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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

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By JIM HOLT

Democracy is a wonderful thing. We Americans have been enjoying it for over two centuries. Gradually, fitfully, much of the rest of the world has joined us. Although competing systems may menace it for a time, they will eventually collapse because of their internal contradictions. That is why the advance of democracy is inevitable. And the best the United States can do is to help history along by pushing it on recalcitrant parts of the world, like the Middle East.

But wait. Are we sure that what we are enjoying and promoting is democracy? True, we call it that. But the regimes of the former Soviet bloc also called themselves democracies. Suppose their system had won out — a possibility that may be hard to imagine now but that was once a source of anxiety in the West. They, too, would have proclaimed a triumph of democracy. But surely, you want to say, their democratic pretensions were ludicrous. When [Kim Jong Il](#) refers to his nation as the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," it sounds like a case of a double positive yielding a negative. Our claim to be a democracy, by contrast, is fully merited. Just like the Greeks who, two and a half millennia ago, both coined the term and invented the thing, we have government by the people.

There are two problems with this line of thought. The first is that our form of government bears scant resemblance to what the ancients called *demokratia*. Tellingly, we hardly recognize the name of its inventor, Kleisthenes. The most distinctive feature of Athenian democracy, as the British political theorist John Dunn reminds us in his forthcoming book, "Democracy: A History," was its "fierce directness." Laws were made by an assembly that every full citizen had the right to attend, address and vote in as an equal. (Excluding women, resident aliens and slaves, that left about 30,000 participants.) The assembly's agenda for each meeting was decided on by a council of 500 citizens, chosen by lot. The only elected figures were military generals, and this was considered the least democratic aspect of the system.

Our own government, to the Athenians, would look like an elective oligarchy. In fact, it was deliberately set up to ensure, as James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers, "the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity, from any share" in it. Yet we insist on applying a Greek label to it as an honorific. And that is the second problem. For most of history, "democracy" was a term of abuse, connoting the rule of the vulgar multitude. The founding fathers fought shy of it, taking care to use "republic" instead.

