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Divider Title: _____



THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF CIVIC AMERICA

BY ROBERT D. PUTNAM

For the last year or so, I have been wrestling with a difficult mystery. It is a classic brainteaser, with a *corpus delicti*, a crime scene strewn with clues, and many potential suspects. As in all good detective stories, however, some plausible miscreants turn out to have impeccable alibis, and some important clues hint at portentous developments that occurred before the curtain rose.

The mystery concerns the strange disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in America. By "social capital," I mean features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. (Whether or not their shared goals are praiseworthy is, of course, entirely another matter.) I use the term "civic engagement" to refer to people's connections with the life of their communities, not only with politics.

Although I am not yet sure that I have solved the mystery, I have assembled evidence that clarifies what happened. An important clue, as we shall see, involves differences among generations. Americans who came of age during the Depression and World War II have been far more deeply engaged in the life of their communities than the generations that have followed them. The passing of this "long civic generation" appears to be an important proximate cause of the decline of our civic life. This discovery does not in itself crack the case, but when combined with other data it points strongly to one suspect against whom I shall presently bring an indictment.

Evidence for the decline of social capital and civic engagement comes from a number of independent sources. Surveys of average Americans in 1965, 1975, and 1985, in which they recorded every single activity during a day—so-called "time-budget" stud-

A more extended version of this article, complete with references, appears in the Winter 1995 issue of PS, a publication of the American Political Science Association. This work, originally delivered as the inaugural Itihel de Sola Pool Lecture, builds on Putnam's earlier articles, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Journal of Democracy (January 1995) and "The Prosperous Community," TAP (Spring 1993).

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ies—indicate that since 1965 time spent on informal socializing and visiting is down (perhaps by one-quarter) and time devoted to clubs and organizations is down even more sharply (by roughly half). Membership records of such diverse organizations as the PTA, the Elks club, the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, labor unions, and even bowling leagues show that participation in many conventional voluntary associations has declined by roughly 25 percent to 50 percent over the last two to three decades. Surveys show sharp declines in many measures of collective political participation, including attending a rally or speech (off 36 percent between 1973 and 1993), attending a meeting on town or school affairs (off 39 percent), or working for a political party (off 56 percent).

Some of the most reliable evidence about trends comes from the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted nearly every year for more than two decades. The GSS demonstrates, at all levels of education and among both men and women, a drop of roughly one-quarter in group membership since 1974 and a drop of roughly one-third in social trust since 1972. (Trust in political authorities, indeed in many social institutions, has also declined sharply over the last three decades, but that is conceptually a distinct trend.) Slumping membership has afflicted all sorts of groups, from sports clubs and professional associations to literary discussion groups and labor unions. Only nationality groups, hobby and garden clubs, and the catch-all category of “other” seem to have resisted the ebbing tide. Gallup polls report that church attendance fell by roughly 15 percent during the 1960s and has remained at that lower level ever since, while data from the National Opinion Research Center suggest that the decline continued during the 1970s and 1980s and by now amounts to roughly 30 percent. A more complete audit of American social capital would need to account for apparent countertrends. Some observers believe, for example, that support groups and neighborhood watch groups are proliferating, and few deny that the last several decades have witnessed explosive growth in interest groups represented in Washington. The growth of such “mailing list” organizations as the American Association of Retired People and the Sierra Club, although highly significant in political (and commercial) terms, is not really a counterexample to the supposed decline in social connectedness, however, since these are not really associations in which members meet one another. Their members’ ties are to common symbols and ideologies, but not to each other. Similarly, although most secondary associations are not-for-profit, most prominent nonprofits (from Harvard University to the Ford Foundation to the Metropolitan Opera) are bureaucracies, not secondary associations, so the growth of the “third sector” is not tantamount to a growth in social connectedness. With due regard to various kinds of counterevidence,

Those born between 1910 and 1940 are substantially more engaged in community affairs than people born later.

I believe that the weight of available evidence confirms that Americans today are significantly less engaged with their communities than was true a generation ago.

Of course, American civil society is not moribund. Many good people across the land work hard every day to keep their communities vital. Indeed, evidence suggests that America still outranks many other countries in the degree of our community involvement and social trust. But if we examine our lives, not our aspirations, and if we compare ourselves not with other countries but with our parents, the best available evidence suggests that we are less connected with one another.

Reversing this trend depends, at least in part, on understanding the causes of the strange malady afflicting American civic life. This is the mystery I seek to unravel here: Why, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1970s and 1980s, did the fabric of American community life begin to fray? Why are more Americans bowling alone?

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Many possible answers have been suggested for this puzzle:

- busy-ness and time pressure;
- economic hard times (or, according to alternative theories, material affluence);
- residential mobility;
- suburbanization;
- the movement of women into the paid labor force and the stresses of two-career families;
- disruption of marriage and family ties;
- changes in the structure of the American economy, such as the rise of chain stores, branch firms, and the service sector;
- the sixties (most of which actually happened in the seventies); including
 - Vietnam, Watergate, and disillusion with public life; and
 - the cultural revolt against authority (sex, drugs, and so on);
- growth of the welfare state;
- the civil rights revolution;
- television, the electronic revolution, and other technological changes.

The classic questions posed by a detective are means, motive, and opportunity. A solution, even a

partial one, to our mystery must pass analogous tests.

Is the proposed explanatory factor correlated with trust and civic engagement? If not, that factor probably does not belong in the lineup. For example, if working women turn out to be more engaged in community life than housewives, it would be harder to attribute the downturn in community organizations to the rise of two-career families.

Is the correlation spurious? If parents, for example, were more likely than childless people to be joiners, that might be an important clue. However, if the correlation between parental status and civic engagement turned out to be entirely spurious, due to the effects of (say) age, we would have to remove the declining birth rate from our list of suspects.

Is the proposed explanatory factor changing in the relevant way? Suppose, for instance, that people who often move have shallower community roots. That could be an important part of the answer to our mystery *only if* residential mobility itself had risen during this period.

Is the proposed explanatory factor vulnerable to the claim that it might be the result of civic disengagement, not the cause? For example, even if newspaper readership were closely correlated with civic engagement across individuals and across time, we would need to weigh the degree to which reduced newspaper circulation is the result (not the cause) of disengagement.

Against those benchmarks, let us weigh the evidence. But first we must acknowledge a trend that only complicates our task.

EDUCATION DEEPENS THE MYSTERY

Education is by far the strongest correlate that I have discovered of civic engagement in all its forms, including social trust and membership in many different types of groups. In fact, the effects of education become greater and greater as we move up the educational ladder. The four years of education between 14 and 18 total years have *ten times more impact* on trust and membership than the first four years of formal education. This curvilinear pattern applies to both men and women, and to all races and generations.

Sorting out just why education has such a massive effect on social connectedness would require a book in itself. Education is in part a proxy for social class and economic differences, but when income, social status, and education are used togeth-



er to predict trust and group membership, education continues to be the primary influence. So, well-educated people are much more likely to be joiners and trusters, partly because they are better off economically, but mostly because of the skills, resources, and inclinations that were imparted to them at home and in school.

The expansion of high schools and colleges earlier this century has had an enormous impact on the educational composition of the adult population during just the last two decades. Since 1972 the proportion of adults with fewer than 12 years of education has been cut in half, falling from 40 percent to 18 percent, while the proportion with more than 12 years has nearly doubled, rising from 28 percent to 50 percent, as the generation of Americans educated around the turn of this century (most of whom did not finish high school) died off and were replaced by the baby boomers and their successors (most of whom attended college).

So here we have two facts—education boosts civic engagement sharply, and educational levels have risen massively—that only deepen our central mystery. By itself, the rise in educational levels should have increased social capital during the last 20 years by 15-20 percent, even assuming that the effects of education were merely linear. (Taking account of the curvilinear effect in the figure, “Education and Civic Life,” the rise in trusting and joining should have been even greater, as Americans moved up the accelerating curve.) By contrast, however, the actual GSS figures show a net decline since the early 1970s of roughly the same magnitude (trust by about 20-25 percent, memberships by about 15-20 percent). The relative declines in social capital are similar within each educational category—roughly 25 percent in group memberships and

roughly 30 percent in social trust since the early 1970s, and probably even more since the early 1960s.

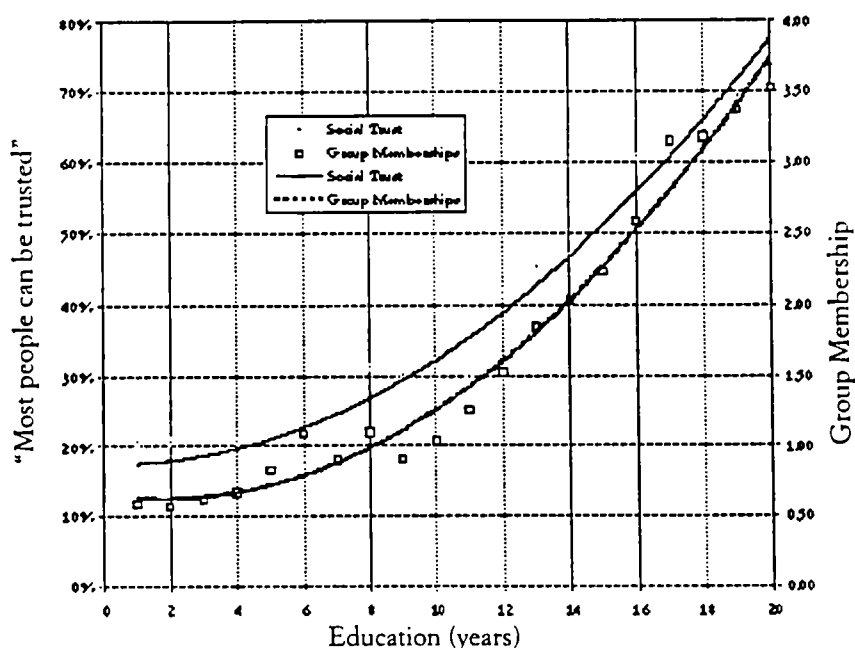
While this first investigative foray leaves us more mystified than before, we may nevertheless draw two useful conclusions. First, we need to take account of educational differences in our exploration of other factors to be sure that we do not confuse their effects with the consequences of education. And, second, the mysterious disengagement of the last quarter century seems to have afflicted all educational strata in our society, whether they have had graduate education or did not finish high school.

MOBILITY AND SUBURBANIZATION

Many studies have found that residential stability and such related phenomena as homeownership are associated with greater civic engagement. At an earlier stage in this investigation I observed that “mobility, like frequent re-potting of plants, tends to disrupt root systems, and it takes time for an uprooted individual to put down new roots.” I must now report, however, that further inquiry

EDUCATION AND CIVIC LIFE

Social trust and group membership by years of education



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-1994

fully exonerates residential mobility from any responsibility for our fading civic engagement.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995 (and earlier years) show that rates of residential mobility have been remarkably constant over the last half century. In fact, to the extent that there has been any change at all, both long-distance and short-distance mobility have declined over the last five decades. During the 1950s, 20 percent of Americans changed residence each year and 6.9 percent annually moved across county borders; during the 1990s, the comparable figures are 17 percent and 6.6 percent. Americans, in short, are today slightly more rooted residentially than a generation ago. The verdict on mobility is unequivocal: This theory is simply wrong.

But if moving itself has not eroded our social capital, what about the possibility that we have moved to places, especially suburbs, that are less congenial to social connectedness? In fact, social connectedness does differ by community type, but the differences turn out to be modest and in directions that are inconsistent with the theory.

Controlling for such characteristics as education, age, income, work status, and race, citizens of the nation's 12 largest metropolitan areas (particularly their central cities, but also their suburbs) are roughly 10 percent less trusting and report 10-20 percent fewer group memberships than residents of other cities and towns (and their suburbs). Meanwhile, residents of very small towns and rural areas are (in accord with some hoary stereotypes) slightly more trusting and civically engaged than other Americans. Unsurprisingly, the prominence of different types of groups does vary significantly by location: Major cities have more political and nationality clubs; smaller cities more fraternal, service, hobby, veterans', and church groups; and rural areas more agricultural organizations. But overall rates of associational membership are not very different.

Moreover, this pattern cannot account for our central puzzle. In the first place, there is virtually no correlation between gains in population and losses in social capital, either across states or across localities of different sizes. Even taking into account the educational and social backgrounds of those who have moved there, the suburbs have faintly higher levels of trust and civic engagement than their respective central cities, which should have produced growth, not decay, in social capital over the

last generation. The central point, however, is that the downtrends in trusting and joining are virtually identical everywhere—in cities, big and small, in suburbs, in small towns, and in the countryside.

Of course, Evanston is not Levittown is not Sun City. The evidence available does not allow us to determine whether different types of suburban living have different effects on civic connections and social trust. However, these data do rule out the thesis that suburbanization per se has caused the erosion of America's social capital. Both where we live and how long we've lived there matter for social capital, but neither explains why it is eroding everywhere.

PRESSURES OF TIME AND MONEY

Americans certainly *feel* busier now than a generation ago: The proportion of us who report feeling "always rushed" jumped by half between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s. Probably the most obvious suspect behind our tendency to drop out of community affairs is pervasive busy-ness. And lurking nearby in the shadows are economic pressures so much discussed nowadays, from job insecurity to declining real wages.

Yet, however culpable busy-ness and economic insecurity may appear at first glance, it is hard to find incriminating evidence. In the first place, time-budget studies do not confirm the thesis that Americans are, on average, working longer than a generation ago. On the contrary, a new study by John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey of the University of Maryland reports a five hour per week *gain* in free time for the average American between 1965 and 1985, due partly to reduced time spent on housework and partly to earlier retirement. Their claim that Americans have more leisure time now than several decades ago is, to be sure, contested by other observers, notably Juliet Schor, who in her 1991 book *The Overworked American* reports evidence that work hours are lengthening, especially for women.

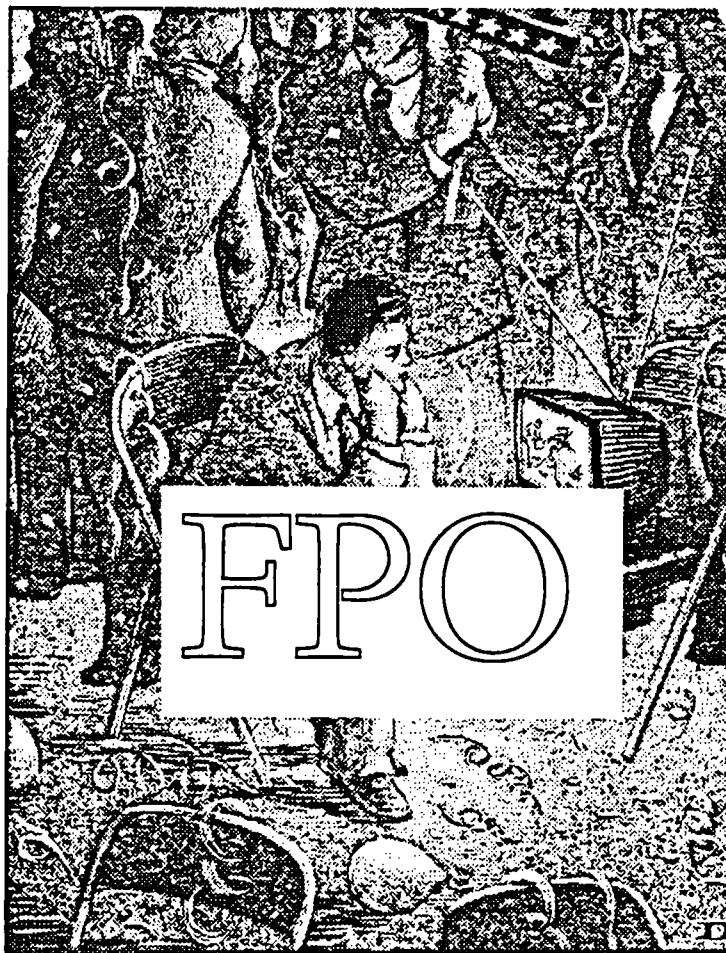
But whatever the resolution of that controversy, other data call into question whether longer hours at work lead to lessened involvement in civic life or reduced social trust. Results from the GSS show that employed people belong to somewhat more groups than those outside the paid labor force. Even more striking is the fact that among workers, longer hours are linked to more civic engagement. The patterns among men and women on this score

are not identical: Women who work part-time appear to be somewhat more civically engaged and socially trusting than either those who work full-time or those who do not work outside the home at all—an intriguing anomaly, though not relevant to our basic puzzle, since female part-time workers constitute a relatively small fraction of the American population, and the fraction is growing, up from about 8 percent to about 10 percent between the early 1970s and early 1990s.

But what do workaholics do less? Robinson reports that, unsurprisingly, people who spend more time at work do feel more rushed, and these harried souls do spend less time eating, sleeping, reading books, engaging in hobbies, and just doing nothing. Compared to the rest of the population, they also spend a lot less time watching television, almost 30 percent less. However, they do not spend less time on organizational activity. In short, those who work longer forego *Nightline*, but not the Kiwanis club; *ER*, but not the Red Cross.

So hard work does not *prevent* civic engagement. Moreover, the nationwide falloff in joining and trusting is perfectly mirrored among full-time workers, among part-time workers, and among those outside the paid labor force. So if people are dropping out of community life, long hours do not seem to be the reason.

If time pressure is not the culprit, how about financial pressures? It is true that people with lower incomes and those who feel financially strapped are somewhat less engaged in community life and somewhat less trusting than those who are better off, even holding education constant. On the other hand, the downtrends in social trust and civic engagement are visible among people of all incomes, with no sign whatever that they are concentrated among those who have borne the brunt of the economic distress of the last two decades. Quite the contrary, the declines in engagement and trust are actually somewhat greater among the more affluent segments of the American public than among the poor and middle-income wage-earners. Moreover, personal financial satisfaction is wholly uncorrelated with civic engagement and



social trust. In short, neither objective nor subjective economic well-being has inoculated Americans against the virus of civic disengagement; if anything, affluence has slightly exacerbated the problem. Poverty and economic inequality are dreadful, growing problems for America, but they are not the villains of *this* piece.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

Most of our mothers were housewives, and most of them invested heavily in social capital formation—a jargony way of referring to untold unpaid hours in church suppers, PTA meetings, neighborhood coffee klatches, and visits to friends and relatives. The movement of women out of the home and into the paid labor force is probably the most portentous social change of the last half century. However welcome and overdue the feminist revolution may be, it is hard to believe that it has had no impact on social connectedness. Could this be the primary reason for the decline of social capital over the last generation?



Some patterns in the survey evidence seem to support this claim. All things considered, women belong to somewhat fewer voluntary associations than men do. On the other hand, time-budget studies suggest that women spend more time on those groups and more time in informal social connecting than men. Although the absolute declines in joining and trusting are approximately equivalent among men and women, the relative declines are somewhat greater among women. Controlling for education, memberships among men have declined at a rate of about 10-15 percent a decade, compared to about 20-25 percent a decade for women. The time-budget data, too, strongly suggest that the decline in organizational involvement in recent years is concentrated among women. These sorts of facts, coupled with the obvious transformation in the professional role of women over this same period, led me in previous work to suppose that the emergence of two-career families might be the most important single factor in the erosion of social capital.

As we saw earlier, however, work status itself seems to have little net impact on group membership or on trust. Housewives belong to different types of groups than do working women (more PTAs, for example, and fewer professional associations), but in the aggregate working women are actually members of slightly more voluntary associations (though housewives, according to Robinson and Godbey, spend more time on them). Moreover, the overall declines in civic engagement are somewhat greater among housewives than among employed women. Comparison of time-budget data between 1965 and 1985 seems to show that employed women as a group are actually spending more time on organizations than before, while housewives are spending less. This same study suggests that the major decline in informal socializing since 1965 has also been concentrated among housewives. The central fact, of course, is that the overall trends are down for all categories of women (and for men, too, even bachelors), but the figures suggest that women who work full-time actually may have been more resistant to the slump than those who do not.

Thus, although women appear to have borne a disproportionate share of the decline in civic engagement over the last two decades, it is not easy to find any micro-level data that tie that fact directly to their entry into the labor force. Of course,

women who have chosen to enter the workforce doubtless differ in many respects from women who have chosen to stay home. Perhaps one reason that community involvement appears to be rising among working women and declining among housewives is that precisely the sort of women who, in an earlier era, were most involved with their communities have been disproportionately likely to enter the workforce, thus lowering the average level of civic engagement among the remaining homemakers and raising the average among women in the workplace.

No doubt the movement of women into the workplace over the last generation has changed the *types of organizations* to which they belong. Contrary to my own earlier speculations, however, I can find little evidence to support the hypothesis that this movement has played a major role in the net reduction of social connectedness and civic engagement. On the other hand, I have no clear alternative explanation for the fact that the relative declines are greater among women, both those who work outside the home and those who don't, than among men. Since this evidence is at best circumstantial, perhaps the best interim judgment here is the famous Scots verdict: not proven.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Another widely discussed social trend that more or less coincides with the downturn in civic engagement is the breakdown of the traditional family unit—mom, dad, and the kids. Since the family itself is, by some accounts, a key form of social capital, perhaps its eclipse is part of the explanation for the reduction in joining and trusting in the wider community. What does the evidence show?

First of all, evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal. In addition to the century-long increase in divorce rates (which accelerated from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and then leveled off), and the more recent increase in single-parent families, the incidence of one-person households has more than doubled since 1950, in part because of the rising number of widows living alone. The net effect of all these changes, as reflected in the General Social Survey, is that the proportion of all American adults currently unmarried climbed from 28 percent in 1974 to 48 percent in 1994.

Second, married men and women do rank somewhat higher on both our measures of social capital.

That is, controlling for education, age, race, and so on, single people—both men and women, divorced, separated, and never married—are significantly less trusting and less engaged civically than married people. (Multivariate analysis hints that one major reason why divorce lowers connectedness is that it lowers family income, which in turn reduces civic engagement.) Roughly speaking, married men and women are about a third more trusting and belong to about 15-25 percent more groups than comparable single men and women. (Widows and widowers are more like married people than single people in this comparison.)

In short, successful marriage, especially if the family includes children, is statistically associated with greater social trust and civic engagement. Thus, some part of the decline in both trust and membership is tied to the decline in marriage. To be sure, the direction of causality behind this correlation may be complicated, since it is conceivable that loners and paranoids are harder to live with. If so, divorce may in some degree be the consequence, not the cause, of lower social capital. Probably the most reasonable summary of these arrays of data, however, is that the decline in successful marriage is a significant, though modest part of the reason for declining trust and lower group membership. On the other hand, changes in family structure cannot be a major part of our story, since the overall declines in joining and trusting are substantial even among the happily married. My own verdict (based in part on additional evidence to be introduced later) is that the disintegration of marriage is probably an accessory to the crime, but not the major villain of the piece.

THE RISE OF THE WELFARE STATE

Circumstantial evidence, particularly the timing of the downturn in social connectedness, has suggested to some observers that an important cause—perhaps even *the* cause—is big government and the growth of the welfare state. By “crowding out” private initiative, it is argued, state intervention has subverted civil society.

Some government policies have almost certainly had the effect of destroying social capital. For example, the so-called “slum clearance” policies of the

1950s and 1960s replaced physical capital, but destroyed social capital, by disrupting existing community ties. It is also conceivable that certain social expenditures and tax policies may have created disincentives for civic-minded philanthropy.

On the other hand, it is much harder to see which government policies might be responsible for the decline in bowling leagues and literary clubs. Some community institutions sponsored, organized, or subsidized by government, such as National Service, agricultural extension programs, and Head Start, may enhance trust and social capital. Which effect prevails needs to be resolved with evidence, not ideology.

One empirical approach to this issue is to examine differences in civic engagement and public policy across different political jurisdictions to see whether

enlarged government leads to shriveled social capital. Among the U.S. states, however, differences in social capital appear essentially uncorrelated with various measures of welfare spending or government size. Citizens in free-spending states are no less trusting or engaged than citizens in frugal ones.

Cross-national comparison can also shed light on this question. Among nineteen member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for which data on social trust and group membership are available from the 1990-1991 World Values Survey, these indicators of social capital are, if anything, positively correlated with the size of the state. This simple bivariate analysis, of course, cannot tell us whether social connectedness encourages welfare spending, whether the welfare state fosters civic engagement, or whether both are the result of some other unmeasured factor(s). Even this simple finding, however, is not easily reconciled with the notion that big government undermines social capital.

RACE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS REVOLUTION

Some observers have noted that the decline in social connectedness began just after the successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. That coincidence has suggested the possibility of a kind of sociological “white flight,” as legal desegregation of civic life led whites to withdraw from community associations.

The decline of marriage is probably an accessory to the crime, not the main villain.

The erosion of social capital, however, has affected all races. In fact, during the 1980s the downturns in both joining and trusting were even greater among African Americans (and other racial minorities) than among the white majority. This fact is inconsistent with the thesis that "white flight" is a significant cause of civic disengagement, since black Americans have been dropping out of religious and civic organizations at least as rapidly as white Americans. Even more important, the pace of disengagement among whites has been uncorrelated with racial intolerance or support for segregation. Avowedly racist or segregationist whites have been no quicker to drop out of community organizations during this period than more tolerant whites.

This evidence is far from conclusive, of course, but it does shift the burden of proof onto those who believe that racism is a primary explanation for growing civic disengagement over the last quarter century. This evidence also suggests that reversing the civil rights gains of the last thirty years would do nothing to reverse the social capital losses.

GENERATIONAL EFFECTS

Our efforts thus far to identify the major sources of civic disengagement have been singularly unfruitful. In all our statistical analyses, however, one factor, second only to education, stands out as a predictor of all forms of civic engagement and trust. That factor is age. Older people belong to more organizations than young people, and they are less misanthropic. Older Americans also vote more often and read newspapers more frequently, two other forms of civic engagement closely correlated with joining and trusting.

"Civic Engagement by Age" shows the basic pattern. Civic involvement appears to rise more or less steadily from early adulthood toward a plateau in middle age, from which it declines only late in life. This humpback pattern seems naturally to represent the arc of life's engagements. That, at least, was how I first interpreted the data. But that would be a fundamental misreading of the most important clue in our whole whodunit.

Evidence from the General Social Survey enables us to follow individual cohorts as they age. If the rising lines in the figure indeed represent deepening civic engagement with age, we should be able to track this same deepening engagement as we follow, for example, the first of the baby

boomers, born in 1947, as they aged from 25 in 1972 (the first year of the GSS) to 47 in 1994 (the latest year available). Startlingly, however, such an analysis, repeated for successive birth cohorts, produces virtually no evidence of such life cycle changes in civic engagement. In fact, as various generations moved through the period between 1972 and 1994, their levels of trust and membership more often fell than rose, reflecting a more or less simultaneous decline in civic engagement among young and old alike, particularly during the second half of the 1980s. But that downtrend obviously cannot explain why, throughout the period, older Americans were always more trusting and engaged. In fact, the only reliable life cycle effect visible in these data is a withdrawal from civic engagement very late in life, as we move through our eighties.

The central paradox posed by these patterns is this: Older people are consistently more engaged and trusting than younger people, yet we do not become more engaged and trusting as we age. What's going on here?

Time and age are notoriously ambiguous in their effects on social behavior. Social scientists have learned to distinguish three contrasting phenomena:

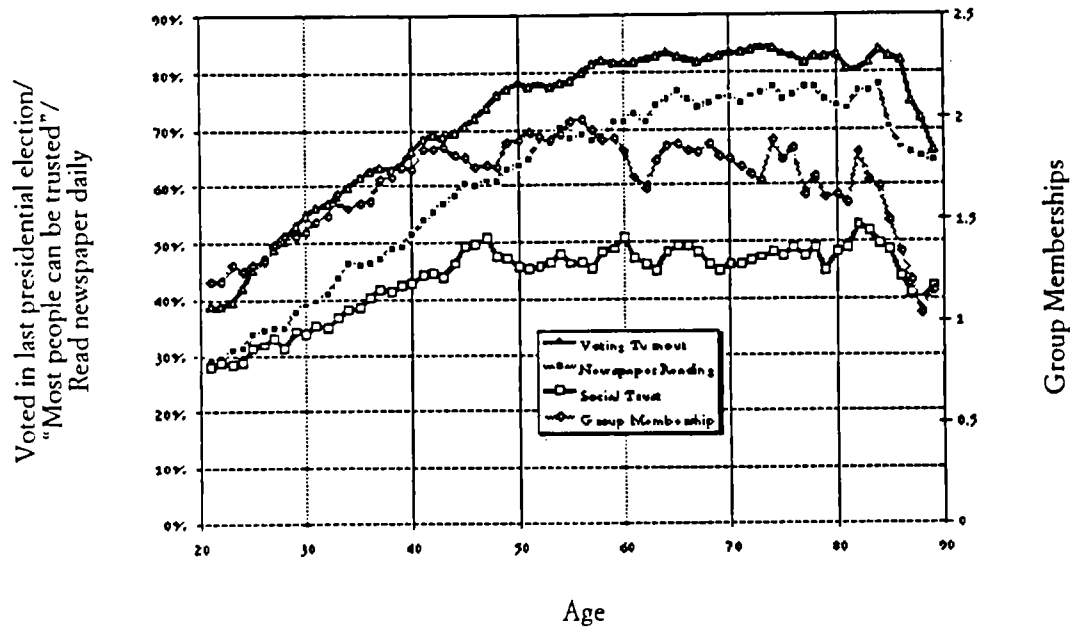
Life cycle effects represent differences attributable to stage of life. In this case individuals change as they age, but since the effects of aging are, in the aggregate, neatly balanced by the "demographic metabolism" of births and deaths, life cycle effects produce no aggregate change. Everyone's close-focus eyesight worsens as we age, but the aggregate demand for reading glasses changes little.

Period effects affect all people who live through a given era, regardless of their age. Period effects can produce both individual and aggregate change, often quickly and enduringly, without any age-related differences. The sharp drop in trust in government between 1965 and 1975, for example, was almost entirely this sort of period effect, as Americans of all ages changed their minds about their leaders' trustworthiness. Similarly, as just noted, a modest portion of the decline in social capital during the 1980s appears to be a period effect.

Generational effects affect all people born at the same time. Like life cycle effects (and unlike typical period effects), generational effects show up as disparities among age groups at a single point in time, but like period effects (and unlike life cycle

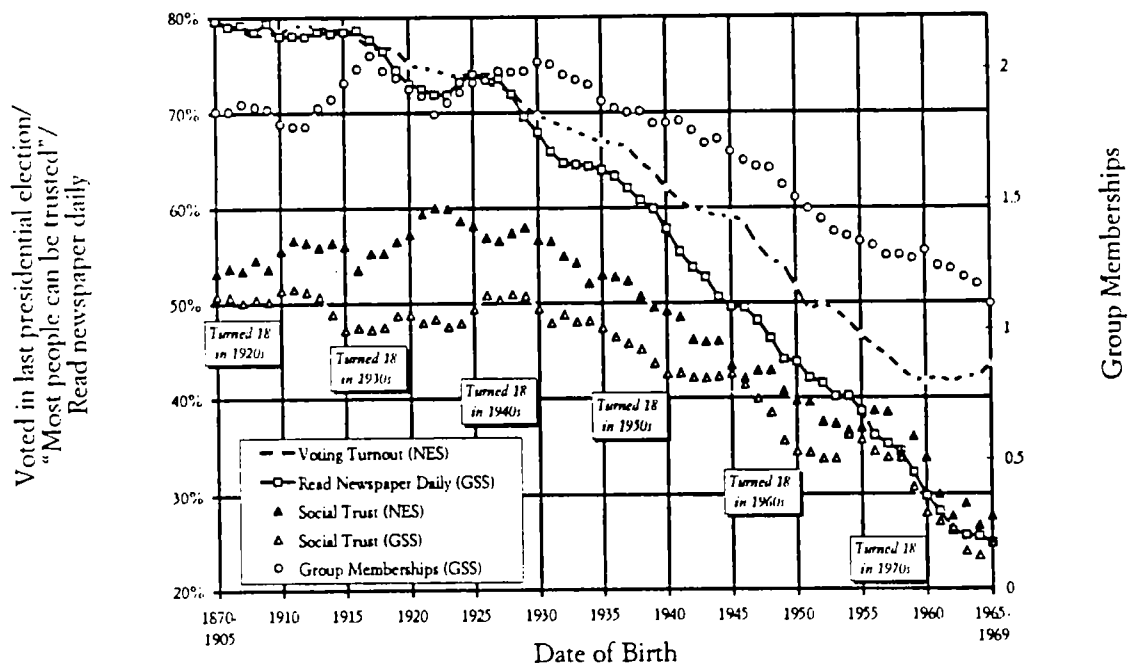
TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CIVIC GENERATION GAP

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY AGE (EDUCATION CONTROLLED)



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-1994. Respondents aged 21-89. Three-year moving averages. Equal weighting of three educational categories.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY GENERATION (EDUCATION CONTROLLED)



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-1994, and National Election Studies, 1952-1992. Respondents aged 25-80. Five-year moving averages. Equal weighting of three educational categories.

effects) generational effects produce real social change, as successive generations, enduringly "imprinted" with divergent outlooks, enter and leave the population. In pure generational effects, no individual ever changes, but society does.

Returning to our conundrum, how could older people today be more engaged and trusting, if they did not become more engaged and trusting as they aged? The key to this paradox, as David Butler and Donald Stokes observed in another context, is to ask, not *how old people are*, but *when they were young*. The figure on page 43, "Social Capital and Civic Engagement by Generation," addresses this reformulated question, displaying various measures of civic engagement according to the respondents' year of birth.

THE LONG CIVIC GENERATION

In effect, the figure on page 42 lines up Americans from left to right according to their date of birth, beginning with those born in the last third of the nineteenth century and continuing across to the generation of their great-grandchildren, born in the last third of the twentieth century. As we begin moving along this queue from left to right—from those raised around the turn of the century to those raised during the Roaring Twenties, and so on—we find relatively high and unevenly rising levels of civic engagement and social trust. Then rather abruptly, however, we encounter signs of reduced community involvement, starting with men and women born in the early 1930s. Remarkably, this downward trend in joining, trusting, voting, and newspaper reading continues almost uninterrupted for nearly 40 years. The trajectories for the various different indicators of civic engagement are strikingly parallel: Each shows a high, sometimes rising plateau for people born and raised during the first third of the century; each shows a turning point in the cohorts around 1930; and each then shows a more or less constant decline down to the cohorts born during the 1960s.

By any standard, these intergenerational differences are extraordinary. Compare, for example, the generation born in the early 1920s with the generation of their grandchildren born in the late 1960s. Controlling for educational disparities, members of the generation born in the 1920s belong to almost twice as many civic associations as those born in the late 1960s (roughly 1.9 memberships per capi-

ta, compared to roughly 1.1 memberships per capita). The grandparents are more than twice as likely to trust other people (50-60 percent compared with 25 percent for the grandchildren). They vote at nearly double the rate of the most recent cohorts (roughly 75 percent compared with 40-45 percent), and they read newspapers almost three times as often (70-80 percent read a paper daily compared with 25-30 percent). And bear in mind that we have found no evidence that the youngest generation will come to match their grandparents' higher levels of civic engagement as they grow older.

Thus, read not as life cycle effects, but rather as generational effects, the age-related patterns in our data suggest a radically different interpretation of our basic puzzle. Deciphered with this key, the figure on page 43 depicts a long "civic" generation, born roughly between 1910 and 1940, a broad group of people substantially more engaged in community affairs and substantially more trusting than those younger than they. (Members of the 1910-1940 generation also seem more civic than their elders, at least to judge by the outlooks of relatively few men and women born in the late nineteenth century who appeared in our samples.) The culminating point of this civic generation is the cohort born in 1925-1930, who attended grade school during the Great Depression, spent World War II in high school (or on the battlefield), first voted in 1948 or 1952, set up housekeeping in the 1950s, and watched their first television when they were in their late twenties. Since national surveying began, this cohort has been exceptionally civic: voting more, joining more, reading newspapers more, trusting more. As the distinguished sociologist Charles Tilly (born in 1928) said in commenting on an early version of this essay, "We are the last suckers."

To help in interpreting the historical contexts within which these successive generations of Americans matured, the figure also indicates the decade within which each cohort came of age. Thus, we can see that each generation that reached adulthood since the 1940s has been less engaged in community affairs than its immediate predecessor.

Further confirmation of this generational interpretation comes from a comparison of the two parallel lines that chart responses to an identical question about social trust, posed first in the National Election Studies (mainly between 1964 and 1976) and then in the General Social Survey

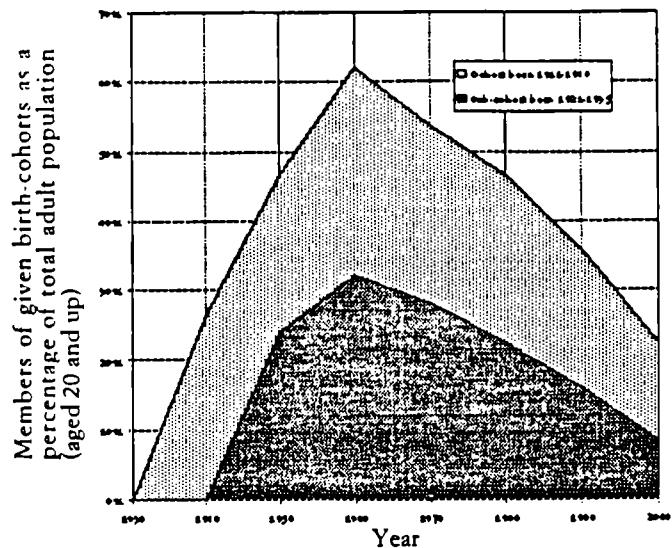
between 1972 and 1994. If the greater trust expressed by Americans born earlier in the century represented a life cycle effect, then the graph from the GSS surveys (conducted when these cohorts were, on average, 10 years older) should have been some distance above the NES line. In fact, the GSS line lies about 5-10 percent below the NES line. That downward shift almost surely represents a period effect that depressed social trust among all cohorts during the 1980s. That downward period effect, however, is substantially more modest than the large generational differences already noted.

In short, the most parsimonious interpretation of the age-related differences in civic engagement is that they represent a powerful reduction in civic engagement among Americans who came of age in the decades after World War II, as well as some modest additional disengagement that affected all cohorts during the 1980s. These patterns hint that being raised after World War II was a quite different experience from being raised before that watershed. It is as though the postwar generations were exposed to some mysterious X-ray that permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community. Whatever that force might have been, it—rather than anything that happened during the 1970s and 1980s—accounts for most of the civic disengagement that lies at the core of our mystery.

But if this reinterpretation of our puzzle is correct, why did it take so long for the effects of that mysterious X-ray to become manifest? If the underlying causes of civic disengagement can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s, why did the effects become conspicuous in PTA meetings and Masonic lodges, in the volunteer lists of the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts, and in polling stations and church pews and bowling alleys across the land only during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s?

The visible effects of this generational disengagement were delayed by two important factors. First, the postwar boom in college enrollments raised levels of civic engagement, offsetting the generational trends. As Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks observe in their as yet unpublished book, *The American Voter Reconsidered*, the postwar expansion of educational opportunities “fore-

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF A CIVIC GENERATION

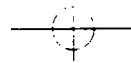


Source: Calculated from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports.

stalled a cataclysmic drop” in voting turnout, and it had a similar delaying effect on civic disengagement more generally.

Second, the full effects of generational developments generally appear several decades after their onset, because it takes that long for a given generation to become numerically dominant in the adult population. Only after the mid-1960s did significant numbers of the “post-civic generation” reach adulthood, supplanting older, more civic cohorts. The figure above (“The Rise and Decline of a Civic Generation”) illustrates this generational accounting. The long civic generation born between 1910 and 1940 reached its zenith in 1960, when it comprised 62 percent of those who chose between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. By the time that Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, that cohort’s share in the electorate had been cut precisely in half. Conversely, over the last two decades (from 1974 to 1994) boomers and X-ers (that is, Americans born after 1946) have grown as a fraction of the adult population from 24 percent to 60 percent.

In short, the very decades that have seen a national deterioration in social capital are the same decades during which the numerical dominance of a trusting and civic generation has been replaced by the dominion of “post-civic” cohorts. Moreover, although the long civic generation has enjoyed unprecedented life expectancy, allowing its mem-



bers to contribute more than their share to American social capital in recent decades, they are now passing from the scene. Even the youngest members of that generation will reach retirement age within the next few years. Thus, a generational analysis leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that the national slump in trust and engagement is likely to continue, regardless of whether the more modest "period effect" depression of the 1980s continues.

OUR PRIME SUSPECT

To say that civic disengagement in contemporary America is in large measure generational merely reformulates our central puzzle. We now know that much of the cause of our lonely bowling probably dates to the 1940s and 1950s, rather than to the 1960s and 1970s. What could have been the mysterious anticivic "X-ray" that affected Americans who came of age after World War II and whose effects progressively deepened at least into the 1970s?

Our new formulation of the puzzle opens the possibility that the zeitgeist of national unity, patriotism, and shared sacrifice that culminated in 1945 might have reinforced civic-mindedness. On the other hand, it is hard to assign any consistent role to the Cold War and the Bomb, since the anticivic trend appears to have deepened steadily from the 1940s to the 1970s, in no obvious harmony with the rhythms of world affairs. Nor is it easy to construct an interpretation of the data on generational differences in which the cultural vicissitudes of the sixties could play a significant role. Neither can economic adversity or affluence easily be tied to the generational decline in civic engagement, since the slump seems to have affected in equal measure those who came of age in the placid fifties, the booming sixties, and the busted seventies.

I have discovered only one prominent suspect against whom circumstantial evidence can be mounted, and in this case, it turns out, some directly incriminating evidence has also turned up. This is not the occasion to lay out the full case for the prosecution, nor to review rebuttal evidence for the defense, but I want to present evidence that justifies indictment.

The culprit is television.

First, the timing fits. The long civic generation was the last cohort of Americans to grow up without television, for television flashed into American society like lightning in the 1950s. In 1950 barely

10 percent of American homes had television sets, but by 1959, 90 percent did, probably the fastest diffusion of a major technological innovation ever recorded. The reverberations from this lightning bolt continued for decades, as viewing hours grew by 17-20 percent during the 1960s and by an additional 7-8 percent during the 1970s. In the early years, TV watching was concentrated among the less educated sectors of the population, but during the 1970s the viewing time of the more educated sectors of the population began to converge upward. Television viewing increases with age, particularly upon retirement, but each generation since the introduction of television has begun its life cycle at a higher starting point. By 1995 viewing per TV household was more than 50 percent higher than it had been in the 1950s.

Most studies estimate that the average American now watches roughly four hours per day (excluding periods in which television is merely playing in the background). Even a more conservative estimate of three hours means that television absorbs 40 percent of the average American's free time, an increase of about one-third since 1965. Moreover, multiple sets have proliferated: By the late 1980s three-quarters of all U.S. homes had more than one set, and these numbers too are rising steadily, allowing ever more private viewing. Robinson and Godbey are surely right to conclude that "television is the 800-pound gorilla of leisure time." This massive change in the way Americans spend their days and nights occurred precisely during the years of generational civic disengagement.

Evidence of a link between the arrival of television and the erosion of social connections is, however, not merely circumstantial. The links between civic engagement and television viewing can be instructively compared with the links between civic engagement and newspaper reading. The basic contrast is straightforward: Newspaper reading is associated with high social capital, TV viewing with low social capital.

Controlling for education, income, age, race, place of residence, work status, and gender, TV viewing is strongly and negatively related to social trust and group membership, whereas the same correlations with newspaper reading are positive. Within every educational category, heavy readers are avid joiners, whereas heavy viewers are more likely to be loners. In fact, more detailed analysis suggests that heavy TV watching is one important

reason *why* less educated people are less engaged in the life of their communities. Controlling for differential TV exposure significantly reduces the correlation between education and engagement.

Viewing and reading are themselves uncorrelated—some people do lots of both, some do little of either—but “pure readers” (that is, people who watch less TV than average and read more newspapers than average) belong to 76 percent more civic organizations than “pure viewers” (controlling for education, as always). Precisely the same pattern applies to other indicators of civic engagement, including social trust and voting turnout. “Pure readers,” for example, are 55 percent more trusting than “pure viewers.”

In other words, each hour spent viewing television is associated with less social trust and less group membership, while each hour reading a newspaper is associated with more. An increase in television viewing of the magnitude that the U.S. has experienced in the last four decades might directly account for as much as one-quarter to one-half of the total drop in social capital, even without taking into account, for example, the indirect effects of television viewing on newspaper reader-

ship or the cumulative effects of lifetime viewing hours. Newspaper circulation (per household) has dropped by more than half since its peak in 1947. To be sure, it is not clear which way the tie between newspaper reading and civic involvement works, since disengagement might itself dampen one’s interest in community news. But the two trends are clearly linked.

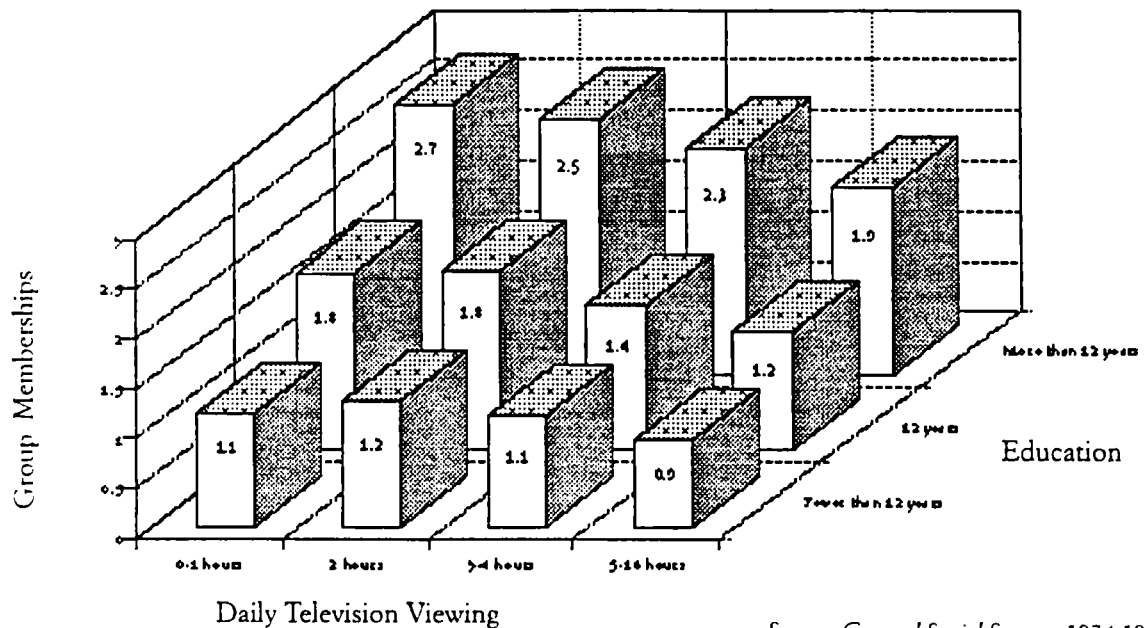
HOW MIGHT TV DESTROY SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Time displacement. Even though there are only 24 hours in everyone’s day, most forms of social and media participation are positively correlated. People who listen to lots of classical music are more likely, not less likely, than others to attend Cubs games. Television is the principal exception to this generalization—the only leisure activity that seems to inhibit participation outside the home. TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home, especially social gatherings and informal conversations. TV viewers are homebodies.

Most studies that report a negative correlation between television watching and community

THE TV CONNECTION

Group membership by television viewing and education



Source: General Social Survey, 1974-1994

involvement (see "The TV Connection"), previous page) are ambiguous with respect to causality, because they merely compare different individuals at a single time. However, one important quasi-experimental study of the introduction of television in three Canadian towns found the same pattern at the aggregate level across time. A major effect of television's arrival was the reduction in participation in social, recreational, and community activities among people of all ages. In short, television privatizes our leisure time.

Effects on the outlooks of viewers. An impressive body of literature suggests that heavy watchers of TV are unusually skeptical about the benevolence of other people—overestimating crime rates, for example. This body of literature has generated much debate about the underlying causal patterns, with skeptics suggesting that misanthropy may foster couch-potato behavior rather than the reverse. While awaiting better experimental evidence, however, a reasonable interim judgment is that heavy television watching may well increase pessimism about human nature. Perhaps too, as social critics have long argued, both the medium and the message have more basic effects on our ways of interacting with the world and with one another. Television may induce passivity, as Neil Postman has claimed.

Effects on children. TV consumes an extraordinary part of children's lives, about 40 hours per week on average. Viewing is especially high among pre-adolescents, but it remains high among younger adolescents: Time-budget studies suggest that among youngsters aged 9 to 14 television consumes as much time as all other discretionary activities combined, including playing, hobbies, clubs, outdoor activities, informal visiting, and just hanging out. The effects of television on childhood socialization have, of course, been hotly debated for more than three decades. The most reasonable conclusion from a welter of sometimes conflicting results appears to be that heavy television watching probably increases aggressiveness (although perhaps not actual violence), that it probably reduces school achievement, and that it is statistically associated with "psychosocial malfunctioning," although how much of this effect is self-selection and how much causal remains much debated. The evidence is, as I have said, not yet enough to convict, but the defense has a lot of explaining to do.

More than two decades ago, just as the first signs of disengagement were beginning to appear in American politics, the political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool observed that the central issue would be—it was then too soon to judge, as he rightly noted—whether the development represented a temporary change in the weather or a more enduring change in the climate. It now appears that much of the change whose initial signs he spotted did in fact reflect a climatic shift.

Moreover, just as the erosion of the ozone layer was detected only many years after the proliferation of the chlorofluorocarbons that caused it, so too the erosion of America's social capital became visible only several decades after the underlying process had begun. Like Minerva's owl that flies at dusk, we come to appreciate how important the long civic generation has been to American community life just as its members are retiring. Unless America experiences a dramatic upward boost in civic engagement (a favorable "period effect") in the next few years, Americans in 2010 will join, trust, and vote even less than we do today.

In an astonishingly prescient book, *Technologies without Borders*, published in 1991 after his death, Pool concluded that the electronic revolution in communications technology was the first major technological advance in centuries that would have a profoundly decentralizing and fragmenting effect on society and culture. He hoped that the result might be "community without contiguity." As a classic liberal, he welcomed the benefits of technological change for individual freedom, and in part, I share that enthusiasm. Those of us who bemoan the decline of community in contemporary America need to be sensitive to the liberating gains achieved during the same decades. We need to avoid an uncritical nostalgia for the fifties. On the other hand, some of the same freedom-friendly technologies whose rise Pool predicted may indeed be undermining our connections with one another and with our communities. Pool defended what he called "soft technological determinism" because he recognized that social values can condition the effects of technology. This perspective invites us not merely to consider how technology is privatizing our lives—if, as it seems to me, it is—but to ask whether we like the result, and if not, what we might do about it. Those are questions we should, of course, be asking together, not alone. □

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14

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Note: Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain (Divinity School, The University of Chicago) was unable to accept our invitation for January 7 because of a long-scheduled commitment to participate in a conference in South Africa.

Jean Bethke Elshtain,

a political philosopher whose task has been to show the connections between our political and our ethical convictions, is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at The University of Chicago.

Professor Elshtain was born in the irrigated farm country of northern Colorado and grew up in the small village of Timnath, Colorado (population 185). She attended public schools in Timnath, Colorado, and the Cache la Poudre Consolidated High School. A graduate of Colorado State University (A.B., 1963), Professor Elshtain went on to earn a Master's degree in history as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow before turning to the study of politics. She received her Ph.D. from Brandeis University in Politics in 1973 and immediately joined the faculty of the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. She served as an assistant professor from 1973 to 1976 when she was promoted to an associate professorship. She became a full professor in 1981. She joined the faculty of Vanderbilt University in 1988 and was appointed to her current position at the University of Chicago in 1995. As well, she has done guest stints as a visiting professor at Oberlin College, Yale University, and Harvard University.

Her books include

- *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1981; second edition, 1992)
- *The Family in Political Thought*, editor (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982)
- *Meditations on Modern Political Thought* (Praeger, 1986; reissued by Penn State Press, 1992)
- *Women and War* (Basic Books, 1987; Italian translation published by Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991; Japanese translation published by Hosei University Press, 1994; second paperback edition with new Epilogue, University of Chicago Press, 1995)
- *Women, Militarism, and War*, co-editor (Roman and Allenheld, 1990)
- *Rebuilding the Nest. A New Commitment to the American Family*, co-editor (Family Services Publication, Milwaukee, 1990)
- *Power Trips and Other Journeys* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990)
- *Just War Theory*, editor (Basil Blackwell, 1990)
- *But Was It Just. Reflections on the Morality of the Persian Gulf War*, co-author, with Michael Walzer, George Weigel, Stanley Hauerwas, and Sari Nusseibeh (Doubleday, 1992)
- *Democracy on Trial*, her 1993 Massey Lectures for the Canadian Broadcasting corporation (Basic Books, 1995)
- *Politics and the Human Body*, co-editor (Vanderbilt University Press, 1995)
- forthcoming is *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1996)

Works in progress include

- *Jane Addams and America*, an intellectual biography of Jane Addams

and

- *The King is Dead. Sovereignty at Century's End*

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Page Two of Two from Jean Bethke Elshtain (office fax 312 702-6048)

Jean Bethke Elshtain is the author of well over one hundred essays in scholarly journals, over one hundred essays in journals of civic opinion, and some one hundred-fifteen book reviews. She has delivered many guest lectureships. Of special note are:

The Annual Tom Seely Lecture on Law and the Free Society, University of Texas, Austin, Law School
The Annual Peace Lecture, University of Groningen, Holland
The Sproul Lectures, McGill University
The Distinguished Humanities Lectures, University of Georgia
The Lynd and Harry Bradley Lecturer, Kenyon College
The Bertha May Belle Andrews Memorial Lecture, Bates College
Plenary Speaker, International Conference on Christianity and Democracy, Emory University
The Edward Douglass White Lecture, Louisiana State University
The Charles Phelps Taft Lecture, University of Cincinnati
The Massey Lectures, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
The Ryan Lecture, Georgetown University Law Center
The Andrew Cecil Lecture on Citizenship in a Free Society, Univ. Texas/Dallas
The Donald R. Brown Memorial Lecture, University of Vermont
The Joy Gilbert Jameson Lecture, The University of the Redlands
The Bernard J. Flanagan Lecture on Religion and Public Affairs, Holy Cross College
The Covey Lectures, Loyola University of Chicago
The Willard O. Eddy Lecture, Colorado State University
The Lois Miller Memorial Lecture, St. Norbert's College
The Gordon Sandison Lecture, Western Washington University
The James A. Gray Lectures, The Divinity School, Duke University
The McMartin Lecture, The University of Ottawa

Professor Elshtain has been a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. She currently serves as a member of the Board of Trustees of Members of the Institute for Advanced Study. She has been a Scholar in Residence, Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Conference and Study Center, Como, Italy, a Guggenheim Fellow (1991-92) working on an intellectual biography of Jane Addams, and a Writer in Residence, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire. She is the recipient of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for excellence in classroom teaching--the highest award for undergraduate teaching at Vanderbilt University.

Jean Bethke Elshtain is married and the mother of four children -- Sheri, Heidi, Jenny, and Eric; and the grandmother of JoAnn Paulette Welch.

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The Politics of Difference

THE question of unity and diversity has been posed from the beginning of political thought in the West. The American Founders were well aware of the vexations attendant upon the creation of a new political body. They worked with, and against, metaphors that had once served as the symbolic vehicles of political incorporation. As men of the Enlightenment, they rejected images of the body politic that had dominated medieval and early-modern political thinking. For Jefferson, Madison, and others, political theories of "the King's two bodies"—John of Salisbury's twelfth-century vision in *Politicraticus* of a body politic with the prince as the head and animating force—were too strongly corporatist, predemocratic, and explicitly Christian to serve the *novus ordo seclorum*.¹ But they were haunted nonetheless by Hebrew and Christian metaphors of a covenanted polity: The body is one but has many members.

Indeed, one might argue that it is only incorporation within a single body that makes meaningful diversity possible.

Our differences must be recognized if they are to exist substantively. As political philosopher Charles Taylor noted, "my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. . . . My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others."² In other words, we cannot be different all by ourselves. The great challenge for the Founders was to form a political body that brought people together and created a "we," but also enabled people to remain separate and to recognize and respect one another's differences. Modern democrats face the same challenge.

I indicated in chapter 2 that one version of our current discontents—the politics of displacement—tries to solve this problem by smashing it to bits. Rather than negotiating the complexity of public and private identities, those who adopt this view disdain and displace any distinction between the citizen and whatever else a person may be—male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, black or white. One seeks full public recognition as a person with a handicap or a particular sexual orientation, or membership in an ethnic or racial group, and that exhausts one's public concerns. Marks of difference, once they gain public recognition in this form, translate all too easily into group triumphalism as the story grows that the public world is a world of many I's who form a we only with others exactly like themselves. No recognition of commonality is forthcoming. We are stuck in what the philosopher calls a world of "incommensurability," a world in which we literally cannot understand one another.

Democrats historically would have found this notion

peculiar at best, anathema at worst. Democrats today are troubled by such developments. We recognize in the rush for recognition of difference a powerful, and legitimate, modern concern. Some forms of equal recognition surely not only are possible in a democracy but form its very lifeblood. The question is, What sort of recognition? Recognition of what? For what? To claim "I am different, you must recognize me and honor my difference" tells me nothing that is civically interesting. Should I honor or recognize someone simply because she is female or proclaims a particular version of her sexual identity? This would make little sense. I may disagree profoundly with her about everything I find important—from what American policy ought to be in the war in the Balkans, to what needs to be done to stem the tide of deterioration and despair in America's inner cities, to whether violence on television is a serious concern or just an easy target for riled and worried parents and educators.

My recognition of her difference, by which I mean my preparedness to engage her as an interlocutor *given* our differences on the things that count politically—including equality, justice, freedom, fairness, authority, and power—turns on the fact that I share something with her: She is in the world with me; she, too, is a citizen. We both, it is hoped, operate from a stance of goodwill and an acceptance of the backdrop of democratic constitutional guarantees, as well as democratic habits and dispositions. We are both committed to rough-and-ready parity, an energetic desire to forge at least provisional agreements on highly controversial issues or to remain committed to the centrality of dialogue and debate to our shared way of life if we cannot resolve our differences. If I am her

enemy because I am white or heterosexual or a mother or an academic, or she is mine because she is none of these things, our only option is to "go to war"—to silence, reproach, even wipe out each other. One makes war with enemies; one does politics—democratic politics—with opponents.

DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY

I will turn later to how we come to know something "in common," to accept that we share a heritage, although we share it imperfectly and unevenly. But, first, let me say a bit more about the current politics of difference. At one point not so long ago, it was the liberal position that an emphasis on the ways people differed sanctioned inequality and that our "sameness" alone secured an egalitarian, democratic regime: If you prick me, do I not bleed? After all, was it not hierarchical, inequalitarian, conservative thinkers who insisted that natural differences must translate into social and political inequalities? American society is, perhaps, unique among nations in that, from the first, equality ("all men are created equal") has been one of the touchstones of its national identity and political culture. Need I acknowledge that slaves and women were omitted from the formal definition and struggled mightily for inclusion? But the general principle named both a partial and imperfect reality and a continuing aspiration.

For many conservatives, an extension of equality beyond legal recognition—and even that might be going too far—was balderdash because it was obvious to them that people were

different from one another, indeed, unequal by nature. Such persons equated equality with sameness and inequality with difference. Because it is clear that human beings differ, they insisted, society must reflect those differences. Furthermore, they contended, we will invariably wind up with widespread social inequality because people are not the same; inequality is lodged in nature. It follows that attempts to alter institutions to eliminate or reduce inequality will require nasty social surgery, because we must then eliminate human differences themselves. It seems best, according to this conservative argument, to allow natural differences—seen as inequalities—to work themselves out, even if the result is a stratified, inequalitarian society in the social and economic sense even as we remain equal only before the law.

Those who opposed this view, usually persons from the political Left or centrist liberals, insisted that it strained credulity to believe that all those who were well placed had fully earned it and that their power and privilege simply flowed from their being different—unequal—from the rest of us. Alas, the radical egalitarian response often got as tendentious as that of its ideological opposite. Rather than challenge the equation of equality with sameness, many critics implicitly embraced the idea: The more we were the same, the better. So they extolled a fuzzy or utopian notion of a world in which people were as indistinguishable from one another as happy peas in the egalitarian pod. Arguments defending the necessity to assess the disparate value or merit of diverse human capacities, abilities, and achievements vanished like the early morning dew in the sunlight's steady glare. I clearly remember the heated denunciations of "elitism" from my college compatriots

in the 1960s whenever evaluations of merit and accomplishment were defended. Some argued that standards themselves are somehow inherently antidemocratic. The same argument is even more vehemently pressed today.

This vision of a bland equality of sameness was promoted by many calling themselves egalitarians, some of whom were indebted to Marxism. The American writer Kurt Vonnegut satirized it in his short story "Harrison Bergeron," which appears in a collection called *Welcome to the Monkey House*:

The year was 2081 and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.³

In this delightfully ironic yet worrisome tale, Vonnegut portrays a future society in which all differences, all particular and unique human talents and gifts, have been compensated for downward to achieve the "equal society," in the belief that differences in themselves constitute inequalities. Thus ballet dancers, naturally gifted and trained to be lithe and limber, must dance with huge weights and irons on their legs so that they cannot leap any higher or move any more gracefully than anyone else. The world of perfect equality, one in which nobody is better at anything than anybody else, is at last attained! Of course, none of us would care to inhabit Vonnegut's fictional world. That is his point.

In education and the academy, the equation of equality with sameness led to a muddleheaded assault on any notion of distinctiveness or value. A "core curriculum," for example, was jettisoned at many institutions on the presumption that the core was suited only for elitists and hampered individual liberty. Some colleges and universities gave up grading students altogether or adopted a "pass/fail" system, which often amounted to the same thing. Textbook publishers knowingly began to "dumb down" texts in history, science, and literature. In an understandable and justifiable urge to improve the lot of the many, the distinctiveness of the one was forgotten, even disdained.

In his poignant autobiography about growing up as the son of Mexican immigrant parents in California and becoming a "scholarship kid," Richard Rodriguez wrote about the condescending paternalism he encountered all too often at the hands of interventionist egalitarians. His target is affirmative action and his legal categorization as a "minority" as part of educational efforts made in his behalf. Although he received an excellent parochial and public education, he was treated as a victim of cultural deprivation; the working assumption, of course, was that he was both ignorant and incapable of defending himself. All sorts of "allowances" were made for poorly educated Mexican American students and they were pushed through the system under the assumption that standards of merit and achievement were impositions by the Anglo majority on all minorities.

In the name of equality, of promoting "integration" and leveling, political radicals and school administrators often acted in deeply paternalistic ways. As Rodriguez explained:

The conspiracy of kindness became a conspiracy of uncaring. Cruelly, callously, admissions committees agreed to overlook serious academic deficiency. I knew students in college then barely able to read, students unable to grasp the function of a sentence. I knew non-white graduate students who were bewildered by the requirement to compose a term paper and who each day were humiliated when they couldn't compete with other students in seminars. . . . Not surprisingly, among those students with very poor academic preparation, few completed their courses of study. Many dropped out, blaming themselves for their failure. One fall, six nonwhite students I knew suffered severe mental collapse. None of the professors who had welcomed them to graduate school were around when it came time to take them to the infirmary or the airport. And the university officials who so diligently took note of those students in their self-serving totals of entering minority students finally took no note of them when they left.⁴

Unsurprisingly, at the time his book was published, in the early 1980s, there were concerted attempts to discredit Rodriguez as a stalking-horse for right-wing reaction; in this way, his arguments could be ignored, and the general inability of the Left to tolerate diversity in the ranks of minority groups—presumably they should all think alike and have identical needs that can be ministered to—was made evident. This situation has grown even more pronounced since then.

Remember, these assumptions were made with a grim determination to promote sameness in the name of educational and civic equality. Consider how quickly things have changed or, more to the point, how quickly the rhetoric of difference has supplanted the rhetoric of equality—perhaps the

better to promote homogenizing ends. I recall my perplexity at a conference on women and feminism in the late 1980s, when I listened to two and a half days of assaults on the very idea of equality. Equality meant "the same." Equality was the mark of masculinism. Equality was the stigma of heterosexism. Equality was pretty much every nasty thing you could come up with and name. Somehow even the Nazis got to be perverse egalitarians in their rush to exterminate the different.

Equality, I learned, meant "homologization with the male subject." As that was news to me, I decided I needed to ponder this matter further. The rush to eliminate equality from our political idiom and our political aspiration struck me as daft. Recognizing that democracy without equality is an impossible proposition, I got the uneasy feeling—one that remains with me and has only been strengthened by recent celebrations of difference as a uniform and fixed group identity—that perhaps many of those who are immersed in what they call the "discourse of difference" are not so keen on constitutional democracy itself. One participant in the conference was candid about this point. Women, she claimed, should be celebrating their "will-to-power." Democratic equality was both "puny and phony." She evidently neither knew nor cared about the ways that slogan had been disastrously deployed in the not-too-distant past. I refer, of course, to the perverse use of this idea by mid-century haters of democracy, especially in fascist rhetoric and theory. We are not so far removed from these events that we can be blithe about deploying certain slogans uncritically. Perhaps one should not be too concerned, however. Perhaps this is primarily an academic exercise, radical playacting by a few indi-

viduals who would be appalled to see the implication of their own ideas fully worked out.

But there is room for worry. As the political theorist George Kateb noted: "To want to believe that there is either a fixed majority interest or a homogeneous group identity is not compatible with the premises of rights-based individualism."⁵ Although I prefer to speak of democratic "individuality," rather than "individualism," Kateb's point is well taken. To the extent that citizens begin to retribalize into ethnic or other "fixed-identity" groups, democracy falters. Any possibility for human dialogue, for democratic communication and commonality, vanishes as so much froth on the polluted sea of phony equality. Difference becomes more and more exclusivist. If you are black and I am white, by definition I do not and cannot, in principle, "get it." There is no way that we can negotiate the space between our given differences. We are just stuck with them, stuck in what political thinkers used to call "ascriptive characteristics"—things we cannot change about ourselves. Mired in the cement of our own identities, we need never deal with one another. Not really. One of us will win and one of us will lose the cultural war or the political struggle. That's what it's all about: power of the most reductive, impositional sort.

The political theorist Sheldon Wolin fears that the most important democratic category, the citizen, will dissolve in the acids of this new ideology of difference, an ideology that despairs of, or huffily rejects, equality. In this respect, Wolin defines equality as "some broad measure of similarity if only to support a notion of membership that entails equality of rights, responsibilities, and treatment."⁶ Repudiating the "sameness" of equality for its homogenizing urge, ideologues of difference

embrace their own version of sameness—an exclusionist sameness along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference. There is no apparent end to this process, as identities get shaved off into more and more minute slivers, for example, lesbian women of color; "Act-Up" militants who favor outing; white, heterosexual men who were abused by their fathers—the possibilities are endless. Ironically, according to Wolin, it has traditionally been the "nondemocratic rulers, the men who justify their rule by appealing to differences—heredity, divinity, merit, knowledge—who reduce populations to a common condition."⁷ We now impose a common condition on ourselves in the name of diversity.

If one sees in democratic principles, including the insistence that we are obliged to reach out to one another rather than to entrench in our isolated groups, only a cover for hidden privileges, one stalls out as a citizen. This leads to a terrible impasse, Wolin concludes, one to which "the politics of difference and the ideology of multiculturalism have contributed by rendering suspect the language and possibilities of collectivity, common action, and shared purposes."⁸ Yet, those who push such politics must, in practice, appeal to "some culture of commonality" in launching their demands that their differences be respected and their grievances responded to. There is, in fact, a way it can be done that recognizes both the "difference" and the commonality of an aggrieved group.

Let us consider the discourse on equality and difference as it pertains to persons with developmental disabilities. I can track four stages in the story of equality and difference as it pertains to people with such disabilities. First, the "retarded" are construed as being outside the world of equality, having

been identified by others as persons who lack the qualities necessary to play a part in the world of equality and inequality, the world of juridical and civic relations, the world of public freedom. Their difference disqualifies them by definition. Some, of course, even put such persons outside the boundaries of humanity—recall that the mentally handicapped and disabled were the first targets of Nazi extermination policies. In the second stage, the retarded, still called and thought of as such, are drawn within the circle of concern by those who do have a civic identity and are part of the world of democratic equality. The disabled become the recipients of concern; their welfare must be seen to. But they are not yet participants in the drama of democratic equality themselves. In a third phase, the retarded, in and through their "normal" representatives, make claims upon the "equal," arguing that they, too, have the qualifications to be part of the discourse. They, too, can vote and hold jobs—or the vast majority can. They, too, can love and be loved. So, over time, they are incorporated on the presumption that they are not so "different" as was once assumed.

~~Finally, the developmentally different find their own voice, however halting, and insist that their difference does not sever them from equality.~~

In vital ways, persons with disabilities are more like than unlike those without disabilities. But because of the ways they are unlike the majority, they must struggle to make the case for equality with respect for difference. They seek recognition. Language shifts: We are not "retards," they implore us; we are your fellow citizens with disabilities. Equality, or entering the discourse of equality, does not and need not have to do with homogeneity. Instead, equality remains a powerful term of

political discourse and an instrument for social change and justice, one of the strongest weapons the relatively powerless have at their disposal to make their case and define their aims before their fellow citizens.

But if you have consigned equality to the discursive trash heap as so much phony-baloney, as we used to say as children, and scream at me that you will have none of it; if, instead, you insist that what politics must consist of is my acknowledging and recognizing your differences but not being allowed to engage you about these differences directly because we have nothing to say to each other, then I can only respond that you are not thinking and acting like a democratic citizen. You are thinking and acting like a royal pain in the neck, and the sooner I can get you out of my sight and mind, I will—not because I am racist or sexist or any of the other handy labels we toss around all too easily these days, but because I am weary of being accused of bad faith no matter what I do, or say, or refrain from doing or saying.

MULTICULTURALISM AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

How did we get into this mess? There are many reasons, including the unraveling of democratic civil society I discussed in chapter 1. Here I want to focus on another dimension of the trials of contemporary democracy: education. American public education is in big trouble and has been since at least the 1970s. Defenders of public schools are on the defensive. Most

often they portray themselves as embattled champions of democracy against repressive right-wingers, evangelical hot-heads, and irrational and unenlightened parents. Now, there are no doubt repressive types and hotheads and overwrought parents engaged in skirmishes with educational institutions, from preschools to universities. But critics do not neatly fit this demeaning and misleading picture.

Bear in mind that it was taken for granted from the start of the American democratic experiment that the survival of the republic for any length of time would depend heavily on the cultivation of civic sentiments among the young. The optimistic hope was that a national character could be formed by the careful molding of each generation's children. This hope had a long and noble lineage. In his great funeral oration, Pericles marked the difference between the Spartan system, which subjected young boys to harsh and laborious training replete with grim martial restrictions, and the open Athenian system of generosity and leniency. Like the Spartans, the Athenians were brave in battle; unlike the Spartans, they promoted goodwill, what we today might call "well-roundedness." (I discuss Pericles' funeral oration in more detail in chapter 4.)

The American Founders debated education, rejecting explicitly a classic civic republican education modeled on the Spartan example because it demanded and likely yielded homogeneity and sameness. In *Federalist Number 10*, Publius advanced a commitment to civility, one that implies acceptance of difference as well as political equality. The "spirit of the people," informed by religious principles and a belief in nature and nature's laws, required no prefixed and dogmatic creed. This epistemological version of difference involved the

awareness of different opinions: We do not all think alike. In contrast, the claims to difference of many contemporary multiculturalists are couched in ontological terms: This is what we *are*. According to this vision of exclusive groups, there is such a thing as "thinking black" or "thinking white"; you can't help it, if you are one or the other. To the extent that public schools put themselves at the service of this latter version of multiculturalism, they disastrously abandon the turf they were deeded, the space within which they were enjoined to help create a commitment to a rough-and-ready social egalitarianism, coupled with an equally strong commitment to civility.

But how can imposed uniformity—whether of sameness or of difference—prepare citizens of a democracy to exercise civic and social responsibilities? This is a worry that many now have about the educational wars being waged in America over so-called multicultural curricula that are designed explicitly to entrench differences. The new multiculturalism promotes, as I noted earlier, incommensurability: If I am white and you are black, we cannot, in principle, speak to or understand each other. You just don't and won't "get it." As a form of ideological teaching, multicultural absolutism isolates us in our own skins and equates culture with racial or ethnic identity. Some critics have described this as a process of "resegregation" and wonder how long it will take to move from separate approaches for black children in the name of Afro-centricity, for example, to a quest for separate schools. One of the glories of American public education has been its mingling of class, gender, ethnicity, and race. That was part of the democratic ethos. In *Days of Obligation*, Richard Rodriguez noted:

American educators have lost the confidence of their public institution. . . . There are influential educators today, and I have met them, who believe that the purpose of American education is to instill in children a pride in their ancestral pasts. Such a curtailing of education seems to me condescending; seems to me the worst sort of missionary spirit. Did anyone attempt to protect the white middle-class student of yore from the ironies of history? Thomas Jefferson—that great democrat—was also a slaveowner. Need we protect black students from complexity? Thomas Jefferson, that slaveowner, was also a democrat. American history has become a pageant of exemplary slaves and black educators. Gay studies, women's studies, ethnic studies—the new curriculum ensures that education will be flattering. But I submit that America is not a tale for sentimentalists.⁹

If we are flattered and cajoled into thinking ours is a story of purity because it is one of victimization, we become sentimentalists. As Rodriguez went on to insist, newcomers to this country need to know about seventeenth-century Puritans and about cowboys and Indians; these are constitutive dramas of American society. Teaching exotic, mythic, and "foreign" pasts does not prepare one for a culture that is both "in common" and forever changing. If I can indulge in yet another reminder, democracy is not simply a set of procedures or a constitution, but an ethos, a spirit, a way of responding, and a way of conducting oneself. Not being simple, democracy does not afford us a straightforward answer to the question of what education is, and for, democracy might be. If, for example, we move too quickly to the notion of relevance—teach them something practical, so they can

get jobs when they leave school—we may stress watery adaptation above authentic excellence. If we concentrate exclusively on the few, assuming that the many are less vital in the overall scheme of things, the democratic culture necessary to sustain constitutional democracy over the long haul will either wither on the vine or not bear fruit in the first place. If we say that education must be for the many, and we believe the many are not up to much, we abandon excellence for the lowest common denominator: There goes Jefferson's aristocracy of virtue and talent!

A delicate line separates the overpoliticization of education from the awareness that education is never outside a world of which politics—how human beings govern and order a way of life in common—is a necessary feature. Education is always cast as the means whereby some, or all, citizens of a particular society get their bearings and learn to live with and among one another. Education always reflects a society's views of what is excellent, worthy, and necessary. These reflections are not cast in cement like so many foundation stones; rather, they are refracted and reshaped over time as definitions, meanings, and purposes change through democratic contestation. In this sense education is political, but being political is different from being directly and blatantly politicized—being made to serve interests and ends imposed by militant groups, whether in the name of heightened racial awareness, true biblical morality, androgyny, therapeutic self-esteem, or all the other sorts of enthusiasms in which we are currently awash.

Consider the following examples. A class takes up the Declaration of Independence, with its grand pronouncement

that "all men are created equal." But when the Declaration of Independence was written, women (and many men) were disenfranchised, and slaves were not counted as full persons. How could this be, the students wonder? What meaning of equality did the Founders embrace? Were any of them uneasy about it? How did they square this shared meaning with what we perceive to be manifest inequalities? What was debated, and what was not? What political and moral exigencies of that historic moment compelled what sorts of compromises? Might things have gone differently? This classroom is an instance of reflective political education in and for a particular democracy—the American version—and its perennial dilemma of the one and the many.

But let me put forth a second and a third example, exaggerated in order to mark the differences between these latter two instances and my first example as clearly as I can. In a second classroom, the teacher declares that the Founders were correct in every respect. To be sure, slavery was an unfortunate blemish, but it was corrected. As a democratic educator at the end of the twentieth century, she must reaffirm her students' devotion to the Founders and the Republic. After all, did they not distill the essence of the wisdom of the ages, good for all times and all places, in their handiwork? They were statesmen, above the fray, not politicians. Here, uncritical adulation triumphs.

The hagiographer's mirror image is offered by my third teacher, who declares that nothing good ever came from the hand of that abstract, all-purpose villain, the "dead, white European male." The words and deeds of such men, including the Founders, were nefarious. Nothing but racists and patri-

archalists, those blatant oppressors hid behind fine-sounding words. All they created is tainted and hypocritical. All is foreclosed. All, presumably, has been exposed. Debate ends or is discouraged. To express a different point of view is to betray a false consciousness, venality, or white, patriarchal privilege. Demonology triumphs.

These two examples of teacherly malfeasance I take to be instances of unreflective, dogmatic politicization. Each evades the dilemmas of democratic equality rather than offering us points of critical reflection on that dilemma. This sort of education fails in its particular and important task of preparing us for a world of ambiguity and variety. It equips us only for resentment or malicious naïveté. Let me be clear: I am not indicting education on any level as the sole author of our growing balkanization. But I am suggesting that the schools, whose mission once was to instill some measure of commonality across differences, now suffer under the claim that that effort itself is but another name for "normalization" and cultural imperialism. All those dedicated teachers in all those public schools—the vast majority of them women—who work long hours for low pay and see their work as a vocation, relegated by some contemporary radicals, including militant multiculturalists, to the status of agents of domination, sometimes witting, sometimes not.

There are two off-kilter positions, then. In one, the mesmerized worshiper of authority, who will brook no criticism of the Founders, denies herself the critical freedom that is hers as an educator and that should be imparted to her students. In the other, the agitated negator of all that has gone before preaches freedom from the dismal and spurious past

and what she sees as an all-pervasive and menacing tradition that she would cast off, and she insists that her students see it that way, too. But a genuine education in and for democracy would bring matters to the surface; would help us engage in a debate with interlocutors long dead or protagonists who never lived, save on the page; and, through that engagement, would elaborate alternative conceptions through which to apprehend our world and the way that world represents itself.

"Perhaps," wrote the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott,

we may think of the components of culture as voices, each the expression of a distinct condition and understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all.¹⁰

This openness to diverse voices helps to keep alive both our distinctiveness and the possibility of commonalities.

I think of my own education, and my democratic dreams, as they were nurtured in the rural Colorado village in which I grew up. The Timnath Public School, District Number 62, incorporated Grades 1 through 12 in a single building. I remember that we memorized the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. When my classmates and I were in Grades 7 and 8, in a single classroom under the firm if

somewhat eccentric tutelage of Miss McCarthy, the recitation of the Gettysburg Address was quite an event. We would line up in a single row around the classroom. On Miss McCarthy's signal, we would begin to hum the stirring song of the American Civil War, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," as Miss McCarthy recited the Gettysburg Address with flourish and fervor. She had a way of trailing off each sentence in a trembly, melodramatic whisper that sometimes left us hummers in stitches. But I never forgot the Gettysburg Address and its promise of democratic equality.

My democratic dream was nurtured by a presumption that none of us is stuck inside our own skins; our identities and our ideas are not reducible to our membership in a race, an ethnic group, or a sex. I remember my father telling me that the "Mexican kids" were sometimes smart and nice and sometimes not, just like other kids. (Mexican was the term of respect in that time and place.) I had learned long before Martin Luther King, Jr., made it the central theme of his great "I Have a Dream" speech that I was to judge others not by the color of their skins but by the content of their character and the quality of their deeds. It would never have occurred to me that I should think girlishly or that my friend Raymond Barros was required to think "with his blood."

Our text for the high school English class in that isolated little place was called *Adventures in Reading*. I still have my copy—I bought it from the school because I loved so many of the stories and poems in it. The table of contents list "Good Stories Old and New," with such bracing subsections as "Winning Against the Odds," "Meeting the Unusual," and "Facing Problems." We read "Lyrics from Many Lands" and "American

Songs and Sketches." I looked at this text recently as I thought about democracy and education. By no means was it dominated by a single point of view, that of the dread dead white European male. We read Mary O'Hara, Dorothy Canfield, Margaret Weymouth Jackson, Elsie Singmaster, Selma Lagerlöf, Rosemary Vincent Benét, Kathryn Forbes, Sarojini Naidu, Willa Cather, and Emily Dickinson, among others. We read the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the black reformer Booker T. Washington. We read Leo Tolstoy and Pedro de Alarcón. We read translations of Native American warrior songs.

Now this reading was not done under the specific rubric of multiculturalism. It was undertaken on the assumption that life is diverse, filled with many wonders. Through *Adventures in Reading*, we could make the lives and thoughts of others our own in some way. In my imaginings and yearnings, I did not feel constrained because some of the writers I admired most were men. I later chafed against the constraints I encountered outside my imagination, of course, but education is about opening the world up, not imprisoning us in terms of race, gender, or ethnicity. I was taught, as the preface to the textbook said, that: "Reading is your passport to adventure in faraway places. In books the world lies before you, its paths radiating from great cities to distant lands, to scenes forever new, forever changing. . . . Reading knows no barrier, neither time nor space nor bounds of prejudice—it admits us all to the community of human experience." Clearly, I was a lucky child, a lucky *democratic* child, for I learned that, in Oakeshott's words, "Learning is not merely acquiring information . . . , nor is it merely 'improving one's mind'; it is learning to recognize

some specific invitations to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding."¹¹

This work of self-understanding cannot be the exclusive purview of the family or of some overweening state or bureaucracy that is pushing either homogeneity or multiculturalism. It is primarily a task of civil society, of which schools are a part. Of course, education in and for a democratic culture is a porous affair, open to the wide world outside the door and beyond the playground. But that does not mean it must become the plaything of purveyors of passing political or pedagogical enthusiasms. The danger in continuing down our present path is that our understanding of education itself is increasingly imperiled because we have done too little to protect education, and the children being educated, from heavy-handed intrusion by those who would have both education and children serve this political master or that ideological purpose, whether in the name of change or in defense of some status quo. Thus, we increasingly give over to education all sorts of tasks it is ill equipped to handle. At the same time, we seem intent on stripping education of what it ought to be about: an invitation to "particular adventures in human self-understanding."

A democratic drama is the playing out of the story of self-limiting freedom. The danger in any ideological definition of education is that it undermines this essential dimension, in much the way Pericles argued that Sparta undermined authentic, self-chosen civic bravery by mandating harsh and severe sacrifice. Because democracy requires freedom as responsibility, any definition or system that sanctions the evasion of responsibility, as I sink my identity totally into that of a group and its "groupthink," imperils democracy. Education is atom-

ized; civic identity is splintered. Whether in the name of change or to forestall change, an ideological system of education is the worst way for human beings to try to order and to ensure their collective democratic affairs. For once a world of personal responsibility with its characteristic virtues and marks of decency (honor, friendship, fidelity, and fairness) is ruptured or emptied, what rushes in to take its place is politics as a "technology of power," in Václav Havel's words. Responsibility, according to Havel—and he is as surefooted a guide as any currently available—flows from the aims of life "in its essence," these aims being plurality and independent self-constitution, as opposed to the conformity, uniformity, and stultifying dogmas of left- and right-wing ideologues who abandon reality and assault life with their rigid, abstract chimeras.

A fusion of freedom and responsibility yields a distinct but definite political conclusion: Democracy is the political form that permits and requires human freedom, not as an act of self-overcoming or pure reason, but in service to others in one's time and place. Democrats are so concerned with the education of children because, through education, children can get acquainted with the world in a way that will help them assume responsibility. To live "within the truth," as Havel called it, is to give voice to a self and a citizen who has embraced responsibility for the here and now: "That means that responsibility is ours, that we must accept it and grasp it here, now, in this place where the Lord has set us down, and that we cannot lie our way out of it by moving somewhere else, whether it be to an Indian ashram or to a parallel *polts*."¹²

Havel believes we are all living in the midst of a general crisis of human consciousness, which manifests itself in the

spheres of human freedom, responsibility, and identity. Accepting the risks of free action—an affirmation that education in and for democracy makes possible but does not guarantee—marks one as a person and forms the basis of one's identity. Any mode of thought or program of education that reduces human responsibility narrows the horizon of human possibility. To assume full responsibility is not to lapse into dour moralism or to universalize a giddy and boundless compassion; rather, it is to take up the specific, concrete burdens of one's culture. Recently, for example, Havel denounced the troubles faced by Eastern Europe's Gypsy population as an example of the search in a post-Communist world, for "pseudo-certainities," identity politics being one of the most readily available and virulent forms of such certainty. Assaults against Gypsies, for not being one of "us," offer "a litmus test not of democracy but of civil society. The two are certainly two sides of the same coin. . . . [W]e have created all the basic institutions of democracy—political parties, a parliament, elections. Now much more effort should be focused on building a civil society, to promote a climate that would encourage people to act as citizens in the best sense of the word. . . ."¹³ Public education that undermines the possibility of, and responsibility for, this form of citizenship is an exercise in speciousness.

This is tough stuff. But, then, democracy is for the stout of heart who know there are things worth fighting for in a world of paradox, ambiguity, and irony. This democratic way—moderation with courage, open to compromise from a basis of principle—is the rare but occasionally attainable fruit of the democratic imagination and the democratic citizen in action. Democracy is on trial in our time, beleaguered by foes

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and bedeviled by friends. But there have always been skeptics. Democracy was both tried and condemned by a number of my distinguished forebears in the world of Western political philosophy. Perhaps it is worth making a brief detour into democracy's contentious past in order to take the most accurate measure we can of the current prospects for democracy.

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Divider Title: _____

Note:

This is a draft of my contribution to a larger group effort to rethink the governing philosophy of American democracy in response to the great transformations--economic, social, and political--now underway here and around the world. The threshold idea is that our situation at the end of the 20th century bears a remarkable resemblance to the circumstances facing the Progressive movement in the late 19th century.

Bill Galston

Toward a New Democracy: Introduction

It is often said that the core of America is an idea, that we are (as Abraham Lincoln put it) a nation dedicated to a proposition. And this is true. But the idea is dynamic, not static; not dry and abstract, but suffused with a sense of possibility and hope. The American idea is a **promise** extended to all who enter the community, and it is a **dream** cherished by generations of Americans.

The promise of American life--the American Dream--has shaped our history. It is the promise of equal opportunity for all, unfettered by the status of one's ancestors or the limits of one's current condition; of material and social progress from generation to generation; of equal rights for all to protect against concentrations of power and secure a zone of individual liberty; of a free society in which we may form all manner voluntary associations to pursue shared interests and express core values; of democratic self-government at every level of our public lives; and of a civic unity that both embraces and transcends our differences.

The American Dream is not a condition to be described, but an ideal to be realized. Each generation of Americans has been called upon to work toward its fulfillment. And many have been challenged to chart dramatically new paths.

Some generations have encountered, and surmounted, a single focal crisis. For the founders, it was the challenge of forging a unified constitutional republic. For the Civil War generation, it was the "house divided against itself" by the curse of slavery; six decades ago, it was a Great Depression that threatened not only our economy, but democratic institutions here and around the world.

Other generations have confronted, not a single focal crisis, but rather profound challenges along many fronts. Consider the situation at the end of the 19th century: a great economic transformation from agriculture to the new industrial order; a pervasive sense of social disorder--family breakdown, crime, and immorality--as our population moved from rural small towns to rapidly expanding urban centers; cultural challenges posed by unsettled issues of race and unprecedented waves of immigration more ethnically and religiously diverse than ever before; a crisis of governance in which our public institutions were seen as ineffective, corrupt, and exclusionary; and a fundamental debate on many fronts about America's role in the world--the conditions of global economic engagement, the strategies of military defense, the terms on which we would undertake responsibilities beyond our borders.

In response to these challenges, a group of innovative thinkers developed a set of bold ideas for renewing the promise of American life--ideas that provided the basis for what we now know as the Progressive movement. These ideas included:

- o a stronger national government to cope with economic and social consequences of industrialization;

- o social legislation and regulation to deal with problems of urbanization;
- o a reformed system of public education capable of transforming immigrants into citizens;
- o political reform that expanded suffrage and deployed institutions of direct democracy against state legislatures and local governments dominated by special interests and corruption.

The Progressive movement was not a party, but rather a powerful new vision that influenced both parties as well as citizens and leaders who sought to act outside established party structures. While it scored important early successes (both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson implemented portions of the Progressive agenda), the movement's key contribution was longterm: it created the intellectual and policy predicate for the New Deal and for the rise of a strong centralized government using the tools of legislation, regulation, bureaucracy, and executive leadership to address our national problems. It is no exaggeration to say that the ideas launched by the Progressives shaped our politics for most of the past century.

Today's circumstances are different from those that sparked the progressive movement. Still, the scope of the problems our country confronts at the end of the 20th century bears a remarkable resemblance to those our predecessors faced at the end of the 19th.

- o As the industrial economy yields to the new information age, and as the self-contained national market gives way to global competition, many Americans are experiencing stagnant or declining wages, increased job insecurity, and heightened anxiety about their children's future.
- o Family breakdown, violent crime, and the fraying of neighborhood and community ties have led to a widespread sense of a society coming apart at the seams.
- o High rates of immigration and new forms of ethnic, racial, and religious group self-assertion have weakened confidence in a common civic culture, of a shared sense of what it means to be an American.
- o Our governmental institutions are excessively influenced by special interest groups and concentrations of wealth and power, and they are responsive to a shallow, media-driven, polarized sound-bite politics at the expense of the considered commonsense judgments of average citizens.
- o The collapse of international communism and the replacement of East/West conflict with ethnic and economic rivalries has given rise to confusion about our role in the world and about the strategies for reconciling our global hopes with the means we are willing to devote to their pursuit.

But while our challenges bear a remarkable resemblance to those of a century ago, today most Americans no longer believe that the solution is to be found in a larger, stronger central government. And they are right. In the 20th century, the expansion of central government power--through legislation, regulation, and bureaucracy--dealt effectively with the challenges of growth, security, and social

unity in the industrial age. But today, this course--still supported by traditional liberals--serves more to defend the past than to build the future.

By contrast, many conservatives argue that the overgrown federal government is the source of our problems and that dismantling the government in favor of the free market will solve them. If only our national life were so simple! The market is the best means ever devised for creating wealth. But the invisible hand does not create equal opportunity, or defend equal rights, or renew our civic culture.

At the threshold of the 21st century, the challenge of this generation is to chart a new course to the American Dream

- a course equally removed from the big government structures of the old liberalism and the no-government dogmas of the new conservatives;

- a course that builds on the strengths of the market, that reinvents public institutions to serve public purposes, that brings more effective self-government closer to the people, that helps us rebuild community and a shared civic culture.

We call this course the New Democracy. It rests on three straightforward but powerful ideas.

First: despite all their historic accomplishments, the economics, society, and politics of the Industrial Age are now in irreversible decline. To pretend otherwise is to succumb to nostalgia. For late 20th century progressives, there is no alternative: we must reconstruct our agenda in response to the imperatives of the rising Information Age.

Second: we must retrieve, and renew for our time, the most enduring social ideal of our history, articulated in different ways by Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, by Populists and Progressives alike: the ideal of a nation in which there is equal opportunity for all and special privileges for none.

Third: to realize the ideal of equal opportunity, we must conduct both our politics and our social life on the basis of a moral principle--mutual responsibility. The practical meaning of that principle is clear: We cannot receive benefits unless we give something back to our community and our country. We cannot enjoy our individual rights without doing our fair share to maintain the overall system of rights. And we cannot rightly exempt ourselves from obligations that bind our fellow citizens.

Like the Progressives a century ago, we offer a new politics based on ideas in place of an old politics beholden to interests. Like the Progressives, we hope that the ideas we propose can transform American politics, not just one party; can build new common ground, not new partisan divisions. And like the Progressives, we believe that the New Democracy is the work--not of a day or a year--but of generations to come. Still, we must do what we can. And the time to begin is now.

The Three Cornerstones of the New Democracy

Our country rests on one simple idea: the people have the right, and the ability, to govern themselves. But transforming that idea into reality is anything but simple. Policies and institutions that promote self-government in one era may impede it in the next. Democracy cannot be carved in stone, and the task of self-government is never done. That is why the Declaration of Independence tells us that in addition to the unalienable rights of individuals, there is a collective right of the people, acting as a whole, to alter their institutions to better serve their purposes.

Our current institutions and policies have served us well through the Industrial Age, and through the long struggle against fascism and communism. But today we face new challenges, and we must change to meet them. These challenges have disrupted the old order, and they have brought insecurity and anxiety to millions of average families. But they also offer unprecedented opportunity.

We believe that our nation stands at the threshold of a new era: of growth and prosperity in which all can share; of revitalized free associations among our citizens; of more effective self-government, not just **for** the people but **by** the people, closer to them and more responsive to their concerns.

We call this era the New Democracy. It is possible, but not inevitable. It will come to pass, but only if we have the clarity to envision it and the strength to build it.

To make the New Democracy a reality, we must change how we act. But before we can do that, we must change how we think--about the way prosperity and security are produced in the economy, about the way opportunity can be enhanced through progressive self-government, and about the way we must deal with one another as fellow citizens throughout our society.

The New Economy

A century ago, Americans faced a great transformation of their economy, from agriculture and individual artisanship to giant industrial corporations. Appealing to the tradition of Jefferson and Jackson, some Americans sought to resist this shift as incompatible with equal opportunity and democratic self-government. Others argued that the transition was inevitable. Our nation's intellectual challenge was to decouple enduring Jeffersonian and Jacksonian values from their dying socioeconomic base; our practical task was to craft new policies to strengthen these values within the context of the emerging industrial order. This was the historic mission of the Progressive movement.

The Progressives' program rested on a comprehensive analysis of the new

economy. They understood that this shift in the basis of national wealth was creating profound changes in our society as well. Larger units of organization; concentration and centralization of power; more hierarchy and bureaucracy; increased routinization and anonymity in human relations; rapid urbanization--all these changes and more were inevitable consequences of industrialization. And they would require, in turn, new understandings of worker organization, of labor/management relations, and of the role of government. Fundamental issues of individual economic security, public health and safety, and the of public power to safeguard democracy against the dangers of economic concentration and inequality had to be rethought.

It took generations to complete this rethinking and to create a new public order consistent with the industrial economy--through the efforts of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and decades of national administrations of both parties from the 1940s through the 1970s. And today, once again, we must think and act anew. For the economic transformation now underway is every bit as momentous as the industrialization of a century ago, and its social and political consequences will be equally profound.

A decade ago, politicians and pundits could still puzzle over basic trends. Now, the dimensions of the new economy are increasingly clear. **Knowledge** is the core of the new wealth of nations. The pace of technological innovation is accelerating, and product cycles are shrinking. The information revolution is transforming the design and production of both goods and services. Global economic competition is diminishing the power of national economic policies and is producing an inexorable logic of productivity improvements in every sector. The largely unregulated flow of global capital is creating new opportunities (as well as instabilities) in parts of the world previously shut out of the international economy and is contributing to new pressures on established industrial powers.

Today, as was the case a century ago, the new technology of mass production is linked to new organizational forms. Then it was large, multilayered, hierarchical, bureaucratized units structured along military lines. Today, new information technologies are reversing these trends. In the economy, corporate workforces are shrinking, organization hierarchies are flattening, top-down bureaucratic management of information is yielding to the power of personal computers, and hierarchical authority is giving way to more consensual forms of leadership.

While many corporations have responded effectively to the challenges of the new economy, the prospects for workers and their families have dimmed. Productivity and profits are up, but wages and incomes for many workers are stagnating. Health and pension benefits are being cut back, and a seemingly endless cycle of "downsizing" is shattering expectations of job security. By many measures, inequality is on the rise as the educated professionals who can function most effectively in the new knowledge economy pull away from the rest of society.

These problems are serious, but not unprecedented. A century ago, the new corporate/industrial order produced increased inequality of wealth and magnified insecurity as the economy endured spasms of boom and bust. It took two generations of public policy experimentation to reverse trends toward inequality and create new sources of security for working families. Today, in the new economy, our challenges are much the same. But our responses must be radically different.

While economic agents have adjusted imperfectly to the new forces of information, technology, and global competition, our political system has remained mired in the past. Reform efforts to increase government efficiency by shriking bureaucracy have met with entrenched resistance, exacerbating the loss of public confidence and sparking demands for the wholesale elimination of public agencies and functions. While modern information technology can help decentralize political as well as economic power, these new possibilities for self-government have yet to be translated into practice.

While the policy debate remains clouded, the basic point is clear: The new economy is here to stay, and it is changing the terms on which we must act. We need new policies--for our economic, social and political life--based on hope rather than nostalgia, and realism rather than wishful thinking. There is simply no substitute for bold approaches that acknowledge the irreversible reality and power of the new economy.

Equal Opportunity for All, Special Privileges for None

As we respond to our rapidly changing economy, we must hold fast to our enduring values. One in particular stands out as central to our vision of a good society. It is a principle that has animated generations of American leaders and has attracted tens of million of immigrants to our shores. It is, simply, the promise of equal opportunity for all and special privileges for none. It is the ideal of a society in which individuals earn their rewards through their own talents and effort within a system of fair and open rules.

In one sense, of course, the United States has always been a society without special privilege. The Revolutionary War uprooted our homegrown aristocracy, and the Constitution forever prohibits the granting of titles of nobility. And because we had no aristocracy, we were spared the class warfare that divided European societies for generations.

Still, our history has been marked by waves of struggle against special privilege. Consider the right to vote. It was at first the preserve of relatively well-to-do white males. Over time, states eliminated property qualifications. A wave of social activism at the beginning of this century led to women's suffrage. A hard-fought constitutional amendment eliminated the poll tax. A new wave of

social activism finally redeemed the promise of the post-Civil War amendments and effectively ensured the right of African-Americans to participate in the electoral process. Another constitutional amendment erased the unfairness of requiring young Americans to fight and die for their country while preventing them from participating in the elections that shape foreign policy decisions. And today, conflict continues over the enforcement of "motor voter" legislation that lowers subtle but very real barriers to voting participation by lower-income Americans.

Similar stories could be told about the long fight, not yet concluded, against economic and social privilege. Discrimination, for example, is a moral insult. But it is also an injury--the assertion of unearned and unjustified privilege by some at the expense of others. It violates the most basic terms of the covenant that unites us. And that is why we must fight discrimination until it is only a fading memory.

Our federal budget legislates special privileges, in the form of selective benefits handed out to favored groups on the basis of raw political power rather than achievement or contribution to the common good. These privileges do more than allocate benefits to the undeserving; they divert resources from better uses and deprive others of a fair chance to succeed on their merits. A budget that better reflects our nation's values would do a better job of promoting the national interest. That is why we need to attack fiscal privilege in the national government--and at every level of the federal system.

At various points in our national history, we have persuaded ourselves that the elimination of formal, legal privileges--for example, officially sanctioned aristocracies and racial subordination backed by law--would suffice to create an equal opportunity society. But experience has taught us that merely negative steps, though vitally necessary, are not sufficient. There is no invisible hand that creates equal opportunity; it is a conscious social achievement that requires affirmative acts.

Today, we must return to first principles and ask ourselves what we must do--together--to realize the ideal of an equal opportunity society. For example: What effective steps can we take to strengthen families, assure quality education for all, create bridges for young people to the world of work, and give all workers tools to retrain to meet the challenges of a constantly changing economy?

As we answer these and many other questions, we must keep in mind the first cornerstone of the New Democracy: the irreversible economic shift that is changing our world--and with it, the requirements of equal opportunity. For example: in today's economy, more and more, computer literacy is a key to employment and advancement. For opportunity to be truly equal, all our young people must have the opportunity to acquire this literacy during the course of their elementary and secondary education.

Equal opportunity means a fair chance for every individual to succeed based on talent and effort. It is a double-edged sword. On the one side, it requires the removal of discriminatory barriers and the provision of meaningful arenas for self-development and self-improvement. But on the other, it is not a guarantee of success, and it is not a formula for top-down distribution of social goods. The promise of America is the promise of equal opportunity, not equal results. As we move toward equal opportunity, therefore, we must dismantle the structures that in the past have used mandated outcomes to compensate for disparities in opportunity.

What We Get, What We Give Back: The Ethic of Mutual Responsibility

The third cornerstone of the New Democracy is a principle that should pervade our social bonds as well as our public policies. It goes by many names, but the core idea is simple: As a moral matter, we cannot rightly benefit from any association to which we are not prepared to contribute our fair share or fulfill the duties of our role. And as a practical matter, no association in which this maxim is regularly disregarded is likely to work very well. This is the commonsense meaning of what is sometimes called the "ethic of mutual responsibility."

This ethic is distinguished from three competing principles. First, it does not call for an extreme of altruism--of uncompensated giving to others--but rather for a reasonable balance between what we give and what we get.

Second, the ethic of mutual responsibility rejects libertarianism--the idea that we have no obligations other than the ones we choose. Because we are social beings, because we become human only through our development in society, we live in a dense network of interdependence that we are not free to deny or reject.

And third, the ethic of mutual responsibility is at odds with the philosophy of entitlement--the belief that we can make demands on others, or on the community, without reciprocating. The reason is simple: Just about everything of value, whether material resources or social capital, is produced and sustained through human action, usually in cooperation with others. To demand something of value without contributing anything in return is to assert as a matter of right that others should work for me without compensation. That is wrong as a matter of morality. And in a free society, contributors will soon respond to free riders by withdrawing their support from common enterprises.

Mutual responsibility rests on a foundation of personal responsibility. We are not helpless victims of external forces. We are capable of understanding what is required of us, and of acting on that understanding. That is the faith of a free society, and of democracy itself.

We are born with the capacity for personal responsibility. But as every parent knows, we are not born responsible. The capacity must be developed over

an extended period, starting with the family. While our society must hold all normal adults responsible for their acts, we must recognize the existence of unequal opportunities for developing responsibility. And we must work to ensure, so far as possible, that every child has an adequate chance to do so.

As adults, personal responsibility begins at home. We have an obligation to take care of ourselves and our families--and to avoid unnecessary dependence on others. Regardless of economic or social status, we have an obligation to obey the law--and to convey to our children the importance of law-abidingness.

Mutual responsibility means doing our part to sustain the institutions from which we benefit. For example: because we value the equal protection of the law, we have a responsibility to serve on juries when asked--not to evade jury duty based on weak claims of personal inconvenience.

The norm of mutual responsibility should guide public policy as well as personal conduct. Whenever possible, policies should be structured so that citizens who contribute to the community are rewarded, and those who benefit from the community give something back.

Policies conceived in this spirit of reciprocity are far more likely to work and to enjoy sustained public support. For example, the GI Bill was one of the most effective measures in our history because it expressed the nation's gratitude for our veterans' extraordinary service. And John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps was electrifying because it challenged the most fortunate Americans to give something back through service to their country.

If we take mutual responsibility seriously, we must eliminate public programs that confer one-way benefits on selected individuals or groups. We must reform programs where benefits exceed contributions over time. And we must acknowledge that responsibility links to us future generations as well as to one another. We have received a legacy from our parents and grandparents that we can never repay. But acting as stewards of this inheritance, we can pass it on--intact and enhanced--to our children and grandchildren. That is why practical policy issues such as fiscal discipline and environmental protection also present profound moral challenges to our capacity for responsibility.

Governance in the New Democracy

Taken together, the three cornerstones of the New Democracy--economic transformation, opportunity without privilege, mutual responsibility--define a vision of revitalized enduring values in a context of rapid social change. And they point toward a new conception of self-government.

Recall the basics:

- o Changing structures of production and information are breaking down bureaucratic organizations, bringing new decision-making power to frontline workers, entrepreneurs, and individual citizens.

- o Implementing the principle of opportunity means dismantling centralized mechanisms that exist only to distribute and defend privilege.

- o Taking mutual responsibility seriously means reforming programs and institutions that confer one-way benefits and turn citizens into beneficiaries.

All this means a return to democratic self-government based on confidence in the capacity of average citizens, once furnished with information, to choose responsibly for themselves. In many cases, government, so understood, will yield ground to markets and voluntary associations. When government is still needed, there should be a presumption in favor of decisions made close to the people and implemented in a manner that respects their liberty and common sense.

This does not mean that the federal government is somehow the enemy of the New Democracy. Yes, the philosophy of entitlement is incompatible with the New Democracy. But so is the philosophy of abandonment. What we need instead is government guided by the imperative of empowerment, government that fortifies the self-directing powers of ordinary citizens.

For by itself, the invisible hand will not enable all Americans to participate in the new economy. The commitment to equal opportunity requires affirmative steps taken by the entire nation. The scope of our responsibilities to one another crosses state and local boundaries. We need not always act together as a national community. But even today, national action as circumstances require can still help realize the promise of American life.