With the publication of “The End of History and the Last Man” in 1992, in which he claimed that the end of the Cold War marked the permanent ascendancy of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism throughout the world. Francis Fukuyama emerged as one of our nation’s most prominent and provocative public intellectuals. Over the past quarter of a century, Fukuyama, who now is a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Institute for International Studies, has qualified his “end of history” thesis, distanced himself from neoconservatism, and written big books about big subjects, including the nature of human nature, the origins of social norms, the revolution in biotechnology and the development gap between Latin America and the United States.

A sequel to “The Origins of Political Order” (2011), “Political Order and Political Decay” explains how effective political institutions developed — or didn’t — in dozens of countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and South America from the French Revolution to the Arab Spring. Given the emergence of global economies and highly mobilized populations, Fukuyama argues, a balanced system featuring the state as the guarantor of order and security and a source of public goods, the rule of law and democratic accountability has become a “universal requirement.” Pathways to it and the institutional forms it takes, however, vary considerably, depending on climate and geography as well as human factors, including leadership, international influences and ideology.

Learned and judicious, “Political Order and Political Decay” is jam-packed with insights about political development. The chronological sequencing of the emergence of the state, the rule of law (which Fukuyama distinguishes from rule by law), and accountability in the society, matters, he points out. In the United States, the rule of law, followed by implementation of universal white male suffrage, had a “decisively negative impact on state building” because it made patronage (and not merit-based) appointments pervasive in virtually all levels of government and led to a system of checks and balances that is, for better and worse, unique among liberal democracies. In the 21st century, the United States is paying a steep price for a political culture based on distrust of executive authority: “too much law and too much ‘democracy’ relative to American state capacity.”

Fukuyama also provides an intriguing explanation of the failure of governments in Latin America to build strong state capacities. In contrast to Europe, where frequent wars required the “formation and consolidation of strong modern states,” he suggests, national identities in Latin America were weak because of ethnic diversity and geographical isolation; conflict more often divided classes than countries. Although he does not advocate “giving war a chance,” Fukuyama does observe that “just outcomes in the present are often the result … of crimes committed in the past.”

Fukuyama, who began to criticize the war in Iraq in late 2003, is wary of “nation building.” Drawing on studies of colonialism and more recent efforts to impose “good institutions,” he notes that more often than not they produced “isomorphic mimicry,” form without substance. Foreigners, he adds, are seldom aware of the constraints and opportunities presented by local history, traditions and cultural norms that “underpin the state’s legitimacy.” East Asian countries have succeeded, according to Fukuyama, because local elites were allowed to import Western models and build on an already strong state authority; their challenge has been to limit its power through law and representative government.

Fukuyama is cautiously optimistic about “the prospects for democracy.” “Regimes that balance strong states with legal and democratic constraints on power,” he writes, “have become a normative standard around the world” — and economic growth is spreading to much of “the developing world.” Liberal democracy, however, won’t spread quickly or easily. Much as democratic initiatives in Europe were diverted by nationalism in the 19th century, popular mobilization in the Middle East has been hijacked by radical Islam. And China has succeeded, thus far, with an authoritarian regime. The challenges facing existing liberal democracies are different. Fukuyama does not believe that they face a “system crisis of governability,” but he worries about “the slow erosion of the quality of governance and the consequent loss of democracy’s appeal,” especially in the check-and-balance-laden United States and European Union. The challenges will be all the greater, he notes, because demography and longer life spans are making the social contracts underlying welfare states unsustainable, inequality is growing, and the middle class is shrinking.

No political system, Fukuyama concludes, can work on autopilot. And so, the viability of liberal democracy, in a balanced system of state, law and accountability, will depend on an adaptation to changed conditions by governments and the people to whom they are responsible. Clearly, he wants them — and us — to have the intelligence, the will and the capacity to do so, wisely and well.

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Political Order and Political Decay

From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy

By Francis Fukuyama

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