

CONNECTIONS

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Engagement**

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Kettering's Multinational Research



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through inter-related program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Searching for Balance: America's Role in the World

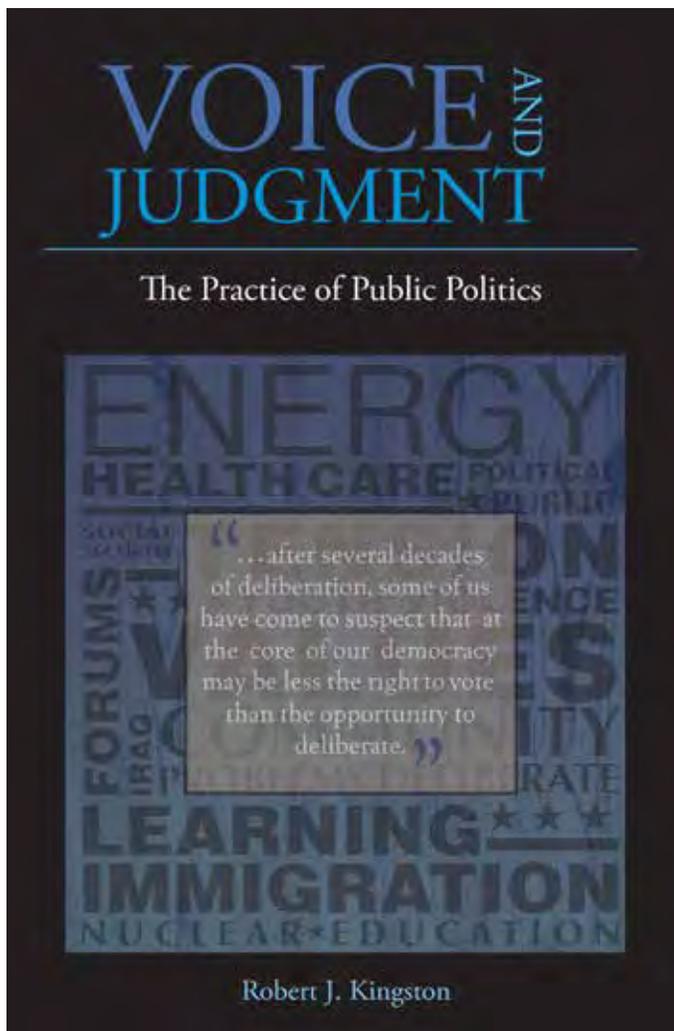
By Robert J. Kingston

Robert J. Kingston, who spent 35 years developing the theory of deliberative politics along with colleagues at Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation, died on August 20, 2016, in Long Island, New York. He was 87 years old. Born in London, Bob's career took him to the United States as an English professor and later as president of the College Board and acting chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, executive director at Public Agenda, and finally as senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, where he served as editor of the Kettering Review. This article is drawn from Kingston's book Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2012), 27-29, 53-57.



All of us, I suspect, while we were still young children, encountered some history-making event that we know was to change the comfort of our little world. We did not surely understand it, nor even really “know” what it was; but we knew that it “happened,” that it “meant” something, and that someday, therefore, we should have to cope with it. To the now elders among American citizens, such an “event” may have been Pearl Harbor or the atomic bomb on Hiroshima; to a very few, even Poland, or Neville Chamberlain getting off a plane from Munich, a piece of paper (signed by Adolf Hitler) fluttering in his hand declaring, more wrongly than he could imagine, “Peace in our time!” Or for a somewhat younger generation, it will have been 9/11—and new enemies, new friends.

The long and continuing sequence of National Issues Forums—which (as this is being written) have addressed



something near 100 issues, nationwide, over the past 30 years—provides now a valuable indication of the progress of public thinking, and the continuities in it, over time, otherwise unavailable, the likelihood of which was perhaps not fully apprehended during the earliest years of the NIF experiment. America’s sense of its place in the world is one such continuing theme.

In the 1980s the country passed through the depths of the Cold War, which, in effect, culminated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Well, this was perhaps not the precise “depth” of the Cold War, granted Sputnik, the space race, and the Cuban Missile Crisis; but the period was certainly filled with deeply troubled and passionate concern about the relative nuclear strengths of the two superpower rivals. Three times in that decade the NIF forums took on a consideration of the US-Soviet relationship. Then again, immediately following the end of the Soviet era in 1989, they turned to consideration of America’s role in the world. And in the fall and winter of 2002-2003, within weeks of the US attack on Iraq, citizens were again discussing “Americans’ Role in the World” in their National Issues Forums.

Questions of international relations and foreign policy present a particular challenge to citizens of democracies, especially if they see themselves as a nation of immigrants. For most of the past century, fortunate Americans thought of themselves as somewhat better off than the rest of the world, and perhaps envied by it! When wars have had to be fought, they have been fought in places other than the United States itself and caused less of its citizenry to be

directly involved in fighting. And the outcomes of the Second World War and the Cold War seemed to place the United States in a position where it could provide extraordinary assistance to the rest of the world, while fearing virtually nothing from it. At least, so some leaders and many citizens like to presume, while others seemed sometimes to prefer to pursue a policy of strength through fear.

VALUES, INTEREST . . . AND THE “RIGHTS” OF OTHERS

The language of “liberty” and “freedom” seems always to have described Americans’ intentions; but in the latter half of the 20th century, US assistance, civil and military, had been provided to and through other nations primarily so that they might remain anticommunist, rather than to the end of their becoming necessarily democratic—or even committed in principle to the exercise of human rights. “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”—this was distinctively not the rhetoric of American democracy. It may have therefore been inevitable that “the ugly American” was to become well known, even in Southeast Asia before the Vietnam War, and that “Yankee, go home” was to become a sustained and familiar injunction internationally throughout the decades that had followed World War II. Nonetheless, in the

1980s and 1990s, a foreign policy that made—or at least claimed to make—the provision of American assistance dependent upon an improvement in matters of human rights (democratization, bit-by-bit) had become increasingly used. The linking of US assistance to a declared commitment to democracy and human rights—even of concessions to communist nations, insofar as they agreed to observe American-style human rights—had thus become “respectable” topics of public conversation.

But such assistance was not always viewed favorably in regard to all countries. In 1992, two-thirds of National Issues Forms participants, responding to an “exit” questionnaire, had expressed agreement with the sentiment that “working for short-term gains with dictators like



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General Noriega or the late President Marcos is immoral.” In Madison, a man similarly pointed to the hypocrisy of a stand on behalf of democracy when we have clearly supported leaders who do not pursue our ideals, whenever that suited our purpose. A woman in El Paso thought we generally should mind our own business: “Especially in Latin America, the United States is not perceived as benign and is interfering constantly in the affairs of certain countries. I don’t think we should involve ourselves in the internal affairs of other countries.” “Do we ourselves really know our democracy?” one young man asked, admittedly somewhat more extreme in his rhetoric than most. Another insisted that although we claim to

support human rights and democracy elsewhere, we have tolerated human rights violations among allies. And a man in Albany, Georgia, said, “Let’s face it, the United States has been guilty of economic exploitation of the Third World. . . . This is something that will have to be addressed.” These discussants professed themselves to be variously liberal and conservative, and they clearly shared a determination to reassess the moral imperatives behind American policy. Yet when asked, “What role should the United States play in the world?” only 1 in 20 of forum participants responding to exit questionnaires placed the highest priority on “promoting democracy and human rights, whenever they are threatened.”

It now becomes clear that these Americans, in a post-Cold War world, at a time when the nation did not feel itself directly threatened, were reassessing their judgments about themselves and their own nation. “It worries me to speak as if we’re the good guys,” said a Texas woman, in the late 1990s. “It seems like we have the idea that we do it so right and so perfect that it should be what everyone else does.” “I don’t always feel that what we have in this country is necessarily the best for everyone else in the world,” echoed a woman in Georgia.

In context, the purpose of such statements was evidently not to declare *mea culpa*. The deliberations here have a more meditative, less accusatory quality. With apparent sincerity, these forum participants, trying to redefine America's role in the world, were coming to grips with a hard and very American question: how to reconcile some of the clear moral imperatives that Americans have always honored in theory, with the proper and necessary *self-interest* that they perceived might always tend to shape the limits of foreign policy.

In one forum, a woman with her own command of recent history pointed out:

Every time we decided to continue to support the bad guys in

the world, not only have we not won, but we've gotten something that was worse. We decided to support Chiang Kai-shek, hoping that we would rescue China from communism— and we got Mao; the day before Castro marched into Cuba, we supported Batista; when we got rid of the democratically reelected person in Iran, we got the Shah. And so every time we have tried to do that, we have gotten something worse. It's a strategy that simply hasn't worked out historically. Aside from the moral value that what we did I think is terrible, politically it never works out; we always end up getting something that could be worse than what we had before. I don't think that is a very good strategy.





Daniel Yankelovich and Robert Kingston, A Public Voice, Washington, DC, May 1994

From this followed a corollary, which quite apparently settled as a bedrock principle for foreign policy among these groups in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union: we have no obligation to make others in our own image, nor any right to do so; each nation must offer and pursue its own definition of human rights. Perhaps paradoxically, in group after group, after the 1989 demonstration of Tiananmen Square was cited, discussions of our relationship with China underscored the point. Disgust with what Americans had seen broadcast from Tiananmen Square still registered strongly, years after the event, but the determination to affirm that judgment was consistently coupled with a widespread reluctance to have it influence our *policy* toward China. Sixty-three percent of forum participants at the conclusion of the NIF discussions in 1993 had agreed that, “We should

develop working relationships with China, even if they are guilty of human rights violations.” In dialogues at the start of the new century—one in 2000 focusing specifically on Americans’ concerns with respect to the Chinese, another in the spring of 2003 relating to Iraq—the “right” of the United States to adjudicate the “rights” of citizens of other nations was broadly called into question.

Whether or not to spread democracy through the use of American power was to become a matter of increasing public concern in 21st-century deliberation. In the summer of the year 2000, for example, in forums held in 20 communities across the United States as part of a larger, ongoing US-China dialogue, participants had considered the degree to which the United States might “promote and foster human rights” in China. Initially, participants characterized human rights by

reference to various contexts: some were concerned about acts of civil disobedience, still recalling the image of the young man facing the tank in Tiananmen Square, years before; some were concerned about the ideal of justice, asking, “Why did this have to happen?” and, “Why is there no monument or sign indicating what happened?”

Yet the published report of these dialogues on US/China relations goes on to say that participants then

became more reflective about US incidents that have created the need for harsh measures. The Los Angeles riots fueled by conflicts between Koreans and African Americans were mentioned. Some brought up the Watts riots. As the discussion turned to the need for internal order in our countries, in a forum held in the southwestern United States, one person asked, “Comparing Kent State versus Tiananmen Square, are we really different?” Another responded, “It’s like calling the kettle black.”

The report on these forums also cites one participant’s observation that “Americans cannot expect traditional human values to be the same in every country.” The report continues:

At an Ohio forum one participant offered this analysis: “As

Americans, we tend to think of human rights as civil rights, such as the right to vote and a fair judicial system. The Chinese think of human rights differently, such as the right to work and to share their economy. Everyone is taken care of materially in some way.” One person said, “The United States should be willing to give and take, but not dictate,” when it comes to human rights. “We stress human rights too much,” she went on. “This is important but should be staged in policy over time.”

The report concludes, “the more they deliberated choice, the more all the participants emphasized a summary that one person offered up: ‘Whatever solutions to Chinese problems there are, they must be Chinese solutions, not American solutions.’” So, as in the much earlier deliberations about US-Soviet relations, there is an important tension evident in these public deliberations about the US-China relationship, and it is by no means a subtle one. The Americans in these forums are prompted both by an interest in *spreading* their idea of democracy and by a reluctance to *enforce* its adoption. For they have a far from unblemished record themselves, they think, as they move between the ideal and the convenient. ■



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