

A CRACK IN THE LIBERTY BELL



MAGUIRE

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*Would it not be simpler
If the government
Dissolved the people
And elected another?*

—BERTOLD BRECHT (1953)

Democracy begins at home. First in the heart; from there it radiates through the house into the neighborhood and community. It is found in smaller places rather than in centralized illusions of popular culture that reflect mind manipulation and mendacity as well as gross distortions of constitutional processes and interpretations.

Democracy is after all a 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 only possible survival for democracy is to establish and sustain balance between conflicting factions so that none gain such power as to be capable of suppressing or ravaging the rest. In that sense, no debate or problem can be fully or finally resolved without its resolution becoming repressive: if any one faction tips the balance of power for very long the fabric of democracy is destroyed. Diversity is democracy, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, the country is rapidly retrogressing from a diversely construed democracy centered on the rule of common folk to an aristo/plutocracy of immensely wealthy persons and corporations. The USA is at a crossroads as severe as the Civil War: a crisis that will determine its future as a nation and society — either as a corporate oligarchy administered by questionably elected figureheads; or an open society as envisioned in its most fundamental beliefs and laws, as well as a leading member of a world confederacy of presumably eventual democracies.

American history boiled to the bone might be encapsulated as war and money rather than about liberty and equality — if it is argued that the wars have all been fought for money, the pursuit of wealth reconfigures as the essential matrix of the USA's 'Manifest Destiny'.

This perspective of history is obviously an injustice to those who have struggled and often been jailed, bled or died for

the larger beliefs relevant in the Bill of Rights, the ten commandments of American democracy. Yet the very fact of the intensity of the strife for equity and justice within our own Constitution gives legitimacy to the claim that for the powerful elite, wealth and who gets it is the mainspring of the nation's history.

If indeed this narrow view of history has any credence, it must be realized that a select few have from the beginning profited from the collective effort of multitudes of ordinary citizens who generally prefer equity to imbalance. In this context the term freedom is misapplied — both politically and economically; "free enterprise" is a misnomer, for the fact that throughout the country's 229 year history the wealthiest Americans have for the most part accumulated and maintained their wealth at public expense, essentially through sales and subsidies, which can also be defined as the blood and taxes of the majority who generally make possible but seldom share in the abundance.

The real issue of democracy is the disparity of wealth, which complicates and corrupts every other issue. The religious rightwing is prepared to begin a second civil war to impose their rigid theocratic hypocrisies upon government and citizenry, but their despotic conservatism is fueled by the secularly-minded wealthy elite whose shadowy support enfranchises virulent attacks against liberalistic leftist ideas and persons.

It is the wealthy, whose affluence is to a large degree established on public money paid by the less-affluent they incessantly impoverish, who are the real revolutionaries of contemporary America because they are the source of the dissolution of the essentially liberal society that indulges their insatiable and arrogant avarices.

The real purpose of the American experience is that human beings are capable of coexisting as equals, that so-called free competition is not one of unfair or dominating advantage. A democracy decays when enormous numbers of citizens are unemployed with poverty and homelessness their only prospects. The remedies for repairing and reversing the intolerable social

catastrophe that has resulted from the past decades of government laissez faire of business and corporate meganopoly of the country are many and varied, and depend upon reapplying the nation's fundamental principles with fresh interpretations.

The colonial rebels who declared independence from their mother country had their own ambitious agendas, but they revived the ancient dream of living freely without shackles, of determining one's own life. The most famous sentiments of the Declaration of Independence virtually shout these long thwarted desires "that all men (though not women, and not all men either, as it turned out) are created equal... (and) that governments are instituted... deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, a democracy; a government of equals. Even the infamous Robespierre could a few years later define democracy as "a state in which the people, as sovereign, guided by laws of its own making, does for itself all that it can, and by its delegates what it cannot." And Bill Moyers wrote two centuries later that "Constitutional democracy is no romantic notion. It is our defense against ourselves, the one foe that can defeat us."

Yet in contrast to the premise that a constitution manifestly provides a reasonable guarantee of political equality, a group of workers in Sheffield, England eloquently expressed a bitterness in 1741 that sounds as if they were speaking about life in the USA today: "What's the constitution to us if we are nothing to it?"

The practice of democracy has been less than its publicity; not completely a sham but all too often a façade of liberty and equality. It has been treated as a vent for the little people to whimper and perhaps exercise a slim possibility to redress inequities between privilege and repression — redresses extremely difficult to accomplish, with no little bloodshed. The real power has always been with economic elites who rule as lords in a state dominated by wealth, and politicians who are supposed to be representatives of the people but are just political real estate, for rent or lease by the aristo/plutocrats who, like old Romans exploit for their own benefit the New World Order that rises on the ruins of Soviet communism.

The oldest struggle after survival is for freedom, of being part of a community, not enslaved by it — the eternal pitiless struggle between *haves* and *have nots*, the despairing rage of those condemned to live bitterly wretched lives in the shadows and as menials to the economic and politically powerful few who are in their turn angrily terrified by this rage.

History is retrogressed by millennia of injustice, with periodic excesses of gross brutality. Sometimes the oppressed overthrow the lords and bosses, but elites always rise in even classless societies. If the American Revolution is accepted as more than a revolt of colonial bourgeoisie and that it gave birth to an egalitarian society in which the common citizenry had a chance to be their own rulers, it should also be realized that every reform has been bitterly and often bloodily resisted and only adopted with great reluctance. Reforms that have been ratified are usually countered with vicious backlash and unrelenting reversion.

Vernon Parrington believed that American history has been "largely a struggle between the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the spirit of the Constitution, the one primarily concerned with the rights of man (*sic*), the other more practically concerned with the rights of property." He could not understand why intelligent Americans confused the two and thought of them as complimentary. "Their unlikeness is unmistakable," he wrote in *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927); "the one a classical statement of French humanitarian democracy, the other an organic law designed to protect the (affluent) minority under republican rule." Historians long debunked his ideological division of the nation's two most important documents, yet as early as the 1820s Alexis deTocqueville observed, as R. R. Palmer wrote, "that 'equality' was one of the most fundamental ideas of the United States; but he also thought the American Revolution of little importance in producing this spirit of equality."

We are a democracy because it is necessary. It is not because of beneficent human nature that we have inherited a few basic rights and liberties sought by the mass of humanity for millennia. These limits on power are to curb the avaricious ambitions of many among us to prevent them from getting their hands on our political rights. Our freedoms are in essence our obligations as well — to preserve them for our descendants.

We are a democracy yet we know little about democracy. Sovereignty, independence and equal rights do not come easily and never stay very long without constant feeding and nurturing. It took a long time for people to be convinced of the possibility of freedom, even though our predecessors inherited a powerful but thwarted tradition of rights and liberties. Our own Revolution was in fact the result of bitter disappointment the mother country did not recognize the loyalty to ancient principles its colonies in North America felt they had exhibited in resisting what they considered illegal and proscriptive edicts intolerable to honest and loyal subjects.

Political rights or liberties hardwon by one generation are usually eroded by successors who are careless with them, not realizing how rare, necessary and fragile they are. The further removed we are from the intense imperatives of our ancestors for freedom and equality the more we take for granted what they fought to establish, and the greater the danger we will allow them to be taken away.

The larger insistent voices proclaim the USA as the freest, most wonderful country on Earth and unfurl the flags of wordly preeminence and Godly jingoism. Smaller voices

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