



A
HUMAN FLOURISHING
SEVEN PILLARS
ESSAY

Designed to Serve

*Why Accountable Governance Matters
for Human Flourishing*

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A Note on This Essay

This essay spends considerable time on the American form of government, and we want to be transparent about why. It is not because the co-founders of Human Flourishing happen to be American. It is because the American constitutional experiment is, in our view, genuinely unique in human history. It was built on ideas formed across millennia and assembled in a way that has never been replicated. The American system is deeply flawed and complex when considered as a full socioeconomic system, but it remains the most successful attempt humanity has made at building institutions that protect individual liberty while maintaining accountable governance.

That claim is empirical rather than patriotic. It invites scrutiny and disagreement. The evidence of the 20th century's experiments points in a consistent direction across controlled comparisons between systems, patterns of migration when people had a choice, and measurable outcomes for human dignity and material welfare. We explore that evidence honestly, including the system's failures and the hard questions it has not yet answered.

A Note on Where We Stand

We begin with an admission. We hold that the most important governance insight in human history is this: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Every institution, every office, every system must be designed with that truth at its center. History has given us working answers to that insight in limited government, the constitutional republic, free enterprise, and the enduring wisdom of the American founding.

That is our starting point, held without apology and openly enough to follow the evidence. The positions taken in this essay are structural, not partisan. They concern accountability, the protection of minority rights, the dispersal of power, and the freedom to speak and dissent. These principles have been honored and violated by governments across the entire ideological spectrum, and they are not the property of any party. Some readers will hear these positions as politically signed because they overlap with what one side of today's debate happens to hold. We accept that risk; the evidence is what we follow, not the political alignment of the moment. The founding essay treated governance

as a set of questions for cross-ideological conversation. This essay takes the stands the evidence supports while remaining open to the questions that genuinely remain.

We also want to honor something at the outset. The great alternative visions of the 20th century, including socialism, communism, and collectivism in its many forms, were not born from malice. They emerged from genuine moral outrage at real injustice: the cruelties of unrestrained industrial capitalism, the grinding poverty of working people, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a powerful few. Those concerns were legitimate. The means chosen to address them, in the cases tried at scale, proved catastrophically wrong. But the concerns themselves remain, and any honest discussion of governance must take them seriously rather than dismiss them.

One particular concern deserves a word here. The concentration of wealth at the top of market economies is a real phenomenon that raises real questions. Our view, explored more fully in our companion essay on free enterprise, is that the moral question about wealth turns on how it was earned and what is done with it. Wealth created by value delivered to willing customers, with fairly compensated labor, reinvested in enterprises that serve human flourishing, is the engine of progress. Wealth extracted through regulatory capture, political favoritism, or exploitation of asymmetric power is a governance failure, not a market one, and one of the most consequential governance failures of our time.

What follows is our attempt at honest engagement with the most consequential question in political thought: what kinds of institutions actually create the conditions in which human beings thrive?

Part 1

Governance Through Deep Time

The First Problem: Who Decides?

Governance did not begin with kings or constitutions. It began with the same problem that faces every group of human beings who must share resources, resolve disputes, and coordinate action: who decides, and by what authority? In the earliest human bands, leadership emerged organically through elders, through shamans, through the most capable hunters and warriors. These arrangements were not tyrannies. They were adaptive solutions to collective survival, accountable in the most direct way possible: a leader who failed to provide was replaced.

The invention of agriculture changed everything. When people settled, land became wealth. That wealth required protection, and protection required organized force under

someone's command, someone who could no longer be easily replaced. The first true states, emerging in Mesopotamia and Egypt around 3000 BCE, fused divine authority with political power to create institutions that could not be questioned without questioning the cosmos itself. Even here, however, a remarkable idea appeared: the ruler had duties. The Code of Hammurabi proclaimed that the king was appointed by the gods to bring about the rule of righteousness, to destroy the wicked, so that the strong should not harm the weak. This is the first articulation, however imperfect, of the principle at the heart of our pillar: institutions must be designed to serve rather than exploit.

The Hidden Cost: Who Is Protected?

There is something the celebratory history of governance almost always omits. Every system we praise for protecting its people was simultaneously defining whole categories of people as outside the circle of protection entirely. The same Code of Hammurabi that proclaimed the king's duty to the weak also codified slavery as a legal institution. In Athens, the birthplace of democracy, slaves comprised between a quarter and a half of the population, and their forced labor underwrote the leisure that allowed free Athenian men to participate in governance. Aristotle, whose political philosophy remains foundational, declared non-Greeks slaves by birth. Rome built its republic and its legal genius on the same foundation.

The American founding, the most sophisticated governance experiment in human history, embedded the same contradiction in its founding document. Millions of Black Americans were subjected to chattel slavery, permanent and hereditary and racially defined, while the nation proclaimed that all men were created equal. The legal and political systems did not merely tolerate this. They actively constructed and enforced the racial hierarchy that made it possible. The history of governance is, in very large measure, the history of that circle of protection being drawn, contested, and slowly expanded, always incompletely and never without struggle. This is the honest prerequisite for understanding what governance is for, and why the work of building institutions that genuinely serve rather than exploit is never finished.

The Sacred and the Secular: A Thousand Years of Contest

No tension in the history of governance runs deeper or longer than the struggle between religious and secular authority. For most of human history, legitimate power came from God. In medieval Europe, the Church baptized you, educated you, married you, judged you, and buried you. Questioning power meant questioning God. At its peak, the medieval papacy wielded authority no modern institution can match. Popes crowned emperors. Excommunication could topple kingdoms. Sacred governance is the least accountable of all, because the question of accountability has a ready answer that forecloses further inquiry.

The Reformation shattered this monopoly at catastrophic cost. The Thirty Years' War of 1618 to 1648 killed roughly a third of Central Europe's population. The horror of religiously driven slaughter drove Enlightenment thinkers toward secular foundations: reason, natural rights, the consent of the governed. The American solution was elegant. A con-

stitutional firewall prevented the state from either establishing or suppressing religion, protecting faith from political capture and governance from religious monopoly at the same time.

Religion has played both roles in the governance story. The same faith tradition weaponized to justify the transatlantic slave trade became the primary moral engine of abolitionism and of the civil rights movement that followed a century later. Religion and governance require structural management of their relationship precisely because each, unchecked by the other, tends toward absolute claims. Today the tension remains live. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan under the Taliban represent governance where religious law is civil law. The question of where God's authority ends and Caesar's begins is not medieval history. It is an active question in dozens of countries today.

The Enlightenment and the Great Idea

The Enlightenment produced the most consequential reframing of governance in human history. Locke, Montesquieu, and their contemporaries asked directly: what is government for? Their answer was radical. Government exists for the protection of the natural rights of individual human beings rather than for the glory of God or the honor of the king. It derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed rather than from divine appointment. If it fails to protect those rights, the people have not merely the right but the duty to alter or abolish it. This was a philosophy with practical consequences. Its claims were written directly into the Declaration of Independence and engineered into the architecture of the Constitution: Montesquieu's separation of powers as the structural blueprint, Locke's social contract as the theory of legitimacy, and Madison's genius translating both into a working system in which ambition checks ambition.

PART II

Power Corrupts: The Central Problem of Governance

An Honest Assessment of Human Nature

Lord Acton's observation that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely is not a cynical aphorism. It is an empirical finding, confirmed independently by virtually every civilization in human history. Human beings are flawed. We harbor self-interest, rationalize our own advantage, seek status, and expand our authority when nothing checks it. The most virtuous people in history, placed in positions of unchecked power, have eventually abused them. Madison understood this with great clarity: "If men were

angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” The entire architecture of the American constitutional system is an engineering solution to human fallibility in power. The design works by building a system that can survive bad leaders, not by assuming good ones.

The Roman Republic lasted nearly five centuries, sustained less by the virtue of its leaders than by institutions that divided power effectively. When those institutions eroded, when Caesar crossed the Rubicon and the Senate proved unable to enforce its own authority, the Republic fell to internal institutional collapse rather than to a foreign conqueror. The Weimar Republic, one of the most sophisticated democratic constitutions ever written, could not survive economic despair, institutional distrust, and a leader willing to use legal mechanisms to concentrate power. Hitler did not seize power through a coup. He rose through a legal process, and a democratic majority enabled the systematic dismantling of the checks democracy requires to survive.

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” — James Madison, Federalist No. 51

The Tribal Brain and the Strongman Temptation

The deepest tension in democratic governance requires the most honesty to confront. The same evolutionary wiring that makes human beings capable of extraordinary cooperation also makes them vulnerable to authoritarianism, and this vulnerability lives in all of us regardless of political orientation. Human ancestors evolved in small bands facing existential threats from rival groups, and following a dominant, decisive leader was often the difference between survival and annihilation. That instinct has not disappeared. Under conditions of threat and uncertainty, the kind of conditions authoritarian movements manufacture and exploit, people across cultures preferentially turn toward dominant, protective leaders. The desire for a powerful figure who will restore order and vanquish enemies is a feature of human psychology as old as our species, not a pathology to be moralized away.

Research is consistent on a harder point. The tendency is not confined to one side of the political spectrum. Liberals and conservatives show similar levels of tribal bias and authoritarian preference under stress. The susceptibility belongs to all of us. The Founders understood this, and the constitution they wrote was designed to constrain bad leaders rather than rely on good ones. The paradox of democratic governance is that the people themselves can choose their chains. The 20th century’s totalitarian systems achieved mass support through precisely the mechanisms democratic theory predicts: identifying a threatening outgroup, promising decisive protection, and offering the emotional comfort of belonging to a powerful collective. Hannah Arendt observed that the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced ideologue but the person for whom the distinction

between fact and fiction no longer exists, the person who has surrendered the individual judgment that self-governance requires.

The Architecture of Constraint: Dividing Power

The American founders' solution was structural rather than personal. They built a system in which bad people could not do unlimited damage rather than trying to find better people. This required dividing power in two dimensions at once. Horizontally, the Constitution separates power among three branches: executive, legislative, judicial. Each is able to check the others. The President can veto legislation but cannot make law alone. Congress controls the purse but cannot execute. The courts can strike down the acts of both, while remaining appointed by the executive and confirmed by the legislature. Important things are supposed to be hard to do.

Vertically, federalism divides power between the national government and the states, and further between states and their local governments. This is a structural safeguard, not mere administrative convenience. A corrupt federal administration cannot easily reach into every state at once, and a state that experiments with a bad policy can be a cautionary example rather than a national catastrophe. Distributing power across levels makes it harder for any single actor to concentrate it. Beneath both dimensions stand the people themselves, endowed with rights that government did not grant and cannot take away, protected by a Bill of Rights that places certain freedoms beyond the reach of any majority vote. This is one of the most radical governance ideas in human history: that the individual human being has inherent dignity that the state must honor as a constraint on its own power.

PART III

Republic, Not Democracy: A Distinction That Matters

What Madison Actually Built

One of the most consequential misunderstandings in American civic life is the conflation of republic and democracy. In Federalist No. 10, Madison defined a pure democracy as a society in which citizens assemble and administer the government in person. A republic, by contrast, is a government in which the scheme of representation takes place. The difference is not procedural. It reflects a fundamentally different theory of what governance is for and how it fails. Madison's diagnosis of democracy's fatal flaw was faction: the tendency of a passionate majority to override the rights of the minority. His conclusion was unsentimental. Pure democracies have ever been found incompatible with personal

security or the rights of property, and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.

The republic he designed addressed this through three mechanisms. The first was representation, allowing elected officials accountable to voters but not identical with them to refine and enlarge the public views. The second was size, an extended republic covering a large, diverse territory that would contain so many competing factions that no single one could easily dominate. The third was structural friction in the form of separation of powers, a bicameral legislature, presidential veto, and independent judiciary, all of which would slow governance enough that passionate majorities could cool, minorities could organize, and the republic could correct its mistakes.

The Deliberate Slowness Is the Point

Friends in Canada, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe sometimes observe with frustration that the American system seems incapable of making decisions. Parliamentary systems can pass major legislation in weeks. The American system can struggle for years. The frustration is understandable, but we think it misreads the design. The slowness is the most important feature of the system, not a flaw to be corrected.

Parliamentary government, in which the executive is drawn from and accountable to the legislature, is efficient precisely because it concentrates power. A majority government in Westminster can move with remarkable speed. It can also, in moments of majoritarian passion, make sweeping changes that permanently alter the relationship between citizens and the state, with limited structural ability for minority interests to slow or stop the process. The same feature that makes parliamentary systems feel responsive also makes them more vulnerable to majoritarian overreach.

The American founders were specifically trying to prevent that. The supermajority requirements embedded in the Constitution, two thirds to override a presidential veto, two thirds of both chambers and three fourths of states to amend the Constitution itself, reflect a deliberate philosophy: big decisions should be hard. Permanent changes to fundamental law should require genuine consensus rather than a momentary majority. The friction is the protection.

Parliamentary vs. Constitutional Republic: The Core Distinction

Parliamentary systems (UK, Canada, Australia, most of Europe) concentrate executive power in a legislative majority. They are fast, responsive, and capable of decisive action. They also lack the structural firewalls against majoritarian overreach that the American system provides.

The American constitutional republic disperses power across branches, levels of government, and the people themselves. It is deliberately slow. Major legislation requires broad consensus. Constitutional change requires near-unanimity. Important decisions are structurally hard to make and structurally hard to unmake.

The frustration of American allies who watch Washington gridlock is real. So is the protection that gridlock provides. The design question worth asking is not how to make government faster. It is how to make government accountable. Those are different problems with different solutions.

Legitimate Change and the Limits of Interpretation

The American Constitution is often called a “living document,” and the term can mean two different things that are worth distinguishing.

In one sense, the description is accurate. The Constitution is designed to evolve, and the amendment process exists precisely to allow fundamental change when American society reaches genuine consensus that change is needed. The abolition of slavery, the extension of the franchise to women, the direct election of senators were all profound transformations accomplished through that process. It is hard. It requires a supermajority of Congress and ratification by three fourths of states. It is supposed to be hard. Big changes affecting all Americans should require the genuine assent of most Americans, expressed through their representatives over time.

The phrase “living constitution” is also used in a different sense, to describe judicial interpretation that produces substantive change without the amendment process. Reasonable people of good faith disagree about how to draw the line between legitimate interpretation and effective amendment, and we do not propose to settle that debate here. What we do insist on is a structural point that applies equally to all three branches. When major change happens outside the mechanisms designed for legitimate change, the system’s accountability suffers. A president who governs by executive order what should be legislation, a Congress that delegates its lawmaking authority to agencies insulated from voters, and a judiciary that resolves contested questions of social policy without the give-and-take of democratic deliberation all face the same structural concern. The fragility of the republic depends in part on whether the mechanisms of legitimate change retain their authority. When major social changes bypass those mechanisms, the result tends to be a kind of democratic resentment that the changes themselves cannot address. This is part of why Human Flourishing exists. When citizens shy away from the hard conversations that legitimate change requires, the fragile system we depend on quietly erodes.

The Socioeconomic System: Governance and Free Enterprise Together

Governance cannot be understood in isolation from the economic system within which it operates. We have written a companion essay on free enterprise as foundational to human flourishing, and the two pillars are intended to be read together. The relationship between them is structural rather than incidental.

Without good governance, free enterprise does not work. Property rights require enforcement. Contracts require courts. Competition requires rules against fraud and monopoly. The market economy that has done more to lift human beings out of poverty than any other system in history depends entirely on governance institutions that establish and protect the conditions for voluntary exchange. Where those institutions are absent

through corruption, state capture, or institutional collapse, the market degenerates into extraction, strongman protection rackets, and the rule of whoever has the most guns.

The relationship runs in the other direction as well, and this is where vigilance is required. Socialism in its strict definition is state ownership of property and the means of production. A republican form of government that imposes excessive regulation can produce something functionally similar without ever formally taking ownership. When regulations proliferate to the point that only large, established players can afford the compliance costs, when licensing requirements foreclose entry by the small and the new, when the regulatory process is captured by the industries it is meant to govern, the state has effective control over the means of production without holding nominal title. Some call this soft socialism. The phrase will sound politically charged to some readers, and we use it here for its precise analytical meaning: a system in which the formal trappings of free enterprise remain while the substantive freedom to enter, compete, and exchange has been hollowed out by accumulated regulation and the political favoritism that grows alongside it. This is a documented feature of regulatory economies across the political spectrum, not a theoretical concern, and it is one of the most consequential failure modes of the socioeconomic system as a whole.

The Fragility of the Republic

None of this is to suggest that the American system is self-sustaining. It is fragile. It depends not only on its formal structures but on the civic culture, institutional trust, and shared commitment to the rules of the game that give those structures their authority. A constitution is a piece of paper. Its power derives entirely from the willingness of citizens, leaders, and institutions to treat it as binding.

Democratic backsliding in the 21st century has followed a consistent pattern. Not coups but gradual legal erosion. Institutions are weakened from within by leaders who understand how to use legal mechanisms to concentrate power while maintaining the form of democratic governance. Elections are held but manipulated. Courts are packed or intimidated. The press is delegitimized before it is silenced. The republic dies not with a proclamation but through a thousand small concessions, each of which seems defensible in isolation. The V-Dem Institute's 2026 democracy report documented nearly a quarter of the world's countries undergoing autocratization, including several in Europe and North America. The direction is not automatic. It requires active, engaged citizens who understand what they are defending and why.

PART IV

Free Speech: The People's Check on Power

Of all the structural safeguards built into the American system, none is more foundational than the freedom to speak. The First Amendment protects self-expression, but its core purpose is structural. It is the mechanism by which citizens retain the capacity to criticize, expose, organize against, and ultimately replace those who govern them. Madison's original draft described freedom of the press as "one of the great bulwarks of liberty." George Washington stated the logic directly: if men are precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter, the freedom of speech may be taken away, and dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter.

Every authoritarian movement in history has moved to control speech early, not because ideas are abstractly dangerous but because the ability to name what is wrong, to say publicly what those in power are doing, is the precondition for all other accountability. Citizens cannot organize against what they cannot name. They cannot vote against what they cannot discuss. The structural concern is not new and is not bound to any particular technology or era. Whenever the means by which citizens share and contest information come under the concentrated control of a small number of actors, whether those actors are crowns, parties, monopolies, or platforms, the foundational check on power that free speech provides is compromised. The specific battles change. The principle does not.

What makes this principle hard to defend across history is that the advocates of censorship change positions. The party most willing to suppress speech in one decade may be the party most willing to protect it in the next, and vice versa. This is part of why the principle has to be defended structurally rather than tribally. The American founders understood that any majority, given control over what may be said, will eventually use that control to entrench itself, and that the only protection is to place the freedom to speak beyond the reach of any majority vote. The principle is harder to defend when it protects speech we find ugly. That is also the point. A right that only protects speech we approve of is not a right but a permission.

"Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins."

— CATO'S LETTERS, 1720

PART V

The Intellectual Battle: Democracy, Socialism, Communism, and the Results

The Moral Origins of Collectivism

To understand the 20th century's great governance debate honestly, we have to begin where it began, with genuine and legitimate moral outrage. The industrial capitalism of the 19th century produced extraordinary wealth and extraordinary misery at the same time. Children worked in mines and factories. Workers were maimed without compensation. The socialist and communist movements that emerged from this context were not born from envy. They were born from a moral intuition that remains valid: a system that produces that much suffering for that many people while generating that much wealth for so few is unjust and must be changed. Marx's analysis of industrial capitalism's contradictions was, in many ways, brilliant. His diagnosis of the problem was more accurate than his prescription for solving it. We honor the concerns. The evidence now makes clear that the proposed solutions failed at scale wherever they were tried. Dismissing the concerns themselves without engaging them honestly is both intellectually dishonest and strategically foolish, because it leaves the field open for the same failed prescriptions to return, which they are now doing.

Equal Opportunity and Equal Outcome

Before examining the experiments themselves, we need to establish a distinction that is among the most consequential and most frequently blurred in political discourse. The difference between equal opportunity and equal outcome is not semantic. It reflects two fundamentally incompatible visions of what justice means and what governance should do.

America was founded on the principle of equal opportunity. The promise was that every person, regardless of birth, should have access to the conditions that make flourishing possible: rule of law, protection of rights, the freedom to pursue their own ends. The promise was not that everyone would arrive at the same destination but that the starting conditions would be fair enough that individual effort, talent, and choices could shape what happened next. This is a demanding standard that America has often failed to meet, as the history of slavery, segregation, and ongoing discrimination makes plain. The failure to deliver equal opportunity is a genuine and serious indictment of the system on its own terms.

Equal outcome is a different idea. It is the goal of ensuring that all people end with roughly equivalent material results regardless of their choices, contributions, or circumstances. Taken seriously, it requires the continuous exercise of state coercion to override the dif-

ferential results of voluntary human action. The words “equality” and “fairness” are often used interchangeably in public discourse, but conflating them obscures a fundamental fork in the road. One path asks whether all people have genuine access to the conditions of flourishing. The other asks whether all people end up in the same place. These are different questions. They lead to different governance structures, and the historical evidence on which path actually produces flourishing across the population is not ambiguous.

A related hard question, which we raise without pretending to resolve it, is the size and scope of the social safety net. The American system was founded with the understanding that a safety net is necessary for those who genuinely cannot provide for themselves. Where to draw that line is one of the truly hard governance questions a society faces. What does genuine protection of the vulnerable look like, as distinct from a system organized to treat the equalization of outcomes as a right? This is not a question with a simple answer. It is a question that must be asked honestly, in terms that distinguish the worthy goal of genuine protection from the unworkable goal of guaranteed equal outcomes.

The Experiments Were Run

The 20th century conducted the most consequential governance experiments in human history. Germany provided the most controlled comparison. Two halves of the same people, sharing the same language, culture, history, and starting point, were divided only by their governance and economic system. By 1991, per capita income in East Germany had fallen to 31 percent of West Germany’s, from rough parity at the point of division. Between 1950 and 1989, the GDR’s population fell from 18.4 million to 16.4 million while West Germany’s grew from 50 million to 62 million. The people voted with their feet. The socialist state had to build a wall to stop them.

Korea provides a second controlled experiment, even more stark. North and South Korea in 1950 were at similar levels of development. South Korea today is one of the world’s most prosperous democracies. North Korea has experienced repeated famines. The difference is attributable to governance and economic system in a way that few comparisons in modern history allow us to claim. The Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 was the consequence of a system that could not generate accurate information about what people needed, could not allocate resources efficiently, and could not correct its errors because the mechanisms of error-correction, free prices, a free press, and political opposition, had been systematically eliminated.

The Curious Forgetting

Something here is worth sitting with. We know these results. The experiments were run at scale. The data is unambiguous in its broad direction. And yet the ideas that produced those results are experiencing a significant revival, particularly among younger generations in Western democracies. Part of the explanation is generational. People who did not live through the Soviet era encounter socialist ideas stripped of their historical context. Part of it is the genuine failures of democratic capitalism since the Cold War: the concentration of gains at the top, the 2008 financial crisis, the perception that markets serve the already-wealthy at everyone else’s expense. When an existing system visibly fails to

deliver on its promises, alternatives become attractive again. This is a warning that defenders of free enterprise and republican democracy have to take seriously. The case for these systems is not made by pointing to history alone. It has to be made continuously, by actually delivering broadly shared flourishing.

The Honest Defense: Flawed Systems With Built-In Correction

The intellectually honest case for republican democracy and market capitalism is not that they are perfect. Democratic republics have oppressed minorities, waged unjust wars, and been captured by elite interests. Free markets have produced genuine cruelty and devastating inequality. The case is different and more modest. These systems contain structural mechanisms for self-correction that the alternatives do not. Markets make mistakes, and price signals, competition, and bankruptcy discipline those mistakes over time. Democratic republics make mistakes, and elections, courts, a free press, and constitutional constraints discipline those mistakes over time. The feedback loops are built in. Socialism and communism in their tried-at-scale forms systematically eliminated those feedback loops, and without them, the systems could not learn, correct, or recover.

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried.”

— WINSTON CHURCHILL

PART VI

Governance in Practice: Three Case Studies

Theory is tested by evidence. The principles we have examined, that power corrupts without accountability, that feedback loops are essential, that governance structures determine outcomes more than culture or resources, are not abstract. They play out in real places with real consequences for real people. Three contemporary cases bring them into focus: China’s managed entrepreneurship experiment, Africa’s governance-driven poverty trap, and the relationship between trade and peace that operates quietly beneath the surface of global order.

China: The Managed Entrepreneurship Experiment

China represents the most significant contemporary governance experiment, and intellectual honesty requires engaging it seriously. Over the past four decades, China has achieved the largest and fastest poverty reduction in human history, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of destitution. This is not a small thing, and those who dismiss it fail to reckon with what it means for human flourishing at scale.

Understanding how China achieved this matters as much as acknowledging that it did. The early years of China's economic growth, particularly in the 1980s, were driven by genuine entrepreneurial freedom at the local and rural level. Small businesses, market competition, and the release of productive human energy that central planning had suppressed produced rapid gains. It looked, for a time, like a promising hybrid: economic freedom within a politically controlled system.

What has emerged since, particularly under Xi Jinping, is something scholars describe as "party-state capitalism." The Communist Party has systematically extended its reach into private firms through embedded party cells, management appointments, and the blurred distinction between state and private capital. Entrepreneurs are permitted and even celebrated, but they operate entirely at the pleasure of the state, which can and does retract that permission without warning or recourse. The Chinese economy has generated remarkable growth. But it rests on a foundation of managed labor, constrained freedom, and political subordination of economic activity to party goals that raises serious questions about both its sustainability and its human cost. It is, at best, an ongoing experiment whose results are not yet in. At worst, it is a sophisticated structure that depends on the continued willingness of a system built on restricted freedom to generate the innovation and productivity that free systems produce naturally.

Africa: When Governance Is the Roadblock

Sub-Saharan Africa presents one of the most instructive governance case studies in the world, and one of the most consequential for human flourishing, given that it is home to the majority of the world's remaining extreme poverty. The standard narrative attributes African poverty primarily to the legacy of colonialism and the slave trade. These are real and serious historical harms, and any honest account has to acknowledge them. They are not, however, sufficient explanations for the persistence of extreme poverty today, decades after independence.

The institutional account points to something deeper. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, in work that won Acemoglu the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics, have documented across decades of comparative research that institutions are the central determinant of long-run prosperity. They distinguish "inclusive" institutions, which include broad property rights, rule of law, accountable government, and political participation, from "extractive" institutions, which concentrate power and channel resources to narrow elites. Inclusive institutions create the conditions for sustained growth. Extractive institutions

can produce short bursts but cannot sustain prosperity over time. Their argument is that colonialism installed extractive institutions across much of Africa, and that post-independence governments often perpetuated those patterns rather than replacing them.

Magatte Wade, the Senegalese entrepreneur and author, makes a related but more specific argument from inside the African experience. In her 2023 book *The Heart of A Cheetah*, she argues that the most immediate institutional barrier in much of Africa is the accumulated layer of regulation, inherited from colonial-era systems and added to since, that makes it nearly impossible for ordinary Africans to start a business, obtain a license, access capital, or compete in formal markets. Multinationals with the resources to navigate regulatory complexity can manage it. Everyone else cannot. The result is a continent of extraordinary human energy and talent locked out of the economic participation that generates prosperity. Dambisa Moyo, the Zambian economist, adds a parallel critique focused on the international aid architecture in her book *Dead Aid*, arguing that decades of aid have propped up bad governments and crowded out the private investment and market development that actually produce growth.

There is a serious counter-argument from the heterodox tradition. Ha-Joon Chang, the Cambridge economist, has argued that today's rich countries became rich through active state intervention, protectionism, and industrial policy, and that the free-market reforms imposed on African countries through structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s hollowed out African states and harmed development. On his account, what Africa needs is more capable state-led coordination of development, not less. The East Asian success stories of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan support part of his case. Those countries did use active industrial policy to rise from poverty.

We take Chang's argument seriously while still landing closer to the Wade and Acemoglu-Robinson diagnosis for the African context specifically, for two reasons. First, the East Asian developmental states Chang cites operated through capable, relatively non-corrupt bureaucracies focused on national development. Most African states do not have that institutional capacity today, and asking them to coordinate development at scale invites exactly the corruption and extraction the institutional literature describes. Second, Wade's specific point about regulatory barriers operates at a level below grand industrial strategy. It is about whether an ordinary person can legally open a small business. That question can be answered without resolving the larger debate, and the evidence is consistent that loosening those specific barriers expands African economic participation immediately. The deeper question of state capacity, and how African societies can build the kind of institutions that make either market-friendly or state-led development work, remains genuinely open.

The implication of all of this is not that Africa needs charity or aid, though genuine human needs always deserve response. It is that Africa needs institutional reform: rule of law, property rights, reduction of the regulatory barriers Wade documents, and protection from the corruption that diverts public resources and extorts private ones. A new generation of African entrepreneurs, including those Wade calls the Cheetah Generation, are

working toward exactly that. Their success or failure will be one of the defining governance stories of the 21st century, and it will turn on the institutions they build rather than on the talent, energy, or ambition of the African people, which has never been in question.

Trade, Peace, and the Quiet Power of Mutual Dependence

The third case study is less a single country than a principle visible across many: the relationship between trade and peace. Montesquieu observed it in 1748: “Peace is the natural effect of trade. Two nations who traffic with each other become reciprocally dependent; for if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling; and thus their union is founded on their mutual necessities.” The aphorism that emerged from this tradition, that when goods do not cross borders, soldiers eventually will, has substantial empirical support. Nations that trade extensively with each other have dramatically lower rates of armed conflict between them. The economic interdependence created by trade raises the cost of war to the point where it becomes irrational for both parties.

Markets do something that diplomacy and international law struggle to achieve. They create aligned incentives between parties who might otherwise be adversaries. In Israel and Turkey, societies that span the fault lines of some of the world’s deepest religious and cultural conflicts, economic freedom creates spaces where Muslims, Jews, and Christians set aside their differences to trade with each other, build businesses together, and pursue common interests. The marketplace does not eliminate difference or resolve all conflict. It does create relationships of mutual dependence that give people powerful reasons to sustain peace. These are lived realities, not abstract theories, and they deserve recognition in any honest governance framework.

The challenge is genuine. What should be done when a trading partner is abusing its own citizens or its neighbors? Does economic engagement with an authoritarian regime legitimize it, or does it create conditions like rising living standards, exposure to outside ideas, and an expanding middle class that eventually produce liberalization? The evidence is mixed. The optimistic theory that trade would liberalize China has not produced the results its proponents predicted. Complete economic isolation has rarely produced regime change either. This tension has no clean resolution, and any framework for international order has to wrestle with it honestly rather than pretending otherwise.

PART VII

The Global Order: Nation-States, International Institutions, and the Hardest Questions

The principles we have traced through domestic governance, that power corrupts without accountability, that distributed authority outperforms concentrated authority, that institutions must serve the governed rather than those who control them, do not stop at national borders. They apply with equal force to the international order, where the problems are harder, the accountability mechanisms weaker, and the consequences of failure correspondingly larger. This part zooms out from individual nations to ask how sovereign states should relate to each other and what kinds of international institutions actually serve human flourishing.

The Nation-State as Governance Unit

The nation-state, a sovereign political unit defined by territory, population, and self-governance, is the dominant organizational form of global governance, and for good reasons that often go unappreciated. In the global architecture, nation-states play the same role that states play within the American federal system. They are laboratories that can try different governance and economic experiments. Successful experiments can be emulated. Failed ones can serve as cautionary examples without taking the entire world down with them. The diversity of nation-states is a feature rather than a problem to be solved by global standardization, and it operates on the same logic that makes market competition more effective than central planning.

Nations that have developed strong institutions of rule of law, property rights, accountable governance, and free enterprise have consistently generated the conditions for human flourishing regardless of culture, religion, or geography. Nations that have not done so have consistently struggled, regardless of their natural resources or historical legacy. Governance is the variable. This is the central finding of development economics, visible from East Asia to Eastern Europe to Latin America and most clearly in Africa, where the institutional analysis explored earlier applies in its most consequential form. The roadblock is never the people. It is the institutions that determine what the people are allowed to build.

The United Nations and International Law: Good Ideas, Unresolved Tensions

The post-World War II international order, which includes the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the framework of international law, was built on a genuinely important insight. The catastrophic wars of the 20th century were partly the product of

a system of sovereign states with no institutional mechanisms for managing conflict, and building such mechanisms was both possible and necessary. The impulse was sound. The execution has been mixed, and honest assessment requires saying so.

The United Nations has produced genuine goods: coordination on humanitarian crises, forums for diplomatic engagement, and peacekeeping operations that have prevented some conflicts from escalating. It has also demonstrated the characteristic failure of institutions without adequate accountability mechanisms. It has been captured by the interests of its most powerful members. It has failed to prevent or stop numerous genocides and humanitarian catastrophes. Its decision-making structures give equal voice to democracies and authoritarian states in ways that consistently impede action against the latter. An institution that cannot distinguish between a government that protects its citizens and one that massacres them has a foundational design problem that procedural reforms have not solved.

International law presents a parallel set of tensions. The idea that nation-states should be bound by common legal frameworks on trade, on human rights, and on the conduct of war is genuinely valuable, derived from the same logic that makes domestic rule of law valuable: predictability, protection from arbitrary power, and common standards that make cooperation possible. The concern is the one that runs through this entire essay. International legal frameworks that operate without clear accountability to the people they govern, that are enforced selectively by powerful nations, and that are interpreted by bodies insulated from democratic oversight carry their own risks of abuse. The same question we ask of all governance applies here: who does it serve, who is it accountable to, and what happens when it fails?

The Hardest Question: Who Intervenes, and Who Decides?

The most difficult question in global governance is the one the international community has consistently failed to answer coherently. What should the global community do when a nation-state is abusing its own citizens or threatening its neighbors? The principle of national sovereignty, that each state has the right to govern its own territory without external interference, is foundational to international order. It is also, in cases of genocide, mass atrocity, and aggressive war, in direct tension with the principle that human beings have rights that no government can legitimately violate.

These tensions are not going away, and they do not have clean answers. When intervention is justified, who has the authority to authorize it? How do we prevent the principle of “humanitarian intervention” from becoming a license for powerful nations to impose their will on weaker ones, as it has sometimes been? How do we hold nation-states accountable to standards of human rights without creating international bodies whose own concentration of power becomes the next problem? Human Flourishing does not offer definitive answers to these questions. We insist that they must be asked, that easy answers should be distrusted, and that the same principle applies here as everywhere else in this essay. Concentrated decision-making authority, even in a body nominally representing the

international community, carries the risks that concentrated power always carries. The answer is accountable international order rather than no international order at all, and building that remains one of the defining unfinished projects of our time.

PART VIII

What This Means for Human Flourishing

The Structural Conditions of Flourishing

Our pillar statement says that the conditions for flourishing are never purely personal. They are structural. This is the insight that the history of governance confirms at every turn. It does not matter how virtuous an individual is, how hard-working, how talented, or how committed to family and community: if the institutions surrounding her are corrupt, predatory, or designed to serve the powerful at her expense, her flourishing will be constrained or prevented by forces she cannot individually overcome.

The governance question for Human Flourishing is therefore not primarily ideological. It is structural. Are the institutions of governance designed to serve rather than exploit? Are the mechanisms of accountability, including elections, courts, free press, free speech, and the right to organize and dissent, intact and functional? Is power distributed enough that no single faction can capture the system and use it for private ends? Is the circle of protection, the set of people the system genuinely serves, still expanding rather than contracting?

The Trust Crisis and Its Stakes

The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer found that government leaders, at 42 percent global trust, are among the least trusted societal leaders in the world. Media is the least trusted institution globally. In the United States, trust in government has been in near-continuous decline since the 1960s. This is not an abstraction. Research shows that 75 percent of people who trust their government are willing to sacrifice for the greater good, compared to only 48 percent of those who do not. Institutional trust is the foundation of social cooperation itself, not a satisfaction metric. When citizens no longer trust their institutions to be honest, accountable, and oriented toward the common good, they stop cooperating with them, stop defending them, and become susceptible to the authoritarian alternative that promises to cut through the mess with decisive power.

Citizens Who Can Disagree Without Enmity

There is one more structural condition worth naming. The institutions described in this essay, however well designed, depend on something deeper: the capacity of citizens to

disagree with each other about hard questions without treating each other as enemies. A republic is sustained by the daily practice of its citizens, not by paper alone. When neighbors who hold different views can still talk, debate, and live together, the institutions hold. When they cannot, the institutions begin to corrode regardless of their formal design. This is part of what Human Flourishing's other essays are about. The founding essay traced how fear and tribalism are tearing us apart. The Pledge commits its signatories to engaging disagreement with courage, respect, and genuine curiosity. The governance argument we have made here depends on that. Structural protections only do their work if the citizens beneath them remain capable of the hard conversations a free society requires. The institutional and the personal are not separate projects. They are two sides of the same one.

The Human Flourishing Response

Human Flourishing does not offer a partisan political program. We are not here to tell anyone how to vote. We are here to say, as clearly as we can, that the structural conditions of governance matter for the project of human flourishing in ways that cannot be reduced to individual effort or community goodwill.

The stands we have taken in this essay are these. Power corrupts, and every institution has to be designed with that truth at its center. The protection of minority rights from majoritarian overreach is the most essential feature of democracy rather than an optional refinement to it. The deliberate slowness of constitutional processes for fundamental change is wisdom rather than dysfunction. Free speech is the mechanism by which all other accountability is made possible. Equal opportunity, meaning genuine access to the conditions of flourishing, is a legitimate and demanding standard. Equal outcome is an unworkable goal that has consistently required coercion to pursue. The experiments of the 20th century are empirical evidence rather than mere history, and forgetting them is civic negligence rather than intellectual openness.

We also believe that the concerns animating critiques of the status quo, about inequality, about captured institutions, about markets that serve the powerful at the expense of the many, about governance that talks about equal opportunity while delivering unequal access, are legitimate concerns that defenders of republican democracy and free enterprise have to answer honestly. The case for these systems is not made by declaring victory. It is made by continuing to deliver, imperfectly and accountably, through the mechanisms of self-correction that make it possible to fail and recover.

The greatest threat to human flourishing is not any foreign adversary or natural disaster. It is the slow erosion of the institutional fabric that has, fitfully and incompletely, expanded the circle of human freedom over centuries. Defending and renewing that fabric, as a human project rather than a partisan one, is among the most important things any generation can do for those who come after.

A Final Reflection

The governance story told here draws heavily from the Western tradition, and we are aware of that. Other traditions carry their own governance wisdom: the Iroquois Confederacy whose structure influenced the Founders, the African Ubuntu philosophy of communal accountability, the Confucian tradition of governance as moral cultivation. The principles we have identified, including accountability, dispersal of power, protection of the vulnerable, and the expansion of the circle of protection, appear across these traditions in different forms. The underlying problem is universal. How do flawed human beings organize power in ways that serve rather than destroy the conditions of human flourishing?

That problem is never finally solved. It is worked on continuously, imperfectly, and courageously, by citizens who care enough to defend the institutions that protect them, to hold power accountable through the mechanisms available to them, to speak when speaking is difficult, and to remember what the alternative has always cost when the appeals to fear and to the strongman are most seductive.

Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at humanflourishing.us, and sign it if what it names is what you are trying to practice.

Share this essay with someone who sees the world differently than you do — and then, when they have read it, have the conversation about it.

The work is ongoing. The community is forming. The conversation is just beginning.

Scott McIntosh

Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | MAC6 | Conscious Capitalism Arizona

Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC⁶, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

Angela McIllece

Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution — helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures — including living in New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia — raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and across the United States. These experiences have shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular — expressed differently across cultures, but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

Selected Sources and Further Reading

This essay draws on a long tradition of political thought, contemporary research on governance and institutions, and the empirical record of the 20th century's great governance experiments. The works listed below are not a comprehensive citation but a starting point for readers who want to go deeper into the arguments made here.

On the classical foundations of constitutional governance

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (1787–1788). Madison's Federalist No. 10 on faction and the extended republic, and Federalist No. 51 on separation of powers, are the foundational texts behind the architectural argument of this essay.

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). The natural rights and consent-of-the-governed framework that shaped the Declaration of Independence.

Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). The separation of powers as structural blueprint, and the original articulation of the trade-and-peace argument quoted in Part VI.

Lord Acton, letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887. The source of "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

George Washington, address to the officers of the Continental Army at Newburgh, March 15, 1783. Source of the "dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter" passage in Part IV.

On historical case studies referenced in the essay

Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (Liveright, 2015). Accessible and rigorous account of the Roman Republic's rise and institutional collapse.

Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (Viking, 1980). Standard scholarly reference on the scale and structure of slavery in classical Athens and Rome.

Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Belknap/Harvard, 2009). The standard modern history of the war whose mortality is referenced in Part I.

On authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the psychology of power

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Schocken, 1951). Source of the observation about the ideal subject of totalitarian rule that anchors the argument in Part II.

Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 2003). Definitive account of how Weimar democracy was dismantled through legal mechanisms rather than overthrown by force.

Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography* (Norton, 2008). Companion historical perspective on the same period.

Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Empirical research on the latent disposition toward authoritarianism that activates under perceived threat, demonstrating its presence across the political spectrum.

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012). Research on moral intuitions and tribal cognition across ideological lines, supporting the claim in Part II that liberals and conservatives show similar levels of tribal bias under stress.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018). Comparative analysis of democratic backsliding in the 21st century, central to the fragility argument in Part III.

V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (University of Gothenburg, 2026). Annual measurement of democracy and autocratization trends worldwide, including the finding that nearly a quarter of the world's countries are now undergoing autocratization, with new autocratizing countries concentrated in Europe and North America.

On the 2008 financial crisis and the structural relationship between governance and markets

Raghuram G. Rajan, *Fault Lines: How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2010). Argues that political pressure to expand homeownership through credit substituted for stagnant middle-class incomes and helped produce the crisis. Awarded the Financial Times and Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year.

Charles W. Calomiris and Stephen H. Haber, *Fragile by Design: The Political Origins of Banking Crises and Scarce Credit* (Princeton University Press, 2014). Comparative political economy of banking crises, with extensive analysis of the U.S. case.

On African development and the institutional argument

Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (Crown, 2012). The institutional argument central to the Africa section of Part VI. Acemoglu shared the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics with Robinson and Simon Johnson for this body of work.

Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty* (Penguin, 2019). Extends the institutional argument to the question of how liberty is sustained between state weakness and state dominance.

Magatte Wade, *The Heart of A Cheetah: How We Have Been Lied to about African Poverty, and What That Means for Human Flourishing*, foreword by George Ayittey (Cheetah Press, 2023). The regulatory-barriers argument and the Cheetah Generation framing in Part VI.

Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009). The parallel African critique of the international aid architecture.

Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Anthem Press, 2002). The heterodox case for state-led development, engaged directly in Part VI.

Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism* (Bloomsbury, 2007). Chang's argument applied to development economics and trade policy.

William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Penguin, 2006). The "planners versus searchers" critique of top-down development, relevant context for the Africa discussion.

On contemporary China

Margaret M. Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai, "Party-State Capitalism in China," *Current History* 120, no. 827 (September 2021): 207–213. Source for the concept of party-state capitalism used in Part VI's discussion of China.

On institutional trust

Edelman, 2024 *Edelman Trust Barometer: Innovation in Peril* (Edelman, January 2024). Annual global survey of trust in institutions, source for the figures cited in Part VIII on government leaders and media trust.

Edelman, 2024 *Edelman Trust Barometer Special Analysis: Trust and Government* (Edelman, October 2024). Source for the finding that 75 percent of those who trust government are willing to sacrifice for the greater good, compared with 48 percent of those who do not.

On historical economic comparisons

Maddison Project Database (Groningen Growth and Development Centre, University of Groningen). Standard scholarly source for long-run historical GDP per capita comparisons, including the East/West Germany and Korea data referenced in Part V.

World Bank Open Data (data.worldbank.org). Source for contemporary economic and demographic data referenced in the essay.

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