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PRESERVING DEMOCRACY

I. WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

BY MARSHALL M. KNAPPEN



Signing of The Declaration of Independence

MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE :: EXTENSION DIVISION
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Preserving Democracy

I. What Is Democracy?

*By Marshall M. Knappen**

A humorist once said that everybody talked about the weather but nobody did anything about it. We must not take that attitude toward democracy.

Today doing is more important than talking. We must spend more time working and fighting for democracy than in discussing it. The war must be won if there is to be any democracy to talk about, and so winning the war must always be our first aim.

But we shall work and fight harder if we know clearly what we are talking about when we say we are trying to preserve democracy. For that reason this series of bulletins is being issued. This introductory one will deal with the general idea of democracy, the objections our enemies make to it, and what our answers are to those objections. The bulletins to follow will take up particular features of the democratic system, such as the rights and duties of the citizen, representation, lawmaking and law enforcement.

WHAT DEMOCRACY IS

Democracy is government by the people. In democratic countries the people as a whole decide what form of government they shall have, how that government shall work, and who shall fill the offices necessary to make it work. In democratic countries there are frequent and free elections which give the people opportunity to make new decisions on all of these questions at short intervals.

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WHAT DEMOCRACY IS NOT: DICTATORSHIP, ARISTOCRACY, THEOCRACY, MONARCHY

Since democracy is government by the people, countries in which the people do not decide for themselves how they shall be governed and where they do not have the chance to make new choices every few years are not democratic. These decisions can be made by many other authorities besides the people. Today we are mostly concerned about countries in which the power is in the hands of dictators, men who have seized power and are exercising it without the consent of the people given in frequent free elections where candidates of rival parties are permitted to oppose the dictator. Those countries are called dictatorships.

Other non-democratic systems are aristocracies, in which nobles or some other select group rules; theocracies, in which priests or ministers rule; and absolute monarchies, where hereditary kings hold the power. But many countries, such as England, are democracies although they have kings. This is because the kings are not absolute or unrestricted, but are so limited by a constitution which puts the real power in the hands of the people that the kings are little more than figureheads.

DEMOCRACY IS NOT ANARCHY

Democracy is government by the people. Because it is a form of government it cannot be anarchy which is the same as no government. Many people believe that as citizens of a democracy they have a right to do whatever they please and that anything which prevents them from doing as they like is undemocratic. But government means a system of governing or controlling, and if people wish to live in a democracy they must expect that they will be governed by the will of the majority and thus occasionally be prevented from doing what they want to do. If they wish to be free from all restrictions they must look for some place—such as a remote island—where there is no government, and anarchy is the rule. But since there would be no government in such a place and democracy is a form of government the system would not be democratic.

RELATION TO ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

Democracy is not an economic system. Economic systems determine the way we make our living, not how we are governed, and because democracy is a system of government it cannot necessarily be connected with any particular way people have of making their livings.

From the earliest days of our democracy some of its citizens have worked for others, some for the government, and some have farmed independently or been in business for themselves. Presumably we shall always continue to have these different ways of making our living. Yet if the number of us earning our living one way or another should increase or decrease—or even if one of these groups should disappear altogether—democracy as a form of government will still be possible, for men and women who have made their living in each of these ways have made good citizens of a democracy.

There is a definite relationship between economic systems and forms of government—a relationship which will be explained more in detail in a later bulletin—and anyone who wishes to understand clearly the problems we face in trying to preserve democracy must study this relationship. But here it is sufficient to point out that there is no necessary connection between democracy and any one way of making a living. Fewer of us may stay in business for ourselves and more of us may come to work for the government or for others, as statistics show we are now doing, without democracy necessarily being destroyed in the process, since democracy is government by the people—a system of government and not an economic system.

HOW DID WE GET OUR DEMOCRACY?

The idea of government by the people is a very old one, and the system was used in ancient Greece five hundred years before the time of Christ. But there were rival ideas then, just as now, and the Greeks were not always intelligent and cooperative enough to make democracy work as it should. The result was that our European ancestors turned to monarchies, aristocracies, theocracies and dictatorships in the effort to secure satisfactory government. A short time before the discovery of America, however, merchants living in the trading towns rediscovered the virtues of democracy as a system giving the greatest good for the greatest number when the people are reasonably intelligent and cooperative. So, although their national systems were not democratic, the towns generally adopted forms of government which were at least semi-democratic, just as today a town may have a city manager although the state government follows another pattern.

By the seventeenth century, when this country was being settled, most European countries had come under the control of strong hereditary monarchs. The development of towns and invention of gunpowder, which destroyed the military value of the heavily armored knights "and made all men the same size," had eliminated aristocracy as a rival system, while the Protestant Reformation had divided the Christian church in such a way that priests and ministers no longer



The first American colonists brought the seeds of democracy with them. This painting depicts the adoption of the Mayflower Compact in 1620.

could be so influential as they were before. That left the democratic system of the merchants as the chief alternative to monarchy, and as people became more and more interested in trade or some other independent business they became more and more interested in controlling their own affairs and less and less in having a king tell them what to do.

It is probable that the development of Protestantism also contributed to the rise of the democratic spirit. Already the Catholics had made a great contribution by teaching the doctrine of the infinite worth of each human soul, and in addition to that Protestants emphasized the responsibility of the individual Christian to make his own peace with God instead of relying on priests to do it for him.

BEGINNINGS IN AMERICA

In any case, the American colonies—while not entirely democratic—had the seeds of democracy in them. The merchants who founded Virginia provided in 1619 for a legislature to be elected by the colonists, and on the boat coming over to Plymouth the Pilgrims drew up an agreement among themselves, known as the Mayflower Compact, which provided for a civil government with laws which they could change whenever they thought best. Once our forefathers were located in

this country the frontier conditions in which they lived still further strengthened these democratic principles. Independent small farming proved to be the most profitable way of settling the new land. This produced self-reliant and stable citizens, good material for a democracy. By the time the colonies came to break away from the mother country in 1776 democratic ideas were fully developed in this country and they are set forth in the first lines of our Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

In those great words many important democratic principles are set forth, either directly or indirectly. Among them are the ideas of the social contract—that governments are originally established by the general consent of the community concerned and not imposed from above—of popular sovereignty ("under God the people rule"), and the right of revolution if the established government proves unsatisfactory. All of these are important principles, but there are three others also suggested in those lines of the Declaration which are even more important just now and which therefore call for special attention.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

The first of these is the idea of natural right and particularly the natural right to equality of opportunity. All men are said to be created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This proposition that all men are created equal, to which our government is dedicated, as Lincoln said in his Gettysburg address, does not mean that the founding fathers believed that all men are by nature equally strong, or intelligent, or good looking. It means that all men are fundamentally alike at birth in that they belong to a single species and therefore should be equal before the law and have equal legal rights to such things as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the same as they all have two arms, two eyes and other characteristics of the species. In modern language we call this the right of all human beings to equality of opportunity. We need not be alarmed, therefore, by people who tell us that democracy is built on a false foundation because men are obviously not born exactly equal in every way, physically and mentally. As long as they are born with the common traits of the species and

so nearly alike that the identity of babies is sometimes confused because nurses and parents cannot tell one from another we shall have all the natural basis for democracy which the founding fathers claimed. Although a person's clothes may later indicate his social position, these differences in rank acquired after birth are only varying shapes and surfaces for a single substance common to all—"but the guinea's stamp," as the poet Burns said. "The man's the gowd (gold) for all that."

*What though on hamely fare we dine,
We'ar hoddin grey, an' a' that?
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine—
A man's a man for a' that.*

IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The idea of unalienable rights also involves a second great democratic principle, the importance of the individual citizen as contrasted with that of the state, and the resulting obligation of the community to respect and protect him as long as he does not interfere with the similar privileges of other citizens.

If all men have certain rights which cannot be alienated or taken away, this means that every man has a sphere of action on which his neighbors, even when organized as the state, cannot intrude. To be sure, this area is limited to the field in which he does not hurt his neighbors, that is to say the field which includes such elementary things as life itself, freedom of expression, and religious belief. Beyond those limits the organized democratic community does have the right to control and limit him, as we have said before. But these restrictions on the power of the state serve to distinguish democratic communities, which respect the dignity and worth of each individual citizen, from the totalitarian states which do not. In fact, non-democratic states are now called totalitarian because they follow the principle that the state represents the totality of all individual interests, is thus always superior to the private citizen, and can therefore invade what we consider the legitimate sphere of a citizen's private rights and control him body and soul.

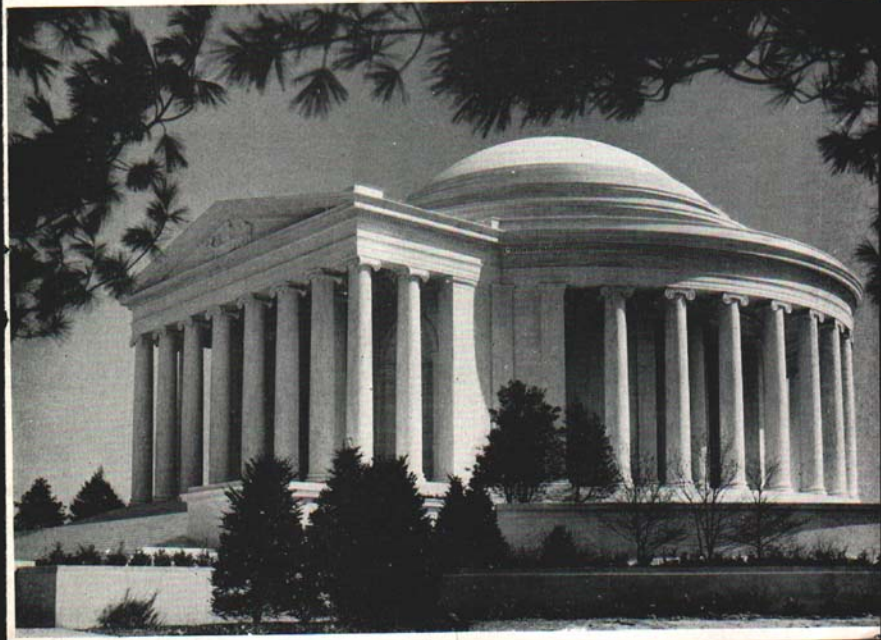
FAITH IN THE AVERAGE MAN

The third great democratic principle which is implied by the Declaration in the lines already quoted is the belief in the fundamental goodness and intelligence of the average man or woman. While there are also fundamental weaknesses in man, and while the citizen may sometimes use his vote to promote his own selfish interest and may frequently be uninformed on important points, the essential theory back of our great Declaration holds that over a period of years the majority of

the ordinary people will be able and willing to learn the facts involved in any important issue and will take the right action on it, one which will serve the community interest rather than petty minority ones.

"State a moral case to a plowman and a professor," said Thomas Jefferson, the chief author of the Declaration. "The former will decide it as well and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial means." He concluded that many men were greedy and self-centered, but not the majority. "I cannot act as if all men were unfaithful because some are so, nor believe all will betray me because some do. I had rather be the victim of occasional infidelities than relinquish my general confidence in the honesty of man." Therefore while minorities may be selfish, and even the majority deceived or not up to its best at times, still in the long run the will of the majority is sure to be the best available guide to sound political action. So the first principle of practical democracy, as Jefferson said, is that of the law of the majority. Otherwise there can be no guide but force, which is certain to result in military despotism.

Thomas Jefferson, chief author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, had faith in the plowman. This beautiful memorial to him was recently erected in Washington, D. C.



The Gettysburg

Address delivered at the dedication of the
Cemetery at Gettysburg.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers
brought forth on this continent, a new na-
tion, conceived in liberty, and dedicated
to the proposition that all men are crea-
tions equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war,
testing whether that nation, or any nation
so conceived and so dedicated, can long
endure. We are met on a great battlefield
of that war. We have come to dedicate a
portion of that field, as a final resting
place for those who here gave their lives
that that nation might live. It is alto-
gether fitting and proper that we should
do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not ded-
icate — we can not consecrate — we can not
hallow this ground. The brave men, liv-

ing and
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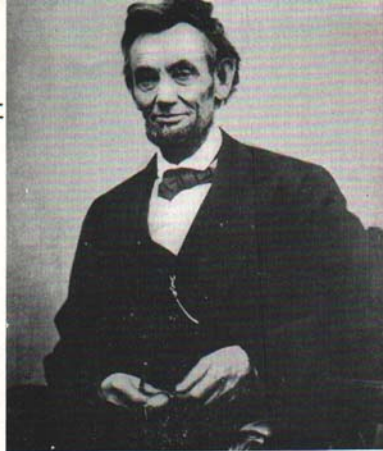
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Address



dead, who struggled here, have come to, far above our poor power to add to. The world will little note, nor remember what we say here, but it can see what they did here. It is for us, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

It is for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, God-blessed, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln.

19. 1863.

Lincoln recognized that the democratic form of government must be able to stand the test of war. Sacrifices made to preserve the principle of human equality demonstrate the vitality of government of, by, and for the people.

THE CONSTITUTION

The Declaration of Independence was a splendid statement of democratic principles but it was too idealistic to be immediately practical in every way. Notably in the matter of slavery the country was not prepared to adopt it as the rule of conduct in all cases. Furthermore, as a statement of principles, it did not deal with the details of how the American people should govern themselves. So a second pillar was needed for the new temple of democracy, a practical constitution adapted to the needs of the time.

At first the newly emancipated states bound themselves together with certain Articles of Confederation. But the central government set up by those Articles proved all too weak to meet the demands made on it, and after a few years of experimentation it became clear that a new and better constitution was needed. As a result our present Constitution was drawn up in 1787 and adopted two years later. It provided the necessary strength for the federal government and under it, with comparatively few amendments, we have continued ever since to govern ourselves successfully and peacefully with the one exception of the Civil War. In that crisis it is noteworthy that Americans were brought to renew their faith in the ideal of government of, by, and for the people and to pledge increased devotion and loyalty to the ideal of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

In every succeeding time of crisis, such as the present one, we need to go back again and again to those principles and to find in a new understanding and appreciation of them fresh strength for the struggle to preserve democracy.

CRITICISMS OF DEMOCRACY

It is often said that democracy is a noble ideal but that as a system of government it is too impractical to last much longer in the modern world. Before considering some of these pessimistic opinions in detail it would be well to remember that much of this feeling has come with the collapse of continental European democracies since 1922.

To gain the proper perspective on those unhappy failures we should remind ourselves that many of the democracies which have given way to dictatorships in the last twenty years were products of the 1914-19 period and had few if any roots which went back beyond that time. While their loss is a real setback for the democratic cause, it must not be taken too seriously as a sign of the decadence of democracy, since these particular democracies did not survive long enough to justify talking about their decay. Perhaps the history of the last twenty years

shows that the mortality rate is heavy among young democracies, but such a fact hardly can be used to prove decadence.

We must remember that when Lincoln gave his Gettysburg address in the fall of 1863 he thought of the United States as the only important democracy in the world. In his mind our country was an experiment in popular government which was to stand or fall by the outcome of the Civil War, a war in which the defeat of the North would mean that government by the people would perish from the earth. That we now have the democratic tradition firmly established in Great Britain and the self-governing Dominions of the British Empire in itself represents a great gain for the forces of democracy, without taking into account the many other places where democracy has taken root and continued to flourish since those days. If Japan, Italy, and Germany are now anti-democratic, for the most part they were the same in 1863 also, and so do not represent any loss to the cause of democracy when we think in generations—as the student of government should—instead of the last few years.

IS DEMOCRACY INEFFICIENT?

It is frequently said that democracies are inefficient—that there is too much debating and hesitation in such a system and that the dictators overrun the earth while we are getting our boots on. Nearly all of this argument is concerned with military efficiency alone and neglects the very great advantages which democracy possesses on the civilian side. But let us meet these critics on their own ground. First, we must remember that we are considering the idea of democracy as a system of government. To prove that democracy as such is an inefficient system it is not enough to show that this or that democracy was inefficient in this or that way at this or that time. It must be demonstrated that there is a fundamental inefficiency in the system itself, not that one or more democracies have failed to work the system properly. There have been many monarchs and dictators in this history of the world who also have been grossly inefficient about military matters—and virtually everything else for that matter—and yet the critics of democracy as a system do not stop to think about that.

As a matter of fact, there is nothing in our democratic political system to prevent our becoming—as we are possibly now becoming—the greatest military power in the world. From colonial times the militia has been considered part of our democratic order and after we became a nation the Constitution provided for the maintenance of the Army and the Navy as well. The President, our commander-in-chief, is still elected by a democratic process and the Selective Service Act was passed in a strictly constitutional fashion. If other proofs

are needed to show that military efficiency and the democratic system may go together, we have only to recall that before the First World War the navy of democratic Great Britain was unquestionably the strongest in the world. Similarly democratic Australians have established a world-wide reputation for effectiveness on the battlefield. Democracies may have gone to sleep and neglected military preparedness from time to time, just as crowned heads and dictators have at other times. But there is nothing in the idea of democracy which prevents democracies from being efficient military powers. The colonial militia was as much a part of primitive American democracy as the New England town meeting, and our modern Army and Navy are as constitutionally correct under our democratic system as Congress itself. The armed forces remain subject to congressional and presidential control right through the war. By voting at election time all citizens may have a voice in their management.

It would appear that our form of government has been efficient at its job of providing citizens with opportunities for the pursuit of happiness. A city street scene on a busy day suggests the high standard of living possible in a democracy.



IN PEACE AND WAR—IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

That democracy is not an inefficient form of government in time of peace may be seen by our high standard of living. As long as America is far ahead of the rest of the world in expenditures per person on automobiles, radios, food, clothing, housing and nearly everything else it would not appear that our form of government has been so inefficient at its job of providing citizens with opportunities for the pursuit of happiness. It is true, as said before, that there is no necessary connection between a particular way of making a living and any one form of government. But if the existing government were inefficient, no way of making a living would be very profitable and so the country would not be prosperous. Thus our prosperity, which shows up so strikingly in comparison with conditions in the rest of the world, constitutes a very strong argument for the comparative efficiency of our democratic form of government.

We must beware of being deceived by the one or two strong features of dictatorship instead of judging by the only standards by which any form of government should be judged, its performances over a long period of years, in peace and war, in good times and bad. Judged by that record the advantages of democracy may be clearly seen. A dictatorship may have the advantage in making quick, secret decisions on minor matters of civil or military policy, but it has no efficient machinery for making major changes when they become necessary.

Then the dictator states must go in for assassinations, purges, and revolutions, while we are able to do the job at the ballot box without bloodshed and loss of manpower.* Furthermore, the dictatorship system which looked attractive to many citizens of fascist states a few years ago has now led them to the battlefield. Just as earlier imperial ambitions cost the German people nearly two million dead in the First World War so the Hitler program has now brought them an estimated million and a half casualties, with the end not yet in sight. The German Republic was not so inefficient at providing life, liberty, and happiness, when contrasted with the Nazi system and its accompanying slaughter. Democracies have been known to start wars, it is true, but their record in that respect is so much better than the dictators' that in any comparison of their long-range records there is no difficulty in telling which form of government is really efficient at affording the greatest good for the greatest number.

CAN DEMOCRACY MEET THE NEW ECONOMIC CONDITIONS?

"Yes," some people say, "democracy's past record is pretty good, but what about the future?" Democracy was all right, they grant, when the new world was being settled, when most people found small

farming the most profitable way of making a living, and there was plenty of room to expand. But now, the argument runs, with the world filled up, no more open frontier, and large-scale industry the order of the day we are going to need a different sort of government to deal with the more complicated problems which the more complicated kind of economy brings with it. By our own admission, they say, we now have one-third of our people underfed, poorly clothed and badly housed and the top fifth of the people are getting half the national income. They ask how long can democracy survive at that rate.

Undoubtedly these thinkers have pointed out a real problem which all believers in democracy must study carefully. Yet it can hardly be said to be insolvable. Of course, no one knows what the future will bring, but as yet—it may safely be asserted—no type of need has appeared with which democratic governmental machinery has shown itself incapable of dealing satisfactorily. We have been taking steps to remedy the situation of the underprivileged one-third. We have put in office by democratic means legislatures, governors, congresses and presidents of both major political parties who have shown themselves able to devise and apply remedies for any sort of ailment which the body politic might develop. It is quite true that we have not succeeded perfectly in every undertaking, but again we must remember to view these problems in long-range perspective and in comparison with the situation in other countries. No government has ever been perfect, because the people who comprise it are not perfect and so the inevitable weaknesses of human nature make for abuses in government. "What is government but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels no government would be necessary." So said one of the authors (either James Madison or Alexander Hamilton) of *The Federalist*, the most important early commentary on our Constitution. We must remember that our form of government is apparently much more capable of dealing effectively with current problems than it was eighty years ago at the time of the Civil War when it did break down and our grandfathers took their arguments to the battlefield. We must never forget that despite the underprivileged one-third our average standard of living is still much higher than that in the dictatorship countries and that their over-all records of performance under modern conditions can hardly be called inspiring.

ARE PEOPLE INTELLIGENT ENOUGH TO WORK A DEMOCRACY?

Frequently people say that the average man is too stupid to vote intelligently, that he cannot understand such complicated issues as the tariff, the gold standard, or inflation, and that he will not investigate



Scientific tests prove that any race is capable of making democracy work. In this picture are shown Negro men and women meeting to discuss a program of community betterment.

all the issues and candidates presented to him on our "bed-sheet" ballots.

In response to this objection it may be freely granted that democracies have at times overtaxed the capacities of the individual voter. But it is not an essential feature of democracy that they do so. The British have long been running a democratic system in which the voter in national elections is asked to do no more than choose between two or three candidates for membership in parliament. Once that is done the elected legislative representatives do the rest and do it without the voters feeling that their wishes are being neglected. How this is done is too long a story to tell here, but it is done, and this proves that the democratic system, as a system, need not overtax the capacities of the average voter. Furthermore, when a single policy, such as adherence to the gold standard has become the main issue of an election in this or any other democratic country, the voters over and over again have shown that they can understand it and intelligently vote for what they considered their best interests. As a shrewd English observer, Samuel Johnson, remarked nearly two hundred years ago, "About things on which the public thinks long it commonly attains to think right."

"Yes, this might do for our Anglo-Saxon peoples," some say, "but other races haven't got the sense to work a democracy." The answer to that objection is not difficult. The German, French, and Italian peoples making up the Swiss nation have successfully worked a democratic system for centuries. And exhaustive scientific tests have failed

to show that the typical Indian or Negro has any lower natural intelligence than a white man. There are Indians and Negroes who are stupid by nature, just as there are naturally stupid white people, but the typical man of one race is the same as the average of another, when it comes to natural intelligence, regardless of the color of his skin. It is true that a tribe of primitive people raised in a jungle will average lower on an intelligence test than we will, but that is because they have not had the advantages of our education, newspapers, movies, and other surrounding influences. Consequently the believer in democracy must expect to have to educate backward peoples up to the level where they can appreciate and operate a democratic system. But however backward the people may be, if they are given training equal to ours they will demonstrate that we are right in founding our democracy on the principle that all men are created equal.

DOES THE AVERAGE MAN HAVE THE CHARACTER TO MAKE DEMOCRACY WORK?

The last objection commonly made to democracy as a form of government is that even if the theory is efficient enough and the average voter intelligent enough to work it, he will not make it work because he doesn't want it to work. He may know who is the best candidate and what is the best national policy, but he will not vote for them because he prefers mediocre candidates, people of his own sort, and wants to further his own interests, to "get his," rather than do the right thing by his fellow citizens.

This is a serious indictment, and in fact the most serious objection to democracy as a form of government which has yet been made. If man has the knowledge to work the democratic system but not the will to do so, the situation is indeed serious. We must not ignore the fundamental fact that at bottom the success or failure of democracy depends on how we face the moral issue involved, and that we have often fallen far short of measuring up to the moral standard necessary for the most successful working of the democratic system. Whether democracy is to be preserved depends on how each of us meets this challenge in the days that lie ahead.

But surely the record gives us grounds for hope, because the facts would not appear to be quite as represented by the critics of democracy. Over and over again democratic elections, from selections of club officers on up, have demonstrated that voters are not only willing but eager to vote for men of abilities superior to their own. And the record also shows that in emergencies, at least, men are willing to drop petty differences and abandon the pursuit of special interests while they serve the common good. Dr. George Gallup, director of the

institute conducting the Gallup poll has made a careful study of the responses given during the last few years by the general public to questions involving matters of governmental policy which affect the special interests of different groups. He concludes that the average man is willing to make far more sacrifices for the public good than might be supposed from the stands taken by leaders of the various special interest groups. "Continuous studies of public opinion," he says, "show that the common man can be trusted to govern himself, and that if majority opinion had been acted upon more often—or more quickly—some of the nation's present headaches might have been avoided." In part this general willingness to sacrifice personal interest to the common good—the patriotism of the plain people, as Lincoln called it—is an evidence of the fundamental soundness of human nature in which the authors of the Declaration of Independence believed, and which is as characteristic of human nature as those unpleasant incidental features which make some form of government necessary. But it is also an evidence of common sense, since, obviously, special advantages for special interests will be valueless if the whole country goes down. After all, if the ship is in danger of sinking, why try to get title to the cargo when men are needed at the pumps?

It is in such a position that we find ourselves today, and for the same kind of reasons we may expect democracy once more to come through with flying colors. The system has demonstrated that it can be efficient and the average man has shown that he has the intelligence to work the system and the character to do his duty in times like these. We have never been "summer patriots" and "sunshine soldiers". Whenever our forefathers were hard pressed they paused to think what the issue was and what they had at stake. In so doing they found the inspiration and the courage to go on to victory. If we will follow their example the principle that all men are created equal will prove its power again.



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