

Is democracy overrated?

By Jim Nowlan

The gridlock in Washington and the inaction in Springfield cause me to wonder if we are capable of governing ourselves, given the grave problems that face us—debt, Medicare and Social Security stability, unmet pension obligations in Illinois, and overall American decline, among others.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato and his mentor Socrates, upon which much of the Western canon of philosophy is based, never held democracy in high esteem, a form of government they felt would fall prey to a tyranny run by demagogues. Maybe they were right.

Leaders of both parties are certainly guilty of avoidance of the risk entailed in confronting the problems head on, and painfully.

The fault also lies with: 1) the political systems that have developed in our nation and state, and 2) with a public that seems to be sleepwalking through our decline.

First, we have a complicated, multi-step democratic system of checks and balances among two houses of our legislatures, a separate executive, and a supreme court that can overrule both legislative and executive branches. This has always meant that decision-making would be deliberate, even slow, or as at present, almost nonexistent.

Our U.S. Congress and the Illinois General Assembly have further, by rules of their own, given power to the minority to control the flow of legislation.

In Congress, the Senate operates with a rule of “cloture” (French for closure or ending), which means that 60 of 100 members must support a measure before it can move; this gives great power to a minority, and often to just a majority within that minority.

Similarly, in the U.S. House of Representatives there is an informal rule within the majority party Republicans that the party will not act unless it has the support of “a majority of the majority,” or in effect not many more than one-quarter of the whole body.

In Illinois, the Speaker of the House alone controls the flow of legislation, of what will and will not be considered by the whole body. This clearly gives him great power to get things done, yet he covets that power obsessively and is loath to spend it to get difficult things done, such as reforming expensive state pensions.

The public is also to blame. Too many of us hang onto the simplistic belief that our problems of deficit spending can be solved by cutting waste and corruption.

At the national level, we borrowing 30-35 cents of every dollar we spend. And most of the spending goes for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, defense, and interest on the already horrendous debt.

Cutting waste and corruption alone won't cut it.

So we continue spending our country into the poorhouse, indebted heavily to our primary competitor, China, which holds a Sword of Damocles over our economy, should it decide to unload its trillion dollar holdings of our debt.

Not only do we need to address the problems identified above, we also need to be on a war-footing of discipline and sacrifice in order to deal with substandard educational achievement and underinvestment in digital and transportation infrastructure. These are areas where we used to be at the head of the class, but now are mired in the middle internationally, at best.

What to do? For starters, Congress and the Illinois legislature need to change their rules so that minorities can no longer bottle up the flow of legislation.

As for the public, it seems a crisis the equivalent of our entry into World War II may be needed to awaken us from our slumber. President Franklin Roosevelt couldn't lead Americans into the fight against Nazism until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, when it was almost too late.

Our crisis is upon us, but it is silent, stealthy, weighing us down imperceptibly, a gossamer layer daily.

Most elected officials understand this, yet are skating above the reality, focused instead on the election that is always right around the corner.

To stir us to action, many elected officials would have to fall on their swords for telling us what we don't want to hear—that balanced budgets and necessary investment will mean more taxes for all, cuts in entitlement programs and indeed a lower standard of living until we can right the ship of state.

I'm not optimistic, yet maybe the large classes of freshman legislators in D.C. and Springfield include among them some real future leaders. Time is running out.