

Commentary

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Democracy isn't perfect, but we shouldn't take it for granted

My friend Robert Ivie up at Indiana University offers a course in rhetorical theory called Democratic Deliberation. Its Web site — www.indiana.edu/~ivieweb/deliberative.htm — is worth visiting simply for its choice selection of quotations about democracy.

George Bernard Shaw, as we might expect, was drily ironic: "Democracy is a device that

ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve." H.L. Mencken was wickedly pragmatic: "Only a country that is rich and safe can afford to be a democracy." Winston Churchill uses a delicious turn of phrase to make a point that Aristotle made almost 2,300 years earlier, namely that democracy is not perfect, but other forms of government could be much worse: "... democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." And Reinhold Niebuhr is moral and cynical: "Man's

capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

The trouble is, all of them are right.

And so are those thinkers whose take on democracy is most forthrightly anti-democratic, like Thomas Macaulay, who said: "I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both"; and Alexander Hamilton, who claimed "Our real disease is democracy."

I have been thinking about democracy because I have been reading for review my friend Paul Woodruff's latest thoughtful meditation on ancient Greek culture, "First Democracy." Woodruff is director of the Plan II Honors Program and a deeply ethical and engaged citizen scholar. His last book, "Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue" gave us lessons for how to renew the principle of reverence in all aspects of our lives.

In "First Democracy," Woodruff explores the wonderful experiment that Athenian democracy was during the nearly three centuries in which it

evolved and then existed. One of his main points is that true democracy has never been realized. Even those who live in a democracy have failed to live up to its full challenges and possibilities, because of fear, distrust, lack of nerve, lack of will, apathy, self-interest, hunger for personal power and other reasons.

Woodruff's book is so plainly written and so deep in its implications for our lives that I have found myself frozen in thought and counter-thought about its many perspectives. It has also made me see clearly what is at stake in the topic I announced as forthcoming in my last column — intellectualism, inside and outside the university.

One major point is clear. Democracy depends on what the ancient Greeks called *paideia*. This word is often translated as "education," but, as you might expect from my other columns about ancient Greek ideas and realities, this word needs lots of nuancing. In its root sense, it means something like "the process of child-ing" — i.e., all that goes into making sure that a newborn baby will mature into an adult

with the abilities of mind, moral sensibilities, self-discipline, habits, sense of cultural history and tradition, and intellectual skills that a member of a society should possess. It is, then, a flexible tool. The regimented, oligarchic-socialist Spartan state practiced one form of *paideia*. The radically democratic Athenians could and should have used quite another.

The Greeks meant something much different by "education" than we do. Just as they would not recognize our virulent strain of "government-bashing" — ironically, promoted by the government's leaders — or the notion that government is an entity separate from ourselves, so, too, they would find unimaginable how we discuss our "educational system" as something that we can blame others for getting it wrong. And they would find current proposals for improving this system, such as accountability through overloads of standardized testing, counter to what *paideia* is supposed to achieve.

So it is easy for us to misunderstand what it takes in the way of education, or we might call it preparation or even

nurturing, for citizens to make democracy work. Proper democratic *paideia* incorporates respectful habits of mind and behavior, the ability to speak clearly and persuasively and listen respectfully in public forums, and a commitment to hard work. It takes dedication to the common good and a corresponding willingness to sacrifice personal desires.

Intellectualism is important, too, but it is of a kind that I find mostly missing inside and outside our institutions of education, lower and higher. More about that next time. In the meantime, please think and talk about what you think education should be to make our democracy work, or work again.

Two last thoughts, Woodruff maintains that democracy is messy, but worth the mess. And Alexander Hamilton, to return to Bob Ivie's Web site, thought that "ancient democracies, in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one feature of good government." One of them is dead wrong. Guess who?

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