

Democracy and Our Civic Responsibilities

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, October 15, 2006
By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

At the center of democracy lies a respect for others. At the center of Ethical Culture is a respect for others. Both postulate a responsibility to others. Not for others but to others. I wanted you to know from the outset just why I'm speaking on *Democracy and Our Civic Responsibilities* this morning. Democracy and Ethical Humanism are separate, as such things ought to be, but they both rest on respect and responsibility. I also want you to know that I believe, as will become apparent, that civic responsibility belongs to those elected just as much as to those who elect them.

Democracy, from the Greek demos, "the people"; and kratein, "to rule." Here's the definition of democracy found in Microsoft's Encarta Encyclopedia. "Democracy, a political system in which the people of a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish." That definition was written by Professor Richard M. Pious of Columbia University who will be speaking to you from this Platform in two weeks.

Three things are required for a democracy to exist. First, the people. Second, a territory, most often, and certainly within the context of civic responsibility, a geographic territory. And third, the government that is formed and serves democratically. That's the holy trinity of democracy; People, territory, government.

A territorial government, a nation state, has two primary duties. The first of which is to ensure the general peace: to protect the territory from invasion by outside forces and to protect the people within the territory from each other or from infiltrators. The second is to provide for the common good, to see that not one of its citizens is cold or hungry, that each has warmth, a roof overhead, and food on the table.

Providing for the general defense against threats from without and within is generally recognized today. Some might say recognized and over emphasized. But that last, providing for the common good, is neglected. Whenever a sustaining livelihood is denied a person, whenever a family goes without a home, whenever people go without food, they either perish or are supported by the charity of others.

In times past that care was provided directly, citizen to citizen, families caring for their own—the crazy aunt in the attic, the prodigal offspring. Today it mostly comes through relief provided by a governmental expression of our collective compassion—through charity funded by our tax dollars.

That we rely on the abundance of the earth for survival is a matter of evident sense. That the resources of an abundant land and of a society must somehow be shared equitably is equally evident. That's part of government's responsibility. And it's part of our civic responsibility to see that our government lives up to that responsibility.

Yes, we can and have argued at length within these very walls over just what that means. But people of compassion and goodwill of whatever ideological or political persuasion have never turned away from that basic responsibility to care for each other. Deciding whether that is happening now is likewise part of your civic responsibility.

We often speak of civil rights, but not often enough about civic responsibility.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

In plain language, democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people. That's a well known and generally accepted definition of democracy that's often thought to come from our Constitution. It doesn't. Does anyone know where it's from?

Right, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It's from the closing phrase he delivered on November 20, 1863 in which he said that one of the "great task[s] remaining before us" is to see that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." The burden of that task is as great if not greater today that it was then.

Government *of the people* recognizes the right and ability of people to govern themselves. It's a notion that displaced the divine right of kings, the privileges of birth and social status, wealth, religious station, or any other form of bestowed, assumed or commandeered leadership, authority or tyranny, and replaced them all with the will of those to be governed.

It respects us all as equal before the law, and gives us each an equal voice in determining what that law shall be. And it gives us the right to expect that the law of the land will be followed equally by all. No one is above the law, and no one is beneath having an equal say in how the law is established.

But just as democracy gives us certain unalienable rights, so too does it confer upon us certain unavoidable responsibilities. *Of the people* recognizes our right and ability to govern ourselves. *By the people* assumes our willingness to do so, to actively participate in the government we ourselves establish.

That's a huge responsibility that has come to be largely ignored in America today. I am far less concerned about what some believe a "silent majority" may think than I am that the majority is silent in the first place. It was Tony Blankley, hardly a man cast in the socially liberal mold, who said after the election two years ago, "America is sleepwalking." A bit on how we might wake up a little later.

And just as we have responsibilities, *for the people* bestows upon our elected representatives a responsibility—a responsibility to govern in our best interests, another thing that has come to be largely ignored in America today, where information on what the electorate wants has been used and followed selectively. The will of the people has all too often been subjected to the will of our elected representatives, to their own personal agenda and ideology, and always to their instinct for political survival.

The essence of democracy lies in self determination, not in the structure of that which is determined. Democracy can be direct, as in a system driven by referenda, or it can be representative in many different forms. We can elect our representatives to govern through their own judgment, or we can stipulate that they express the will of their electorate as determined through periodic elections, polls, or otherwise. They can be required and expected to represent the good of the whole or any of its constituent parts.

But whatever the system, we must maintain a cooperative overlay of trust and respect or democracy itself will be rejected and along with it the will of the subjects will be rejected in favor of subjecting their will to the authority of those in power. Even though they came to power through democratic means, it's pretty unreasonable to expect those who thirst for absolute power to respect the limits of democracy, or to easily relinquish privilege by democratic means. Their ideology just doesn't allow them to function that way.

And ideology is never far from the fray. Democracy is strong enough to withstand and balance the pressure of ideology if and only if the citizenry—that's you and me—are strong enough to do likewise. Recently we haven't been. We've shirked that responsibility.

But this morning we stood up. We stood up and we spoke out. We stood up and were counted. Did that feel good? You bet it did.

I gleaned this in my research: "Although often used interchangeably, the terms democracy and republic are not synonymous. Both systems delegate the power to govern to their elected representatives. In a republic, however, these officials are expected to act on their own best judgment of the needs and interests of the country. The officials in a democracy more generally directly reflect the known or ascertained views of their constituents, sometimes subordinating their own judgment." Can you imagine that happening today? Arrogance seldom suborns itself.

But this balance of judgment is one we strive to maintain in democratic organizations of any size, be they nations or an Ethical Society, weighing direct democracy with representative democracy.

There are of course times when our representatives must act in accord with their own principles, that's why we take their principles into account in electing them. But an over application of an elected official's opinions above the known wishes of her or his constituency is not what we expect—that's a step toward tyranny. We expect that they take our views into account. Modern polling makes that easier but also comes with a caveat as over reliance on that process takes us to direct rather than representative democracy.

And polling information can be distorted and manipulated. Excuse me. As an Ethical Culture Leader I should be more charitable toward others. The data selected from polls can be interpreted and used toward different ends. Figures may not lie, but liars can figure. As well as charitable I should also be realistic and honest.

Some states and nations have frequent referenda so that citizens can express their views and impact legislation directly, using that influence to balance that of their elected representatives.

Throw into that mix the balancing of powers not only among the branches of government but among the administrative and inspirational leaders we select to lead us and you have a real challenge.

An essential aspect of democracy is a genuine respect manifest in trust, and that trust has justifiably eroded in our country. There was a day, not all that long ago in retrospect, when we trusted our elected leaders. We expected and allowed those we handed responsibility to live up to it and respected their efforts on our behalf even, or perhaps especially, when we didn't fully agree with them.

We viewed their actions with the same healthy skepticism that's inherent in the balance of powers established in our Constitution. But that healthy skepticism has become a cancerous cynicism that, if a balance of trust and responsibility is not restored, will continue to eat at our national character until it destroys it.

In examining the "democracy" of today, we find ourselves in a position not dissimilar to that which the founder of Ethical Culture, Felix Adler, found himself in when examining the religion of his birth. Of it he said, "Stagnation everywhere; hopes that

were once so high, changed into helpless indifference. The best spirits of the age are turning their backs upon religion.”

Religion of the sort that troubled Adler had, in his analogy, become “Year by year ... more stony and barren, until it produces only thorns and thistles, food for the herd, but giving no nourishment to [us]. He was so concerned that he asked, “Is religion about to perish?”

We have an advantage that the followers of most traditions don’t. The citizenry of a democracy has a say. The laity of most religions doesn’t. And with that say comes a responsibility. We cannot allow the hopes of the founders of our country—and I want to stress our country, not that of our elected leaders but our country—we cannot allow the hopes of the shapers of modern democracy to perish, to atrophy into helpless indifference as the leaders of the nation they founded turn their backs on the principles upon which that nation was founded. We cannot and we will not allow that.

What I am saying, and I want to be clear, is you cannot propagate democracy by means at odds with the basic principles of democracy. The effort to impose democracy by force of arms is at odds with the spirit of democracy. I do not think that Abraham Lincoln meant that people should perish or that we should risk the earth itself perishing in the process of imposing democracy on others. As Helen Thomas, who was here in this hall just a couple of weeks ago, put it, “You can’t impose democracy through the barrel of a gun.”

Yet that’s what we’ve been trying to do, and that effort—in addition to the military lives lost, and uncounted, unreported, but not unmourned civilian lives lost—is now costing us \$9 billion a month in Iraq alone. That’s billion with a B-boy. That means during the course of our meeting this morning our nation will have spent some \$16 million trying to impose democracy through the barrel of a gun.

On this day when we’ve stood up for so much, three hundred million of our tax dollars will be spent in the effort. That’s a dollar a day, seven dollars a week, for every man, woman and child in our nation. Shouldn’t we spend at least that much on peace, on poverty, and on basic human rights?

An imposed democracy may, repeat may, eventually, repeat eventually, have the outward, repeat outward, appearance of democracy for a time, repeat for a time. But it becomes, year by year, stony and barren, until it nourishes only the ambitions and ideologies of its leaders who come to resemble autocrats more than servants. That’s when democracy perishes. And it can perish just as easily in the face of fear as when staring down the barrel of a gun.

That’s not what the founders and fosterers of the grand democratic experiment that is America stood for, and it’s not the respect and responsibility that Ethical Culture stands for.

Democracy is participatory; it is not a spectator sport. Sit back and watch it happen and it is likely to happen to you and not for you. You have to recognize and accept your civic responsibility.

How? I have some suggestions.

Staying informed is the first step. You can’t get very far without knowing and thinking. Testing your thinking with others is next. It’s by learning and discussing that you become more fully aware of your own values and how they apply to the critical

issues of today, the values and the issues that will cause you to vote for one candidate over another. And of course being involved, participating is what democracy is all about.

I'm not just urging you to "go out and vote," though I certainly think you should. Get-out-the-vote campaigns are often jingoistic and they can be efforts to manipulate the system to insure that those who get out and vote get out and vote the way they're supposed to—in agreement with those who got them out to vote in the first place. That's not democracy, that's the modern-day equivalent of stuffing the ballot box—of getting people drunk and carting them from poll to poll to vote repeatedly, or of scaring them away so they don't vote at all. Today the technology is modern but the techniques of fear and manipulation are not.

Be informed. Think. Act.

So, yes, get out and vote your conscious by all means. But more than that, take an active interest in your government—your government. It's been said that if you want to know about a people of a democratic nation, look at the leaders they elect. Ask yourself what that says about us? Ask yourself is that's something you want to say to the world? If it's not, change the statement by changing the leadership.

An election is rapidly approaching and change is certainly in the wind. Is that good? Do you want to say something different to the world? Take it personally because it is! Our civic responsibilities, our responsibility for the kind of government and the kind of leaders we have, and what that says to the world, is personal.

If the message isn't right, if it doesn't resonate with you, if it's out of step with what this country is all about, if it violates that which you hold dear, then use that as a wake up call. Wake up and wake up others. Bring them out of the sleepwalk that Tony Blankly described.

If your values are not to prevail in the political arena, let it be because of honest and open discussion rather than fear. And if your values do prevail, let it be with an attitude of progress, of moving forward, of improvement. Let it be because you see a better way.

That's deep democracy and there's a fulfilling quality to it aside from what it provides to the general peace and the common good. It's through this process that we become better individually and collectively.

We are each an integral and indispensable part of the electoral fabric of our nation. We are also an interdependent part of the ethical whole, of an Ethical Culture, and we should keep that perspective. Elections of course put only one candidate in office. That's their purpose. But defeating those in power or those who seek power is not an end unto itself but only a means to a better end. And it is that end that should capture and hold our attention.

That leads to, if not agreement, understanding, an understanding that in turn leads to respect. Respect for those who differ with you and, hopefully, their equal respect for you. When respect is restored, trust and trustworthiness follow.

If you can accomplish that, if together we can accomplish that, democracy will be well and we will have fulfilled our civic responsibility.



A member of the American Ethical Union
and the International Humanist & Ethical Union
2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org