivial as being caught with long facial hair could be enough to get you detained. Phone calls are monitored. For someone living in Xinjiang, even the actions of a relative or friend outside the country could be deemed enough of a threat to warrant detention. Technology has made all of this possible – technology that was exported from the US before its full potential was ever understood. Meanwhile, China has been busy extending its influence. It’s launched an enormous building project known as the Belt and Road Initiative, involving close to 70 countries that will likely benefit enough not to complain about China’s questionable human rights record. And it’s been trying to exert increased control over the semi-autonomous region of Hong Kong. Already, so many organizations and companies rely on Chinese business that few will speak out. But on the streets of Hong Kong, protests have reignited. China wants to enact a law allowing for the extradition of Hong Kong citizens to the mainland. Could people in Hong Kong expect the same fate as the Uighurs in Xinjiang? Many protestors feel that that threat is all too real.

There are reasons to remain hopeful that authoritarianism will fail.

The story of what’s happened around the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall isn’t just about leaders like Orbán, Putin, and Xi. It’s also filled with smaller, more personal tales of how the big decisions can affect us all. There’s Sandor Lederer, a half-Jewish Hungarian who, like Orbán, experienced a political awakening fighting corruption in politics. But now, Lederer’s anti-corruption watchdog is considered an “enemy of the state.” Then there’s Zhanna Nemtsova, daughter of the assassinated Boris Nemtsov, who set up a foundation to promote liberal politics and democracy in his memory. The author spoke to Lederer, Nemtsova, and protesters in Hong Kong, all of whom were continuing to fight for democracy in their home countries. In every conversation, the question became: Will democracy prevail? The key message is: There are reasons to remain hopeful that authoritarianism will fail. When the author spoke to Barack Obama about the book he was writing, Obama pointed out that the characteristics of the post-Cold War era aren’t unique. Throughout history, democracy and totalitarianism have ebbed and flowed, and will likely continue to do so. Maria Stepanova, a Russian writer and poet, sees a possible silver lining in the current pandemic that has affected just about everyone in the world. Maybe this global crisis will remind people that truth, expert knowledge and global unity are more useful than distorted realities, racist conspiracy theories, and vengeful nationalism. Maybe people will see the absurdity of trapping themselves behind their own tightly walled borders. Of course, the opposite could also happen. Maybe the pandemic will lead people to become even more isolated in their social media bubbles of disinformation and their realities even more distorted by hatred and anger. But there is reason to believe that we’ve awakened to the dangers that the internet presents to democracy. Can we hold products like Facebook more accountable? Can we put guardrail regulations on social media? Currently, the only thing Mark Zuckerberg is accountable for is the money he’s making, and that’s clearly not good enough. In his conversations with the author, and even amid the pandemic, anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny remained stubbornly hopeful. Sooner or later, he said, people like Putin, Orbán, and Trump run out of justifications for the corruption at the heart of their endeavors. Leadership that is about consolidating power and money can’t last – which is why every empire comes crashing down. The people

continuing to protest in Budapest, Moscow, Hong Kong, and throughout the US know that we can do better. And this is a reality that can't be suppressed or distorted.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the Cold War, America was left without a purpose in the world. Instead of fighting for democracy, it promoted a version of capitalism that led to economic inequality – culminating in the 2008 financial crisis. This, combined with the unjust war on terror that followed 9/11, greatly reduced America's moral authority and helped sustain a drift away from democracy in places like Hungary, Russia, and China. Now, the internet and social media are continuing to fuel a rise in authoritarianism around the world, spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, while also monitoring people and suppressing political resistance. But there is one small bright spot. And that's the knowledge that political leadership built only on money and power are doomed to fail, eventually. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with After the Fall as the subject line, and share your thoughts!