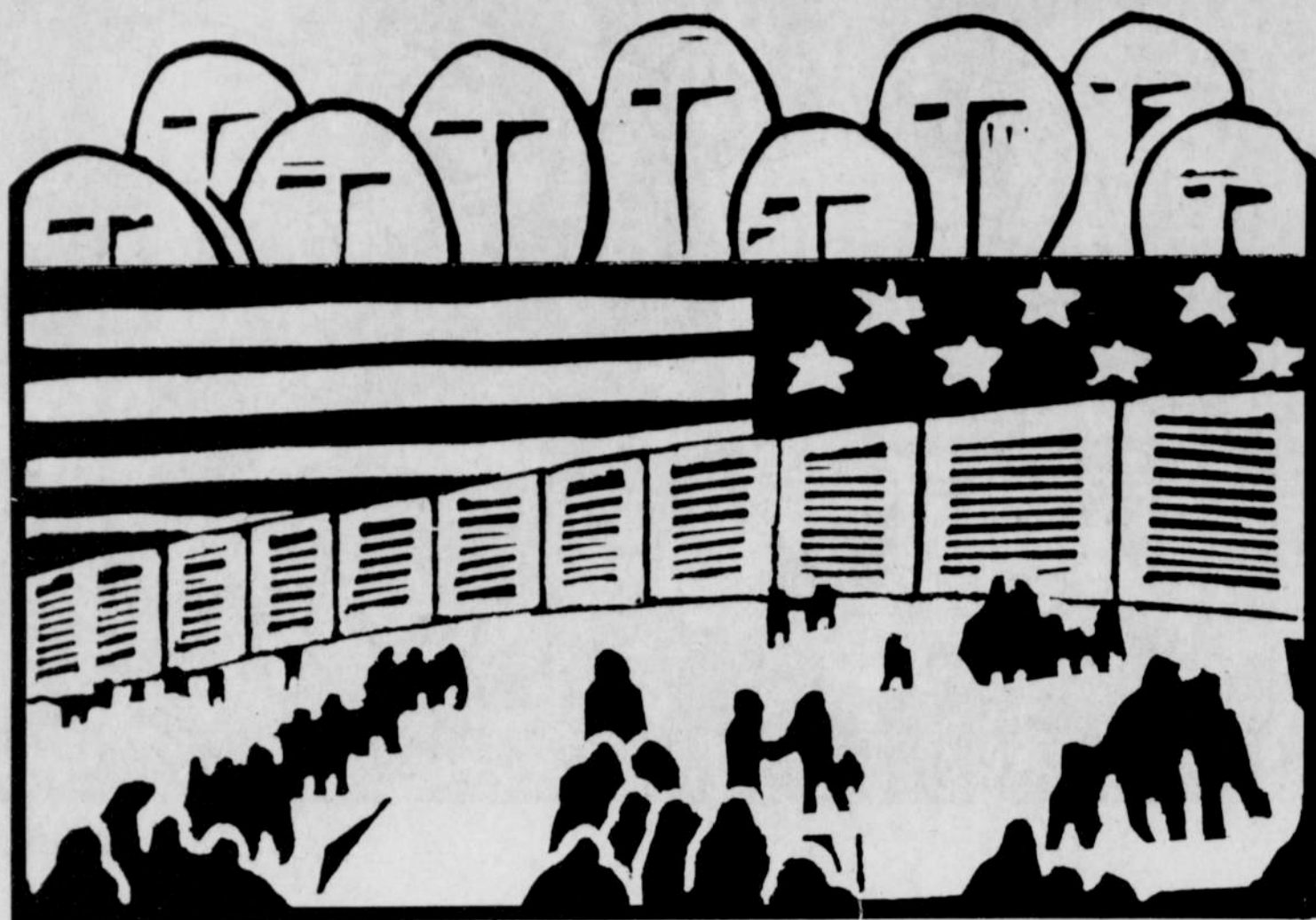


DEMOCRACY BEGINS AT HOME



ANDY NELSON

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"Remember one thing about democracy. We can have everything we want and at the same time, we always end up with what we deserve."

—EDWARD ALBEE

Democracy began in 508 BC when the citizens of Athens overthrew a Tyrant and set up a government of the people. *Democracy* is a Greek word meaning 'rule of the people'.

Unfortunately the Tyrant came back with an army and executed the more prominent democrats who ousted him. He took back the government and ruled as a tyrant until he died. Yet as our revolutionary ancestors demonstrated two centuries ago, democracy frequently prevails over tyrants and outlives them.

Democracy is a pragmatic compromise between the yearning for freedom and the urge to frustrate it. It is an elaborate though inherently fragile system of concessions between diverse and disparate ambitions and ideologies represented by a variety of economic and political classes, despite an enshrined myth that a democracy is a classless society. The irony is that democracy is better able to tolerate class differences than any other system of government.

The only possible survival for a democracy is to establish and sustain a balance between its conflicting factions and allow none of them to gain such power as to be capable of suppressing or ravaging the rest.

So long as no particular interest is powerful enough to fully and finally overwhelm its varied rivals, nor any alliance capable of singleness of purpose long enough to accomplish that end, a tacit respect for the laws and terms of constitutional democracy is maintained. At rare moments an idea that might accidentally resemble social justice is sometimes enacted as law of the land, although opposing forces waste little time in their attempts to overturn whatever might be to their disadvantage.

Democracies are themselves compromises between dreamlike edens of anarchy, socialist collectives of workers' paradises in which individual liberties are usually forfeit as are most worldly possessions including food and shoes, and aristocracies of one shape or another that rule through tradition and privilege for the single purpose of their own comfort which is historically at the expense of large masses of impoverished citizens who are obliged to toil and obey. Democratic governments are most often inspired by rising classes of bourgeoisie whose general outlook is liberal and progressive yet seldom naïve about the affairs of business and government. The political suffrage of the democratic public is channeled by powerful political/economic interests to stifle possibly contagious outbreaks of populism.

Democracies face periodic crisis when ideological concerns lose patience with legislative or judicial processes. Powerful, often retrogressive and reactionary forces rise at times of rapid social transformation, which also generally include more than usual excesses of corruption as well as strained economies. When ideologies rigidify into implacable positions that despise workable compromise the likely result is civil violence, which might erupt on a skinhead scale yet quickly escalate into savage extremes such as an earlier American experience (1861-65) or the current Balkan butcheries. (A distinction should be made between violent reprisals by an uncompromising government and uncompromising violence by a rapacious minority determined to undermine and overthrow government.)

At the heart of radical myth is the claim there are no neutrals in the epic struggle to eliminate tyranny and poverty (or perpetuate them) but in real life most people prefer to be neutral. They would rather work to improve their lot within a familiar structure than risk the imponderables of a new one. As the *Longview Daily News* once put it, garbage disposal, safe drinking water, groundwater contamination, sewage problems, radioactive and toxic wastes are more on people's minds than overthrowing the government. It is not so much poverty, inequality or repression that bring out public clamor for change but more usually the fear of losing comforts already attained.

The assumption of democracy is that the average human being is intelligent and inspired by compassion and that most people will think and act reasonably most of the time. The

usual assumption of government is the common citizenry is unintelligent, primitive and brutal and must be shielded from its own perfidious nature. The tendency of government is to rule, and by implication or force of its sovereignty, parasitically feed upon and subtract the political liberties, rights and powers of those it rules. It is the responsibility of the people to always contain the power of their government which without that restraint will relentlessly take away power from the people. In this century the U.S. government has usurped much power for itself, some of it for the betterment of the people such as civil rights laws, but also much of it against the people such as the rule of terror, secrecy and doubt that characterized the Cold War and nuclear arms race with the now defunct Soviet Union.

The idea of the authority of law is a recognition by most of us that a few of us will cheat, rob, murder or otherwise make life uncomfortable for the rest. A majority desires protection from the psychopathy of an avaricious minority. For exactly the same purpose, to protect us from predatory or cruel government, the political freedom and power of the common citizenry has been made the law of this nation. Yet a government of the people is assumed to also be a government for the people, so it is entrusted to act in the people's behalf to prevent or correct the excesses of monopolistic and unprincipled private interests, which is in contrast to the current era of virulent capitalism. Former President Reagan was wrong when he said that a free government must be free from government. The dismantling of

'I LIKE MIKE'

"90% of politics is deciding whom to blame."

—MEG GREENFIELD

I had a half-awake dream one night that my neighbor, friend and political rival, Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen was riding past me on his new motorcycle as I walked home. He waved and shouted "Hi Michael!" as he usually does; the bike suddenly went out of control and he cartwheeled into a tree.

That might be the only chance I have of becoming the 20th century's last Mayor of the Oldest City in the West. There is something beguiling about the word 'candidate' — the *candid* part that impels me to acknowledge I probably have as much chance as I do flying off on a comet.

I am campaigning for Mayor because it offers an opportunity to learn real American politics. And because Theodore Roosevelt called every election a "Bully Pulpit."

I have not put together much of a campaign. I have not formed a committee or raised any money. I haven't rung doorbells or pressed flesh. I haven't made any soundbites for radio or TV; and no ads in local newspapers. I plan to speak at a few public forums I have been invited to and the Mayor has agreed to debate at least once with me on a local public radio program. And I do have a campaign slogan, "I Like Mike". (But no buttons or posters.)

Friends suggest my only chance of winning is to play the game, press the flesh, take the bucks; get down, dirty and mean, show folks I *really* want the job. "You can have fun but you've got to be serious," a woman warned.

A lot is on the plate this election: the American President threatened with impeachment, the global economy melting down, the possibility of nuclear war in Asia on the larger scale. The disparity of wealth locally as well as nationally. The changing cultural demographics with the growing Hispanic population. The inadequacy of tourism as a substitute for the loss of timber, fish and virtually all of Astoria's maritime economy. The preservation of the city's antiquity or selling it off. The decline of voting in elections, which is as critical as any other problem or issue.

Rene Dubois had a very good suggestion for American politics when he said, "Think universally, act locally." A wise and reasonable credo for campaigners as well as voters.

—MPMc

government protections which has continued since his administration alters government's role from acting as benefactor and protector of civil rights and liberties to its more ominous nature of guardian and enforcer of the reigning *status quo*, which is increasingly articulated by the religious right.

The practice of democracy is incomplete in its concentration on political rights without adequate attention paid to economic or social rights. In theory everybody has an equal chance to make a buck and live the American Dream in pursuit of happiness, but of course some are more equal than others in intelligence and capability or just plain luck (or cupidity). A few of these happyfortunates share their good fortune but the majority usually hog what they accumulate and increase it at the expense and labor of others whom they impede from sharing in the worth of their production; such notions of inequity are dismissed as socialist or politically incorrect.

The plutocrats who control the country's major political parties claim that the economy defines the nation more than its ideology (the *Declaration of Independence* and *Bill of Rights*): money is the nation's ideology. What they mean by their strict interpretation of the "economy" is their own personal domination of the national wealth. Narrow monetary policies that singularly benefit the upper layers of society draw from money from less well-off levels which keeps them less well-off and always under pressure to pay what is demanded. Releasing public money (most of it pried from middle class and blue-collar labor) to business and the wealthy elite is considered sound investment and essential to the economy. Feeding the poor or providing them adequate shelter and medical care, or even educating them, is regarded as uneconomical and a drain on the national treasury.

Yet the real purpose of the American experiment is that human beings should be able to coexist as equals, not necessarily in wealth or advantage but in basic rights and liberties and equally share in power, and that none should be denied these whatever their wealth or advantage.

The USA has seldom been kind or generous to its poor or minorities. Each time an outcast population struggles for equality the powerful and others who fear diversity or do not wish to share wealth or power attempt to squash individuals and movements responsible, usually in the names of law and order and/or national security. Yet compelling the underprivileged to remain in poverty and dejection is at once volatile and ultimately calamitous to the nation. The real best and brightest are kept out and all of us in the end suffer.

The imbalance that results corrupts the core of our democracy and produces mendacious mediocrity at the upper levels of power. We are governed by pious hypocrites who are mostly white males in a nation in which women are the majority and the great variety of races outnumber Caucasians. Women have made it into the middle levels of politics, as have a few blacks, Hispanics and Asian-Americans: but for the present and most likely beyond the end of the century the top national positions are closed to all but a small club of white males, a minority of upper class men who strain to hold onto power, clinging desperately, defiantly and ruthlessly to their peculiar form of country club apartheid.

Candidates of the political parties appeal to the masses for their votes but usually serve the minority at society's upper end. It is not entirely the fault of office seekers that the system is tilted toward the top. Elites take root in every society and wield disproportionate power unless a counterbalance restrains them. In a democracy that force of resistance is constitutionally the power of ordinary people. Political parties are formed to reflect and channel the passions of ordinary people and publicly represent them fairly, efficiently and powerfully — in theory at least — with a minimum of corruption and disruption. The two party system fails in this purpose. It is too exclusive and compressed, and it eliminates too many people and ideas from the actual process of governance. The parties in reality serve politicians and their favored patrons rather than the voters.

Reflecting the world at large which has generally been divided into rich and poor nations, politics in the USA are an ever-widening bicameral separation between *haves* and *have-nots*, with the Democratic Party accumulating a disproportionate membership of the impoverished that for a long time gave it numerical superiority but recently percolated a major defection of its traditional (white) middle-class base, tremendously benefitting the Republican Party.

The degeneration of the Democratic Party intensifies the problem and leaves a black hole in the center of American politics. The Party's own center has fallen out, deserted to the Republican Superparty, leaving disenfranchised minorities clinging to a disintegrated corona. Perhaps like the Soviet Communist Party its ruins should be abandoned, the surviving fragments reformed into a new party (as in Russia) or a multitude of parties that might at least reflect the disparate new majorities that have moved into the American electorate but so far have not gained real or representative power.

The Democratic Party is traditionally the party of working people and minorities. Though its history is hardly glorious — in particular its advocacy of Southern apartheid in the 19th century — the Democratic Party usually, though reluctantly and always narrowly, encompasses a mixed variety of ideas, philosophies and cultural styles that would otherwise find expression in other parties, which generally have little chance against the prevalent two party system. Jammed uncomfortably into this single political party alongside a now virtually vanished core of strict constructionists are liberals, leftists, trade unionists,



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