

To be a citizen or idiot: The choice is ours

On Sept. 10, the prevailing political mood in the United States was to get government out of our lives. Terrorist slaughter of thousands of innocents has brought government into our

lives in ways we have not contemplated since World War II. How do we respond as citizens?

My simple answer is that we must stop being idiots. This is not

easy. I know. I am an idiot.

Words take on different meanings at different times. Originally, the Greek word "idiotes" meant "a man who attends to his own concerns." The Athenian leader Pericles, according to Thucydides, used the term "idiotes" of citizens who focused on their own affairs and were ignorant of the important issues facing the city of Athens.

In this sense, many of us are idiots. We have been lulled by our isolation, our comforts and our unparalleled freedoms into believing we can and should separate how we lead our personal lives from what

the thing we call "the government" does. I pray that our rude awakening to our vulnerability has also brought some awareness that millions of human beings in the Middle East live without the fundamental liberty to be part of their governments, to choose their leaders through democratic elections and to control the actions of their leaders through free expression of opinion.

From the 1840s into the 1950s, political leaders in Great Britain and the United States were educated in the classical tradition and emulated the positive aspects of ancient Athenian democracy as described in the funeral oration of Pericles. Pericles was a combination of George S. Patton, Lyndon Baines Johnson and Ronald Reagan, a military genius, political pragmatist and great communicator. He was nobody's fool. He led Athens through an escalating cold war into the first years of an all-out war with Sparta. Periclean Athens stood for freely elected representative government, personal liberty, high standards of education, trend-setting in the arts and sciences, and society-wide energy that reached out and educated the rest of the civilized world. Their citizen army rose to every occasion.

Sounds a lot like how we view ourselves.

This ideal was a model for U.S. foreign policy after World War II. I recommend reading the thoughts of a U.S. State Department official and graduate of the National War College for his description of what the United States set out to be and to do in the world 50 years ago: Louis J. Halle, "Civilization and Foreign Policy." Halle makes clear that our ideals and all the truths we believe to be self-evident are our greatest pragmatic weapons in the brutal world of foreign affairs.

Thucydides and Halle would agree that a free and democratic state depends on three things. First, the involvement of individual citizens in the governmental process. As Pericles puts it, "We do not think that people who concentrate exclusively on their own affairs are minding their own business. We think they have no business here at all."

Second, deep feelings of respect for the civic process, our place in the world and our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. Paul Woodruff in his new book "Reverence" discusses how important it is for individuals, their families, their communities and their countries to reclaim this lost virtue.

Third — and most at risk right now — the right of individuals, in the most dangerous of times, to speak freely so that important decisions can be made with all perspectives taken into account. To deny or curtail this basic freedom will turn us into idiots rather than participants in the decisions that affect millions of lives in the United States and the Middle East.

During the brutal war with Sparta that cost Athens the lives of at least an entire generation of adult male citizens, brought death to women and children though starvation and plague and caused all Athenian families agonizing grief, Euripides produced at a major public festival a masterpiece of anti-war literature "The Trojan Women." Aristophanes wrote scathing satires of Athenian leaders and their conduct of the war, and Socrates was, depending on your politics, actively educating or corrupting the youth of Athens. Freedom of speech means the free expression of ideas.

Take time to learn. Read. Listen. Watch. Surf. Talk. Write.

Don't be an idiot.

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