

The American Democratic Experiment

America's great documents indicate the democratic values that must be made to live in our experiences.

IN AN ERA marked by political and industrial revolutions, a new nation was born, the United States. The European father, as Max Lerner termed the heritage, contributed to this American offspring a faith in libertarian ideas and in representative government.

There is more than an echo of Milton in Jefferson's words during his inaugural address, "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." There is a thunderous reverberation of the British struggle for self government in the Colonial petitions to the British Parliament and in the Declaration of Independence.

The new nation's greatest document of democracy was explicit in its support of ideals akin to those of the French Revolution. Liberty, equality and fraternity were on the march across the world in the era when the new nation held "that all men are created equal" and that their rights included "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

But the Declaration of Independence was an ideal in a land which had far to go for its full realization. The new

country included states where slavery was legally practiced. Women had no votes and a property qualification disenfranchised many men who were "free, white and over twenty-one." Yet the enduring ideal of the Declaration of Independence was to be increasingly achieved with time.

Though the Constitution of the United States was made possible through many compromises, several of them to achieve a balance between free and equal, it was uncompromising in spelling out the freedoms guaranteed Americans in the Bill of Rights added at the insistence of the people. Its preamble spoke of "We the People" and foreshadowed constitutional interpretations that "We the People" included no second-class citizens.

The Democratic Dream

But documents of democracy may be revoked or repudiated. A nation has a fighting chance to achieve the aspirations of its documents only if the conditions of its life, its daily experience, support those ideals. Happily such were the conditions in the early years of the young

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nation. There was one direction to expand, West. The Westward Movement fostered individualism, self-reliance and equalitarianism among the newly free and independent Americans. Even those who stayed in the growing towns and cities of the Eastern seaboard developed a willingness to take chances in an expanding economy.

Both frontiersmen and city dwellers became more demanding of the right to vote and to play a role in public affairs. In a period of Jacksonian democracy, the common man began to come into his own. There were excesses to be sure, the spoils system among them, and foreign observers such as Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens were not overly impressed with American manners and courtesy. (What visitor ever accused the hustling American democracy of being neat, orderly, tidy?)

The hail fellow, well-met democracy of free and equal common men was severely tested in the nineteenth century by a Civil War in which brother contended with brother and two systems of economic organization, the plantation and the factory, fought it out. Inextricably entangled with economic issues were moral issues, particularly the haunting problem of human slavery. The fervor of the abolitionists, with their impassioned pleas for human dignity, with their martyrs for civil liberties such as Elijah Lovejoy whose press was burned in Illinois, insured that the moral aspects of the irrepressible conflict would be imperishably written into American literature by Thoreau, Emerson, and Whittier, among others.

Nor could the democratic stakes be ignored when the leader was Lincoln matching any step backward, such as suspension of habeas corpus, with three steps forward, such as the Emancipation

Proclamation, his encompassing humanity, his faith in the common man. As he said simply in his first inaugural address, "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it." In a letter he once said, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy." Best known of Lincoln's statements on democracy is, of course, the Gettysburg Address with its phrases on our nation "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," and its closing plea "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Social and Economic Frontiers

With the triumph of industrialism, democratic ideals were to be further tested by the rise of great cities (in colorful Jefferson language "festering sores"); by the tides of immigrants who lacked acquaintance with American ways and democratic ideals; by the closing of the frontier, as free land was no more; by the rise of big business power. The new problems were the social and economic dilemmas of an urban, industrialist, capitalist society. In America, 1890 was a watershed. On one side lay the older rural society, a blend of Benjamin Franklin and Davy Crockett; on the other side, lay the complexities of twentieth century urban living, a blend too complex for personification.

Americans found that in an urban, industrial, capitalistic America the nineteenth century democratic values could become distorted through excesses or extremist interpretation. A frontier individualism which tamed the wilderness in

little more than a century could become an industrialist individualism marked by predatory exploitation, the pursuit of the almighty dollar, the creation of urban jungles. Liberty could become license, lack of restraint, the lawlessness and mobocracy which conservatives like Hamilton and Madison and Adams predicted and feared.

The answer to these value perplexities was not to surrender individualism and liberty as no longer tenable values. The preferable answer was to define them better, apply them with more discrimination, moderate them with companion democratic values to serve man better in industrialized urban settings. For reinterpretation, reliance must be placed on the kingpin among the democratic values, the use of intelligence and reflective thought, in order to judge which democratic values required new stress or reorientation.

Such a reappraisal was characteristic of the Age of Reform in American life, a time of intellectual, reformist, political ferment from 1890 to the Second World War. In the context of a social and economic, rather than a physical, frontier, the procedures growing out of fraternity, a persisting democratic value, became more applicable. Cooperation, working together for common purposes commonly arrived at, the general welfare, widening the area of shared experiences, practicing human brotherhood, came to be prized by the thoughtful. Egalitarianism was seen as a corrective for skewing of income distribution, for poverty in the midst of plenty. As usual, government which belonged to the people by long-established democratic precedent, became one of the tools first seized upon by the new reformation. Government was seen not simply as an agency guaranteeing the political

right to the ballot now legally achieved by all men regardless of property and soon to be achieved by women. Government was also seen as an agency with a weather eye to the improvement of the settings in which Americans must both live and earn their livings. These settings were jobs, transportation, homes, streets, neighborhoods.

So the campaigns for social and economic democracy were fought and often won in the name of general welfare and with the support of the values of fraternity and equality. They included the Square Deal, the New Freedom, the New Deal, and the Fair Deal. The battlegrounds were numerous: anti-monopoly, control of transportation rates, factory inspection, health conditions, the income tax, child labor, the right of collective bargaining, recreational opportunities, minimum wages, consumer protection, housing, social security, anti-discrimination legislation. But they were battlegrounds in a single war. The common man was struggling to maintain dignity and human liberty in a new urban setting. Even when Americans elected the more conservative of competing candidates, the voices of those who wanted to turn back history's clock by repeal of social legislation did not prevail against the view which insisted that equalitarianism and freedom were compatible, that government could contribute to the creation of fraternity while not sacrificing the values of individualism.

The credo of the liberal reformers stressed human rights not property rights, emphasized social action, relied on reason and the scientific method. The hope of the supporters of reform was increasingly to develop such life goals in Americans as sensitivity about life, a sense of connection among all human beings, a devotion to meaningful work,

self insight and self knowledge, joy in the variety and potentiality of life, the pursuit of happiness in the best sense. Yet many Americans held to older, firmly established life goals of success, prestige, money and power.

A Permanent Revolution

So America is a dynamic experiment in democracy, an unfinished country. It combines its values into a constellation. Its philosophy of government includes emphasis on liberty and the dignity of the individual, including constitutional government, civil liberties, limitation of governmental powers, protection against arbitrary encroachment. And its philosophy of government also includes emphasis on equality and fraternity, including rule of the majority, improvement of educational and job opportunities, swift adaptation of man's institutions to social purposes. All, paradoxically, are essential; in practice each is interlocked.

The American ideology supports both individual freedom and mass participation. Its philosophy of persons includes both respect for the worth and dignity of the individual person and recognition that people must work together for common purposes and steadily widen the area of shared interests. In short, America attempts to combine an individualism which respects human dignity, with a libertarianism which stresses constitutional guarantees, with an equalitarianism which insists on equal opportunities, with a fraternity which holds to common interests and cooperative arrangements. Balancing all, fostering consideration of alternatives, urging the reconstruction of experiences, presides the guiding method of a democracy, the use of reflective thought through apply-

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ing the method of intelligence to human affairs.

As the nineteen fifties moved toward their close, the chorus on values included some new voices which warned against subordination of individualism and loss of liberty and freedom through abuse of fraternity and egalitarianism. The menace no longer was seen as predatory exploitation, as callousness to welfare values by robber barons. To a mid-century generation of intellectuals, the threat to democracy seemed to be a gray anonymity, a nation of other-directed personalities, of organization men, of conformist status seekers, of dependents on tranquilizers, of manipulators of group process, of prophets of uncritical adjustment to the status quo, of passive security-minded denizens of a brave new world, an animal farm, a 1984. Perhaps again, in our own time, a reassessment of what our values mean for modern life was under way, sparked by the continuous self-criticism which characterized the key value of democracy, the use of intelligence in the in-

terest of humanity. Today is too early to tell the outcome.

The Danger to Democracy

In the last half of the twentieth century, the peril to the dynamic democratic experiment, to "the permanent revolution," seems superficially to be external. This is a planet on which the fascist bid for world domination was repelled only to be succeeded by at least an equally monstrous threat, the Russian and Chinese Soviet powers proceeding through a combination of subversion and direct aggression to swallow up Asiatic and Eastern European nations.

Yet it is part of a communist theory to rely on internal weaknesses in the practice of the democratic idea. They hope an internal failure of the democratic experiment in America and the world will do their work for them. As their guarantee that the world will fall like ripe fruit into their hands, the Marxists, true to their prophet, rely upon the collapse of capitalism, recurring economic depression, fondness for imperialist exploitation, in contrast to high Soviet production, rising living standards of backward peoples in the Soviet orbit, know-how in cultivating international relationships. They regard as essentially hypocritical American values of respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, of love for liberty and freedom, of egalitarianism, and of fraternity. In refutation they allege undemocratic practices by Americans, segregation of the American Negro, the plight of slum dwellers, persisting maldistribution of wealth, vestiges of industrial feudalism, starved social services (especially education) in an affluent society, callousness toward underdeveloped nations, use of foreign aid

as an instrument of military policy, superior attitudes of Americans abroad. The communists regard our undemocratic policies as certain to doom our democratic protestations.

The communists may be right. It is up to us to prove them wrong. The crucial test of the last half of the twentieth century may be whether the democratic way in open competition with the communist way proves to be the better permanent revolution for the peoples of the world. The crucial test of American democracy may be on an issue older than the United States, at least as old as the Greek city state—making our democratic values live in our experiences.

Emerson's Page

His neighbors scratched
stones from their land,
but Emerson with
practiced hand

rifled their secrets
as he read,
A stone is a granite
book, he said.

Stones break plows
hidden from sight
and farmers answer
with dynamite.

But will by force
is not the sun
to ripen truth,
said Emerson,

a pine tree's wisdom
speaks in cones.
He went on reading
brooks and stones.

—JAMES HEARST, *Cedar Falls, Iowa*

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