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Promoting democracy abroad is one of the most important elements of US foreign policy for decades. Some critics argue that it is damaging to promote democracy in countries without liberal values because it creates illiberal democracies, posing serious threats to freedom. Others argue that foreign policy of promoting democracy abroad promotes economic development in those places, reduces threats to the United States at home and creates partners for better economic trade and development. There are varying degrees of democracies ranging from full to limited and even flawed. Democracies can also be authoritarian, meaning people can vote, but have little or no choice in what or for whom they vote. When rebellion dropped the presidency of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt on July 3, 2013, the United States called for a quick return to order and democracy, by statements from White House Press Secretary Jay Carney on July 8, 2013. During this transition period, Egypt's stability and democratic political order is at stake, and Egypt will not be able to come out of this crisis unless its people gather to find a non-violent and inclusive path forward. We remain actively involved on all sides, and we are committed to supporting the Egyptian people if they want to save their country's democracy. [We] will work with the transitional Egyptian government to promote a quick and responsible return to a sustainable, democratically elected civilian government. We also call on all political parties and movements to remain involved in dialogue, and to commit to participating in a political process to chase the return of full authority to a democratically elected government. There is no mistake that boosting democracy is one of the cornerstones of American foreign policy. It wasn't always like that. A democracy, of course, is a government that invests power in its citizens through the franchise, or the right to vote. Democracy comes from ancient Greece and has been filtered to the West and the United States by such Enlightenment thinkers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. The United States is a democracy and a republic, meaning the people speak through elected representatives. At the beginning, American democracy was not universal: Only white, adult (more than 21), property holders could vote males. The 14th, 15th, 19th and 26th Amendments —plus a variety of civil rights acts— eventually voted universally in the 20th century. For its first 150 years, the United States was concerned about its own domestic problems—constitutional interpretation, state rights, slavery, expansion—more than it was with world affairs. Then the United States focused on pushing its way to the world increased in an era of But with World War II, the United States began moving in a different direction. Much of President Woodrow Wilson's proposal for a post-war Europe - the Fourteen Points - dealt with national self-determination. This meant forces like France, Germany and Great Britain must give themselves from their empire, and former colonies must form their own governments. Wilson intended to lead those newly independent nations in democracies, but Americans were of a different mind. After the slaughter of the war, the public just wanted to move back to isolation and let Europe work out its own problems. After World War II, however, the United States could no longer fall back into isolation. It actively promoted democracy, but it was often a hollow phrase that allowed the United States to counter communism with compliance with governments around the world. Democracy promotion continued after the Cold War. President George W. Bush linked it to the post-9/11 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course, there are ways to promote democracy differently from warfare. The State Department's website says it supports and promotes democracy in various areas: Promoting religious freedom and tolerance Civil society strengthens and the political process Labor rights, economic opportunity, and inclusive growth Independent media, press freedom, and internet freedom Criminal Justice, law enforcement, and rule of Law Promotion of Human Rights Promotion of Disability Rights Promotion of Women's Rights Fighting Corruption and Supporting Good Governance The programs above are funded and administered by the State Department and the USA. Adversaries of democracy promotion say that it creates stable environments, which in turn promote strong economies. In theory, the stronger a country's economy and the more educated and empowered its citizenship, the less it needs foreign aid. Thus, democracy promotion and US foreign aid create strong nations around the world. Opponents say that democracy promotion is only American imperialism by another name. It binds local all kinds of people to the United States with foreign aid incentives, which the United States will withdraw if the country does not progress to democracy. The same opponents ask you not to force democracy on the people of any nation. If the pursuit of democracy is not homegrown, is it really democracy? William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman celebrates the races and nationalities of America, which makes a thousand diverse contributions to the country's one identity, his ever-united countries. Compare Americans to the leaves on a very branched tree, he invites the readers of his poem to gather for themselves bouquets of the incomparable feuilleage of these States. Looking back on it, I think that's what I did when I recently made the longest road trip of my life: accepting Whitman's invitation, collecting bouquets. Drag a rented, ancient Airstream trailer behind a pickup truck, I travel with my wife, Leslie, and our two English settlers, Sage and Sky, from the southernmost in die kontinentale Verenigde State van Amerika, Key West, Florida, Florida, the northernly reachable by road, Deadhorse, Alaska, on the grey shores of the Arctic Ocean. The four of us drove through 18 states and northwestern Canada, passing more trees and under wider air than we could ever imagine. We baked in temperatures of more than 100 degrees for weeks, seen the spectacular lightning and hailstorms of the Midwest, and finally, drove by a snowstorm. The circling route back home in Connecticut took us down to Texas, where we handed the Airstream to its owner. Altogether, we covered 16,241 miles in a little under four months. Some friends and family said I was nuts to try such a monumental journey at my age-70. But I was inspired by the memory of the day, in 1996, when I was in Kaktovic, a settlement on windsweeping Barter Island, just off Alaska's north coast. I was amazed that his Inuit Eskimo schoolchildren promised marriage to the same flag as the children of Cuban immigrants in Key West, 6,000 miles away. Two islands beyond New York City are from Moscow and still part of the same country. It was almost miraculous that a nation was so great, spoiled by almost every race and ethnicity and religion on earth, managed to stay in one piece. What, I wondered, did the United States like together? Years after that, I asked myself a variation of that question: Did the nation hold together as well as what it once did? From reading and listening to the news, I took the impression that Whitman's ever-united countries had fragmented in a patchy nation of red and blue states where no one could agree on much of anything. But how accurate was that impression? As Leslie and I leave Key West, I decided to find out by asking everyday Americans the same question I want to myself: What do we like together? I have spoken to more than 80 people: white, Latino, African-American and Native American. They come from all walks of life, including a politician in Florida and another in Alaska, a farmwoman in Missouri, a wrangler in Montana, college children living on a community in Tennessee, an ice-road truck, and a taco entrepreneur who was also a Lakota Sioux shaman. William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo When Leslie and I arrived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that city and most of northern Alabama continued to recover from deadly tornadoes that struck a single day earlier. Parts of Tuscaloosa seemed to be bombarding carpet. We volunteered to assist in the relief effort. A coordinator at the volunteer centre told us that more than 14,000 people from almost every state had pitched in the union. He asked us to write our initials on an acetate-covered map of the United States that showed the volunteers' home states. Would I want to discover the power that bound the atoms of America onto to another? Perhaps I looked at it: a spirit that moved thousands of men and women to distances to help fellow citizens in need. We are assigned to a warehouse, where we were beaten by industrial fans who were all but useless in the 102-degree heat. We loaded boxes with food, medicine, and clothes along with about 20 other volunteers, mostly young people from church groups. The volunteers were white; their supervisors, from the Seventh-day Adventist disaster relief services, were black. This in Tuscaloosa, where in 1963, Governor George Wallace promised in his inauguration speech, Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever! William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo two weeks later, after meeting in Mississippi and Tennessee, we were camped on Meramec Farm, in the green Missouri Ozarks. It is owned by Carol Springer, a compact blonde that increases cattle and horses on 470 hectares. The farm is all seven generations in her family. As we sat in her kitchen and swallow lemonade, she gave me perspective on what puts the unum in our national motto, E pluribus unum: The glue is a belief that it is not clearly defined: that we have more in common than not, that we are more equal than we are different. I'm not sure it's true, but the important thing is that we believe it is. In other words, I asked, the perception becomes reality? Springer was terrified. I'm known to believe I'll come home in the dark in the dark in the rain. I'm not convinced, but I believe I will, and I get there. We moved on from Missouri, the ocean expanse of the Great Plains, to the South Dakota badlands. There, near the depressed Pine Ridge Indian Bookings in South Dakota, we stopped in a dinner. You have to meet Ansel Woodknife, the cook said after ordering braai tacos. He's quite a guy. The next day I appealed to Woodknife, who invented the braai taco dish at his home in Interior. A broad face, strongly built man greeted me at the front door. Working on the study for an EMT test, he could not speak then, but dropped by our campsite a few nights later. Woodknife was also amazed at the size and diversity of the United States, and that it did not somehow fall. That's because of change, he told me. This is the only country where everything changes all the time. People come here expecting change, and if they're going to survive, if they're going to be successful, they need to learn to adapt to change, to different people from different races. Woodknife's formal education ended in the ninth grade, but he earned a doctorate in adaptation. Born on neighbouring Rosebud discussion, raised as one of 12 children in a cabin without electricity or running water, he was taken from his parents at the age of nine against their wishes—and placed in a white foster home in Philadelphia. It happened to thousands of Native American children, trapped in a government program to de-indianize them. It did not fall into Woodknife's case not. He ran away so often that he was branded unbreakable and sent back to the discussion, where he learned to make more fierce lying to his side Culture, finally becoming a Lakota Sun-Dancer. He also has an entrepreneur, running a busy restaurant and marketing Indian frying bread tacos to supermarket chains across the country. In 2003 he was incorporated into South Dakota's Small Business Hall of Fame. Citing himself as an example, Woodknife did not think the melting pot was the path to national unity. Rather, he said, every American should try to stay true to his or her ethnic heritage while holding an American identity. The fabric of the country would then be, he said, a blanket of color, all sewn in the form of the United States. William Brinson for Reader's Digest/Courtesy Philip Caputo Leslie and I stayed for the most part interstates, sticking to old routes such as the Natchez Trace, blamed by early American settlers, and the Lewis and Clark Route, a network of major roads and backroads following the route taken by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804 to 1806. At a Montana dude farm, we drove alpine meadows with a young wrangler, Annal Barely five feet tall, Apel described herself as a once-girl gangster who grew up on the east side of St. Paul. She resorted to bringing horses to save herself from that life. Apel embraced the disunity I feared and tore their seams. I think the country is definitely in disgrace, she said. At the same time, growing as a country, we must have conflict, and conflict is healthy. But the media has this wonderful way of blowing it out of relationship. The Lewis and Clark Route eventually brought us to the Pacific coast. We headed north, crossed the Canadian border, and took our way on the tales of Alaska Highway through British Columbia and the Yukon in Alaska. There, north of Fairbanks, we picked up the northernmost road in the United States: the Dalton Highway, more than 400 miles of gravel and buckled asphalt. Road conditions make it a risky ride, and the scenery-endless stretching of mountains and tundra, the trans-Alaska oil pipeline crossing and the recall of the landscape—can be hypnotic. But we only have one accident: a flat tire, before achieving our goal. Seventy-nine days after we started from Key West, we stood on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. We baptized our toes—briefly, because polar bears were seen nearby—and I added Arctic water to a bottle that I had already partially filled with water from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. There I heard the most succinct answer to my Big Question. It was given by the Airstream owner, Erica Sherwood, a 37-year-old small business owner. As I sat telling traveller's stories to Erica and her husband, Jef, she turned the tables by throwing the question back to me. Taking me cue from Annalian Apel's remarks about conflict, I use a metaphor of astronomy: A star remains a star because of the dynamic disequilibrium between its gravity, which draws innerlik, en kernfusion, nuclear fusion, send his case outside. If there is too much of some way or another, either collapse on itself or blow apart. Almost from his birth, America was drawn toward maximum individual freedom by Thomas Jefferson's notion that the government that governed the least ruled the best, and in the opposite direction by Alexander Hamilton's faith in centralized power. This is the eternal but equal conflict between these extremes that generate the binding power, I said. Too much Jefferson can lead to anarchy, too much Hamilton to tyranny. Erica and Jef found a little strange and abstract, so I asked for Erica's thoughts about being United Americans, and she nailed it. That's hope, she said. Isn't that what it always was? Philip Caputo is a Pulitzer Prize winner and author of 15 books. His latest is The Longest Road, from which this essay was adapted. Adapted.

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