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Building a Community of Freedom

by E. J. Dionne

“Individuality seeks expression in communal acts as well as individual deeds; and . . . the self longs for autonomy but also freely embraces the encumbrances and responsibilities of family, friendship, community, and country.”

When he announced his ill-fated presidential candidacy in August 2011, Rick Perry, in a single sentence, brought to life the stakes in our national argument at that moment in our history. “I’ll work every day,” he declared, “to make Washington, DC, as inconsequential in your life as I can.”

That same month, Mitt Romney, in theory the Republicans’ least ideological contender, delivered a memorable and revealing line at the Iowa State Fair, when someone in the crowd shouted out a demand to increase taxes on corporations. Romney smiled and gave a reply more heartfelt than was typical of a candidate whose comments were so proudly disciplined. His proclamation heard round the political world: “Corporations are people, my friend.”

Romney’s language echoed the legal point that the Gilded Age Supreme Court had made and on which the *Citizens United* decision was built. But that wasn’t his purpose. He was presenting a simple argument that “everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people.” Yet his comment went viral because it seemed to go to the heart of the divide in the nation—and perhaps also to Romney’s identity as a corporate conservative. For many, endowing corporations with the same standing as actual human beings (and often with additional privileges) was precisely what ailed the country.

A month later, the Occupy Wall Street protests were launched on a sea of homemade signs. Naturally, one of the earliest placards proclaimed, “Corporations are *not* people.” Another declared: “Due to recent budget cuts, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off.”

Barack Obama’s first term in office began with the rise of the Tea Party movement and drew to a close with the protests against the

power and influence of America's richest "one percent." The two movements represented bookends of the American political sensibility, one directed at the power of government, the other at the power of high finance. They high-

In a democratic republic, "those people" are also fellow citizens. And self-government ultimately requires us to work with them, too.

lighted two aspects of the American character, reflected in the Tea Party's focus on liberty, self-reliance, and the unencumbered individual and in Occupy Wall Street's emphasis on equality, interconnection, and social obligation.

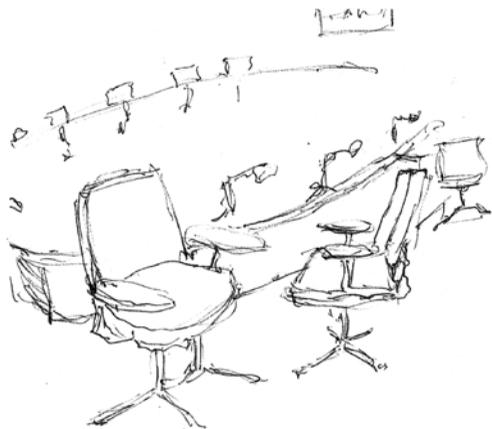
In better economic times, we might have expected a different outcome. Yet there was a certain inevitability that no matter how hard Obama tried to make it otherwise, his presidency could never avoid becoming the locus of a great national struggle over who we are as a people. The crisis the country faced economically, the crisis of identity created by fears of decline, the crisis of national authority that began taking hold under George W. Bush, and the crisis of contemporary conservatism—all came together to force the country to a decision point. At stake was the long consensus that had guided the nation for a century.

It was not inevitable that conservatives would respond to Bush's failures and their defeat in 2008 by moving to the right. In similar circumstances, other conservative parties and movements had regained power by pursuing moderate paths, proposing to check the excesses of their progressive foes without undoing all

their work. This was how the Republican Party had eventually dealt with the New Deal, accepting its achievements as reflecting the popular will. In following that course, the Republicans went *with* rather than *against* the grain of American history. The Civil War had decisively settled the question that we were a nation, not a collection of states. The economic developments that followed thoroughly nationalized our commercial life. The federal government grew in tandem with the economy. After the New Deal, Dwight Eisenhower was the quintessential figure in this new settlement.

But many Republicans and conservatives never accepted the path of accommodation. With Barry Goldwater's nomination, they began pulling the party in a new direction. The shift was gradual, and Ronald Reagan did not try to unravel the New Deal consensus. But Bush's failures opened the way for a decisive break, and Tea Party activists became the agents and symbols of a new conservative revolution.

For all his difficulties as a candidate, Rick Perry had captured his movement's new objective with great succinctness in his pledge to make the federal government as "inconsequential" as possible. His statement would have horrified Hamilton, Clay, and Lincoln (and of course



Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Johnson). And that, was, in a way, his point. With more candor and radicalism than politicians typically muster, Perry was calling into question not only Obama's decisions, not only the achievements of the Great Society, the New Deal, and the Progressive years, but also a much older American project that envisioned a national government that the country's citizens would see as both consequential and constructive—just what Hamilton promised long ago in Federalist No. 27. Perry's emphasis on states' rights echoed Calhoun more than Lincoln.

Passage of the health-care law was a substantial victory, an achievement that had eluded every Democratic president from Harry Truman forward. For all the criticism Obama received, he was right to undertake the fight and to carry it to success. Yet the battle for health-care reform took too long and the process through which the measure passed was ugly, given the Republicans' refusal to cooperate and Obama's insistence that bipartisan cooperation be attempted long after it had any chance of succeeding. The process tainted the bill, and the time needed to pass it allowed a great achievement to turn sour for voters who felt they never heard an adequate explanation of what the intricate law accomplished.

If describing developments in American political life candidly is dismissed as a form of partisanship, then honest speech becomes impossible. Partisanship is indeed destructive when party advantage or personal ambition prevents two sides from solving problems by reaching agreements that they would otherwise be prepared to make; but when two sides do not operate within the same framework, identify the same problems, or even share a common understanding of our history, the difficulty of finding accord cannot be ascribed to pettiness, selfishness, or a lack of imagination. It reflects

the fact that the country has reached "a time for choosing," to echo the title of Ronald Reagan's memorable 1964 speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater. (The time for choosing that Reagan had in mind was delayed, partly by the relative moderation of Reagan himself when he was president.)

America has worked well on the whole because we have faced such times for choosing only rarely. Our divided political heart inclines us to resist such moments. The American experiment from the beginning recognized both sides of our character, and successful American politicians understood, with Tocqueville, that we are a nation of private striving *and* public engagement, of rights *and* responsibilities. Americans understood that individualism needed to be protected from concentrated power in both the private marketplace and the government. They also understood that individuality seeks expression in communal acts as well as individual deeds; and that the self longs for autonomy but also freely embraces the encumbrances and responsibilities of family, friendship, community, and country. These truths have usually been accepted, albeit in different ways, by progressives



and conservatives alike. It is this deep American consensus that is now in jeopardy, and its disappearance threatens to block constructive action at the very moment when our position in the world is precarious.

It can fairly be said that I have placed more emphasis in these pages on community than on individualism. I have done so to underscore the extent to which the American conversation has veered away from an understanding of our communal impulses. But nothing here is intended to deny the fierce independence that Americans so value. We have always held up as heroes inventors and adventurers, cowboys and private eyes, entrepreneurs and free spirits. “Telling Americans to improve democracy by sinking comfortably into a community, by losing themselves in a collective life, is calling into the wind,” wrote the historian Robert Wiebe. “There has never been an American democracy without its powerful strand of individualism, and nothing suggests there ever will be.” Wiebe is entirely right. But it is also calling into the wind to pretend that Americans have lived by individualism alone. We are the nation of both *High Noon* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Our current discontent has many roots. But we will not



resolve our problems or restore our greatness by fleeing from either of our twin commitments, from either side of our character.

There is no point in seeking compromise at the midway point between the Long Consensus and the radical individualists. The Long Consensus *itself* embodies moderation, balance, and compromise, a view Obama himself finally embraced in a series of speeches in the fall of 2011 and early 2012. There is much room for argument within that consensus over when and whether to tilt more toward the public or the private, the individual or the community. What the country neither needs nor wants is an endless series of campaigns and political battles revolving around competing fears—of excessive government on one side and of an end to core programs, such as Medicaid and Social Security, on the other.

The rising generation that rallied to Obama in 2008 did not do so simply because of their fascination with an unusual and compelling human being—“the biggest celebrity in the world,” as John McCain’s campaign correctly called him. They also mobilized because, as a generation, they espouse even more than their elders the values and commitments of the Long Consensus. Obama ended his first term by embracing the imperative of defending the Long Consensus—belatedly, perhaps, but also forcefully. But it will be the task of the new generation to make it vital in the unfolding century.

Young Americans are, at once, more passionately individualistic and more passionately communitarian than any other age group in the country. The Millennials (generally defined as Americans born in 1981 or later) are the most socially tolerant of the generations. They are also the generation most comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity, most open on matters such as gay marriage, and most welcoming to new im-

migrants. The fact that they are such a racially and ethnically diverse generation explains and undergirds many of their attitudes. Latinos, who combine a determination to succeed with a strong commitment to community and the idea of a common good, are an important component of the Millennial generation. It is a generation whose members have faith in their own capacity, collectively and as individuals, to effect change.

Their sense of communal obligation is made manifest in their exceptional devotion to service—as volunteers in tutoring programs, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, environmental initiatives, and community organizing. They are also the generation that bore the largest burden of fighting the nation's two longest wars. Surveys have consistently found that helping those in need is a high personal priority for members of this generation.

They have more faith than their elders do in government's constructive capacities, even as they also wish for a government that is less bureaucratic and more nimble. They combine the idealism of the 1960s generation with the more worldly concerns of the generation that came of age in the 1980s and the 1990s. One might say that they are more practical than the 1960s generation, and more idealistic than younger Americans were in the 1980s. They want to do good, but they want the good they do to last. They are willing to take risks, but they are not foolhardy. They have doubts about politics, but they have shown a willingness to give politics a chance. They have few illusions, but they do have hope.

No one harnessed those hopes more effectively than Obama. In the 2008 election, two-thirds of voters 29 and younger supported him; by contrast, Obama won only 45 percent among voters who were 65 and older. As the Pew Research Center pointed out, this was “the largest dispar-

ity between younger and older voters recorded in four decades of modern Election Day exit polling.”

Moreover, Pew observed, “After decades of low voter participation by the young, the turnout gap in 2008 between voters under and over the age of 30 was the smallest it had been since 18- to 20-year-olds were given the right to vote

Individualism needed to be protected from concentrated power in both the private marketplace and the government.

in 1972.” The members of this generation are more engaged in politics at this point in the life cycle than any generation in four decades.

Turnout among the young rose steadily beginning in 2000, as has support for Democrats. In 2008, Obama built on something that was already happening even as he mobilized the young in unprecedented ways.

Members of the new generation believe in voluntary action and in government action. They are more skeptical of traditional norms than older Americans are, yet their goals in life might have found approval from old-line Whigs. When asked by Pew's researchers to list their most important goals in life, “being a good parent” ranked first at 52 percent, followed by “having a successful marriage” at 30 percent and “helping those in need” at 21 percent. Interestingly, this last came in ahead of “having a high-paying career,” which came in at 15 percent. This generation is pioneering a blend of progressive politics and back-to-basics values.

Yet the citizens of this new economic and technological world have lost neither their desire

for social justice nor their inclination to protest conditions that narrow their opportunities. The anti-Wall Street demonstrations and the support they won are evidence of this. Consider that we are a nation that celebrates the liberating possibility of new technologies, and then we

We are libertarians when things go well for us, but we want to socialize the risks that threaten us.

quickly form social networks. We disparage the federal government, and then we heap praise and honor on our men and women in uniform, who represent the most self-sacrificing part of that government. More prosaically, we demand that government do less and spend less, even as we demand that it do more for the elderly, for the unemployed, for the education of our children, for the eradication of disease, for safeguarding our natural environment, for protecting consumers, for preventing financial fraud and abuse. We are libertarians when things go well for us, but we want to socialize the risks that threaten us, notably those arising from old age, natural disasters, unsafe products, and ineffective drugs. “Government is the enemy,” former Republican Senator Bill Cohen once said, “until you need a friend.”

It was one of the great strengths of the Long Consensus that it was neither static nor backward-looking. It fostered, absorbed, and managed change. Paradoxically, by building a sense of social and economic security, the consensus encouraged risk taking and innovation by making risk less frightening. Government underwrote the infrastructure—social as well as physical—within which

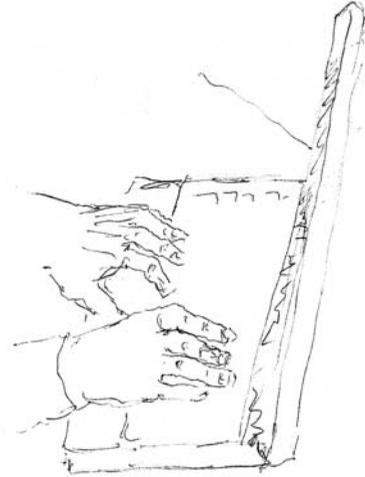
innovation could occur. By promoting mass education, research, and scientific breakthroughs, government increased the capacity of individuals to prosper and society’s capacity to advance technologically. The GI Bill and subsequent federal college scholarship and student loan programs were classics in the genre: they expanded individual opportunities while increasing the community’s economic resources (and its level of knowledge and expertise). Hamilton and Clay might be shocked at the speed with which American society democratized itself; they would not be surprised by government’s capacity to foster growth or promote mass education.

At the same time, those who devote their lives to public service through government too often find themselves demonized, their significant contributions disparaged, their sometimes heroic efforts to innovate and reform dismissed. This creates a vicious cycle that further erodes government’s capacities. Broad assaults on government tarnish its image, which in turn discourages the innovators and the reformers from joining the public sector in the first place. Paul Light, a close student of the bureaucracy, has observed that young people interested in



public service have gravitated more to the not-for-profit sector than to government. This is certainly good for the third sector; it is not good for the future of government. We must thus create a new virtuous cycle in which government's need to attract new talent leads it to create dynamic work environments. Public sector work should again provoke pride. Those who work for government should experience the same sense of efficacy that their peers in the private and nonprofit sectors do. It was, after all, only a half century ago that John F. Kennedy created a genuine excitement over the prospect of government work. "When my brother John and I were growing up," Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg declared in a speech in 2000, "hardly a day went by when someone didn't come up to us and say, 'Your father changed my life. I went into public service because he asked me.'" The devotees of the New Frontier who descended upon Washington in 1960 were not saints, but neither were they mere opportunists. "The mood," wrote the journalist Godfrey Hodgson, "was strangely blended from ambition and idealism, aggressive social climbing and a sense of youthful adventure." We could do, and have done, much worse.

But restoring this enthusiasm for public service will require us to create a government that is much less distant from our aspirations to a sense of community. Government is not just a bureaucracy. It is also a town square. It is not simply a place that issues licenses and permits but also the institution that builds the schools, colleges, libraries, parks, and neighborhood centers that foster community life. In a democracy, government should be seen less as an entity that issues commands than as a forum where citizens debate the future of their community and their nation. Government is not just the FBI and the IRS, as important as those two institutions are to our security and our



solvency. It is also the TVA, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the National Science Foundation.

Liberals and progressives have sometimes forgotten that their purpose is not and never has been to defend government as such. Big government is not an end. Government's most successful ventures have involved empowering individuals and communities, often by increasing the bargaining power of those who previously had been at an unfair disadvantage. The New Deal's most successful venture in redistributing wealth and income to the less affluent was not any particular tax-spend-and-transfer program but the National Labor Relations Act, which enabled employees to form unions and bargain on their own behalf. Requiring manufacturers and lenders to provide consumers with adequate information on the products they buy and the loans they receive costs government little, but it can shift the balance in market transactions decisively in the consumer's direction. Government's massive commitment to education at all levels is not—or certainly should not be—about the employment of educators and administrators.

It is (and has been through most of our history) an effort to provide citizens with the capacity for self-government, prosperity, self-reliance, and personal growth. At a moment of skepticism about all institutions, reforms that

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promote public and private transparency, accountability, and responsiveness will speak to all of the disparate villages and neighborhoods that make up the world of Bill Bishop's *Big Sort*.

Democratic self-government, if it is functioning properly, is simply the expression of the will of the community. The republican conception of government to which our Founders subscribed stoutly opposed the idea of a government captured by factions or for sale to particular interests. This is why the *Citizens United* decision opening the electoral system to the intrusion of large sums of money is antithetical to the Founders' intentions. Republicanism insisted that citizens should participate in public life not simply to serve

their legitimate personal or group interests but also, and primarily, because self-rule is essential to liberty. "Unless citizens have reason to believe that sharing in self-government is intrinsically important," Michael Sandel has written, "their willingness to sacrifice individual interests for the common good may be eroded by instrumental calculations about the costs and benefits of political participation." Paradoxically, restoring republican idealism is the only practical remedy for our democratic distemper. All other solutions are likely to fall short. One senses it was this intuition that inspired tens of thousands to knock on doors in 2008 in pursuit of nothing more, or less, than "change we can believe in."

In analyzing our tendency to sort ourselves into communities organized by attitudes, lifestyles, and political inclination, Bill Bishop notes our increasing propensity to refer to political opponents as "those people." In a competitive democratic system, there will always be a certain amount of such talk. In tough political campaigns, being nice is rarely a top priority. But in a democratic republic, "those people" are also fellow citizens. And self-government ultimately requires us to work with them, too.

E.J. Dionne is a columnist with the Washington Post, Professor of Government at Georgetown University and the author of many books, including the book from which this essay is drawn, Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent.

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