

"AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION"
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
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Let me tell you a story. I read it first in a book by Gertrude Stein called *The Making of Americans*. Seems there was a son dragging his father down the road by the hair. The father kept yelling "stop," and the son kept dragging him. Finally, in fury and outrage, the father cried, "Stop! I didn't drag my father beyond this tree." The story is, of course, a metaphor. Hold that metaphor!

It has something to do with the dialectic of democracy in this restless republic of ours. Sometimes it has to be pulled by the hair by to go forward - and it is often a generational pull. Seldom is it easy.

Now add that to what we know about George Mason, Virginia's delegate to the Constitutional Convention some 220 years ago. He didn't sign the Constitution and he opposed its ratification because he believed it didn't sufficiently oppose slavery or safeguard individual rights. History vindicated him with the Bill of Rights.

(Is this the first Woodrow Wilson lecture ever to include Gertrude Stein and George Mason?)

What they shared and held dear is an understanding that freedom is

indivisible -- the only way to defend it is to permit it. Even and especially at times like these, when war, anxiety and fear are in the air. When libraries and words start being watched, that's usually a prelude to a crackdown on other rights and liberties.

Sure enough, starting seven years ago, an American president moved to restrict our rights because of a fear of terrorism. The American people and the Congress quietly let that pass like the dog that didn't bark in a Sherlock Holmes story.

This trimming of rights ought to enrage our citizens. But after a despicable attack called "9/11" the state of our post-Sept. 11th democracy seemed frail -- subdued -- timorous. We collectively lost the noise, buoyancy and confidence of a healthy democracy.

So spooked was our citizenry that most college campuses have had no anti-war demonstrations over the past five years -- even after polls showed widespread discontent with the Iraq war.

As we anticipate a new page in the nation's story, let's identify hurt parts in our body politic, places that need some shoring up. If they were here today, our friends Gertrude Stein and George Mason would say: "The Making of Americans is not a part-time job."

"Let America be America again/Let it be the dream it used to be," wrote the poet Langston Hughes. I would only add that America can only be America again when we start acting more like Americans.

Joining them at an imaginary table of past greats are two authors of political classics: Alexis de Tocqueville, the French author of *Democracy in America* in 1835, and President John F. Kennedy with his famous *Profiles in Courage*.

Then there is a personal favorite of mine, Margaret Chase Smith, the Lady of Maine who was the first Senator, the first politician to speak out against the rising tide of McCarthyism in 1950. I once had the pleasure of meeting her and giving a speech paying tribute to her public service.

In this context, I think it's well to remember that for Americans, freedom of speech, of religion, the right to assemble or petition the government to redress our grievances, and of the press are not privileges -- or benefits granted and capable of being rescinded. They are rights, guaranteed by the Constitution, in a free society.

De Tocqueville's travels across a burgeoning young nation gave rise to his outsider's observations on how American democracy was inventing itself before his curious eyes. In vivid detail, he recorded its distinguishing characteristics in *Democracy in America* in almost an Aristotlean manner.

He studied our Constitution in both senses of the word -- the 1787 federal document -- but also our habits, customs, traits as political animals.

The New England town meeting was a source of amazement to him, perhaps the heartbeat of democracy and self-government in its purest form. At its heart was participation, the very thing we seek today as kind of a holy grail.

He was quick to see how the checks and balance of power operated in practice. As he shrewdly noted, the individual rights championed by George Mason and others had some teeth right at the start, in the early 19th century.

The power of courts of justice to strike down a law as unconstitutional was "one of the most powerful barriers that have been devised against the tyranny of political assemblies," de Tocqueville reported.

De Tocqueville was also way ahead of his time in praising a social class that was, on paper, powerless in America: "If I were asked...to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women."

Alexis and I are old friends.

Finally, he admired the optimistic view of the future he saw in us, our faith in human "perfectibility." Let's not lose sight of that kind of sturdy innocence as we walk forward through a few other chapters of our history.

President Kennedy also held up the 19th century republic to close scrutiny and he too was fascinated by the minority versus the majority. The era he examined with discerning insight was the mostly Civil War period when the nation was splitting at the seams and then sewn up again. Being a senator at the time he wrote *Profiles in Courage* more than 50 years ago, those who naturally caught his imagination were elected officials -- senators, as it happened -- those who stood up to waves of pressure and fury from their fellow senators, their own party and larger forces from outside the Capitol chamber.

Well, there were not a whole lot of them. And they were not always on the right side of history.

Kennedy profiled eight courageous senators. One was the orator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts; another was the colorful Sam Houston of Texas, who also served as a governor. Each man flew alone in the face of overwhelming opposition not from his enemies, but from friends and constituents.

On the seventh of March 1850, Webster ruined his reputation at home and all over the North by joining with Henry Clay's famous (or infamous) Compromise. Abolitionists and other Northerners deplored it as strengthening the arm of slavery with a reviled Fugitive Slave Law. In Webster's aging eyes, as he neared death, less liberty equalled more Union and he was willing to pay that price. Webster went down in New England history and lore as a disgraced statesman who sold his own anti-slavery views down the river.

Sam Houston was much like Webster in cherishing the Union at whatever cost in the 1850s. Yet the old Jacksonian Democrat swam in a sea of secessionist fervor in his new state of Texas and he himself was a slaveholder. Go figure. The contradictions are rich and Kennedy commented the country's cross-currents and turmoil seemed to be contained in his swaggering soul.

"I know neither North nor South; I only know the Union," Houston denounced the sectional divide in the face of mobs and threats. Texans were in no mood to listen. At a convention they voted to secede and quickly got rid of Governor Houston over that last lonely stand -- "the love of our common country" -- months before the Civil War broke out.

Consider the third man, a little-known Edmund Ross from Kansas. In the heat of binding up Civil War wounds and the still-simmering sectional divide, quiet Edmund Ross saved the presidency of Andrew Johnson by voting against his impeachment. From the beginning of Johnson's besiegement by Radical Republicans in 1867, Ross told a Northern senator he was committed to "as fair a trial as an accused man ever had." He was hounded day and night, mercilessly investigated and told all day long by Kansans and the madding crowd that his political life was over if he voted to acquit the president of high misdemeanors and thus keep Johnson in office.

Ross did just that and as he told the story, "I almost literally looked down into my open grave," on the Senate floor and saw his friendships, position, fortunes "about to be swept away."

He was about right. The impeachment vote fell just one vote short of conviction in 1868. Accused of being a Judas-like traitor to his own Republican party, scorned as a "poltroon" by the press, the shunned Ross returned to Kansas after serving his term and died in near poverty.

Whether he ever got a thank you note from Andrew Johnson, we don't know, but Kennedy's graceful portrait serves as one for the ages. Ross never regretted his vote and act of conscience. There is a school of

thought that a single vote saved the United States from rupturing! -- and falling apart all over again.

Impeaching a president, as we know, can roil a republic even on a good day.

All three of these men -- Webster, Houston and Ross -- put the national interest ahead of their own.

There are no constitutional protections for lawmakers alone against the crowd *inside* the "political assemblies" de Tocqueville warned against. Unlike individual dissenters and minorities in civil society, they are pretty much on their own to suffer the rough justice of colleagues and voters back home.

That's why President Kennedy's book on courage is short and spare. Senators and members of Congress tend to be gregarious "team players," not loners. One single-standing vote of conscience remains a rare moment in an institution more apt to compromise, the traditionally American art of democracy.

Moving ahead to the 20th century, the chapter of Japanese-American internment camps in the 1940s and the McCarthy era in the 1950s are not just history lessons. They are actually blueprints.

President Roosevelt, otherwise a wise beloved leader, signed an executive order in 1942 after Pearl Harbor. By fiat, the internment experience for more than 100,000 men, women and children went on until 1945. Three years of a World War II shadow on the home front that arose out of fear and will live in infamy. Critics there were none, or few. A Supreme Court decision upheld the order.

Cycles of fear in the '40s continued to churn and started breaking again when the Cold War started. Fear of a clear enemy abroad is one thing, but an insidious fear of an invisible enemy in everyday life is quite another.

That is the place where we Americans get scared easily and the time when we have been most willing to tailor our freedoms. Not just those belonging to others, but those belonging to ourselves. That's what I meant about freedom being indivisible. What you lose today, I will lose tomorrow. And that is far scarier than being dragged down the road by your hair.

By the 1950s, the "enemy" had changed to the bear of the Soviet Union and suspected sympathizers and subversives here and there. Anywhere, especially among the elite: universities, New York and Hollywood writers and the State Department. There may be some right in

this very room. That was the way a certain senator, Joseph McCarthy, worked, just by naming "Un-American" names, holding hearings where his accusations were aired in millions of homes and claiming the existence of conspiracies to undermine the safety and security of the United States. The power of insinuation let loose a kind of hysteria in Washington. Blacklisting was becoming all the rage.

Here is where Senator Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican, rides in to the story. She figured out the sham of McCarthyism before almost any other public figure. She spoke out on June 1, 1950. That day she gave her Declaration of Conscience speech on the Senate floor. McCarthy sat there to hear her every word -- in utter astonishment.

In her opening remarks, Senator Smith went straight to the heart of, (and I quote) "a national feeling of fear and frustration that could result in national suicide and the end of everything that we Americans hold dear." Specifically, she said the right of independent thought was in danger, along with the right to criticize, hold unpopular beliefs and protest.

The American people are "sick and tired of being afraid to speak their minds lest they be politically smeared as 'Communists' or 'Fascists,'" she said. In a flight of eloquence, Senator Smith said she did not wish to

see her party ride to victory on the "Four Horsemen of Calumny -- Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry and Smear."

Those are the kind of words that our young people need to hear, read and understand to elevate not only test scores, but their understanding of our democracy and its perils.

For the record, McCarthy was finally censured in 1954 -- that was four long dark years for the Senate and nation to catch up to Senator Smith's Declaration of Conscience. Her words did not stop his deeds. But yet sometimes all we have to go by is the light of a single clear conscience when our civil liberties are under siege.

The 21st century has not been the best of times. Again, we wavered at a critical juncture and constitutional rights and freedoms were casualties, too, of the terrorism attacks seven years ago. Is it fair to say that terrorism is the new communism?

September 11th, 2001 scared the bejesus out of people. As soon as a "War on Terrorism" was declared by the president, the so-called "Patriot Act" was not far behind in October.

The atmosphere was so electric with shock and charged with grief that nary a word of dissent was expressed. We as a people were very easily led. By its very name, the Patriot Act suggested that those who

opposed it were not loyal trustworthy Americans -- the oldest trick. It became the law of the land after passing the Senate 98-1.

Yes, one. Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin was in good company with himself. As he explained his vote, the Founders wrote "an explicit Bill of Rights to protect liberty in times of war, as well as in times of peace." Citing some of the same episodes, such as the 20th-century internment and blacklisting, he said, "We must not allow these pieces of the past to become prologue."

See, there's always one vote or voice - a George Mason, a Margaret Chase Smith - in the march of civilization. And I know I'm asking a lot when I ask the new generation of young people to emulate them. So be it. I feel very comfortable asking a lot especially from this new Millennial generation.

Democracy in America, after a sustained assault on liberty, is languishing. It's frankly more frail and vulnerable to vicissitudes than we ever learned or taught in school. Yet as a university president I have reason to hope for our democracy recovering its vitality. I sense a yearning out there for a re-invention and re-claiming of American democracy.

There are hints in the voter turnout of young people, who were barely in their teens on Sept. 11th, 2001. They are starting to get it, that they can and must take some ownership of the process to influence it. The last two election cycles saw sharp increases in the youth voter turnout rates. Even better, compared to 2004, young adults' turnout tripled in the 2008 Iowa caucuses and nearly tripled in the New Hampshire primary.

With the Internet and texting as new ways to invigorate the youth vote, the Obama campaign has stirred and invigorated participation among young people. In turn, young Democrats were his strongest supporters in the primary season. He has clearly captured their imaginations with different ways of communicating -- like telling supporters first that "Barack" had chosen Sen. Biden as his running mate through a late-night text message, instead of through the press.

In general, young Americans are increasingly likely to be engaged politically and as recently as 2006 started shifting their votes in favor of Democrats. That said, most young adults still profess a moderate ideology rather than liberal or conservative. Young Democratic voters are the most racially and ethnically diverse voting bloc. Gender differences are clear in this cohort: the turn-out rate of young women was nearly seven

percentage points higher than that of young men in recent presidential elections.

An MTV-CBS poll found that the economy is by far the most important issue to the group, worried as they are that they face declining job prospects. Heartening for the mainstream media, most in the polls said they still get most of their news from newspapers or television news. The Iraq War, education, health care and global warming are also high on the list of young voter concerns, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

We are talking about 44 million eligible voters between the ages of 18 to 29 who could get into the game -- though they are not equally energized across all states. There was one state where only three in a hundred young people bothered to show up for a presidential primary -- c'mon Tennessee!

I learn a lot from teaching and am optimistic about this new generation and new media. As long as there is free speech and communication in the public square, then the form it comes in is secondary. As long as dissent is not silenced and as long as everyone feels entitled to speak their piece, we should welcome it as a vital sign.

As a professor, I have student chat rooms and blogs in my courses. I wonder what de Tocqueville would make of that kind of participation?

Here's a guess:

"America is a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement."

True, and he also said: "They admit that what appears to them today to be good, may be superseded by something better tomorrow."

We like to think that rosy optimism applies to American democracy, but that would be wrong.

Democracy, like a garden, needs fresh infusions to stay vibrant. It needs more than a brave few to tend and defend it in all seasons, when we are told there is a war at home or an enemy within.

The perennials of American constitutional rights and civil liberties are too precious to let the light go without a fight, to be here today and gone tomorrow. For let me remind you:

What you lose today, I will lose tomorrow. What I lose today, you *will* lose tomorrow. Democracy requires great and courageous individuals, but in the end it is a collective act. Unlike Europeans or Russians, we Americans have no history of kings, or czars, or tyrants, or autocrats --

authoritarian rulers who claim to take care of us and control us in the process. In American democracy, we take care of ourselves, which means we must take care of one another.

We Americans are a political nation, built not on an ethnic or even a linguistic heritage, but on a foundation of rights. Those rights make us who we are. But if we can't use them, then we will lose them. And we need them more when we are anxious and afraid than when we are certain and secure. That is my message for this new generation and for all of us to remember.