

# BEYOND THE WAR METAPHOR

THE WORK OF DEMOCRACY

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A Study for the Kettering Foundation

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### **Kettering Foundation**

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Kettering Foundation published *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*, by President David Mathews, with support from the Cousins Research Group. The report calls for a shift in relationship between government and citizens from regulation and service delivery to collaboration in the work of democracy.

This same year, the United States was convulsed by the triple crises of COVID-19, economic decline on a scale not seen since the Great Depression, and enormous and sustained demonstrations for police reform and racial justice in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, by a police officer in Minneapolis. Fires and storms through the summer reminded the nation of the dangers from a changing climate. All of these were inflamed by another crisis: bitter polarization fed by what Trygve Throntveit and I call “the metaphor of war.”<sup>1</sup> In an essay in *Eidos*, Marie Ström and I detail how, across the world, the digital revolution is eroding democratic education while intensifying war narratives.<sup>2</sup>

The war metaphor and other crises feed worries about the future. According to a June 2020 article by Lisa Lerer and Dave Umhoefer in the *New York Times*, 80 percent of American adults believed the country was spiraling out of control. The authors quote Meena Bose from Hofstra University: “Given the rise of social media, [it is] much easier to denigrate and attack than it is to have the kinds of thoughtful, hard conversations that are needed.”<sup>3</sup>

“Democracy-as-usual” troubles continue after Joe Biden’s and Kamala Harris’ victory in the 2020 presidential race. *With the People* is an important response. The report argues that the foundation’s proposal for a citizen-centered view of democracy is “just a different way of thinking,”<sup>4</sup> but Mathews acknowledges that it faces major obstacles, including the declining faith citizens have in each other and the “bureaucratism and modern professionalism [that] have combined in today’s institutions, allowing the two cultures to reinforce one other.”<sup>5</sup>

These are all significant, but the largest obstacle is today’s story of democracy itself, understood as mainly an electoral system. Such a view is expressed in the high-profile report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy in the 21st Century* by the American Academy

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of Arts and Sciences. The report, it is important to note, sees democracy as larger than elections alone, the conventional definition. (For instance, the official site of the United States Agency of International Development in 2013 defined democracy as “a civilian political system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular competitive elections with universal suffrage.”<sup>6</sup>)

*Our Common Purpose* encourages strengthening associational life beyond government in which citizens can “assemble, deliberate and converse with each other.”<sup>7</sup> It finds signs of

“a yearning to believe again in the American story” and “stories of surging participation and innovation, of communities working to build new connections across long-standing divides, and of individual citizens suddenly awakening to the potential of their democratic responsibilities.”<sup>8</sup>

Its lens is an important advance. But recommendations for government and election reform make up the bulk of

the report, neglecting workplaces, workers, and institutions such as libraries, schools, businesses, faith communities, colleges, health clinics, museums, sports programs, and many others as potential places for developing civic muscle.<sup>9</sup>

A government-centered view feeds a war metaphor in which citizens are mainly voters battling for scarce resources. In contrast, the Kettering Foundation report, drawing on ancient roots of the concept, defines democracy as “a political system in which . . . citizens must work with other citizens to produce things—‘public goods’—that make life better for everyone.”<sup>10</sup> Democracy is a kind of *work*. Citizens are *civic producers*. Government is a collaborator with citizens.<sup>11</sup> This is radical, not left or right but etymologically, returning to roots in which *We, the People* are the agents and architects.

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre observes, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”<sup>12</sup> Societies are shaped by the stories they tell of their past, present, and future. *With the People* tells a different story of democracy that implies a question: How can the whole society tell such a story?

After describing the metaphor of war, the way it has spread across society, and how it infuses conventional politics of left and right, the following offers several stories of democracy based on deliberative public work, work *by* the people, work *for* public purposes, and work *in* public, visible and valued. All illustrate government *with* the people. Many show the ties between the Black freedom struggle and democracy’s advance.



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## WAR AND WARRIORS

**T**he COVID-19 virus and police killings of unarmed African Americans illustrate the war metaphor and dramatize its flaws.

On March 18, 2020, President Donald J. Trump proclaimed himself a “wartime president” battling the coronavirus.<sup>13</sup> Soon after came the surgeon general’s warning declaring the COVID-19 outbreak to be a modern Pearl Harbor moment or a new 9/11.<sup>14</sup>

Democrats, too, rallied around the idea of a war against the virus, if not around the president. As Susan E. Rice, Barack Obama’s national security advisor from 2013 to 2017 and Biden’s appointed domestic policy director, wrote in an April 8 editorial for the *New York Times*, “Mr. Trump is correct: This is war, the most consequential since World War II.” Rice expressed no confidence in Trump’s fitness to be commander in what she called “the viral version of World War III” but expressed little doubt that the crisis demanded just the aggressive leadership and centralized authority that Trump was seeking to claim.<sup>15</sup>

Metaphors don’t simply describe reality; they help to create it. President Trump’s call for shared “sacrifice” and “devotion” in the battle against COVID-19 was followed by the firing of administration watchdogs,<sup>16</sup> unilateral suspension of environmental regulations,<sup>17</sup> efforts to preempt public health objections to regulatory changes,<sup>18</sup> and attacks on reporters with the temerity to ask tough questions. As unemployment skyrocketed, he extended the war metaphor to individual citizens, describing the people as “warriors” called to risk their lives in a new battle, reopening the economy, which soon drove out the war against the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Enemies proliferated: China, former President Barack Obama, the “fake media,” and Democratic governors all made the list. Meanwhile, Trump’s talk of the “China virus” created a climate of suspicion and hostility toward Americans of Asian descent.<sup>20</sup> Across the world strongmen also used the language of war to assume new powers.<sup>21</sup>

On May 25, the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in Minneapolis, for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill, sparked enormous demonstrations in Minneapolis and across the country about racial biases in policing and elsewhere in American society. A study by Tufts University found that two-thirds of African Americans know someone who has been mistreated

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by the police. Twenty-two percent report being mistreated themselves.<sup>22</sup> Bias is inflamed by a military mind-set. The year before, in April 2019, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey had highlighted this dynamic when he said he was banning police officers from attending “fear-based or warrior training.” He said such training “creates a battlefield-like mind-set, conditions officers to treat every citizen as a potential threat, and emphasizes an us-versus-them mentality.”<sup>23</sup>

After a second high-profile killing of a Black man, Rayshard Brooks, in Atlanta, by police

on June 13, 2020, US Representative Hank Johnson, an African American from Georgia, put it powerfully:

“There’s a need for a cultural change in the police departments across the country. We need to stem the warrior mentality.”<sup>24</sup>

A war metaphor for politics has old roots in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, whose most influential book,

*Leviathan*, in 1651, argued that society is a war of all against all that requires a strongman to impose order.<sup>25</sup> This view took particular shape in the modern world.

As Throntveit and I describe in the essay mentioned earlier, for more than 100 years, modern war—with its scale, mass mobilizations, technocratic ways of thinking, and single-minded pursuit of objectives—has been used as a model for reform. The country’s participation in the First World War advanced measures advocated for years by reformers, including a progressive income tax, an eight-hour federal workday, and women’s right to vote. It also increased racial and cultural intolerance, curtailed civil liberties, and targeted immigrants, labor organizers, and critics.

The war also reinforced technocratic inclinations of reformers who imagined a society transformed by science and technology and run by disinterested experts. “We all have to follow the lead of specialists,” wrote Walter Lippmann, who set much of the intellectual course for the *New Republic*, a leading public opinion journal. In his view, a growing body of opinion “looks to the infusion of scientific method, the careful application of administrative technique.”<sup>26</sup> In the modern world, science was the model for modern liberal thinking, and “only those will conquer who can understand.” The *New Republic* touted the outlook of engineering and the image of the state as a “machine,” whose workings were best understood by the application of technique. This technical outlook gained considerable impetus from US involvement in World War I, which the journal enthusiastically supported.

The enemy of the war effort, in the editors’ views, was inefficiency. By 1918, piles of undistributed coal had been mobilized for the war effort. “It is a triumph of organized units over unorganized individuals,” wrote one regular writer.<sup>27</sup> An editorial elaborated, “In the last analysis, a strong, scientific organization of the sources of material and access to them is the means to the achievement of the only purposes by which this war can be justified.”<sup>28</sup>

## Nonviolence affirmed the immense complexity and common humanity of all.

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By the war's end, the *New Republic* was full of scientific triumphalism. The war had taught us, it argued, "to meet the threatened class conflict by placing scientific research at the disposal of a conscious purpose." One unsigned editorial argued the consensus: "The business of politics has become too complex to be left to the pretentious misunderstandings of the benevolent amateur."<sup>29</sup>

The Depression years of the 1930s brought into view work-centered practices and views of democracy, but World War II returned the country to the war metaphor, which has intensified in subsequent decades. From the Cold War through the contemporary era, bellicose language dividing the world between the righteous and the enemy has been used by activists on the right and the left. The nonviolent Civil Rights Movement was an extraordinarily powerful alternative. Nonviolence affirmed the immense complexity and common humanity of all, including segregationists and racists. Martin Luther King Jr. argued for the need to "separate the sin from the sinner" and to see potential for contribution in almost everyone.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, most progressive and conservative movements of the post-Civil Rights era are fueled by the conviction that opponents are enemies who must be vanquished.

The technologies of activism illustrate this us-versus-them mind-set. In 1974, Citizens for a Better Environment invented the modern canvass, which involves paid staff going door-to-door on an issue, raising money, and collecting signatures. The formula that makes it work identifies the enemy and defines the issue in reductionist, good-versus-evil terms, a Manichean, war-like politics.<sup>31</sup> Manichean politics makes mass activation *efficient* because hatred and its close cousin, anger, are relatively uncomplicated emotions to manipulate. "We've discovered how to sell progressive politics door-to-door, like selling encyclopedias," was the claim of canvass creators. Canvassers are generally barred from having discussions that complicate the good-versus-evil framing. Over the past four decades, many canvass operations have developed. Dana Fisher's study of the canvass, *Activism, Inc.*, shows its effects in widespread disillusionment among young canvassers.<sup>32</sup>

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The Manichean formula of the canvass polarizes civic life, objectifies and abstracts "the enemy," erodes citizenship, and communicates that politics is warfare. A vivid example was *Disruption*, the promotional film for the New York People's Climate March of 2014.<sup>33</sup> The film claimed the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement's March on Washington in 1963. But *Disruption* was a call for progressives to rise up against conservatives and fossil fuel industries. It bore little resemblance to the inclusive message of the March on Washington, developed by the movement's master strategist, Bayard Rustin. He framed the task as precisely *not* to

polarize but rather to “win over the middle.” A third of the nation was behind the goals of the movement. A third was opposed. Most Americans, focused elsewhere, needed convincing. Martin Luther King Jr.’s brilliant “I Have a Dream” speech embodied Rustin’s strategy. King coupled a challenge to all Americans to make real the inclusive promise of democracy with a call for all Americans to channel anger into constructive change. If the narrative of *Disruption* had followed the approach of the March on Washington, it would have included business owners, Pentagon officials, evangelical Christians, Midwestern civic leaders, and others from outside the progressive ranks who joined the march. Instead, the film presented the civic and political tasks of building an environmentally and socially sustainable society as a confrontation with evil.

New technologies dramatically augment the use and reach of the war metaphor, now employed in twitter, robo-calls, internet mobilizations, talk radio shows, documentaries, and campaign advertising. An *NBC News* report by Chuck Todd and Carrie Dann, “How Big Data Broke American Politics,” details the increasingly polarized campaigns and politics over the last two decades. “Polarization isn’t new, but it’s definitely worse than it was 20 years ago,” they write. “And thanks to technology and the manipulation of demographic data, those charged with the setting and resetting of American politics . . . have set the stage and conditioned the country for a more permanent polarized atmosphere.”<sup>34</sup>

These are global dynamics. For years, youth workers and policymakers have voiced concern that isolated young people who spend a great deal of time online are also vulnerable to inflammatory and extremist online messaging that communicates an us-versus-them mind-set that

appeals to their need to belong. After several UNESCO conferences on related topics, the UNESCO study in 2017, *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research*, reported on extensive research across continents. The report shows how social media contribute to political and civic polarization not only during elections but also throughout civic life.

## War targets enemies and shuts down deliberation in which publics weigh trade-offs.

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It describes the process of “rupture in democratic dialogue and in citizenship engagement,” highlighting how “ideological, indoctrinating, collective discourses are constructed where ‘others’ are portrayed as radically different from ‘us.’” Meanwhile, the “us” group is “then construed as abused, under threat, [and] victims in need [of being] defended while the ‘other’ is dehumanized (e.g., constructed as ‘evil’).” The process justifies blaming, “exclusion, persecution, and possible violence.”<sup>35</sup>

The war metaphor defines citizenship in terms of altruistic service to a collective, hiding or suppressing the constant negotiation between personal and public interests of democratic politics. War targets enemies and shuts down deliberation in which publics weigh trade-offs. It marginalizes vulnerable communities and disenfranchises the people at large. Wars are waged in expectation of ending. The work of citizenship, in contrast, continues.

Democracy needs a *We, the People* alternative and a view of government that supports it.



## THE WORKERS OF DEMOCRACY

**W**ork once animated the spirit of American democracy. According to historian Gordon Wood, when the Founders' classical ideals of virtue failed to knit together the newly independent states, Americans "found new democratic adhesives in the actual behavior of plain ordinary people," who took pride in productive work.<sup>36</sup>

The work of democracy was neither altruistic service nor narrowly self-interested pursuit of individual gain. The work of democracy was down to earth and practical and also concerned with civic advance. People saw their work through the lens of "commonwealth": a term drawing power both from English republican traditions of a government accountable to free citizens and from the experience of diverse immigrants fleeing the erosion of the ancestral commons and committed to replanting them in the New World. Africans, brought against their will, also came from cultures with strong commons traditions. They kept alive an aspirational rendering of the vision of free and independent labor in a future commonwealth.<sup>37</sup>

David Mathews described the commons tradition. "Nineteenth-century self-rule was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics," he writes, "rooted in collective decision-making and acting—especially acting." Some work was destructive of native cultures, but the story of constructive world-building that Mathews describes needs to be recalled because it also created one of the wellsprings of democracy in the country. "Settlers on the frontier had to be producers, not just consumers," Mathews says; they depended on shared goods and institutions such as schools that they themselves "had to join forces to build." As such, Mathews concludes, "Their efforts were examples of 'public work,' meaning work done *by*, not just *for*, the public."<sup>38</sup>

Commons-building public work inflected the "free labor" philosophy that animated Abraham Lincoln's vision for an American democracy unfettered by slavery.<sup>39</sup> Slaveholding societies, in Lincoln's view, rendered the condition of all workers as static, depending on fixed hierarchies of race, class, and (less obvious to Lincoln) gender. A dynamic United States, in contrast, could admit "[no] such thing as a free man being fixed for life," Lincoln argued. Its political economy was based on the promise of a just reward for publicly valued work. This was neither a pro-capitalist nor an anti-capitalist philosophy. It was a pro-*work* philosophy, emphasizing labor's centrality to society. "Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed," Lincoln asserted in 1861. "Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."<sup>40</sup>

Neither public work philosophy nor its traditions are categorically hostile to armed service or conflict. Sometimes defensive wars are a tragic necessity, such as the Civil War fought to

save the union and, as it proceeded, framed as a conflict to free the slaves. As Manisha Sinha describes in *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, "Slave resistance itself was at the heart of the abolition movement."<sup>41</sup> Janelle Bouie put the argument in a *New York Times* opinion piece on Juneteenth. "In fighting that struggle [for freedom], Black Americans would open up new vistas of democratic possibility for the entire country," he said.<sup>42</sup> The Black freedom movement became linked to the advance of democracy.

In the war's aftermath, African Americans sought to achieve civic autonomy provided by land ownership. "The great problem to be solved by the American people," wrote the African American poet Frances Harper in 1875, "is this: Whether there is strength enough in our democracy, virtue enough in our civilization, and power enough in our religion to . . . deal justly with the four millions of people lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery to the new commonwealth of freedom."<sup>43</sup>

The tragedy of Reconstruction was its failure to realize the promise of granting freed slaves "forty acres and a mule," resources for participating as full citizens. The failure left economic, political, and social inequalities and racial prejudices at the heart of society.<sup>44</sup> Still, African Americans' ideal of free labor and an inclusive commonwealth also created resources that future generations were able to draw upon. These included the "knowledge artisans," or citizen professionals, whom community organizer and public intellectual Gerald Taylor credits with building congregations, schools, businesses, and colleges.<sup>45</sup> Such institutions were central sites of power and education for the Black freedom struggle and democracy broadly.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s highlighted the leadership of Blacks in the struggle to realize "the promise of democracy" as well as the dignity and public value of work as central in that process. The

official title of the August 28, 1963,

March on Washington was "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." The Black civil rights

veteran and labor organizer A. Philip Randolph who, as chair of the march committee, insisted that Bayard Rustin take the organizing reins, had worked closely with the Congress of Industrial Organizations since World War II to

intertwine the causes of civil rights and the value and dignity of work. King worked with some of the most racially diverse and visionary unions of the day, including the United Steelworkers of America and the United Automobile Workers. Union support was key to the march's success. In August, Black and European American workers from dozens of national unions walked side by side. On stage that day, Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, described

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the tasks of building up Black communities and a *We, the People* democracy as one and the same. Working people, Reuther stated, could never be certain of adequate education, housing, or other fundamentals of dignity “as long as millions of Americans, Negroes, are treated as second-class citizens.”<sup>46</sup> King paralleled and amplified Reuther’s message, calling on African American participants to embrace their European American fellow Americans like the thousands

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gathered with them on the National Mall, who had “come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.”<sup>47</sup>

The March on Washington helped to secure passage of the landmark Civil Rights Bill of 1964. Notably, it included provisions curtailing hiring discrimination. Though the quest for full and dignified employment fell short of the full goals of the march, in

part because of the Vietnam War, which once again dramatized the chilling effects of war on democratic advancement, it showed the inextricable connection between the struggle for Black freedom, democracy, and the dignity of workers.

This connection led to the garbage workers’ strike of 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, the culmination of King’s career.<sup>48</sup> In a speech to the workers and the larger community on March 18, King described the workers’ struggle as part of the struggle of all Americans. “You are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages!” he exclaimed. “You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of all labor.”<sup>49</sup> He argued, “The person who picks up garbage is as crucial to the health of society as is the doctor.” King insisted, “so-called big jobs” might be better rewarded but were no more significant. “Let me say to you tonight,” King said in his last major speech, “that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth.”<sup>50</sup>

The movement’s work-inflected citizenship contrasted with much weaker versions of citizenship developing during the same period, such as the idealized volunteerism that became the dominant meaning of national service. In 1963, when President Kennedy conceived the idea of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), he contrasted its idealistic helping with the Jobs Corps, which prepared young people who needed work. VISTA was enacted by President Johnson in 1964. By comparison, New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps were described as “work” and introduced participants to different career options, as political historian Melissa Bass has detailed.<sup>51</sup> President Clinton continued Kennedy’s conception of citizenship as idealized service in “civil society,” explicitly contrasted with the world of work. Clinton ended a

highly successful federal program called “Cooperative Education” that had had strong bipartisan support and provided resources for colleges to connect with local employers, replacing it with the expansion of AmeriCorps, the service program he had launched in 1993. At colleges such as Augsburg, cooperative education had allowed students to explore the civic dimensions of many kinds of employment. Lois Olson, who led Augsburg’s program, made this a central priority, disagreeing with those who argued that civic engagement is service or service learning.<sup>52</sup>

Today, there are opportunities for the renewal of focus on the public value and democratic possibilities of work. A recent study in the *Harvard Business Review* found that 9 out of 10 Americans surveyed were willing to earn less money to do work that was meaningful.<sup>53</sup> The COVID crisis may create the basis for respect for the public value of work as Americans realize we are surrounded by “essential” and health workers who clean corridors, stock shelves, drive trucks, and keep us alive. As Throntveit and I argued in *YES!* magazine, this new recognition is a striking contrast to the metaphor of war.<sup>54</sup>

There are also important stories over the last half century that show the scale and power of deliberative public work. What follow are cases of young people, communities, professionals, and societies creating new narratives about their future.



## YOUNG PEOPLE AND PUBLIC WORK

**In the early 1990s, I launched Public Achievement (PA) in partnership with Mayor Jim Scheibel in St. Paul and Dennis Donovan at St. Bernard’s Elementary School, drawing on what I had witnessed all around me in the Civil Rights Movement.** The aim of PA has been to develop in young people the empowering grassroots capacities, productive citizenship, confidence, and public identification of “citizen” as the foundational agents of democracy that I had seen and experienced while working for King’s organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It explicitly aims to provide an alternative to the war-like politics that young people have most often experienced.

Public Achievement is based on the framework called *public work*, in which young people work as teams on issues they choose that make a public contribution, undertaken in nonviolent and legal fashion. In PA, young people tackle issues ranging from bullying, racism, gang violence, drugs, and sexual harassment to playground improvements, curricular changes, and better school lunches. Teams are coached by adults—often college students—who help them develop public strengths and talents, what we call civic agency. They use political concepts that challenge conventional views. For instance, young people are described as citizens who are “cocreators” of schools and communities, not citizens-in-waiting for the opportunity to vote. Politics is about creating a world of shared resources, not simply fighting over scarce resources. This brings into view a generative understanding of power as “power to,” not simply power over others’ actions. Some organizers and leaders in Public Achievement, such as David McIvor at Colorado State University and Lisa Strahley at SUNY Broome Community College, have integrated public work and deliberative practices in highly creative ways.<sup>55</sup> PA differs from the predominant civic education focus on knowledge (that is, emphasis on government), skills (mobilizing the troops), or volunteerism. Most broadly, it challenges the idea of democracy as an institutional system of government and elections. It puts citizens at the center as civic producers, not simply volunteers or voters or consumers of government services and solutions.

Public Achievement has spread to communities across the United States and more than 20 countries, from Northern Ireland and South Africa to Poland and Japan, and its offshoots have taken many other forms.<sup>56</sup>



## COMMUNITY-WIDE PUBLIC WORK

**E**ast Brooklyn Churches (EBC) is a community organization based largely among African American churches in the impoverished neighborhoods of Brooklyn, part of the nation's oldest network of community organizations, the Industrial Areas Foundation. The group began modestly in 1978 when a small group of Catholic and Protestant clergy and laity met to discuss the formidable array of community issues they faced. They followed the organizing dictum to start with small “winnable” issues around which poor and powerless people can experience confidence-building success and develop sober assessments of obstacles. EBC members forced clean-ups of rotten meat in local food stores, pressured the city to install hundreds of street signs, led in the renovation of local parks, and worked together to clean up vacant lots. Slowly, they forged a sense of solidarity and potency. “We are not a grass-roots organization,” thundered the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood, the president of the group. “Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. Our roots are deep roots. *Our* roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York.”<sup>57</sup>

Youngblood began a series of sermons on the book of Nehemiah. In the *Old Testament*, the prophet Nehemiah was sent back to Jerusalem by the King of Persia in 420 BC to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Nehemiah held together a motley crew—40 different groups are named, including merchants, priests, governors, members of the perfume and goldsmiths’ guilds, and women. At one point, he organized a great assembly to call to account nobles making excessive profit from the poor. People who heard the sermons saw their application to their situation.

In the early 1980s, EBC began a project to build thousands of houses that were affordable for working-class and low-income people on a scale that dwarfed any low-income housing development initiative in the country. They turned to housing out of the conviction that only widespread home ownership could create the kind of roots essential for renewed community pride and freedom from fear. Teaming up with a well-known developer, I.D. Robbins, they adopted his controversial argument that for half the cost of high-density, high-rise apartments, it would be possible to build large numbers of single-family homes, owned by low-income families. In turn, that would create neighborhood anchors. EBC named their undertaking the Nehemiah Plan.

As the Jewish people rebuilt their walls, they renewed their sense of purpose and identity as a people and a sense of the commonwealth of Israel that was both a material and symbolic embodiment of their life together. “The story connected our work to something real, not

something bogus,” said Mike Gecan, the organizer for EBC. It put housing experts in a different position in the effort, “on tap, not on top,” in the language of organizing. The effort “got out of the ‘housing’ field and the idea that you have to have consultants to do anything. It made it a ‘nonprogram,’ something more than housing.” Or, as one EBC leader, Celina Jamieson, put it, “We are more than a Nehemiah Plan. We are about the central development of dignity and self-respect.”<sup>58</sup> Although the group had won financial commitments from an impressive array of backers, including many church bodies, they also needed funding from the city. They were stymied by New York Mayor Edward Koch, so they held a press conference to publicize the effort. That evening, the local CBS television affiliate broadcast video clips of the desolate area. A reporter told the story of the organizing that led to the plan for low-income houses and read from Nehemiah: “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”

The EBC story was an example of citizen agency through public work. It was dramatically amplified by the democratic uses of journalism that enabled diverse groups to see themselves. The news story activated immense support. It took some time, but Mayor Koch eventually declared himself the new Nehemiah and pledged his support for the effort. Though it was mostly an African American event in Brooklyn, Polish and Italian immigrants and people of other ethnicities from neighborhoods across New York joined the interfaith religious celebration at the ground breaking for the first homes. Since that day, nearly 4,000 homes have been built. There have been only one or two defaults over 30 years. The project became the spark for the only major low-income housing legislation during the Reagan years.<sup>59</sup>

Years later, the story of Clear Vision in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, has shown how government can support the public work of a whole community—a vivid example of government working *with* the people.

Mike Huggins worked with the Center for Democracy and Citizenship for several years on a project about lessening teenage drinking in eight small towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin. He became conscious of the hidden dynamic of technocracy, including narrow expert-knows-best training, overlooked in most civic engagement approaches. “If government is not the center of the universe for local problem solving, then what is the role of city managers as government leaders?” he asked. “It’s a hard concept for many managers to get. The idea of citizen-centered problem solving requires managers to let go of control, which is hard.”<sup>60</sup> City managers, in his view, are trained to be “master problem solvers” who “manage structures and processes to get the outcomes we think are important.” Trusting problem solving that puts citizens at the center, “expecting that the outcome is going to be good,” is challenging. It is difficult, in Huggins’ experience, to get city managers even to acknowledge power relationships. “As managers, we are uncomfortable talking publicly about power—what it is, who has it, how to build it, and how to use it.” Yet for all the challenges, he also thinks local government needs a paradigm

shift—“a 21st century vision for local democracy centered on citizens.” The question is how to do that. The public-work approach impressed him as a potential framework. He became convinced of the possibility of adapting it to local democracy after attending a conference of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship held at the Humphrey Institute. There, he heard civic organizers such as Dorothy Cotton, former director of the Citizenship Education Program in the freedom movement, and Gerald Taylor and Tony Massengale, organizers with the Industrial Areas Foundation.

In 2007, Huggins organized an informal meeting of government and nonprofit leaders to discuss how to deal with the challenges of social services and infrastructure. The result was a highly unusual visioning and planning process that involved government but centered on the community. The group secured an initial \$40,000 from a broad range of partners, including the city, county, Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, the Eau Claire Community Foundation, and the University of Wisconsin and Chippewa Valley Technical College. They contacted the venerable National Civic League, a group dedicated to participatory civic life, which had created a planning process involving both large group meetings and small working groups to set priorities, develop strategies, and generate measurable outcomes. A 15-member initiating committee included some of the original leaders and 8 others who reflected a cross section of the community. The committee invited about 500 citizens to an extended process over the course of a year. When Huggins reported to an international conference on participatory local governance funded by the Ford Foundation and held at the University of Sussex in England, in 2007, conference organizers recognized the highly unusual nature of Eau Claire’s process and asked him for a more detailed case study.

Those invited reflected the diversity of the community by gender, age, geographic location, race, employment, and income. The initiating committee made special efforts to recruit from low-income and ethnic-minority groups. They met with members of the Hmong (a large new immigrant population in the city) and African American communities, as well as with local trade unions. An initial 200 came to the first meetings and about 120 stayed through the whole process, which concluded in June of 2008. Clear Vision Eau Claire was born. The working groups identified priorities that included community collaboration, education, health care, transportation, quality of life, and economic development.

The process was highly diverse, citizen driven, and respectful of the knowledge of lay citizens in ways that were unique. In most public planning processes, “Citizens provide input at designated times. [In Eau Claire], citizens are actively involved in designing and conducting the process, determining the format and substance of recommendations, writing the final report, and determining the implementation strategies.” Embodying Huggins’ awareness of the subtle but crucial dynamics of technocratic power, the process “blend[ed] citizen passion with technical knowledge and expertise.”<sup>61</sup>

These elements became part of the identity of Clear Vision Eau Claire when the group integrated public-work skills and concepts. Elaine Eschenbacher and Dennis Donovan of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship worked closely with Huggins and the Clear Vision board to provide training and develop a relational problem-solving model. Clear Vision developed a tool kit adapted from the Public Achievement coaches' guide. Continuing citizen training and development were crucial dimensions. Huggins translated deliberative skills from his work with the Kettering Foundation to the organization as well.

The mission of Clear Vision is “to engage our community for the common good.” It was founded with three basic principles: preserving the quality of life, transforming the local economy, and empowering citizens. The overall purpose, according to the website, is “to convene, nurture, and support diverse groups of community members for civic work that addresses the immediate and future needs of Eau Claire.”<sup>62</sup> Harvard University's Innovations in American Government Awards presented Clear Vision \$10,000 as a finalist for the Ash Award. The award recognized the use of core concepts, such as public work, power, public relationships, deliberation, and self-interest in Clear Vision's highly innovative model and noted that Clear Vision teaches skills such as house dialogues, one-on-one relational meetings, power mapping, public evaluation, and action planning.<sup>63</sup> Huggins, who teaches a course on local government at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, develops these skills and concepts in his students, who are often coaches in Clear Vision.

Clear Vision teams tackle issues of community concern. Some teams have struggled; others have had considerable success, developing projects such as the Sojourner House homeless shelter created by a team working on preventing recidivism, which included formerly incarcerated individuals as leaders in the effort. Clear Vision has created community gardens, a citywide project on public art, and an initiative to make public services widely known to low-income communities (including vivid displays on buses). It has been the driving force behind the Confluence Project, a \$45 million performing arts center connected to a \$35 million commercial and residential development project. The most recent effort, a community-wide initiative to address poverty, came out of a summit on emerging challenges. “Communities just don't know what to do about poverty,” said Catherine Emmanuelle, a member of both the Clear Vision initiating committee and city council. “It's difficult, and people throw their hands up in the air. But Eau Claire is going to take it on and hopefully come up with some ways to address it.”<sup>64</sup>

Community leaders observe many ripple effects. Emmanuelle began her involvement in Clear Vision as a member of the first expanded initiating committee and continued as a board member. She was a young, single mother on public assistance, and the experience gave her tools and self-confidence that were transformative. “One of the biggest things that it taught me was building my civic muscles,” she remembers. “I was on Food Share and other kinds of public assistance. I thought that people who influence the community are people with titles or money. I discovered I didn't need any of that to make a difference.”

Emmanuelle used practices such as one-on-ones and power mapping in many settings in her work with Clear Vision and as an Extension educator. Emmanuelle created a popular Latino leadership course in nearby Trempealeau County. “Public Achievement was at the heart of the leadership program,” she describes. “I’d go door to door, speaking Spanish. I’d tell people my great-grandmother came here from Mexico, and we’d like to invest with [them] to have more power. We translated the Clear Vision Tool Kit, based on a similar one from Public Achievement, into Spanish.” She also found the practices of public evaluation, incorporated into each meeting, highly valuable. “That helps me say my piece and also everyone else can have a say.” Emmanuelle became regional director of three counties for the Wisconsin Extension Service, with a staff of 21. She teaches organizing skills and practices to all her colleagues, and they use them in many different projects. She identifies the approach as shifting from town meetings, where government asks for input, to what she calls the Public Achievement model. “There is a function of having a public hearing, but there is also a value of sitting around a table and figuring things out. They’re different.” She gives the example of a controversy about public drinking in a neighborhood near the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire campus. She introduced a process that would bring all the voices to the table, and the city council unanimously approved the participatory process. “Now the city is hosting meetings with the bar owners, police, students, and neighbors at the same table, talking about what the facts are, what is motivating us, why we are here, what we are going to do.” Whether the outcome is similar on paper to a public hearing process or not, the civic organizing process is crucial, creating ownership and civic agency.<sup>65</sup>

When Vicki Hoehn became vice president of the initial Clear Vision board, she was a highly respected business leader—vice president of marketing for the Royal Credit Union, with \$2.3 billion in assets, branches in 42 counties and 2 states, 28 credit unions, and more than 180,000 members. In Hoehn’s view, Clear Vision generated a framework shift in the community. “At the time we began, our community blamed government. People said nothing happened because the government was too slow.” She believes that Clear Vision “opened a lot of eyes.” Many came to see themselves as citizens. “It’s not about relying on or blaming government. It’s about taking responsibility and ownership ourselves as citizens.” Hoehn has seen a shift in the outlook and behavior of the business community in the city. “The Chamber, in the past, often just turned to their members who are paying the dues. Now they work with others outside the business community as well.” The collaborative approach has also impacted substantial decisions by Royal Credit Union. When Royal acquired land for a large new office building, their plan was to build it directly on the river. “We started talking to neighbors, and people said, ‘If you build there, we aren’t going to be able to get to the river.’ So, we put a street and a park in front of the building. This never would have happened if we hadn’t met with the neighbors, talked with the city, and found a solution.” What she calls “the model” also affects her own work in substantial ways. Hoehn now has the newly created position of

vice president for community engagement at Royal Credit Union. She gets to know the communities when Royal is opening a new branch. “Everything I do, I say, ‘How will this affect others?’ I listen more. I ask questions, I probe on collaboration, I ask my staff, ‘How do you work with other people?’”<sup>66</sup>

Ten years of work with Clear Vision have shown challenges and successes on its projects. Mike Huggins, aspiring to develop the civic and political capacities of thousands of citizens by teaching put into practice through public work and deliberation, also sees it as an extremely important experiment in local democracy. “A public life is not just a nice thing. It’s an absolute necessity,” he explains. “You can’t lead a full life as a human without a public life, learning how to work with others to make your neighborhood and your community and your school a better place.” He sees such work as vital to democracy’s future. “It’s a struggle, won or lost in local communities.”<sup>67</sup>



## CITIZEN PROFESSIONALS

**C**itizen professionalism emphasizes the civically empowering and educative dimensions of professions through which professionals learn to work *with* other citizens, rather than *on* them or *for* them.<sup>68</sup> Albert Dzur has detailed how professionals' work can be catalytic and energizing when they step back from the cult of the expert, chronicling unexpected democratic trends in medicine, law, movements against domestic violence, and elsewhere that enhance the authority and efficacy of lay citizens.<sup>69</sup>

William Doherty, who founded the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota, with Tai Mendenhall, Jerica Berge, and others, emphasizes “a new role for professionals in a democracy: catalyzing the efforts of ordinary citizens, with professional expertise again ‘on tap, not on top.’”<sup>70</sup> Adapting public work concepts and practices to family and health sciences, the approach begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge and the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is often the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives.

The Citizen Professional Center has generated multiple partnerships embodying this civic philosophy. FEDS, a project on diabetes led by American Indian elders in the Twin Cities, brings together community members and medical practitioners. It has shown strong positive health outcomes, according to conventional assessments. Other partnerships include a movement of suburban families working to tame overscheduled, consumerist lives; a project in Burnsville, Minnesota, in which families are developing strategies to counter obesity among children; and an African American “Citizen Fathers” project fostering positive fathering models and practices, which birthed a Black Men and Police initiative in Minneapolis focused on police working in respectful ways with communities on issues such as domestic violence. It was challenged by the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests demanding the defunding of police in Minneapolis, but it survived, and several of the arguments by a group of African American leaders in the police department to recruit and train “officers, not warriors” are gaining national attention.<sup>71</sup> Most recently, Doherty has cofounded the Braver Angels movement (detailed later), a *We, the People* effort to depolarize the United States.

The efforts advocated by those at the forefront of police reform comport with the views of participants in more than 200 deliberative forums around the country organized by local communities with support from the National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation.<sup>72</sup> In the report, forum participants:

- pointed to “something fundamentally wrong” with the culture, training, and recruitment in many police departments;
- worried that officers often made snap judgments based on race or ethnicity rather than probable cause;
- saw an urgent need to increase understanding and mutual respect between police and people of color;
- recognized the need to tackle growing disrespect for law enforcement, especially among young people;
- called for increased mental health services in their communities; and
- supported training police officers in de-escalation techniques.

Jeanne Ayers, a public health professional, served as the founding director of the Center for Public Health Education and Outreach of the University’s School of Public Health. She studied community organizing, the citizen professional concept, and the work of Doherty and his colleagues at the Citizen Professional Center and was energized by the idea that she could integrate her passion for racial and social justice, growing from her Catholic faith, with her public health career. To learn more about organizing, she became involved with ISALAH, a Twin Cities faith-based community organization that focused on building broad-based popular power through relationships across diverse networks. Ayers helped to lead ISALAH in a successful, multiyear, healthy communities initiative that included a transportation campaign to create a light rail train between Minneapolis and St. Paul. The campaign involved thousands of conversations with community residents, public officials, and policy professionals. It made a strong public linkage between the light rail train and access to local groceries, employment opportunities, schools, and affordable housing in low-income and minority communities. It also developed a narrative of health as a distinctive kind of power in addition to the classic community organizing focus on “power of people” and “power of resources.” The story involved expanding the understanding of health far beyond individual behaviors and treatments to include the vital conditions necessary for healthy communities and to illuminate underlying health and racial inequities that disadvantage minority populations in particular.<sup>73</sup>

The experience with the healthy communities initiative served as a foundation for Ayers’ work when she became assistant commissioner at the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) in 2011. She translated her considerable organizing skills into pioneering work with the Healthy Minnesota Partnership, a multi-sector effort that included state agencies, communities of color, local public health groups, elected officials, providers, nonprofits, and community organizations. The partnership then emphasized the “social determinants” of health, beyond health care and prevention, such as birth and early childhood, transportation, education, work, housing, and a community’s sense of self-efficacy.

Ayers’ team worked with partners in Minnesota and Bobby Milstein, director of evaluation at the Centers for Disease Control, who called for a new evaluation of health based on overall

community strength and “civic muscle” (also civic agency).<sup>74</sup> In 2014, with support from Ed Ehlinger, commissioner of health and a longtime colleague, Ayers and Melanie Peterson-Hickey organized an internal planning team with more than 100 MDH staff members, charged by the state legislature to develop a report on health equity in the state. The team designed a planning process that engaged more than 1,000 civic and community leaders and health professionals across the state. The team used hundreds of pages of feedback and comments that focused especially on structural racism, often hidden elements in communities that disadvantage minorities. Ayers also clearly differentiated structural racism, a “comprehensive view of racism,” from a “narrow view” that focuses on individual bias and intentional acts. This distinction allowed staff and diverse members of the broader public and state legislature to recognize their own practices that had been “invisible and insidious.” For instance, at one point, staff members of the environmental health unit in the MDH were analyzing their radon testing program from the vantage of race. Ayers remembers that one said, “Oh my God, we’ve designed the whole radon program around home ownership. Seventy-five percent of White people in the state own their own homes, but only 21 percent of African Americans do. That’s what structural racism is!”<sup>75</sup>

**“We need to commit to building a shared understanding, building from the assets of different communities, and being in enough conversations and relationships to cocreate a path forward in a time of uncertainty.”**

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The report, *Advancing Health Equity in Minnesota, Report to the Legislature*, was widely acclaimed as making a notable contribution to equity work in the nation. In Minnesota, it created the basis for major changes in policies on grantmaking and evaluation for American Indian tribes and minority communities and in local public health departments and served to strengthen the emphasis on community empowerment as a path to creating healthy communities. Later, as the state health officer in Wisconsin, Ayers played a key role in designing the strategy for the COVID-19 epidemic. She brought her understanding about different kinds of knowledge (from factual, or empirical, subjective/personal and normative knowledge to “complex” knowledge involved in acting and holding other kinds of knowledge in tension) to the creation of the diverse Community Resilience and Recovery Task Force to develop plans. “We can’t simply tell people what to do with rules from the governor’s office or public health experts. That approach might work initially for a month or two. For the longer term, we need to commit to building a shared understanding, building from the assets of different communities, and being in enough conversations and relationships to cocreate a path forward in a time of uncertainty.”<sup>76</sup>

Ayers' experiences show the possibilities of successful organizing for institutional change and for developing public policies that create a new story, drawing on the insights of many different groups and people. In South Africa, narrative-building public work was key to stemming a threatened racial conflagration.



## DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

**A**partheid in South Africa (SA), formalized segregation of the races that entrenched White domination of the Black, Colored, and Indian populations, was established after the 1948 election. Crucial to ending Apartheid was a successful challenge to Apartheid's premise of a "nation at war." Mainstream White communities of English and Dutch descent adopted the war metaphor. In counterpoint, from the 1950s to the 1980s, antiracist Whites also saw themselves at war with their home communities. As David Everatt details in *The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid* in the 1950s, most activist Whites found productive engagement virtually impossible, equating a pro-Black stance with hating Whites. These challenges, he notes, lasted for decades.<sup>77</sup> The Institute for Democracy in South Africa (formerly the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa) broke the deadlock and changed the metaphor.<sup>78</sup>

"Most Dramatic Day in White Politics," read the banner headline in the *Sunday Star* in early February, 1986. The article continued, "Dr. Frederick van Zyl Slabbert resigned as leader of the opposition because he had reached the end of his tether in trying to promote a politics of negotiation within the National Party. In announcing he was to quit, Dr. Slabbert delivered the most telling thumbs-down to the Government that has ever been witnessed."<sup>79</sup>

Months later, Slabbert and Alex Boraine, another leader of the opposition, created the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (Idasa). It was not founded as a political party, nor as an advocacy group. Its aim was to generate discussion and engagement across a highly polarized society and to work with forces for change. Idasa's ultimate goal was a non-racial, democratic South Africa with increased cross-racial understanding that could lead to a new sense of possibility. It held that it was crucial that the country find a viable, nonviolent, nonracial, and democratic alternative for South Africa, yet such a prospect was increasingly dim against the background of growing violence from the state, ideological politics, and calls for violent revolution from the oppressed Black majority.

Slabbert's understanding of such politics had always involved much more than the formal institutions of government. "I went into Parliament with the conviction that Parliamentary politics alone could never solve the problems of a country like South Africa," he explained.<sup>80</sup> Slabbert agreed with the understanding of politics advanced by British political theorist Bernard Crick, whose classic 1962 work, *In Defense of Politics*, sought to rescue the concept of politics, in an older sense, from its "enemies," such as ideological zealotry, mass democracy, and technocratic modes of thought.<sup>81</sup> In Crick's and Slabbert's views, politics is a nonviolent

“civilizing activity,” the way that people of diverse interests and views in heterogeneous societies negotiate across lines of difference to solve problems and live together without violence. Slabbert had argued vigorously in Parliament for such a politics, different from protest politics, the politics of the status quo, or partisan politics.

South Africa of the 1980s was a highly polarized and violent society. It was also characterized by vast ignorance on the part of the White population about the situation of the Black majority and its political organizations, including the African National Congress (ANC), PAC, Inkatha, and AZAPO. Most Whites unthinkingly accepted the government description of the ANC as “a terrorist group based in Lusaka with no constituency and a commitment to violence at all costs,” as Boraine put it.<sup>82</sup> More generally, the everyday lives, concerns, talents, and oppressive conditions of Blacks were almost entirely invisible.

Idasa’s first years were marked by milestone meetings to create conversations and spaces for engagement and dialogue, sometimes in full public view, often behind the scenes, that aimed at breaking down stereotypes and educating South Africans about each other across racial, economic, and ideological lines. Dakar, a meeting organized by Idasa between the ANC and White South Africans in July of 1987, reverberated around the world.

Dakar was followed by many meetings of similar purpose, aimed at creating new levels of engagement, conversation, and learning between Whites and Blacks and at creating the foundations for a future beyond racial cataclysm. These included high-level conferences such as the Freedom Charter Conference (September 1988), intended to acquaint White South African leaders with the ideas of the Freedom Charter, and the Strategies for Change Conference (November 1988), which included a broad range of political viewpoints. They also included sectoral conferences, such as the Lawyers’ Conference, the Women’s Conference, and the Writers’ Conference, as well as a large number of local community meetings. After the unbanning of the ANC, Idasa organized discussions between the military forces on both the ANC and SA government side (1990). It also created forums for different sectors to consider their roles in a new democracy—educators (1990), the media (1992), youth (1992), and police (1993). Idasa continued to organize a variety of in-person meetings, such as Mandela’s discussions with business leaders in the Orange Free State in April 1992. In the view of Ivor Jenkins, an Idasa director, these depended on building relationships. He described Idasa’s philosophy in those years as “based on the belief that the future of the nation is written in the bar at night, after the formal sessions, when people get to know each other.”<sup>83</sup> It was an educational process as well, especially aimed at the White population, to counter an ingrained ignorance. Finally, it was an explicitly political process. Idasa stressed the strategic importance of involving the White community in the struggle for nonracial democracy out of their self-interests in change, not through moral exhortation, contrasting to the decades of highly moralized approaches of antiracist White activists. Acknowledging the isolation of White South Africans, Idasa sought to bring them out of their isolation to create a commitment to the nonracial democratic goal.

Through township tours, student retreats, and other meetings between the White and Black communities, White South Africans were introduced to the reality of life for the majority of South Africans. People worked intensively across the color divide to imagine a different future.

Idasa's work during the 1980s and early 1990s is slighted in conventional histories of the transition from Apartheid, but it played a crucial role. The organization also brokered the crucial first relationship between Nelson Mandela and the ANC and the extreme right wing, which led to an explicit attention to the concept of protection of minority rights. An Idasa-led delegation to Belgium and Switzerland looked at procedures for protecting minority rights.



## SIGNS OF A *WE, THE PEOPLE* STORY

**F**rom June 20 to 23, 2019, Better Angels (BA) held its second annual convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Equal numbers of Republican and Democratic delegates participated, 130 from each side and from every state. Participants included Hawk Newsome, president of New York’s Black Lives Matter, and Ray Warrick, a leader of the Tea Party in Cincinnati. “I’ve never been a part of anything where you don’t really have to recruit people,” BA cofounder David Blankenhorn told reporter Megan Mertz, writing for *The Federalist*. “People want to be involved in this.”<sup>84</sup>

Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, had long worried about deepening polarization in the country. After the election in 2016, he enlisted David Lapp, a colleague in Ohio, to organize meetings between Trump and Clinton supporters to see whether any common ground could be found. They called the aforementioned William Doherty, director of the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota. Doherty drew on his experiences in family therapy and his citizen professional work to plan the meeting process, designed to allow participants to “bring their best selves forward, listen to the other person and not just immediately get into an argument, and reflect on their contribution to the problem.”<sup>85</sup>

All the participants—10 Trump supporters and 11 Clinton backers—agreed to a statement that read, “A number of us on both sides began our meetings convinced that the other side could not be dealt with. . . . We say unanimously that our experiences of talking with rather than at or about each other caused us to abandon our belief.”<sup>86</sup> Out of these early efforts Better Angels began, named for Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, “the better angels of our nature,” calling Americans on the verge of Civil War to remember that “we are not enemies, but friends.”

The organization has grown rapidly with more than 11,000 members and is now called Braver Angels. It is active in all 50 states, with Minnesota a leader. BA’s program of workshops, skills-building sessions, alliance building, respectful debates, and other activities is designed not to change opinions, but to allow people bitterly divided along partisan lines to listen to each other and break down stereotypes. A mission is also emerging complementing depolarization: the idea that *We, the People* need to take up the largest challenges facing the nation. Media director John Wood, a young man of mixed racial background and an eloquent spokesperson for Braver Angels’ philosophy, described this aim in a mailing: “To weave and reweave the social fabric of this nation, even as our politics threaten to tear it apart.” The platform declared BA’s intention “to renew our trust in one another and build our civic muscle”

and strive “for the ‘beloved community’ of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. . . . and the ‘more perfect Union’ of the Founders.”<sup>87</sup>

In early 2020, Braver Angels undertook “With Malice Toward None,”<sup>88</sup> a nationwide process of coalition building across the partisan divide to address conflicts in the coming election. Anticipating deep divisions and even violence around the election on November 3, 2020, the website outlines dangers and calls Americans to a new citizenship.

The organization shares a concern over growing polarization with other groups such as the National Issues Forums, the Sustained Dialogue Institute, the American Democracy Project, Public Agenda, and others.<sup>89</sup>



## CONCLUSION

**B**raver Angels and other deliberative groups are part of growing community building efforts that help to counter the war-like qualities of today's conventional politics. Joe Biden's presidential campaign responded to these efforts, calling for Americans to come together across our divides and proposing ideas for forgiving student debt in return for employment in service fields such as health and education. A renewed focus on community and a call for service are also appearing in conservative circles, led by communitarian intellectuals such as Pete Peterson, director of the American Project at Pepperdine University and Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural, and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute, as well as by politicians like Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah), who recently repurposed the Joint Economic Committee of Congress to focus on building social capital. Such communitarian ferment has moved Robert Putnam, best known for *Bowling Alone*, his 2000 study of civic erosion, to believe we are on the cusp of a cultural change. In his new book, *The Upswing*, Putnam and coauthor Shaylyn Romney Garrett argue that the nation can change from "I" to "We."<sup>90</sup>

But framing citizenship as volunteerism or idealistic helping is inadequate for overcoming war-like politics and addressing the many other challenges we face. Communitarian ferment needs deliberative, often frustrating yet inherently dignified, personally rewarding, and publicly meaningful *work*.

Only deliberative public work in many settings and institutions can develop the collective capacity for action—the generative power—and the cultural changes that will be required to dismantle the war metaphor and renew the story of a "We the People" democracy.



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### ENDNOTES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harry C. Boyte is a public intellectual, organizer, and theorist of the public work framework of civic engagement. In the 1960s, he worked in the citizenship schools of the Civil Rights Movement and was a community organizer with impoverished White communities in Durham, North Carolina. Boyte is founder of Public Achievement, a youth political and civic education initiative that has been used in more than 20 countries. He cofounded and directed the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and is now codirector of the Institute for Public Life and Work. Boyte has authored, coauthored, or edited 11 books on democracy, citizenship, and community organizing, including *Awakening Democracy* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2018), *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*, with Nan Kari (Temple University Press, 1996), and *Free Spaces*, with Sara Evans (Harper & Row, 1986; University of Chicago, 1992). Boyte is married to Marie Louise Ström, a longtime democracy educator in Africa.

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