

THE WAGER OF DEMOCRACY

Introduction to “The State of American Democracy” Conference,
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By David W. Orr

For if we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or of history but by hatred and vainglory.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Welcome to the Peter B. Lewis Center and forty-eight hours of intense dialogue about the State of American Democracy. The reason for this Conference and those to follow in Denver, Los Angeles, and Atlanta is the rising danger that we are coming unmoored from our history, the Constitution, the better angels of our nature, our highest values, and our collective solidarity as humans and Americans. In the words of David Frum:

We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered. What happens next is up to you and me.

Accordingly, we are here because our political dialogue—never gentle—has become coarse, violent, and mendacious.

We are here, because of the growing wealth gap between a small oligarchy and the rest of us. Three billionaires reportedly have more wealth than the bottom 50% of Americans. Yet we know the truth of Justice Louis Brandeis words: “We may have democracy or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.”

We are here because 64 million American families exist on less than a living wage while 400 families make \$97,000 every hour.

We are here to demand a response to an unprecedented and ongoing attack by a foreign power on our electoral system and on the bonds that sustain us and define us as a free people.

We are here because the new technology of social media threatens to undermine truth, conviviality, and civil discourse and so weaken our democracy.

We are here because broad support for democracy is in decline here and elsewhere and we believe that it is worth defending.

We are here to counter the power and influence of “Dark Money” that has corrupted the political process and contaminated the very soul of democracy.

We are here because we remember Dwight Eisenhower’s warning about the effects of the military industrial complex and the perils of empire and those long ago by James Madison on the threat standing armies pose to democracy.

We are here to oppose ongoing attempts to distort the will of the people by suppressing their right to vote in fairly drawn voting districts.

We are here because 3 million Americans are in prison and millions more live on the edge of destitution.

We are here because 30,000 of us die each year in a hail of gunfire because a small minority believes that the right to own guns supersedes our right to life.

We are here to oppose a tax system that favors those needing no help and allows the unscrupulous to hide their money in overseas accounts and avoid paying their fair share of support for the country that made them rich.

We are here because our political language, in Rev. William Barber’s words “is too puny for the crises we face.”

We are here to defend science, facts, honest dialogue, and the hard-won gains of the Enlightenment.

We are here, liberals and conservatives alike, in the knowledge that each is necessary to the other.

We are here to close the gap between what a majority of people want and the laws and policies they get.

We are here because we know that the perils of rapid climate change and nuclear war threaten civilization. Sooner or later they will bring destruction unless the voices of the people—an informed and alert citizenry—are heard.

We are here to work for peace between peoples, factions, religions, ideologies, and nations, and between humankind and the web of life.

We are here to enlarge the boundaries of democracy to embrace issues about the fate of the Earth we share with future generations.

We are here because posterity is being deprived of its rights to life, liberty, and property.

And to all of us who live in this historic town of Oberlin, we are here in particular because the mandate of our history, our heritage, and our commitment to human dignity calls on us to join the effort to preserve and extend democracy and take on the responsibilities that go with that privilege.

We are here, in short, to affirm the great truth that out of differences we are one people. We are here to reaffirm our highest values and the original intentions of the Founding generation.

We are here to begin work to repair and strengthen democratic institutions, procedures, and “habits of heart.” This is our Great Work—the work of patriots in the highest sense.

Now, what brings us together is easy to say, but the work that lies ahead will be difficult. There will be casualties and losses along the way. Democracy has never been easy and it has always had its critics. Plato thought democracy was the road to tyranny. Aristotle wasn’t much more sanguine. The founding fathers of our Republic were wary of it. John Adams believed that democracies always end by committing suicide. James Madison believed that with luck democracy in America might last a century, but not longer. English writer E. M. Forster could give it only two cheers, H. L. Mencken none at all, believing people incorrigibly stupid. Economist Joseph Schumpeter likewise thought voters became dumber when they entered the political arena. Robert Dahl, perhaps the greatest student of democracy in the 20th century, once described himself as a “pessimist” about its future.

Winston Churchill captured our predicament in his famous observation that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others ever tried.

In short, democracy is everywhere and always a wager that enough people would know enough and care enough and be wise enough to participate honorably and well in the conduct of the public business. The only sure foundation of democracy is a well-educated and well-informed citizenry that is tolerant of differences, good hearted, merciful, and farsighted. Democracy is also a wager on the durability, fairness, accountability, transparency, and integrity of public institutions and the even-handed administration of justice.

Democracy, however, is a process, never a thing finished once and for all. It needs constant repair, vigilance, and revitalization. We are here to carry on that work in our time of peril. The ground rules are these:

1. Our deliberations are neither conservative nor liberal.
2. Our present situation—however you define it—is a symptom of deeper causes and of a long history that stretches back decades, perhaps centuries.
3. We are not focused on the crisis of the day, but on the work of repair and the strengthening of democratic institutions, procedures, and the habits of mind and heart that undergird democracy.

Democracy is a wager, and I believe that we here today are unanimous in our willingness to bet on we, the people and government truly of, by, and for the people.

Political scientist Michael Sandel (1996) once wrote: “The hope of our time rests with those who can summon the conviction and restraint to make sense of our condition and repair the civic life on which democracy depends.”

That is our charge at this troubled time and for years to come.