



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 7, 2020

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## Aristotle on Tyranny

**Already in Aristotle's day there were radicals trying to break up the government.**

*"The study of history is the best medicine for a troubled mind for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."*

— Livy, *History of Rome*

Thomas Paine's apt analysis of the cold and critical December of 1776 said, "These are the times that try men's souls."

In the days before Paine penned those words, the American Continental Army was nearly defeated, nearly disheartened, and totally disillusioned. They'd limped out of New York, having been routed by the British regulars and run out of Long Island. The rout was so brutal and embarrassing that General Washington lost nearly 90 percent of his Continental Army to desertion.

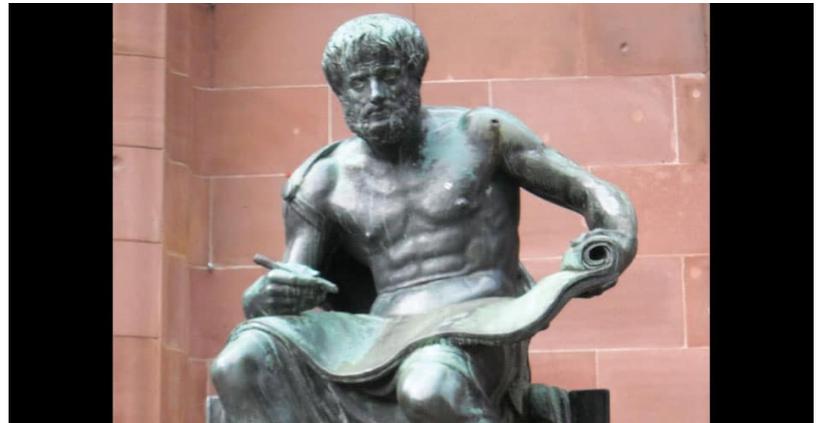
Eviscerated, Washington and his harrowed and hungry troops retreated back across the Delaware River, most of the men believing the dream of American independence from Great Britain would never come true and that all the hardships and all the sacrifices for freedom would be wasted.

Thomas Paine, realizing that the cause of liberty was at a crisis point from which it might not be able to return, wrote a pamphlet for the purpose of giving hope to the weary and worried American soldiers and to the families depending on them to protect their lives, liberty, and property from a tyrannical central government bent on denying them their God-given rights.

In that historic pamphlet, Paine penned the following warning, hoping that it would serve to preserve the hopes of the dispirited soldiers and keep them engaged in the fight against tyranny:

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. [Emphasis in original.]

With the seemingly unstoppable growth of government; its multi-pronged assault on our own lives,



Ahead of his time: The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a book that, among other things, exposed the tactics used by tyrants to destroy good government. That book is known as *Politics*.

(Photo: Michael Paraskevas)



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liberty, and property; and its never-ending quest to confine our liberty into boundaries the government defines, we are forced to face a soul-trying battle against tyranny, just like the one that stood against our patriot forefathers.

We, as they, must decide whether we will accept defeat. Will we console ourselves with the thought that we gave it our best, but our enemy was too strong, that we were outnumbered, and that even nature herself fought against us (there was a smallpox epidemic ravaging New England, followed by a measles outbreak in New York and Pennsylvania during the War for Independence)? Should we allow the anti-police riots or the tyrannical coronavirus restrictions to discourage us in our own perilous times?

Just as Thomas Paine's timely words gave hope to the desperate and diseased soldiers in General Washington's army, there is hope for us in our trying times, too.

## Our Hope Is History

Some time in the fourth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Aristotle (his name means "complete perfection" in Ancient Greek) wrote a book aimed at inquiring into what it was that could keep the community — the polis — peaceful and functioning well and to the benefit of the citizens of the community. Aristotle's guidebook to good governance is known as *Politics*.

Book 5 of *Politics* reads as if it were written for our day. Aristotle begins that section of his essay by reciting what happens when people in the polis begin to "stir up factions" with the intent of overthrowing the established order by using "party strife" to "change parts of the constitution." The purported goal of these "revolutionaries," Aristotle wrote, is a "desire for equality."

Sound familiar?

These fractious factions believe that "as they are equal to others in one thing, they should be equal in all things," including control over property owned by others. The people trying to abolish the constitution, Aristotle warned, would not stop until they were given an "unequal share of all things," due to their perceived unequal treatment in other times and in other areas.

Sound familiar?

What is the motivation of these adversaries of the constitution and order? Aristotle asks rhetorically. His answer might surprise you: "feelings."

The "spirit of feelings," Aristotle writes, grips those seeking to overturn the constitution and to seize control over the property of others.

"Those that desire this 'equality' stir up party strife because they feel that even though they are the equals of those that have more, they are not treated equally," Aristotle explains. "We have said that those who feel they ought to be greater than others start party conflict because of the state of their feelings."

Sound familiar?

Next, the great Greek philosopher reveals, the goal of these agitators is "to get gain and honor by creating conflict and partisan fighting to prevent themselves and their friends from experiencing any dishonor or loss."

Sound familiar?



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After igniting these fires of faction, those organizing the disturbances continue following their feelings because “they resent others unjustly getting a larger share than them.” If the uproar and the conflagrations don’t deliver the power they are seeking, then the instigators will resort to “election intrigue.”

Sound familiar?

Now, so you don’t misunderstand Aristotle’s insightful understanding of the political situation that creates the sort of cultural cacophony we’re experiencing today, he does point out that many of those who support these insurgents are motivated to migrate to that camp by the “insolence and greed shown by men in office.” This greed of the politicians leads them to “prey on private property and raid the common treasury.” The men in power then use their “excessive predominance” to hand out benefits and honors to themselves and their friends, and to begin secretly setting up a tyranny on the ruins of the constitution.

Sound familiar?



**Property and poverty:** One of the policies listed by Aristotle as always being enacted by tyrants is taking the property of the middle class and transferring it to the poor, promising greater equality. As designed, the middle class is then impoverished and the poor are worse off than before. *(Photo: AP Images)*

With the de facto establishment of the despotic government, the tyrants use their extraordinary power to “gradually and little by little without being noticed” destroy the “peace and wealth of the middle class.”

Sound familiar?

In one of the last pushes for complete control over the polis and its property, the tyrants and the terrorists join forces to strengthen their stranglehold on the polis. They squeeze the middle class out of any political influence by siphoning its wealth and gaining control over its property. The cabal’s single policy is the perpetuation of its own power and the prevention of others from ever diminishing its dominance or growing powerful enough to challenge its hegemony.

Sound familiar?

The last act of the despotic drama is the construction of a political program, each plank of which is a

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part of a larger platform supporting the strongmen in their positions of absolute power.

Much to our benefit, in Book 5 Aristotle identifies the weapons in the autocratic arsenal, giving us a 2,300-year heads-up, plenty of time to build the barricades between the liberty of our own polis and the tyrants have through all ages of time have with laser focus fought to demolish them.

Herein is the list of despotic policies published in *Politics* by Aristotle. With this advanced warning, it is hoped that we may, as Livy counseled, use history to avoid falling prey to those people and programs that are “rotten through and through.”

What follows is Aristotle’s slate of statist tactics designed to destroy a republic. I have modernized the language used in the English translation of Aristotle, but the substance of each is faithful to his original text. Readers are encouraged to read Book 5 of Aristotle’s *Politics* to see for themselves just how accurate and applicable these tactics are to those being used by tyrants in our own day.

- Ostracize outstanding men.
- Embarrass the virtuous people.
- Prohibit eating together at public places.
- Prohibit the meetings of clubs.
- Close schools.
- Keep close watch over anything in the society which could lead the people to develop confidence or pride.
- Close down any venues where people could gather to discuss or debate politics.
- Do whatever is necessary to make it difficult for people to get to know each other.
- Keep the people who live in the cities constantly under the surveillance of the government.
- Never allow the government to be uninformed about any conversations or actions of citizens.
- Keep spies among the people or keep them under surveillance so that people become afraid to speak openly.
- Cause friends to quarrel with each other.
- Create class warfare.
- Keep the people divided into groups and pit those groups against each other.
- Make sure the people are not able to employ private security forces, requiring them to accept the government’s police forces as their only law enforcement.
- Keep the people occupied with the daily demands of living so that they will not have time to think about uniting to oppose the tyrant.
- Keep the people always working, but never able to increase their wealth.
- Tax the people heavily so as to be able to reduce a man to poverty within five years.
- Stir up war so that the people are compelled to demonstrate loyalty to the state and to need a strong leader to guide them through the war.



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- As a tyrant, show that you distrust your friends and that you are in charge and they depend on you for their power.
- Flatter the lower classes of people.
- Make friends with foreign leaders.
- Tear down anyone who is perceived as being superior to the tyrant.
- Be rude and vengeful to anyone who displays an independent and free spirit or who refuses to recognize the tyrant's usurped supremacy.

Sound familiar?



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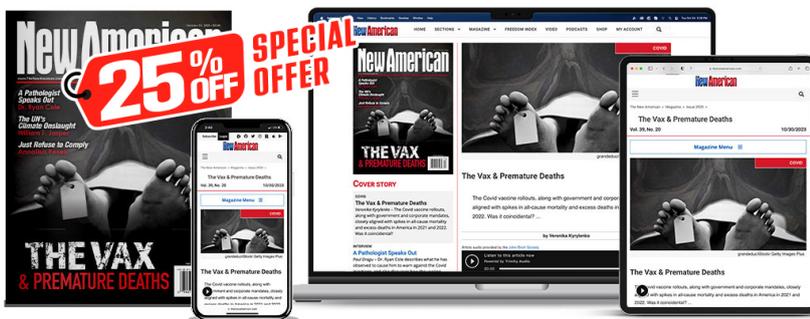
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