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/~iviweb/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: “A country that is rich and safe can afford to be a democracy.”

Athenian democracy was during the nearly three centuries in which it evolved and then existed. One of its 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 topics. One can 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 on education, 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 new-born 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 “education,” and the notion that government is an entity separate from ourselves, so, too, they would find unimaginable how we discuss our “education,” and the notion that government is an entity separate from ourselves.

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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