What the Founders Knew

What did the Founders learn about autocracy from history?
What problems were the Founders hoping to solve with democracy?

The Founders of the United States were far from perfect. They were wrong on many counts, such as slavery, treatment of Native Americans, and not allowing all people to vote. But they were able to set up a nation that would endure and be able to address some of these issues while becoming a more inclusive democracy.

One thing they understood very well was that democracies were fragile and that very few had survived throughout history. Many carefully studied the past and saw that humans had been plagued by kings and dictators for centuries. What they feared most were powerful monarchs, which are a type of autocrat that claims to have a right to rule by God and family inheritance. After all, they had just fought a war for independence from the monarch King George III of Great Britain.

Most of the Founders had studied the history of the previous two centuries. What they saw in the 1500’s and 1600’s were two centuries of kings and queens fighting for power with each other and within their royal families. Kings fighting their sons for power. Princes fighting their brothers for power. Mothers pitting sons against sons. Daughters being forced to marry princes from other families for power. The Thirty Year’s War (1618-1648) and the Eighty Year’s War (1568-1648) were basically endless power struggles among ruling families that also introduced the element of religion to the struggle by pitting Roman Catholic Christians against Protestant Christians. They saw Popes and bishops and religious leaders leading armies!

For most of the Founders, their homeland was England, part of Great Britain. There had been several centuries of struggles between Roman Catholic kings and queens. Even a person elected by democratically elected representatives, Oliver Cromwell, turned into a dictator after several years. Their latest King, George the III was believed to have suffered from mental illness and was seen by all as unstable, but no one in power dared to mention it since he was the monarch. The Founders learned from the past that all forms of authoritarianism, whether monarchies or dictatorships were corrupt, unstable, and bad for the well-being of the average person.

They also learned that the greatest danger in authoritarian governments was at the time of a transfer of power. They saw that when an old, powerful king or queen died, there was no way to fairly determine who should be the next leader. This is when a violent struggle would often erupt. They saw that leaders would try to get us much of a population to fight on their side by saying whatever was necessary to get the most support, whether or not it was true. The most dangerous leaders would try to get one faction of the population to fight another by saying untrue things about the other side, and blame them, or scapegoat, for problems they themselves may have caused, such as famine, poverty, and war.

So, when the Founders sat down to devise a system of government in 1787, one of the things they all agreed on was that the power to choose leaders must be with the people, and that the transfer of power from one president to the next must be peaceful and follow the rules they started in the Constitution.