A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
The Kettering Review® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

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ISSN 0748-8815
On the first Friday of the new year, Cole Campbell, author of the centerpiece in this issue of the *Review*, died, on the way to his office, in a one-car accident on an icy road, in Reno, Nevada. Because Cole was a dear and trusted colleague of so many with whom the *Review* is associated, we record here three tributes, written on the day we learned of that tragedy, by representatives of those who shared his concern for democracy, of this magazine, and of the institution that publishes it.

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IN MEMORIAM
COLE C. CAMPBELL
1953-2007
This weekend I heard the news that Cole Campbell, dean of the school of journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno, was killed on Friday, when his car overturned on an icy road. Every once in a while you realize we’ve lost someone special who made a true impression on the world, someone who will be remembered for years to come. Cole was such an individual. He was a good friend.

During the 1990s when the newspaper industry heard the call to change its ways, Cole was at the forefront of change. I worked with him during his leadership at the Virginian-Pilot and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Some people are smart, he was brilliant. He always ran to embrace the toughest issues—such as the nexus between the role of newspapers and civic health; between the noble traditions of journalism and their applications to Web 2.0; between ethics and winning.

Recently, I was on a panel at the National Archives that Cole moderated. No one I know could cut through the maze of chatter and create a sense of meaning faster or better than Cole. For me, Cole stole the show that day. So many people came up to me afterwards to talk about his performance. But for Cole his engagement was neither unusual nor a performance. Indeed those in attendance were witnesses to just the very tip of his talents.

Cole also had a strong current of integrity running through him.

But, of course, some people were more ready to see his foibles. He pushed for change so hard that he could overwhelm people he worked with. It was said sometimes that he was too conceptual, too smart for his own good, too far out in front of colleagues. And yet each experience made his sense of integrity even more alive and real. You see, Cole deeply understood the meaning of integrity. He knew it from growing up as a preacher’s son. He knew it from being tested by the mistakes he had made and then quietly searching for personal redemption. He knew it because so many people had told him that change was not possible but he discovered that it was, if he would stick by his convictions.

A lot of time is spent by people in our society trying to conform. We all do it. But in Cole Campbell we found that rare individual who was willing to step out of line and reach for his aspirations. That doesn't always make for an easy ride; but it does make the journey ever more worthwhile.

You will be truly missed, Cole Campbell.

Richard Harwood
President, The Harwood Institute

My friend Cole Campbell died. From Associated Press reports, I gather he was speeding down icy roads on his way to his Reno, Nevada, campus. His Honda SUV slid on to an embankment, then flipped over.

I’m so mad at you, Cole Campbell, so mad at you for being in a hurry. What was the hurry? Late at home tending to breakfast dishes? Late getting to work for a meeting? What meeting could cost that much?
I have been there, done that, though not been caught under a ton of metal. The last time we talked, we were both in a hurry. Or really, it was me in a hurry. I don't remember what for. You had just brilliantly moderated a panel at the National Archives. We went out for coffee afterwards. Olsson’s, downtown Washington. You got a call. I thumbed through magazines looking for the architectural magazine I hoped was about to feature my house. After the call, we commiserated about professional commiserations. We talked about possibilities. I said, I'm sorry but I’ve got to run. I drove you to your hotel. We said, good-bye, see you soon.

But I'll never see you again.

I think about your wife, your “bride” as you called her. Your bride is now in Reno, wondering what for. I don't know her, but I think about her. I imagine that she is as mad at you as I am.

This thing called weather, blanketing those western states, while we on the east coast live through unseasonable warmness. This thing called weather, it takes lives. I know this abstractly.

But none of this is abstract. At six a.m. today I sat down with a cup of coffee and the New York Times. I read on the first page about I don’t remember what. Iraqi surges, the body mass index of six-year-olds, the archbishop of somewhere or other. And then it was time to flip through the front section until I got on to the op-ed page. But there, on the way, on the obituary page, which I scanned obligatorily, was a face that did not belong there. Your face. What was it doing there?

Cole Campbell, one of the first newspaper editors to embrace the idea that journalism should help readers be engaged citizens, died Friday in Reno, Nev., when his vehicle flipped on an icy road.

Cole Campbell did indeed embrace an idea. He embraced many ideas. He was a philosopher who happened to be a journalist. One of the first times I met him, when I was not too long out of graduate school, was at a meeting somewhere unremarkable, where the place that caught his fancy was the nearby bookstore. On the bus back to the hotel he pulled books out of the plastic bag to show me his finds. All manner of intellectual fodder about postmodernism, public philosophy, John Dewey, literary criticism. Frankly I don’t remember. I just recall that it was the sort of reading my fellow graduate students and I would read, not what the former editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch would read.

Because of the kind of ideas he embraced, and the kind of wild—that is, experimental—practice he engaged, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch dispatched with Cole Campbell. And so he found himself a philosopher without a newspaper: so he did the respectable thing that philosophers do. He got himself into academe, skipping to the head of the class, the dean of the J school at the University of Nevada, Reno. He set out to reform journalism by way of education, exemplifying the ideal that journalism could be more than reportage, showing how it might be engagement with a public, helping a public identify problems, possibilities, and avenues for public life.

The Associated Press reports people saying he was a “futurist,” but that’s just bunk. There was nothing “science fictiony” about Cole Campbell’s aspirations. I loved him so much
because we shared a very old-fashioned hope about democratic life, a memory of what a country can be before it even has any apparatus of government, a people with a self-governing practice of problem solving. Neither Cole nor I have ever been Reaganesque government bashers, but we both shared the hope that the institutions of public life could be arms of a public, not institutions that hold a public in perpetual tutelage.

For you, Cole Campbell, I will never drive fast again down treacherous roads. I will savor my coffee and my friendships. For you, Cole Campbell, I will shower strangers with unexpected good will, the kind of good will that I found whenever in your company.

Noëlle McAfee  
Associate Editor, Kettering Review

Cole Campbell was generous and warm, always witty, and wise with uncommon insight. He had been an associate of the Kettering Foundation since 2001, and we were looking forward to his contributions to our board, which he joined in 2006. For a research organization in the American tradition of inventive research, Cole was ideal. He understood the importance of discussions that swirl about rather than proceed in a neat, straight line. These discussions are critical to developing new insights, and Cole was comfortable with the rambling give and take. He would listen carefully and then make a suggestion that reoriented everyone's thinking. After one lengthy session on the nature of the “public,” which everyone loves to talk about but seldom defines, he proposed that the public be seen as a dynamic force, not a static body of people. It was a novel idea, to say the least. But it crystallized what was said in the meeting into a powerful image. That was quintessential Cole Campbell. Miss him? You bet we will.

Cole also leaves a void in the profession he loved, journalism. He saw it as a public profession that was responsible for helping the public make sound decisions about the future of communities and the country. He was one of the pioneers in taking his understanding of democracy into the newsroom. Such change brings controversy and often exacts a price from those who step out in new directions. Cole understood that but never wavered. We are all the better for his courage. That is especially true of the international fellows at our foundation. Journalists from Kosovo to South Africa flocked to him for advice on journalistic practices that could help fledgling democracies. Influential worldwide, Cole probably never realized just how important he was. But we do.

David Mathews  
President, Kettering Foundation
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**Cover art:** John F. Champoli’s The Simple Way, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Reproduced with permission of the artist.
Editor’s Letter

At just about this time of the new year, 25 years ago, in 1982, a dozen or so citizens—who had met, a couple of times during the preceding year, in conference with David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, at the historic Wingspread Conference Center in Wisconsin—began to talk with acquaintances from institutions and organizations in their communities, scattered across the United States, about ways to bring together fellow citizens to talk about how they, as a people, might address the problems of Social Security, jobs, and inflation.

At about that same time, in New York City, Dan Yankelovich and Keith Melville were beginning to talk with their colleagues at the Public Agenda research organization about ways in which they might prepare discussion guides on such topics that would be helpful to citizens who were neither political leaders nor experts nor policy wonks, ordinary citizens who thought it nonetheless their responsibility to determine their future as a people.

And about a year later, through a couple of snowy days in February, at the Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, those same people, and several more from other communities and other institutions that had grown interested in the idea, met, under the chairmanship of former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerry Ford, to present what they had heard of public thinking on these issues—to each other and to a group of distinguished visitors from the policy and expert communities.

In the interest of full disclosure (as journalists put it), it should be acknowledged that the present editor was a participant in all the aforementioned conversations; and that this Review was created, in fact, in that context. So when it was agreed, a year ago, that we might publish three successive issues of the Review to celebrate (as it were) 25 years of what we have come to call “deliberative politics,” or “public politics,” or “organic politics,” it seemed appropriate to close the celebratory series with reflective essays from a tiny handful of the people—representing various interests, distinctive professions, and different kinds of experience—whose own thought and work has been influenced by and influential upon the theory and practice of public deliberation over these two and a half decades.
What had begun with a dozen or so people is now practiced by thousands in communities across virtually every state in the Union; it is practiced as a means of addressing community, regional, national, and international challenges in Latin America as well as Canada; in South Africa, North Africa, and the regions in between, in Europe, through Eastern Europe, to Russia, the Middle East, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Other organizations, like Study Circles and AmericaSpeaks, have used their own variations of NIF deliberative practice for particular constituencies. Professions—not the least of them associated with local government, academia, and media—have found value in popular deliberative practice. More and more often the shared problems of our lives as a people are recognized as reflecting tensions, the relief for which must embrace both my values and yours, his need and hers, the personal interest, and the collective good. So let us here quickly introduce our contributors, so that they may share experiences in their own words.

Daniel Kemmis has served in the Montana state legislature, as the mayor of Missoula, and as a trustee of the Kettering Foundation. Not entirely sanguine about the prospects for American democracy, he does recognize that there is a need for democratic self-government on a global scale; but he argues for the fundamental importance of practicing deliberative self-government to address the problems that surround us in our contemporary community lives. Missoula, for Dan, and presumably the United States too, seems to possess something of the promise and the challenge that Tocqueville found here, nearly two centuries ago.

Randa Slim, on the other hand, was born in Lebanon, came here to earn a Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina in the 1980s, and now works from the United States outward, through the rest of the world. As vice president of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, she has shared more directly in the development of embryonic democracies among more peoples around the world than many of us can name. And it is encouraging to learn how often democratic impulses may germinate from what sometime seem to be—or are feared to be—incompatible cultures, when they are rooted in community traditions.

When the late Cole Campbell was editor of the Virginian-Pilot in the early 1990s, it became one of the flagships of what then was thought of as the “public journalism” movement—a sense among practicing journalists that their fundamental responsibility was to contribute to the formation of a public, itself capable of formulating and exercising collective judgment in the public interest. At the time of his death, Cole was dean at a distinguished
school of journalism. The opening pages of this Review will sadly but proudly pay tribute
to his memory; and his understanding of the role of the press—indeed, of the professional,
generally—in a popular democracy remains compelling and exemplary as the centerpiece
of this Review.

John Doble has become—and remained consistently, over these past 25 years—one of
this nation’s principal interpreters of public thinking, as it emerges and may be captured from
public deliberation in the National Issues Forums and other comparable citizens’ groups. A
social analyst by training, John has also been one of the prime interpreters of focus groups
that reveal the nature of public concerns about much-touted policy issues; and what we have
learned about public politics has always depended heavily upon the fruits of his research.

In public deliberation, as John Doble’s essay tells us, unlike the deliberation of experts or
juries, participants tell stories that reveal how a given issue differently affects different lives—
but reveal, too, that attitudes in conflict may stem from profound and widely shared human
values. The outcome of public deliberation, thus, is a deeper and shared understanding of
the dilemmas that both public legislation and private action must embrace. That is its politi-
cal import: it is a means towards viable decision making, rather than the instrument of it.
Nobody has more carefully studied the relationship between personal interest and the com-
mon good than has the distinguished Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Demo-
cratic Values at Harvard, Jane Mansbridge. In the 1980s, her words were profoundly
encouraging to that small group described in the first paragraphs of this letter—and we are
proud to contribute her recent thoughts at the close of this Review.

Finally we should mention the cover art of this now completed trio of celebratory issues.
Some 15 years ago we began to feature on the cover of each issue of the Review a distin-
guished work of art that, to our minds, in some way seemed to suggest the relationship, or
the tension, between the individual and the collective, the discipline and disorder of a people
seeking democracy. We have moved from illustrations in a Book of Hours and anonymous
classical drawings in the British Museum, through the great masters of social observation like
Bruegel, to modern American artists like Horace Pippin, engaged in exploring the relation-
ship of individuals to the world in which they find themselves. The Review, however, is not a
fine arts magazine; we have never sought to suggest meaning or evaluate quality in the works
that we have been privileged to carry; and we are grateful to all of the artists and the agents and the galleries that have permitted us to use their works.

It seemed to us appropriate that for the celebratory triptych we should use only works of living American artists. So in the past Spring issue we were privileged to present the image of a just completed painting by Red Grooms, who for more than half a century has managed to capture something of the energy, and sometimes the desolation, of the individual in our mass society; and in the Fall issue, we were honored to reproduce Robert Rauschenberg’s “Lincoln,” an early work from the 1950s, when Rauschenberg, the recognized master of modern American painting, committed his interest to the civil rights movement. Finally, for this third panel (as it were) of our triptych, we thought it would make sense to present the work of a very young, new American artist. John Champoli has been living only just as long as the National Issues Forums (and our guess is that even his grandparents may not have been born when John Dewey first delivered his famous lecture series on *The Public and Its Problems*! A student in the Master of Fine Arts degree program at Long Island University, he has nonetheless in this past year shown work twice in New York City: once in Chelsea and once on the fine arts version of the Milky Way, the upper east side of Manhattan. No doubt what inclined us to his work was the color, and the extraordinary sense of coherent vitality within variety that it conveys. Not being philosophers of art, we seldom ascribe to any particular work a “meaning”; but John Champoli himself tells us:

This piece is about musical, jazz-like relationships, manifesting themselves in colors. It is about order within the chaos of life; and about finding peace in a chaotic sphere of influence.

We don’t know whether or not John Champoli joins others in public deliberation. But obviously, he might.

Robert J. Kingston
Beyond National Democracy

by Daniel Kemmis

“Democracy is about people taking charge of the conditions under which they live.”

I had just begun thinking about how I might best participate in the democratic anniversaries commemorated in these pages, when Robert Bellah paid a visit to my hometown of Missoula, Montana. He delivered an excellent public lecture, of which I’d enjoyed a preview over lunch earlier that day. That conversation and lecture have become an insistent thread running through the reflections behind this essay.

Bellah’s lecture addressed the possibility of an ethical politics and, more broadly, the current prospects for American democracy. I asked him at lunch to describe the state of his democratic hopefulness, to which he responded that we were in for a fairly gloomy evening. I can’t possibly do justice here to the powerful and complex argument we heard that evening. Even with the preview at lunch, though, I found myself troubled by Bellah’s relative pessimism about the state of democracy, wanting to argue with him about it, and regretting that we had not had a chance to follow our lunch conversation with the best argument I could think of—a stroll along the downtown riverfront that lay just a few steps from our lunch table.

In this essay, I’m going to invite both Bellah and my readers on a poor substitute for that walk, hoping that I may have a chance at the real thing with some of you, one of these days. The real thing, of course, would involve a conversation as we strolled, whereas this will necessarily be only my half of that conversation—and even less than that, since I won’t be learning from you as I go.
Bellah’s lecture itself was part of the ongoing historical conversation about democracy. In the end, he would engage us all as participants in one of Plato’s dialogues, but first he reminded us of the Baron de Montesquieu’s political taxonomy, classifying governments as either despotisms, monarchies, or democracies. Montesquieu had associated each form with a guiding force: despotism with fear; monarchy with honor or ambition, and democracy with virtue—in particular, the capacity to put the common good above individual desires. Bellah’s analysis of the state of American democracy would turn on our capacity for that kind of virtue.

Extending the historical conversation, he underscored his central concern by quoting George Santayana:

If a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common citizen must be something of a saint and something of a hero. We see, therefore, how justly flattering and profound, and at the same time how ominous, was Montesquieu’s saying that the principle of democracy is virtue.

Against the background of this strain of democratic theory, Bellah invited us to take “a closer look at our own national democracy, particularly the degree to which we have lost the very ethos that makes democracy possible.” In the course of that examination, he recalled Tocqueville’s conclusion that a vibrant, face-to-face local democratic practice was essential to keeping alive the civic virtues without which democracy itself cannot survive. Yet throughout his lecture, I had the feeling that Bellah’s gaze was directed above and beyond that local citizenship as he concerned himself with a national democracy about which he was, I thought, appropriately pessimistic.

If I could have taken that walk with Bellah following our lunch, I would have begun by reminding him that I, like thousands of others, had learned a great deal from his earlier engagement with Tocqueville, in Habits of the Heart. Part of my objective on this walking conversation would have been to provide at least a glimpse of how his work had influenced what we would see as we walked.

When I left the Montana Legislature back in the 1980s, I had made up my mind to take a kind of sabbatical, giving myself an opportunity to examine my political experience up to that point, to see how a fresh look at political theory might inform whatever political practice might still lie ahead for me. Luck was with me then, because, as it happened, a number of very thoughtful people were examining democratic politics in ways that would deeply influence me and countless other foot soldiers in the coming years.

Of everything I read during those sabbatical months, nothing reshaped my thought and practice more profoundly than Habits of the Heart. Setting out to reexamine the state of American democracy 150 years after Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous visit, Bellah and his fellow investigators had found the individualism
that had worried Tocqueville now very far advanced and generally toxic to democratic self-determination. But they also found, less visibly but unmistakably, that many of the “habits of the heart” that Tocqueville had seen as the sinews of the body politic—the civic virtues of care and compassion, trust, and willingness to bear responsibility—these habits still survived in the lives of many ordinary Americans.

Heartened by Bellah’s findings, and by the fact that my own neighbors seemed to bear out those findings in their daily lives, I decided to try politics again in a setting where the desire and capacity for community would be most present as a political factor. As mayor of Missoula through much of the 1990s, I found myself once again blessed by good timing, since a widespread longing on the part of my constituents for a stronger sense of community coincided with a number of challenges and opportunities that only a vibrant civic culture could possibly address.

Like most Rocky Mountain communities, Missoula was growing rapidly throughout the 1990s, and the question of how to accommodate so many newcomers without destroying the very qualities of livability that had brought them here presented the most pressing challenge to our ability to manage our community’s destiny. The newcomers tended to be wealthier than the median Missoulian, which meant that they were bidding up land and housing prices and making it steadily more difficult for long-time Missoulians to stay here.

For many of those hard-pressed families, escalating medical costs, the failure of the Clinton national health-care plan, and the fact that many employers provided no health-care benefits only compounded the impact of rising housing prices on modest incomes. In some cases, the incomes were vanishing altogether, as Missoula experienced the economic metamorphosis that was sweeping through so many western communities in the ’80s and ’90s. A region that had depended on resource extraction as its economic mainstay suddenly found itself assaulted by global economic forces that, in the case of Missoula and dozens of other old timber towns, resulted in a steady pulse of sawmill closures and worker layoffs.

Missoula still struggles with these problems, and even if it could solve them all, there would just be a new crop of problems to address. But in terms of democratic vitality, I draw considerably more hope than despair from what I’ve

Investigators found individualism far advanced and toxic to democratic self-determination.
seen this community accomplish over the last 15 to 20 years. Sawmills are still closing, but Missoula’s economy is far more diversified than ever before, largely because business, civic, and government leaders have recognized that quality of life has replaced resource extraction as the principal driver of prosperity. And they have acted intelligently and collectively on that recognition.

Unfortunately, the more livable a community becomes, the greater the pressure on housing prices. So Missoula still struggles with affordable housing; but the last few years have seen a growing number of very creative solutions, often the product of partnerships among nonprofit leaders, bankers, builders, and public officials. And the same kind of resourceful public-private collaboration has produced a highly effective (although still not adequate) program for providing medical care to uninsured families.

While I necessarily put this story in the context of my tenure as mayor—and thereby run the risk of sounding as if I think I had much to do with it—the fact is that the one clearest, strongest, and most democratic lesson that I learned from my tenure in the mayor’s office was simply this: when it came to addressing the community’s challenges and seizing its opportunities, Missoula was several thousand times smarter than I was ever going to be. It is that lesson, more than anything else, that continues to sustain my hope for democracy. And nothing enlivens that hope more than my daily walks along the downtown riverfront. So let me return to that imaginary stroll with Robert Bellah and anyone else who might want to join us.

Just a hundred yards or so down the river from our lunch spot we would have stopped to watch a handful of kayakers testing their skills against the current of the Clark Fork River as it rushes over a row of boulders creating a white-capped wave below our viewing platform. Since leaving the mayor’s office, I’ve served on the board of the Missoula Redevelopment Agency, which has provided some of the funds for this latest installment in Missoula’s love affair with the river at the heart of town. But I know that most of the funds and most of the planning and momentum behind the project had come from the efforts of the kayakers themselves.

Here was just one more in a long, long series of citizen-driven projects that I’ve been lucky enough to watch, and sometimes nudge along, as they unfolded. Like so many of them, this one had taken years to bring to fruition, but unlike most of them, this project depended almost entirely on the passion, the resourcefulness, the perseverance of Missoulians young enough to want to dare the river to upend their kayaks.

Because it took so long for them to navigate the seemingly endless shoals of permits, construction contracts, rising prices, more fundraising, more bureaucracy than
they ever dreamed existed, I had a chance to watch these youngsters, who had only wanted to be kayakers, become citizens as well. I saw them develop civic virtues like patience and perseverance, teamwork, a capacity for give-and-take, the ability to stay in relationship with people whose seeming wrongheadedness and narrow-mindedness they could barely endure. And then, because my office overlooks the river from the other bank, I had the pleasure of watching the truckloads of boulders arrive, watched the wave emerge, watched the kayakers joyously reap the fruit of their labors while, every day, dozens of non-kayaking Missoulians paused on this viewing platform, delighting in one more way that their neighbors had made this a better place to live.

As we turn from that platform to resume our stroll down the river, I hear some grumbling from a few of my companions. “Democracy is serious business, and there are serious national and global issues to be addressed. Kayakers playing in the river seem more than a little beside the point. If this is the foundation of your democratic optimism, it’s too narrow a pedestal to bear the weight.”

I agree that any meaningful form of democratic hopefulness must be able to address issues of far greater gravity and much broader scope than this apparently trivial example. Yet hopeful I am, and I know no other path for these reflections to follow than the one that begins here, where my hope emerges. I can conceive of no meaningful or effective democracy, capable of addressing any of the vast and vexing problems of our age, that is not rooted securely and indeed primarily in people the world over doing just what these youngsters have done … making their community a better place to live.

Ellah’s lecture that night took us back to the roots of democracy—both the word and the practice—in ancient Greece. I was deeply grateful for that rooting, and grateful as well for his asking how anyone who claims to value democracy as much as Americans do can, at the same time, hate politics so much—since it is only by way of politics that we can conceivably practice democracy. So, now, here on the riverbank, I’d want to thank him for insisting on keeping politics in democracy. And then I’d want to ask if we shouldn’t also insist on keeping the polis at the heart of politics, and of democracy.

I want to suggest that it was not only citizenship that our kayakers had found themselves practicing, but that they were also learning politics in the most fundamental sense of caring for and enhancing their polis—the place they call home. What’s more, it was democratic politics, because this polis-enhancing project—like the affordable housing initiatives, the uninsured health-care project, the efforts to diversify Missoula’s economy—had not been conceived or commanded by any kind of elite but had sprung from the dreams and hard work of “ordinary” citizens.

My fondness for Missoula, my pride in my city, is evident in all this; but in fact, we
would find this kind of democracy at hand (indeed underfoot) in almost any city or town we chose to walk through. What I want to propose is that this democratic experience, this democratic productivity, is of a fundamentally different order from what we experience when we focus our attention on national democracy. And if this is so, if, furthermore, that national focus leads not only to an inescapable pessimism but also to our overlooking or undervaluing the lively democracy at our fingertips, might it not be time to stop lavishing so much attention on such an arid wasteland? Or at least, time to start focusing on more fertile democratic soil?

Because anniversaries are the order of the day, what if we invoked another one? It’s now nearing a century since Herbert Croly published his Promise of American Life, the classic call for Americans to shift the focus of their democratic thought and practice from their local communities to the national stage. For reasons lying well beyond the scope of this essay, the time was just right for Croly’s argument. Theodore Roosevelt had been urging a more muscular national polity throughout his presidency; and by the time he ran again in 1912, he had turned Croly’s thesis into a political platform that he called the “New Nationalism.” While Roosevelt lost that election, his New Nationalism was carried forward in another guise, as Woodrow Wilson expanded the national agenda with initiatives like the Federal Reserve Bank.

It was Franklin Roosevelt, though, who most lastingly implemented Croly’s national democratic approach by his aggressive championing of New Deal legislation. In FDR’s wake, both the civil rights and environmental movements would look to national democracy to enact their agendas. Against this background of achievement and progress, it is understandable that progressives have come to take it for granted that when there is something big and important to do, it is as a nation that we must do it. The natural corollary is that progressives have come to measure democracy primarily by a national yardstick.

I want to suggest that by that yardstick (which was the one Bellah used in his lecture) democracy can no longer hope to measure up to our noblest aspirations. It isn’t that we lack challenges and opportunities that require democratic responses. Rather it is that most of those challenges and opportunities are now either too big (global warming or terrorism) or too small (livable communities or good schools) for national democracy to address effectively.

How long has it been now since we as a nation took on a big challenge in a way that we could unabashedly celebrate? I don’t mean to deny that there may still be an occasional project worthy of our best national efforts (health care comes to mind), but we need only consider the abysmal record of a recent national initiative like No Child Left Behind to be reminded that for most contemporary problems, the answer is not likely to be a national one.

There are several reasons that this now seems to be the case. One is that our legal system
has moved steadily in the direction of requiring more and more procedural safeguards as part of the machinery of any governmental initiative. These safeguards are eminently well intentioned; in fact, they are motivated by unimpeachable democratic instincts to provide equal access of all citizens to decision-making processes, and evenhanded treatment of all, once the decisions are made. No democrat can quarrel with these objectives, and I wouldn’t dream of trying. But the end result of decades of pursuing these democratic ideals has been elegantly summed up in Michael Sandel’s evocation of the “procedural republic”—a decision structure so bureaucratized, so mechanized, so incapable of responding to local particularities or even to most forms of common sense, that it drives more people away from public engagement than it brings into democratic play. The procedural republic can be found now at all levels of government, and our kayakers encountered enough of it here in Missoula to have almost caused them to abandon their dream. But the smaller the government, the more pliable it remains to personal interaction, to people relating to each other more as neighbors than as cogs in a machine.

Most challenges are either too big or too small for national democracy to address.

Members of Congress, not to mention presidents, understandably seek to leave behind them a historically significant record of accomplishment. This natural proclivity is strongly reinforced by a political ethos which Croly would warmly endorse: the nearly unquestioned assumption that it is primarily as a nation that we should be up and doing what needs to be done. Yet in fact, the very expectation that we should be doing something big and important together as a nation can become quite dangerous under circumstances in which so few major projects present themselves as being appropriate for national attention.

The thrilling sense of unity that comes with military action then becomes very appealing indeed. When Americans ask why we invaded Iraq, part of an honest answer has to be, “because nothing else excites or unites us as a nation quite as much as watching our troops and weapons swing into action.” The rush of excitement is temporary, of course, while sometimes the wars aren’t. In which case the unity may begin to disintegrate.
I’m not cynical by nature, and I don’t mean to deny that most of our recent calls to arms have been motivated by factors additional to the need to create a sense of common purpose. But I do want to suggest that a century after Herbert Croly issued his call to make democracy primarily national, it may be time to reexamine that approach, in part because, lacking enough constructive work to unite us as a nation, we too readily seek unity in what turn out to be destructive and destabilizing activities. Or irremediably divisive ones! And aside from unilateral militarism, we need to confront the possibility that an excessive focus on nationhood is now beginning to undermine democracy at every level.

No reasonable person can deny that there is serious work to be done at the global scale—on climate change, terrorism, containment of rogue states, income disparities, HIV/AIDS. As a thoroughgoing democrat, I have no doubt that it is only an unprecedented level of global democracy that can hope to fashion and carry to fruition effective solutions to any of these problems. Yet American nationalism has now become, ironically, a serious stumbling block to creating that necessary capacity for global self-determination.

The obstruction is clear and straightforward in the case of global warming, where American opposition to the Kyoto Accords in the name of a narrowly conceived national economic interest has seriously undermined the world’s capacity to do what needs to be done. More insidious is America’s determination to democratize the Middle East by force, and strictly on the U.S. government’s terms. A nation that prides itself on its democratic principles should know that global democracy cannot be dictated by this or any other nation, but must be worked out as democratic solutions are always worked out: by deliberation among equals.

The situation is strongly analogous to the one that confronted the United States under the Articles of Confederation. It became clear, then, that the new nation could not become sustainably self-determining unless all of the states gave up some of their sovereignty—some of their capacity to control events—in favor of a broader, more effective capacity on the part of the entire nation. We have now arrived at the place in history where the world cannot take care of itself unless nations are prepared to relinquish some sovereignty in the name of global self-determination. No nation is now more of an obstacle to that result than the United States. At the global scale, then, the pursuit of democracy requires the transcendence of a purely national approach to self-government. We cannot promote global democracy hegemonically, which means that we must relinquish some of our national capacity to control events.
One can argue that America’s approach to foreign policy or to global warming is simply a matter of misplaced policies; and that what we need is more and better American democracy to elect a president and Congress that will pursue more globally democratic policies. We do need to do that; and arguably the American people did do something of the kind in the 2006 midterm elections, when they fairly resoundingly repudiated the Bush administration’s Iraq policy. But the (sadly belated) ability to say what we don’t any longer want to do as a nation tells us nothing at all about what we do want to do.

The election campaign left it far from clear what the Democrats’ answer to that question might be. Given that party’s past fascination with national programs, I have a certain trepidation about what Democrats might eventually propose. I would argue that a fair portion of our national democratic energy now needs to be devoted to creating alternatives to national democracy. But it is by no means clear that the Democratic Party is any more prepared than the Republicans to do that. I would argue further that we cannot hope to provide our share of effective global citizenship unless we recognize, celebrate, and cultivate the cornucopia of local democracy that our national focus so steadily obscures. To explain what I mean, let me bring us back to our walk along the river.

There is serious work to be done at the global scale.

Our stroll would eventually take us across the river, where we would stop to watch dozens of skateboarders testing their skills against the hair-raising contours of their new skate park. I’m a little embarrassed at how long it has taken Missoula to get this skate park built. But it is built now, and once again, it was primarily the passion and persistence of the youngsters themselves that got the job done. Like the kayakers, these skateboarders are taking care of their place, and they are feeling a justifiable, democratic pride in the difference they’re making. They are motivated by self-interest, of course, since all they really wanted to do was skate. But that pursuit of their particular form of happiness had to become civically enlightened in order to become effective. They had to make the system work; and in fact they had to improve the city, in order to improve their own lives.

When I told one of my friends about my conviction that the skate park was a living example of democracy in action, she responded, “Yes, but will those kids vote?” Well, of course, I want them to vote. And in the 2006 election, a remarkable number of young Missoulians did vote; more than enough to account for Democrat Jon Tester’s razor-thin win over his incumbent opponent—a victory that turned out to be crucial to the Democratic takeover of the U.S. Senate. Still, I would argue that our focus on voting as the ultimate democratic act has become almost as deadly to democracy as our focus on the nation as the only polity that really counts. Democracy is not inherently or fundamentally national, nor is it fundamentally about voting. It is fundamentally about people taking charge of the conditions under which they live.
We need to be developing the capacity for that kind of taking charge at all scales. I know it seems hopelessly inadequate to be talking about skate parks and kayak waves when we've got a world to save. But if we had a world full of communities and neighborhoods being slowly and steadily improved by citizens pursuing their enlightened self-interests, and if global democracy were deliberately constructed on this pedestal, then I am convinced that we would move faster and further toward global self-determination than by relying exclusively or even primarily on strengthening or reforming our national democracy.

One of the people who has accompanied me on several of my strolls along the river is a young man from Gabon, now a student at the University of Montana. Kiki is one of the most promising students I've ever met, and his determination to learn all he can here in America about how to make life better for his neighbors in Gabon has been a genuine inspiration to me. One way he has decided to educate himself is by milking my own political experience for all it's worth—which is where our walking conversations along the river have come in.

Even before he left Gabon, Kiki was working with other high-school students on a number of projects, such as providing a library for their school or publishing a journal to enable students in different parts of the country to teach one another about their respective communities. Kiki understood, then, the kind of motivation and the amount of hard work that Missoula's young citizens had brought to the kayak wave and the skate park. He pressed me hard (and appropriately) with questions about whether all Missoulans would have access to these facilities or whether they would only be available to those able to afford them. In fact, skateboarders come from all economic classes, so this new park is a natural equalizer. Even better, several of the skaters who worked so hard on this project are now traveling to the Flathead Reservation north of Missoula, working with Native American youngsters to build their own skate park.

I don't know exactly how Kiki will use his skills and his education to help build democracy in Gabon when he returns home. I would be very surprised if he does not find a way to make a difference, given his passion and his intelligence. And I would be surprised if the difference he makes does not center, in one way or another, in finding ways to help ordinary people in Gabonese communities pursue their own homegrown dreams about how to improve their daily lives.

I said earlier that I appreciated the emphasis that Robert Bellah had placed in his lecture on the Greek roots of democracy. We might think of Pericles as the leader of a
A democratic party, seeking to spread democracy around the Mediterranean. That project degenerated into an exercise in imperialism that eventually brought Athens to its knees. There are lessons in that part of the story to be sure, but I would argue that another lesson may be that any political party, anywhere in today’s world, that sought to elect candidates committed to global democracy would be most likely to succeed if it began where Pericles’ best democratic efforts began: by invoking the pride of his own Athenian citizens in what they had built together. Pericles’ famous funeral oration, following an early battle of the Peloponnesian War, still stands as one of the world’s most inspiring paens to democracy. Pericles invited Athenians to think of their city as “an education to all of Greece” in being a living lesson in democracy, but at the root of that lesson was one simple fact, powerfully evoked by Pericles. To the extent that Athens could serve as a lesson in democracy, it was because of the way Athenian citizens had worked together to make their city the best place to live that they could manage.

Advocates of democracy must always be learning from history. But equally important, they must always be making it. 1776 is rightly remembered as an epochal year in the history of democracy: the main actors in that drama seemed to share an acute sense of history unfolding at their fingertips. Jefferson revealed this historical sensibility by placing the Declaration of Independence explicitly “in the course of human events.” The political will to declare independence had been mobilized in no small part by the publication earlier that year of Thomas Paine’s Common Sense. Like Jefferson, Paine seemed unusually aware that history was afoot, then and there. He evoked that sense of historical movement when he described the form of governance that had prevailed in the colonies for a century and a half. “There was a time when it was proper.”

Political change is very rarely a linear phenomenon.

He wrote of that established system, “and there is a proper time for it to cease.” That very lively form of historical sensibility is not incidental to democracy—it is indispensable to it. Any people or society that allows itself to be trapped by outmoded institutions or ways of doing public business cannot claim to be fully democratic. This is what Lincoln meant in his second annual message to Congress, when he wrote that “we must disenthrall ourselves” of the old, no longer serviceable, view of the role of the national government in relation to the institution of slavery. Lincoln believed that America had in a sense itself become enslaved—“enthralled”—by ways of thinking and acting that no longer served the cause of democracy.

If there was a time when America needed to follow Herbert Croly’s advice to focus its democratic energy and aspirations at the national scale, a lively democratic sensibility must be open to the possibility that “in the course of human events” there may also be a “proper time” for that commanding national democratic focus “to cease,” or at least for us to begin to “disenthrall” ourselves from a way of doing democracy that no longer adequately serves the democratic cause.
I have been arguing that the focus on national democracy no longer serves us well because the nation is at once too small and too large for most of the democratic work at hand. The argument for moving democracy to larger scales—whether continental or global—seems consistent with the “arrow of history,” since most of the important milestones in the history of democracy have involved a “scaling up” of democratic capacities and institutions. Just as America’s founders recognized that American democracy could only survive by transcending local jealousies; just as Lincoln finally nationalized America’s policy on slavery; just as Croly argued for a bold new step forward in this journey of nationalizing democracy, so now it seems consistent with that unidirectional thrust of history to recognize a growing need for global citizenship and global democracy. And by the same token, it may seem like a step backward in history to argue for a renewed attention to local democracy.

My own experience with political change is that it is very rarely a linear phenomenon. The most important changes have always seemed to me to occur dialectically, by way of tension between contrary vectors, whether those vectors are liberty and security, individualism and community, or localism and globalism. There may be times when we sail with the wind of history full astern; but the more common, the more challenging and, frankly, the more interesting experience is more akin to tacking, moving forward by bringing the wind now on the port, now on the starboard bow.

The twentieth-century adage to “think globally, act locally” reflects still this dialectical exigency of our time. If anything, we are now moving to the next phase, where we recognize that we must develop the capacity to think and act at all appropriate scales—local, regional, national, continental, and global. This requires that a fair number of us must be prepared to think of ourselves as regional, continental, or global citizens, in addition to being citizens of our communities or nations.

The fact that this may require us to lower our expectations of national democracy should not discourage us. This is just one more episode in the eminently democratic process of disen-thralling ourselves from one or another way of practicing democracy that is no longer in itself adequate to the complex task. At the very least, a reevaluation of the role of national democracy would give us an opportunity to cultivate more intentionally those democratic aspirations that we see at work here in the heart of Missoula and in hundreds of other communities across the country and around the world.

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“Actors engaged in promoting democracy need to revise their existing paradigms.”

Notwithstanding official talk about spreading democracy around the world and our country’s mission to help those become free who have suffered under the yoke of authoritarianism for too long, I find in my work in different parts of the world that the reality of the “democracy project” is less rosy than the picture we are being presented with. The story about democracy around the world today is one of a half-full, half-empty glass, depending on which criteria one uses to measure success. Are these new democracies stable? Some are but most are not. Do elections lead to good governance? The record on this link is quite dismal. Are people seeing their lives improve as a result of democratization? Not necessarily—and evidence is pointing to an increase in global poverty. Is conflict waning around the world since democracies never fight against each other? The research indicates that despite the Darfurs, Afghans, and Iraqis of the world, conflict is indeed waning. Are old social divisions and fissures being healed through the electoral processes? It all depends on whether electoral processes come in as part of an overall peace-building process or not.

In the half-full glass, we have witnessed over the last 15 years a number of countries where elections and peace talks have helped turn the corner (at least for now). They include South Africa, Bosnia, Liberia, Ghana, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. Our focus in this article, however, will be on the half-empty glass, today’s vulnerable democracies that can easily spill over into violence—and on what
they can tell us about the challenges facing them and the efforts and integrated strategies that can help strengthen their path toward an open and more inclusive political system.

The most important challenges today to societies undergoing a democratic transformation are three: poverty, corruption, and social exclusion. They usually afflict the country similarly to the way that the “metabolic syndrome” affects the human body. The metabolic syndrome is the medical condition characterized by elevated levels of cholesterol, high blood pressure, and Type II diabetes. Heart attacks, diseases, and deaths are attributed to the metabolic syndrome, as conflict, internal violence, and failed regimes are attributed to the triad of poverty, corruption, and social exclusion.

Some 1.1 billion people in the world now live on less than one U.S. dollar per day, while nearly a billion people are illiterate and almost one-third of the population in the developing world are not expected to survive to the age of 40. Poverty and the ensuing income inequality in any society deprive citizens of their ability to provide for their families' basic needs of food, shelter, health, and education. A hungry and ill-educated citizenry finds participation in the decision-making process daunting. Corruption undermines the institutions through which citizens participate in politics and further perpetuates poverty through an unequal allocation of national resources among different groups in society. Corruption thus leads to political instability: there is a strong correlation between Transparency International’s perception of corruption scores and a state's instability.

Eight of the ten most politically stable countries also appear among the ten least corrupt on Transparency's Index. Chile—widely recognized as the least corrupt country in Latin America—is also the most stable in the region.

By definition, according to Foreign Policy's “The Failed States Index,” a failed state is “one in which the government does not have effective control of its territory, is not perceived as legitimate by a significant portion of its population, does not provide domestic safety or basic public services to its citizens, and lacks a monopoly on the use of force.” In a failed state, there is no shared consensus on the concept of a nation-state and people often define themselves in terms of primary affiliation groups, such as the tribe or the clan; national identity is superseded by that of the regional, ethnic, religious, and/or confessional identity. Social exclusion rather than inclusion is the norm and corruption is rampant. From Yemen, to Uzbekistan, to Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, elections have been held and people went to the voting polls; yet according to the Failed States Index, these countries rank high in their vulnerability to internal violence and risk becoming failed states.

The problem with democracy promotion efforts in the contemporary era—that is, since the end of the cold war—is that they have restricted themselves mostly to the machinery of democracy in the form of elections and referenda and to providing technical assistance to teach people how best to introduce and implement this
machinery. Much less effort has been devoted to making democracy relevant to the citizen’s needs and aspirations. The prevalent form of democracy people have come to know so far has been representative democracy. What the West has most cared about is the holding of elections, people going to the voting booths. Though these acts of citizen participation are an essential first step in a society transforming itself into a democratic state, they are rarely by themselves sufficient to usher in an era of sustainable stability. They raise false expectations among the populace and they often disappoint the international community which is finding it difficult to comprehend why a people, as in the case of Iraq, that went to the voting booth three times in a span of 15 months, still resorts to killing each other.

Elections, it seems, may exacerbate societal divisions rather than heal them. Elections lead to a winner and a loser and, as in the case of many countries in the Middle East, the loser may be a group that has long enjoyed privileges and power that it is not willing to give up without a fight. Elections tend to equate the act of being a citizen to that of becoming a voter. By so doing, it limits the whole responsibility of citizenry to that of choosing among a slate of candidates. Most often it is a solitary act, performed by the individual in the confines of a small voting booth. In divided societies, the challenge for any political intervention aimed at promoting sustainable democratic change is to move the individual from the confines of his or her self (often defined by the tribe or ethnic identity) to the wider realm of a citizen actor, often defined by the national identity. This transition from one narrowly defined identity component (tribe/clan/confession) to a more inclusive one (the nation-state) is the major challenge to any democratic transformation in a divided society. Representative democracy, per se, is least capable to help with this transition.

What is needed is the creation of dialogue spaces, deliberative meetings, and opportunities for collaborative work that provide testing grounds where one citizen may listen to the other and understand where he or she is coming from, may try joint safe activities like brainstorming together, and eventually, may understand the self and what and how the individual has to change in order for societal change to happen. The story of Nelson Mandela is great testimony to the reality that self-induced change in one’s own attitude about the other side, one’s image of “the other,” is a necessary precursor to a changed relationship.
with that other. What is missing from the work of most international organizations involved in this area is just this embracing of a broader concept of democracy that moves beyond technical assistance (with its mere machinery) to the promoting of sustainable and safe spaces where people can, over a sustained period of time,

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Elections, it seems, may exacerbate societal divisions.

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learn and test the basic underpinnings of citizenship on which democracy rests.

Three scenarios often emerge from the imposition of elections in divided societies. Under one scenario, voting exacerbates existing ethnic and religious divisions, leading to further destabilization of the regime—especially if the electoral law is not perceived as setting up a system that is fair and transparent to all. A second scenario is evident now in Iraq, where elections led to the imposition of the will of the majority and further disenfranchisement of minorities: the current impasse wherein the Shia-Kurdish majority coalition is unable to give up any of its newly acquired power, while the Sunni minority is unable to envision an alternative to the status quo ante, where it dominated the levers of power. A third scenario, more prevalent today in the Middle East and many countries of Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, is when elections lead, in the words of Daniel Brumberg to, “semi-authoritarian ‘liberalized’” autocracies. Such regimes allow for a limited yet controlled measure of pluralism and political competition that is in turn used to prevent a wholesale democratization of the political system. An example here is Egypt, where pressure from the international community, including the United States, forced the Egyptian president and his government to accept a constitutional amendment allowing, for the first time in 30 years, a contested multicandidate presidential election. The president, who has been 22 years in office, won the elections with a healthy margin. The first runner-up, Ayman Nour, however, is now lingering in jail on charges of corruption; and the president’s son is being groomed for succession, thus setting the stage for the first father-son succession since the independence of Egypt in the 1950s.

The track record to date of elections like these suggests that they do not often translate into effective governance. In fact the record is so dismal in some cases that the future itself of democratic movements is threatened. For example, average Arab citizens living under oppressive regimes in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are now turned off by the idea of democratic reforms for fear that they would bring to their own country the
Iraqi kind of sectarian upheaval, or a potential civil war as happened in Lebanon. Democratic reformers are more and more being seen as traitors. And elections are seen as inevitable precursors of civil strife.

So how can we turn the corner? My hypothesis is that the international community has by now in fact developed a preliminary understanding of what measures help turn the corner on this grim reality. One assumption they agree on is that the kind of social and political change we are seeking is a long road. It is complicated and quite costly. It is managed poorly by outsiders. However, without consistent and long-term support by the international community to local actors, whether in government or civil society, political change won’t be initiated and sustained.

Doctors treat the metabolic syndrome by encouraging better eating habits, regular exercise, and a string of cholesterol and blood-pressure medications. On the national scale, there are a strong dose of economic and political medicines, which have now become regular staples in interventions to promote democracy. International multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and other regional economic lending organizations work with local governments to promote free-market practices, pass laws to spur and protect the small business sector, and push for privatization of public sectors, thus bringing infusions of cash into stranded budgets while eliminating inefficiency and bureaucracy from the service sector. There is also a political therapy that often includes reforming election laws, reforming the judiciary, allowing free media, training for political parties, creating the legal infrastructure for a healthy NGO sector, establishing the rule of law, and promoting anticorruption campaigns, partly by introducing some conditionality to the allocation and disbursement of financial aid. Then there is always the military option, which by now has proven itself to be often futile and self-defeating. Most if not all of these measures are imposed by outsiders according to their own timetable and conditions; they do hold consultations with local governments and stakeholders, but in these consultations the problem and solutions have typically been already framed by the outside actors.

The verdict on these practices is that they often fail to translate into better governance, improved lives, or more open and stable political systems. It is thus becoming clear that actors engaged in promoting democracy need to revise their existing paradigms. While international democracy promoters, including governments and international NGOs, focus on the machinery of democracy, securing the rule of law, and promoting citizen participation through elections, local populations mostly care about what democracy will give them in terms of economic gain and political change. They care about whether democracy will bring unemployment down; will guarantee them safe drinking water; take care of the sewage problem, of the trash collection problem, and of bringing them electricity
on a regular and predictable basis—these are what most people care about. Paradigms of democracy promotion and assistance, then, must change in order to make sure that democracy becomes relevant to addressing people’s daily needs; otherwise the formal structures of democratic practice will remain foreign entities and never take hold and develop roots in these societies.

To make democracy an integral part of the solution to people’s daily problems, we need to think of a new partnership between the external actors, whether official or unofficial, and the local actors. Local actors know best their society’s problems and how to approach them; hence, new partnerships should be based on an appreciation for the experience and knowledge of local actors. Local actors should be engaged in every step of the work—from needs assessment to framing the problem, to prioritization among problems, to the identification of solutions and designing an action strategy. And they should be engaged, at the end, in an evaluation system that makes sense to them as local actors.

Reevaluation of the paradigm should also include revisiting the type of projects donors fund in relation to what people could or should produce. Instead of large, national projects, the focus should shift to local, sustained community-level initiatives that engage people around issues they most care about, such as improving their schools, creating jobs within their community, and providing better health care to their children. These initiatives should connect with local narratives of problem solving and communal decision making, thus promoting their ownership by people in the community.

Similarly, the focus should first be on small-scale, practical, and doable projects. This will create better chances for short-term successes, thus emboldening people to engage in the leap of faith necessary for collective action. Most important, these local initiatives must be supported for the long-term. Often, donors abandon local initiatives and projects as soon as they can show an acceptable level of success; but what these local initiatives actually propose is changing attitudes about individual responsibility for the problem, creating the trust and social capital that are necessary for sustainable development. Doing so is a long-term project requiring support that is sustainable both financially and through the sharing of skills and lessons learned from other settings.

Local populations mostly care about economic gain and political change.
Instead of aiming to involve hundreds of people (as most donor projects like to do), the focus needs to shift to working with small cadres of local actors over a sustained period of time. John Paul Lederach talks about the need for a “catalytic yeast” of change agents in any sustainable transformation, especially in societies undergoing civil strife. He defines catalytic yeast as “a few strategically connected people [who] have greater potential for creating the social growth of an idea or process, rather than large numbers of people who think alike.” The core members of this catalytic yeast lead the change process on the ground, promote ownership of the process by fellow community members, and assist in developing a “narrative” of change to sustain the change process. The narrative of change is necessarily rooted in communal traditions of decision making and joint work. It must connect to past stories of success, when the community coalesced around a crisis or a major problem and managed successfully to solve it. Most important, the narrative of change must connect to stories of community pride. Each society has these stories and the challenge for designers of change interventions is to rekindle these stories in people’s hearts and minds.

Consider Tajikistan. The fall of the Soviet Union brought independence to Tajikistan in 1991, but with independence, a civil war erupted among different regional groups in the country, each clamoring for its share of the new political power. The civil war claimed thousands of lives, forced hundreds of thousands to take refuge in Iran and Afghanistan, and caused billions of dollars of damage to the country’s economy and infrastructure.

The Tajikistan civil war officially ended in 1997 with the signing of a peace agreement between the government and opposition forces. Tajikistan is today a country of seven million people, 96 percent of its population making less than two dollars per day. On November 6, President Emomali Rahmonov won his second round of presidential elections (first round was held in 2000) and, thanks to constitutional amendments passed by an elected parliament, his mandate runs till 2010. Though Tajikistan is often touted by the World Bank as one of its success stories (because GDP is on a constant growth path), corruption eats up a good part of the aid budget and infiltrates every segment of the society, including the NGO sector. Politically, the nation is considered one of the “liberalized autocracies” because it has multiparty elections, an active Islamist opposition that is allowed to operate semi-freely, and because it boasts a lively if-not-so free media sector. It has held two sets of parliamentary and presidential elections since 1997, and it has a significant number of NGOs operating on its territory.

Yet, if one goes around the country to ask people about democracy, most Tajikistani citizens respond that democracy did not do much for them. A large segment of the population, especially those residing in

Partnerships should be based on the experience and knowledge of local actors.
the north of the country (a region which was endowed with the most political and economic power during Soviet times), feel they have no role in the political process. Most of the young people emigrate to Russia to work in tough conditions as labor migrants. The education and health sectors are in shambles. According to some community leaders, Tajikistan is now living under a new form of authoritarianism. The challenge is to prevent it from moving toward totalitarianism.

In 1999 I began working with Tajikistan’s Public Committee for the Promotion of Democratic Processes (PCDP). PCDP is a nongovernmental organization formed in 1999 by Tajikistani members of what is known as the Inter-Tajik Dialogue, an unofficial U.S.-Russian dialogue initiative that was launched in 1993 as an extension of the Dartmouth Conferences, which linked nongovernmental representatives of the United States and the Soviet Union in unofficial dialogue throughout the cold war. Its purpose was to bring together protagonists in the Tajikistan civil war to discuss ways and processes for conflict management in Tajikistan.

In 2000, the PCDP designed its program to embrace four major activities:

1. Economic Development Committees (EDCs): These are community-based committees, established in different regions of the country to promote job growth and curb unemployment. They also serve as a vehicle to bring together ethnic groups in the community around the common goal of economic development. Each committee usually involves 12 to 15 community members and two moderators.

2. Regional Dialogues: Dialogue spaces, established in seven regions of Tajikistan for the purpose of addressing the major problem(s) facing the country at a given time. They create a space where community leaders come, on a regular basis, to discuss one issue at a time, in depth. Each dialogue involves on average 18 to 20 core members and two moderators.

3. Tajikistani Issues Forums: Organized public spaces for communities’ deliberation about issues, such as education and poverty.


In designing their action strategies in each of these project areas, the PCDP adopted ten specific principles. They have seemed to us so important—indeed fundamental in the long-term development of the democratic community—that I will close this essay by reciting them, briefly, for they may be the necessary therapy for rehabilitation in the prospective democratic state.

- First is the building of an insider-outsider partnership. Being based in the capital Dushanbe, the PCDP is an “outsider” in other regions of Tajikistan; so every project is managed by an “insider”-
“outsider” (PCDP-region or locale) team. Terms of engagement within the management team are agreed upon from the beginning: while the PCDP is in charge of project design and training, the regional/local teams are in charge of implementation and mid-course corrections in the process. They are in charge of day-to-day activities and the project is identified as a joint initiative with PCDP. The PCDP is then responsible for the project’s reflective space, which brings together on a periodic basis all local actors in order to assess the activities to date and share lessons that are being learned.

• **The focus is on local issues.** Even when dealing with national problems, such as poverty and unemployment, PCDP soon discovered that problems manifest themselves differently in different regions of the country, thus requiring a framing of the problem that reflects local needs and builds on local resources. The framing of issues is left for each local team to do.

• **Work takes place at the community level.** The smallest administrative structure in Tajikistan’s political infrastructure is the *jamoat* (literally translated as “community”), which consists of a number of neighborhoods geographically in proximity to “each other,” including, variously, a wide range of residents from 5,000 to 25,000. The Jamoat is often represented by a team involving the head of the Jamoat and leaders of its different neighborhoods, who are charged with identifying the problems, framing them, working out optional solutions on the basis of which the Jamoat group designs its activities and projects, working with PCDP as a partner.

• **At the center is the catalytic yeast.** In all such projects, the PCDP works on identifying members of the project’s catalytic yeast. Whether it be the EDC moderators, or the Tajikistani Issues Forums moderators, or the 24 university professors, or the 14 regional dialogue moderators, the PCDP has invested time in developing working relationships with them, improving their skill base, and has relied on them as process leaders in their regions. These individuals in turn have been responsible for training members of the groups with whom they work in their communities.

• **Partner networks are developed.** On each activity track, the PCDP develops a “partner network” of individuals and organizations that can assist in implementing project activities in different regions of the country. This network itself serves as an action platform, where shared goals can be developed and a common vision nurtured. Sustained relationships among members of the network provide the dynamic through which the democratic project grows.

*Initiatives should connect with local narratives of problem solving.*
• **Plans capitalize on local traditions.** Tajikistan has a rich tradition of community decision making. There have always been councils of elders, often made up of a group of old and respected community members who are responsible for settling small claim disputes, arbitrating over allocation of water, and organizing the *Ashar*. *Ashar* is an old practice in Tajikistan that is similar to the U.S. barn-building tradition; it is often relied upon to organize weddings and funerals which, being costly events for an average Tajikistani family, require contributions from all community members. The PCDP often invokes and relies on such traditions in its community projects. For example, one EDC project involved building a greenhouse to grow tomatoes, a commodity of high value in Tajikistan; while the PCDP provided funds for building materials, the Jamoat members contributed the labor free of charge.

• **Working relations are cultivated with the central and local governments.** Tajikistan is still an authoritarian country, where projects both at the national center and in the regions require official approval prior to implementation. Before the year 2000, local government officials had limited exposure to and limited experience in dealing with civil society; hence they were wary of third-sector initiatives. Thus a need to involve local government officials in project activities became apparent, while maintaining autonomy over the process. Before launching any project, the PCDP staff spends time briefing government officials about the project and its objectives. Doing so serves two functions: it allays suspicions of any possible antigovernmental activities, while educating officials about civil society and the positive role it can play in the country’s life.

• **Work proceeds through dialogue spaces.** Each of these project activities works through a sustained dialogue space among the participants. For example, the EDCs meet, on average, half a day each month and the regional dialogues meet on average four to five hours each month; the curriculum project has involved six 4-day seminars over the course of two years. These dialogue spaces enable the participants to share with others their perspective about the problem and to listen to the others’ concerns about the problem; so they try to reach a common understanding on solutions most
likely to work in their own community and develop a joint action plan for dealing with the problem. A dialogue space effectively serves as a learning space about the other and his or her positions on issues; and it is an innovation space about solutions and, most important, about processes of joint action that are developed from the ground up by community members. It is also a testing space to assess whether one can work with the other, and in that respect it provides a safe space to do so in divided societies, where one must first overcome entrenched stereotypes and misperceptions about the untrustworthiness of the others, before taking the leap of faith necessary for collective action.

It is a working space where participants jointly develop approaches to dealing with a shared problem and processes to implement them. And it is a relational space that is owned by the participants and to which they are asked from the outset to commit for the long-term. Changing relationships among participants in that space is key to their working together. Hence, ideas and proposals that emerge from this space have greater relevance to people’s concerns and are more likely to engage them in action than pure intellectual approaches.

The dialogue space is thus a political space par excellence because it allows participants to reframe their own problems; to engage with different others in the art of give-and-take around ideas and shared concerns; and to build working coalitions on shared interests on the basis of which a platform for joint action is developed. It is the space where the foundations of trust are established.

- **Short-term success is planned.** We are asking people to get out of their comfort zone when we ask them to work with others, especially if it is with those they consider members of “the enemy” groups. Unless the project is designed to produce some short-term tangible success, project leaders are likely to lose face in the community, and other members in the community to lose interest in the project. Short-term success can take on different forms: a jointly-authored book on conflict resolution, securing a computer to one’s university, building a greenhouse in the Dahana Jamoat in the southern part of Tajikistan, or securing a small microcredit project that provides a few $100 loans to small business owners in a community. By delivering such tangible results to the community, the process leaders (our catalytic yeast) have gained prestige and honor in the eyes of other community members, thus solidifying their leadership base and their ability to get others to join in community activities.

The work is for the long haul. This approach assumes that transforming conflictual relationships that have existed in a community or a country for a long time is basic to an integrated strategy for social change. Yet bridging longstanding
cultural divisions and getting people to commit to trusting others and working with them is no easy feat. The approach aims to overcome old feelings of mistrust, old narratives based on earlier failures with collaboration, and on an inevitable human reluctance to abandon the “comfort zone,” irrespective of how that zone is defined. Building trust, framing new narratives and creating new comfort zones is the work of generations. The work is incremental: it acknowledges a past and envisions a future. The work is now, and here, precisely because of that commitment to both history and purpose.

Randa Slim is vice president of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. For the past 20 years, she has worked extensively as a practitioner in reconciliation and peace-building dialogue processes throughout the world, and she is currently active in the Middle East and central Asia.
Bill McKibben, the environmental writer, offered this bracing summary of what’s missing in America’s current political order in a recent issue of the New York Review of Books:

The technology we need most badly is the technology of community—the knowledge about how to cooperate to get things done. Our sense of community is in disrepair at least in part because the prosperity that flowed from cheap fossil fuel has allowed us all to become extremely individualized, even hyperindividualized, in ways that, as we only now begin to understand, represent a truly Faustian bargain. We Americans haven’t needed our neighbors for anything important, and hence neighborliness—local solidarity—has disappeared. Our problem now is that there is no way forward, at least if we’re serious about preventing the worst ecological nightmares, that doesn’t involve working together politically to make changes deep enough and rapid enough to matter.

While McKibben’s assigned topic is environmental catastrophe, his analysis applies equally to the whole range of intractable social problems. If we want to make progress in tackling war, crime, poverty, educational achievement, health-care costs, and similarly contested issues, we need new ways of understanding and acting on them collectively, as publics. This directly implicates those of us who work within institutions and professions, because institutions and professions are in themselves community technologies.

“Institutions and professions should cast themselves as agents of the people, not agencies working on behalf of the people.”
Unfortunately, institutions and professions seem rather to have taken upon themselves the role of guardians—specially trained folks trying to guide and direct citizens about what’s best for them. They see themselves as working for the public rather than with the public. The first approach, themselves working for a public, casts citizens as clients, consumers, dependents; the second, themselves working with a public, casts them as collaborators, cocreators of value, actual sovereigns. The first approach is what Immanuel Kant, in 1784, called tutelage, a grave threat to freedom. “Tutelage,” Kant wrote, “is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without guidance from another.”

The thoughts that follow are offered in terms of journalism and journalistic enterprises, the institutional and professional domain I know best. Yet it will apply, I suspect, to most if not all institutions and professions. In thinking about how journalism can function better as a technology of community rather than a technology of tutelage, the primary question is, to me, how do communities recognize and respond to common challenges or opportunities—and how might they recognize and respond more effectively? A secondary question, then, inevitably follows: how does journalism help communities recognize and respond to common challenges and opportunities? How might it do so more effectively?

Some practitioners are beginning to think of themselves as democratic professionals, according to political scientist Albert Dzur of Bowling Green State University. Professionals have key civic roles to play and must contribute more to public life than skilled expertise. Dzur’s studies of professionals in criminal justice, medicine, and journalism indicate that they share civic and professional tasks with citizens. Just as police officers often think of themselves as the “thin blue line” between order and chaos—between the people they serve and the criminal element they suppress—journalists often think of themselves as the go-between—between citizens and public life, between citizens and public figures.

But in a democracy, practitioners and professionals function best as catalysts and facilitators of public acting, not as go-betweens. Police departments that embrace community policing work closely with citizens to identify the most pressing priorities for public safety—and the work that citizens can do best and the work that trained professionals can do best. Journalists that help form publics as well as inform publics also begin to see their skill sets as assets to share rather than as grounds to supplant citizens in deciding what a community should pay attention to. Journalists can help citizens generate and share insights into what their community should address.

The dominant model in journalism is the trustee or transmission model. This model casts journalists in the role of trustees—a kinder, gentler word for guardians—who transmit knowledge from other guardians to citizens, whose lives may expect to be affected by it. Traditional journalism thus assumes a professional practice, based on trained reporters and editors, who
find authoritative information and communicate it authoritatively to the public. A journalist finds the experts who know what is (or ought to be) happening; the journalist then extracts what the experts know and transmits this knowledge to everybody else. Sometimes, indeed, the knowledge transmitted is about the guardian who is its primary source—Walter Lippmann’s conceit of the “hot glare of publicity,” which allows people as voters to throw the rascals out if the guardians go too far in advancing their own interests ahead of the public interest. Like other professionals, the journalist bears a truth that can and sometimes should affect citizens’ action.

In the trustee/transmission model, journalism’s primary function is to secure and disseminate information—“the best obtainable version of the truth,” to use an axiom popularized by journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of Watergate fame. This kind of journalism is genuinely valuable. The aftermath of the drowning of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina shows that journalism matters profoundly when people and communities find themselves in catastrophic circumstances. The 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service went to two Gulf Coast newspapers for their coverage of the storm. The *Sun-Herald* of Gulfport-Biloxi, Mississippi, won “for its valorous and comprehensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, providing a lifeline for devastated readers, in print and online, during their time of greatest need.” The *Times-Picayune* was recognized “for its heroic, multi-faceted coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, making exceptional use of the newspaper’s resources to serve an inundated city even after evacuation of the newspaper plant.”

But the destruction also throws into sharp relief other critical questions about the trustee/transmission model. The model presumes that someone always knows the truth about complex issues, and the public interest is served when journalists faithfully fulfill their role in transmitting expert truth to the public. But when it comes to helping communities avoid calamities, such as Hurricane Katrina, that presumption may not bear out. Does journalism matter when it comes to averting disaster? Can journalism help communities avoid catastrophe by calling people to act as citizens and reach judgments as a public? In an era of information overload and fragmented publics, can journalists direct sustained attention to critical issues until they are resolved?

The trustee/transmission model says journalists are innocent of what happens

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Professions must contribute more to public life than skilled expertise.
after we sound the clarion call because action belongs to others. This is the thrust of Tim Rutten’s analysis in the Los Angeles Times published September 2, 2005:

Does journalism matter when it comes to averting disaster?

Three years ago, New Orleans’ leading local newspaper, the Times-Picayune, National Public Radio’s signature nightly news program, All Things Considered, and the New York Times each methodically and compellingly reported that the very existence of south Louisiana’s leading city was at risk and hundreds of thousands of lives imperiled by exactly the sequence of events that occurred this week. All three news organizations also made clear that the danger was growing because of a series of public policy decisions and failure to allocate government funds to alleviate the danger…. Politics may have failed the people of New Orleans. Politicians certainly failed them. They may have failed themselves by not demanding better. But their newspaper and other important segments of the American press did not fail them.

Rutten’s analysis makes sense if we conceive of journalism’s work as “warn and scorn”: Warn people about possible catastrophe, then heap scorn upon those who fail to heed us. Yet if we offer prophecies that no one believes (the proof of belief being the willingness to act on it), then we are nothing more than modern-day Cassandras, peddling prophecies with no social utility. We can take no solace in a supposed moral virtue. For when our communities are destroyed, so is our lifeblood as news organizations. So are our homes.

In the New York Times of the same date, Mark Fischetti, a contributing editor for Scientific American, described a major push that brought together “all the parties to one table in 1998 and got them to agree on a coordinated solution” to an anticipated disaster in the region, called Coast 2050, with a price tag of $14 billion, about twice the amount appropriated for a major public works project to resuscitate the Florida Everglades. But conflicting priorities in Congress and Louisiana meant that “the magic moment of consensus was lost. Thus, in true American fashion, we ignored an inevitable problem until disaster focused our attention.”

Does inevitable inevitably mean “unavoidable”? Is true American fashion a cultural straitjacket from which we cannot escape? In the case of New Orleans, the costs of taking action and the costs of not acting were both known. What was unknown was when a catastrophic hurricane might hit. Therefore
there was no “best obtainable version of the truth” about how aggressively public agencies should reinforce levees or take other expensive steps to mitigate such a potential catastrophe. In hindsight, after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, we can say the cost of reconstruction will be several orders of magnitude higher than would have been the cost of preparedness. But to make the best judgment in a situation of uncertainty about when bad things might happen requires more than expertise. It requires judgment. This kind of judgment requires a different kind of journalism.

Despite all that was known about the threat to New Orleans, the larger polis did not act in a way adequate to avert catastrophe. Can we imagine a new kind of journalism—a new relationship of the profession to the public—that would equip citizens and their communities to come to sound judgment on such issues before catastrophe strikes? The goal of such a new model of journalism must be to engage people in imagining the future that they want and in analyzing possible approaches that might achieve that future. Rather than settle for transmitting expert or elite knowledge, it will aim to generate public knowledge, produced by a public’s use of reason and experience. Knowledge, in this usage, is not a commodity that can be stored up and transmitted as needed; rather, this is a kind of knowledge constantly being generated by—and in turn generating—new insights among citizens, experts, and elites working with each other as a community. To the extent that the expertise and knowledge of the press—and of other professionals—can serve in generating this public knowledge, such professionals are valuable instrumental members of the community.

How, then, is public knowledge generated? How does it generate, among the public, a will and capacity to act? There are five clusters of activities that drive public knowledge.

• Myth and meaning: Communities—indeed, organizations and associations of all shapes, sizes, and scales—develop myths about themselves and their capacities to act. When a patriarch exhorts family members to “remember who you are and how we Campbells do things,” he is invoking a family myth to guide individual and collective actions by family members. Even state seals and mottos speak to dominant myths, such as wizened skepticism (Missouri is the “Show Me” state) or virtuous vigilance against usurpers of popular sovereignty (Virginia displays an armed Virtue astride a prostrate tyrant on its state shield).

Richard Harwood of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation says that beleaguered communities can rise to meet the challenges facing them only when they fashion a new story—a new myth—about their aspirations and capacities. Myths inform the frameworks people use to make sense and meaning out of specific events, acts, and incidents. Myths shape how we create meaning out of Hurricane Katrina’s catastrophic impact or out of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.
• Surveillance and assessment: Communities—through institutions and professions, sometimes through citizens acting in concert—pay attention to what’s happening in order to respond appropriately. They undertake community versions of corporate environmental scans and SWOT analyses—that is, analyzing how the community’s strengths and weaknesses position it to respond to opportunities and threats. Sometimes this entails formal “visioning” sessions or long-term planning for highways or economic development strategies. Often it is more informal, percolating in barbershops and dinner conversations and coffee klatches.

• Public discourse: Then communities begin to talk about what might be done about opportunities and threats—how strengths can be leveraged and weaknesses mitigated. Public discourse is not typified by how people talk—high oratory or stentorian intonations—but by what is talked about and what shapes the talk. Elements that make up public discourse, or shape it, include data-driven descriptions of current, historic, or foreseeable conditions; aspirations, values, and experiences from individual lives; options, consequences, trade-offs, and uncertainty; stakes, interests, and differential power within the community.

• Public judgment: Public discourse begins to take on a power for sustained action through something like the process of public judgment as it has been articulated by Daniel Yankelovich, the polling pioneer, and cofounder of Public Agenda. The process, as he demonstrates it, entails three main phases: consciousness raising, which pulls data from surveillance and assessment activities to direct a general public attention to a particular issue; working through choices and trade-offs; and reaching resolution about which choices offer the best course of action. He explains that these movements of a public mind may take months, years, or sometimes generations for a people fully to work through.

• Public work: Finally, the community translates its judgment into action—and assesses and revises that action based on its experience with it. Public work can be done by institutions and professions—in fact, it ought to be demanded of institutions and professions; but it transcends experts and elites. Public work, as Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota reminds us, is the work we do in common; it is the work that makes us citizens; it is the work of a public. As David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, explains in his histories and analyses of public education in America, the public schools were born literally of public work—citizens raising their own money and raising the walls of their own schools—and need to be sustained and
nurtured to this day through public work, the direct engagement of citizens with institutions of teaching and learning. Public work is seen in the continuing exercise of a collective—or “public” will and it has space for the individual, the community institution, and the professional organization alike.

All the activities in these clusters are done by individuals, citizens, working together. Experts and elites work in institutional and professional contexts. Citizens work in association with each other to form publics. Mediating institutions—such as journalism—help connect experts, elites, and citizens. These activities take place in systems and structures that bring cohesion to community life and they are described in the social-capital and social-networking literature. They enable decision making—in politics, government, and markets. And they let us know and learn through knowledge management, innovation, communities of practice, learning organizations, dialogue and deliberation, and other social-intelligence practices.

This system of public knowledge is empirical in that it is observable, but it is not inevitable. In other words, to borrow from appreciative inquiry, this synopsis describes the system when the process works best. I describe these clusters as cyclically linear, in that one cluster of activities is usually an antecedent to others and the cycle renews itself when public work helps reshape public myth and meaning. But there are clearly instances when the sequence is not followed and, in fact, may be reversed. President George W. Bush invoked his take on the myth and meaning of the 9/11 attacks and proceeded to attack Afghanistan without moving through further public surveillance and assessment, public discourse or public judgment—and without asking the public to act, except to continue shopping to support the nation’s retail economy. Lots of forces and factors can disrupt or suboptimize public knowledge. In fact, the continuing challenge to institutions and professions committed to effective democratic practice is to think through how their own practices advance or subvert the process of public knowledge. How can we make the process of public knowledge both normal and normative and not exceptional?

At the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno, we are undertaking an experiment in reconceiving journalism as a social practice, as a mediating institution in the generation of public knowledge. I describe the experiment here to illustrate by one example, in practical terms, how this public knowledge model can guide professional and institutional practice.

We are running a ten-month-long, intensive master’s program enrolling journalists and working with Nevada and California news enterprises. In this program, journalists are experimenting with interactive media tools that connect citizens, experts, and elites in discussing environmental policy and the Lake Tahoe Basin. Lake Tahoe is a beautiful lake,
nestled in the Alpine forests atop the Sierra Nevada range. As the Tahoe Basin has developed into a tourist and second-home paradise, natural wildfires have been suppressed and stringent land-use regulations have been imposed to protect the lake from runoff which decreases its clarity. Yet some of the land-use regulations—such as those limiting the removal of trees from property—actually aggravate the risk of wildfire. The people who live and work and visit the lake are divided among two states, multiple residential communities, and a host of governmental and regulatory jurisdictions.

While not commensurate with the loss of New Orleans as a functional city, wildfire at Lake Tahoe presents a somewhat parallel, if smaller scale case study. The threat was sketched by Don Thompson of the Associated Press in a report published on August 22, 2005:

Scenic, wooded Lake Tahoe, one of America’s natural gems, could easily go up in smoke, speakers at an annual lakeside summit warned Sunday. Much of the attention—and millions of dollars—have gone in recent years to protecting the high alpine lake’s fabled clear blue waters, where visibility once penetrated to more than 100 feet and has recently been improving.

But it is the forested Sierra Nevada mountains reflected in the lake that could destroy the basin that is home to multimillion dollar homes, casinos, ski resorts, lodges, restaurants and parks that draw thousands of tourists. Moreover, a fast-moving wildfire on a crowded summer weekend could pose deadly danger to panicked people fleeing over the Tahoe basin’s few winding roads….

“If there was a fire to happen here, it wouldn’t matter how much we spent to keep Tahoe blue—because it wouldn’t be blue,” said Bruce Kranz, a member of the Placer County, Calif. Board of Supervisors. Scientists say such a wildfire could set back lake restoration efforts by one hundred years.

And so our cohort of journalists is developing a Web-based publishing program designed to connect all these constituents as collaborators to weigh what is—and what ought to be—happening in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The journalists are developing Web pages to help people explore myths and meanings about the lake, to survey, and to assess threats to the lake and discuss alternative approaches to protecting it—thus working toward public judgment about appropriate policies and undertake shared work to protect the lake. The journalists are developing narratives to help raise the consciousness of everyone who cares about the lake—and they are inviting citizens...
to share their own stories about why and how the lake matters to them. They are developing Web pages to pull together agency agendas, scientific and policy expertise, elite perspectives, and citizen perspectives. They are developing Web pages to foster dialogue and deliberation about the trade-offs involved in protecting water clarity as distinct from reducing wildfire risks. One project, Promise Tahoe, makes it easy for citizens to invite one another to join in specific public work tasks to protect the lake. (All of this work can be seen in early 2007 at www.OurTahoe.org.)

In doing this work, these journalists are filling a variety of roles that transcend the normal notion of a journalist as a synthesizer of public meetings, diviner of public documents and databases, or an interviewer of notable figures. They are acting as mapmakers, laying out the policy—and actual terrain. They are acting as candid friends, offering honest feedback to citizens, experts, and elites. They are storytellers, helping capture the lake’s essence through image and narrative. They are impresarios, inviting citizens, experts, and elites to share their stories and pool their knowledge. They are mediators and facilitators of public conversation and deliberation. And they are mindful inquisitors, using photography, cartography, geographic information systems, computer animation, audio, video, and good-old text to inquire about what’s happening in the Tahoe Basin and to encourage citizens to imagine what they want to see happening there.

All this experimentation is grounded on a detailed examination of current journalistic practice and images new journalistic practices that better reflect what it takes for democracy to go well. A principle source of insight is the work of John Dewey. Dewey argued that members of a community, working together, are capable of governing themselves. The problems of modern democracy, in this understanding, do not lie in the people themselves, but in the institutions and professions that serve them poorly. Institutions and professions should cast themselves as agents of the people, not agencies working on behalf of the people. They should perceive and engage citizens as political actors, not as clients and consumers. In investigating what should be done about common problems, the processes

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They are inviting citizens, experts, and elites to share their stories and pool their knowledge.

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of inquiry—whether journalistic, legislative, or executive—should invite all stakeholders—citizen, expert, and elite—to speak and to act, and not simply privilege experts or elites. Inquiry should be considered contingent and open to revision, as more about any particular problem or opportunity is experienced and learned. Accountability, a goal of all journalism,
should be imposed on citizens for what happens in their communities, on institutions and professions for how they act as citizens’ agents, and on journalists as mediators between citizens, experts, and elites.

In First Democracy, Paul Woodruff of the University of Texas considers Athens’ 200-year experiment with self-government. He neither fawns over nor demonizes Athenian democracy. Instead, he considers its strengths and weaknesses—and particularly Athenians’ continuous efforts to strengthen their democracy. He extracts a simple but profound framework for what it takes for democracy to work well. It echoes Dewey’s work. These are the seven essential elements in Woodruff’s framework:

• Freedom from tyranny (and from being a tyrant)
• Harmony
• The rule of law
• Natural equality
• Citizen wisdom
• Reasoning without knowledge
• Education

The first four elements are fundamental to creating what we now call social capital—the personal and institutional capacity of community members to work with people like themselves and unlike themselves. These four elements embody a simple idea: We must be unencumbered (free from tyranny, deep divisions, lawlessness, and unequal standing) in order to collaborate in self-rule.

The final four elements—for natural equality belongs in both sets—are fundamental to generating what Dewey called social intelligence—the personal and institutional capacity of community members to generate insights about what the community must do to secure good consequences and avoid bad ones. This intelligence is generated through the synthesis of experiences, ideas, interests, values, and aspirations with facts or data or information. And these four elements embody a second simple idea: that we must share our insights in order to chart our best course as a community.

Woodruff illuminates the entire framework of democracy with this observation: “The outcome of most public decisions cannot be known in advance…. The future—even the near future—is unknown to us.” Dewey, too, argued that the contingent nature of decisions, the unknowable future, is a profound reason that we need democracy. We need full access to the wisdom distributed
throughout the community to make the best guess at the best course. We need to test our collective thinking. We must minimize forces that disrupt generating and testing wisdom—self-serving tyrants, or factions, or lawless chaos—so that everyone’s knowledge can be shared and evaluated.

We need the greatest investment in public knowledge so that, as a community, we can nimbly adjust and adapt as things play out differently than expected. And that’s why we need institutions and professions that take themselves seriously as community technolo-
gies—willing to examine their practices, experiment with new ones, and adapt to the ever-changing conditions, as they become manifest in a shared understanding of the dilemmas that we face as a people.

The late Cole C. Campbell was dean of the Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada, Reno. Formerly editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Virginian-Pilot, he was also a trustee of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.
The Times, Are They a’Changin’?

by John Doble

“As we work our way through the first decade of the twenty-first century, political observers are again asking about the national mood. The war in Iraq, coupled with doubts about the competence of government and whether it is the cause of national problems or their solution, leads some observers to suggest that the public’s anger is greater than ever. Others see not an angry citizenry but a polarized one. Pointing to a nation divided into “red” and “blue” states, they see an electorate intractably at odds over values issues, such as gay marriage and abortion. Declining newspaper readership, along with low voting turnout, leads others to characterize the nation’s mood as dominated by apathy, or even malaise, while still others say that increased civic involvement and the public’s renewed concern about political corruption in both parties, are indicators that the public has become both more aware and more energized than it’s been in decades.

Before trying to assess these views, let us quickly review where we’ve been and the onset of such sentiments.

When Bob Dylan recorded “The Times They Are a’Changin’” in October 1963, the American people could have scarcely imagined what the next few years had in store: One month later President John Kennedy would be assassinated; in the middle of the decade, as the war in Vietnam escalated, antiwar protests would become increasingly common and increasingly disruptive; the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in the spring of 1968 would be followed by

“Americans want to be not mere observers, but participants in the democracy.”
George Wallace’s promise to “send them a message.” After Richard Nixon’s election, American forces will stay in Vietnam for five more agonizing years. In 1972, the Watergate burglary unravels; and in 1974, President Nixon will resign in disgrace.

At the same time, cultural change abounded in music, art, and what was called lifestyle, including the use of illegal drugs. The cohort of children born after World War II—baby boomers as they were called—insisted on new rules regarding sexual behavior, gender roles, childrearing, and career paths. Following the second war between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the world’s major oil-producing countries, many in the Middle East, formed the OPEC cartel and sharply raised oil prices and curtailed supplies. This action, coupled with inflationary pressure from the Vietnam spending, set off a decline in the global economy along with long gas lines and nearly unprecedented, double-digit inflation in the United States.

When inflation and energy shortages worsened, President Carter told the public that the country faced an unprecedented crisis—an energy crisis—and that citizens must conserve by turning down their thermostats, wearing sweaters indoors, and slowing down on the highways to the new, national speed limit of 55 mph. Only then could the United States tame inflation and regain its energy independence. The country, he insisted, must see the situation as nothing less than the “moral equivalent of war.”

During the Second World War when President Roosevelt had called upon the nation to sacrifice, the American people responded magnificently. The public grew victory gardens, rationed everything from sugar to shoes to gasoline and recycled everything else. But when President Carter asked Americans to sacrifice, the response was quite different: the few who did obey the new 55 mph limit risked their lives as cars, trucks, and buses flew by them on highways; instead of turning down their thermostats, people kept their homes as toasty as ever; despite long lines at gas stations and raging inflation Americans did little in response to the president’s call, beyond making a few adjustments around the edges, such as buying more energy-efficient appliances.

In late 1979, the explanation seemed to be found in an “eyes-only” memo by the president’s pollster which was leaked to the press. The memo said the American people did not respond to the president’s call because they were tired, drained, exhausted, worn out; people needed a break from the cycle of crises. The American people were in a malaise. And so, when President Carter addressed them, he spoke about a “crisis of confidence … that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.”

In 1980, a new president promised that things would return to normal, hope would be restored, and things would be what they used to be. And for a while, all that happened. The hostage crisis, which had effectively ended the Carter presidency, was suddenly and peacefully resolved; OPEC increased oil supplies, sharply dropping the price of gasoline and ending the long lines at
gas stations. After more than four decades, the cold war ended abruptly, with a whimper. With his easygoing style, President Reagan restored the country’s faith in itself as a special place, or what Reagan called, “the city on the hill.”

The era of sacrifice was over, the president said. Instead of through conservation, the country would solve its energy problem through technological innovation, producing more, and relying on the genius of the free-enterprise system. And so the new president removed the solar panels President Carter had installed on the White House, ended the 55 mph speed limit, and told Americans to take off their sweaters and turn up their thermostats. It was time to be comfortable again.

The nation during the 1980s reaffirmed its commitment to traditional values and the can-do, best-is-yet-to-come spirit that has historically characterized the American people. However, despite the optimism of the 1980s, when the national mood seemed so much more confident than it had been a generation earlier, an array of below-the-surface changes involving how people live their daily lives were having profound consequences for people’s communities, their feelings of connectedness, and their ability to tackle and solve community and national issues.

For example, changing social norms meant more single parents, while increasing economic pressures led to larger numbers of two-income households—two changes that left people with less and less free time. As the American workforce became better educated, people became increasingly likely to relocate to pursue job opportunities—which had the indirect effects of contributing to the breakup of extended families and the decline of communities. Changing values and social standards meant that America’s children were subjected to far more media sex and violence than their parents had ever been. The HIV/AIDS epidemic raged, the crime and teen pregnancy rates soared, and the crack cocaine epidemic ravaged family life, especially in low-income and minority communities. Meanwhile computers competed with television for people’s leisure time, and so newspaper and magazine subscriptions began to decline as sharply as radio listenership had in the 1950s.

Americans became less likely to join local associations like the PTA or League of Women Voters, and fewer young people—and their adult mentors—got involved in scouting or Below a surface of indifference lay a mood of restlessness and exasperation.
Little League. In the mid-1990s, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam wrote:

Since 1965 time spent socializing and visiting is down (perhaps by one-quarter) and time devoted to clubs and organizations is down ever more sharply (by roughly half).

[Since the mid-1950s] membership records of such diverse groups as the PTA, the Elks club, the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, labor unions, and even bowling leagues … declined by roughly 25 to 50 percent.

Putnam argued that joining such associations had an array of indirect effects that profoundly influenced the health of a democratic society: “The performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens.”

Over this same period, too, another array of forces was at work. Sociologist Theda Skocpol found that national associations had become increasingly professionalized as they centralized in Washington and focused more on lobbying and generating contributions than on civic work at the local level. Instead of holding meetings and building grassroots networks (which Putnam argues increase social capital because they involve civic work performed by people acting as citizens), organizations concentrated on influencing the government. Indeed, some of the newer organizations existed only to solicit contributions. As a result, Skocpol wrote, “there are too few opportunities for large numbers of Americans to work together for broadly shared values and interests, [which] leaves our public life impoverished.”

Taken together, these shifting realities subtract from Putnam’s “networks, norms, and trust—that enable people to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” The political will that a democratic society needs to solve its short-term and especially, its long-standing problems is diminished.

In the aftermath of Desert Storm, the budget deficit created by the Reagan tax cuts mushroomed. President George H.W. Bush felt compelled to raise taxes; the country fell into a severe but short-lived recession; the president’s popularity plummeted and so did the nation’s confidence. Many pundits and political observers concluded that Americans were once again caught up in a malaise—apathetic and indifferent toward politics and public life. Pointing to indicators like low voter turnout, Americans had become—to use the language of the 1960s—turned off and tuned out.

But there was another explanation. In a nationally acclaimed study for the Kettering Foundation, Richard Harwood, founder of The Harwood Institute, discovered that the American people were anything but apathetic. In a seminal work, Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America, Harwood wrote that Americans were deeply and profoundly alienated, and that just below a surface of what seemed to be indifference lay a mood of restlessness and exaspera-
tion that bordered on desperation.

Americans feel “impotent when it comes to politics,” Harwood wrote. They feel as if they “have been ‘pushed out’ of the political process and left little room to understand,

We have a class of professional politicians who make politics their career.

engage, and make a difference in the substance of politics.” The American people “feel cut off from political debate [and do not] see their concerns reflected in the way current issues are discussed.” People become involved in public life “when they believe they can make a difference,” wrote Harwood. It is the possibility—or a sense of possibility—that their efforts will matter that leads average citizens to spend the time and energy in trying to bring about change. It is this sense that was missing from people’s lives.

Harwood’s most sweeping and important finding was that “reconnecting citizens and politics will take more than legislative changes that attempt to make the system and its ‘loyalists’ more accountable.” Large numbers of Americans want to be, not mere observers, but participants in the democracy, citizens in the fullest sense of the word. Too many otherwise well-intentioned reformers and reform-minded organizations do not, in his view, see the whole picture. Instead of focusing merely on accountability, true political reinvigoration will occur only when the public is reconnected to and reinvolved with politics and political life.

The Harwood study created a good deal of controversy. Some doubted or at least cautioned against quick acceptance of its central conclusions; while others found corroborative evidence in the spectacular, out-of-nowhere success of Ross Perot, who brought the promise of radical but centrist change, and later, other nonpolitical mavericks, including Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger, were elected to governorships.

Still the 1990s may nonetheless go down as one of the most prosperous, peaceful decades the United States has ever enjoyed. The stock market boomed, while unemployment and inflation were near record lows; interest rates were lower than they had been in 20 years; and the federal budget ran a surplus for the first time since the Eisenhower years. Crime and illegal drug use, along with the teen pregnancy rate, decreased dramatically. Americans also benefited from numerous medical and technological advancements: Life expectancy increased, new drugs were discovered almost weekly, and doctors steadily made progress in treating cancer, Alzheimer’s, AIDS, and other longtime scourges. On the industrial front, new technology promised to enhance productivity, while providing consumers with ever lower priced computers and other technological appliances. While problems persisted in the Middle East and Bosnia, and
new ones arose on the Asian subcontinent, the forces of democracy were, in a global sense, on the rise, especially in this hemisphere, and peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable problems in Northern Ireland and South Africa were within reach.

Yet despite the overall peace and prosperity of the decade for the United States, the American people, as represented by a diverse group of more than 3,000 people who attended National Issues Forums in communities across the country in the late 1990s, continued to feel as alienated from, frustrated by, displeased with, and angry at their government as people had, nearly a decade earlier, when *Citizens and Politics* was published.

As people deliberated about the role of money in politics and about the challenges of governing America in the declining years of the twentieth century, they did not question the legitimacy of the government or doubt that its authority came from the citizenry. They did not challenge the proposition that “we, the people” created the United States of America. They did not dispute that government at the federal, state, and local levels is in fact a creation of, and a government of, the people. Instead, their discontent focused on the other two themes President Lincoln stressed at Gettysburg: whether their government was *by* or *for* the people of the United States.

In those forums, many suggested that government is no longer *by* the people. Instead of citizen-legislators, forum participants said we now have a class of professional politicians who make politics their career and whose main interest is getting elected again and again. Contrasting things today with how they were more than two centuries earlier, a woman in a forum in Newark, Delaware, said, “I don’t think the original intent was to have career politicians. The founders worked on government, then went home to their farms. They saw government service as a part-time job.” But running for elective office has become so expensive that the average person is priced out from even considering running. In the words of a woman in a Jackson, Wyoming, forum, “Real people don’t join the [political] process; it’s too expensive.”

People in the forums saw little or no role for themselves in the political process. A woman from Atlanta, Georgia, said: “I watch *60 Minutes* … and I see a lot of abuses in government. … But you just feel that as a private citizen—‘what can you do to change that?’ … We have no voice.” More broadly, people in the forums felt little sense of ownership of the government. In a forum in Dothan, Alabama, a woman said, “We’re not connected to the government. There’s a definite feeling of ‘them’ and ‘us.’” A woman in Los Angeles, California, added: “The government … is definitely not ‘our’ government.”

In some fundamental respects, it would seem that many Americans do indeed feel that government does not understand their reality and is fundamentally out of touch with their lives and problems. George H.W. Bush not knowing about supermarket scanners, Bill
Clinton grossly underestimating the public’s reaction to his last minute pardons, and George W. Bush’s lack of awareness of events surrounding Katrina were only a few notable moments when officials did not see reality as most Americans do. In NIF forums about the public schools, people often said the school system does not understand their reality and so they have withdrawn from it. And, for a great many Americans, including the roughly 50 percent who fail to vote in presidential elections, the system as a whole often feels irrelevant, if not technically illegitimate.

To equate all this with a public thinking that the political system lacks legitimacy is problematic, if legitimacy is defined in the usual sense. The public’s response to 9/11, Katrina, and President Carter’s call not to use credit cards demonstrates that just beneath Americans’ alienation is a reservoir of faith in each other and a deep-seated belief in the system’s legitimacy.

Additionally, people in the forums did suggest that government is too often not for the people. Again and again people said the government gives priority to rich, powerful special interests instead of the broad, general public interest. In participants’ view, the powerful influence of money overwhelms the voice of the people, so that the public’s interest is repeatedly subordinated to special interests. A woman from St. Petersburg, Florida, said, “People feel like they can’t compete with the $10,000 contributions made by large companies.” A Portland, Oregon, man added, “All this soft money, all this hard money, all this in-between money—it’s sickening.” People believe that government is more responsive to special interests because of the influence of money in the form of campaign contributions; and that politicians are more interested in partisan politics and personal advantage than in working together to solve common problems.

When faced with a common problem, Americans believe “the public” is more capable of figuring out a common sense solution than any other political actor, especially the bureaucracy or a group of “politicians.” In work for the state of Vermont, Doble Research has found that the public has more confidence in juries made up of average citizens than in any other component of the criminal justice system, including judges and even the police. Juries, people think, are more likely to determine guilt or innocence correctly than judges are.
The public believes there is great strength in its collective wisdom. People, however, think the system does not tap into, or respond to that collective wisdom and feel frustrated about making their voices heard. They see such community and civic activities as they can join to be separate from the “political machine,” and they seem resigned to the fact that they can’t make much of an impact on politics, as understood in the sense of governments.

And polls show that Americans feel that government itself does a poor job in addressing core public priorities, especially those related to health care and education. In the forums, people regularly said that government—with some exceptions, including Medicare—uses money wastefully and that public institutions operate inefficiently. In work on education for the Kettering Foundation, people talked at length about inefficiency and waste in the public schools, including how basic problems, such as leaky roofs, are not solved. In the “Governing America” forums, people often favored shifting services away from the federal or state governments, where they believe local officials could have a better understanding of the issues and would be more efficient and accountable. The response to Vice President Gore’s efficiency initiative in the 1990s also suggested that Americans yearn for more. By envisioning the American people as consumers, that initiative was an attempt to make government more efficient and responsive. But it failed in part because it failed to understand the public’s sense of itself and its role: Americans want to be treated like citizens, not consumers. They want a sense of connectedness to and ownership of government and public affairs.

Moreover, since (in the words of a Dallas, Texas, man) “money is power,” the general sense remained that average Americans feel powerless. An Oregon man lamented, “I don’t have the kind of access to resources [that would enable me] to really have an impact on the decisions elected officials make.” A Florida woman said, “There’s a tremendous feeling of hopelessness.”

If the public’s mood between the beginning and end of the 1990s was essentially unchanged, many political observers nonetheless saw something radically different emerging with the millennium.

The conventional wisdom among political scientists holds that one of the great strengths of the United States, and a precondition for any stable democracy, is that the public as a whole share a wide array of core values and agree about an array of basic political issues. “Democracy requires compromise,” wrote Dan Yankelovich, “and compromise is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of others.” As a result, and unlike the experience of some emerging democracies or even some European democracies, political
life in the United States has generally evolved without radical change. With the exception of the Civil War and the Great Depression, American political change has not been violent or characterized by swings from one ideological extreme to another.

Beginning with the presidential election in 2000, and with the exception of a brief period around 9/11, some political observers felt that a new mood had descended on the country and that the broad, general American consensus may be threatening to unravel. In *What's the Matter with Kansas*, Thomas Franks describes the rise of conservative populism and the marriage of economic conservatives to cultural conservatives incensed about values issues like prayer in school, abortion, and gay marriage. He quotes Newt Gingrich, who once described Democrats as “the enemy of normal Americans.” David Brooks and David Broder write about a cultural divide between those living on the coasts and in the heartland. And in *Commentary*, in 2004, political scientist James Q. Wilson observed:

Even in the last half century from 1948 to (roughly) 1996, marked as it was by sometimes strong expressions of feeling over

[who] the presidency should go to … opinion surveys do not indicate widespread detestation of one candidate or the other, or of the people who supported him. Now they do. Today, many Americans regularly

“The public” is more capable of figuring out a common sense solution than any other political actor.

… [assert] that [President] Bush “betrayed” America by launching a war designed to benefit his friends and corporate benefactors.

Other political observers have disputed that Americans are as polarized as Wilson and others suggest. For example, in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Morris Fiorina writes that even on the most controversial issues, such as gender equality, tolerance of moral values, gun control, and abortion, people in both “red” and “blue” states take similar, moderate positions. “I’m willing to grant that 10 percent of people are highly polarized,” he writes, “and it’s always been that way.”

To explore the nature and depth of the polarization in late 2004, this writer, with Juliet Potter, convened focus groups in two politically conservative and two liberal, or progressive, sites: Miami, Florida, and Tulsa, Oklahoma (the self-described “buckle of the Bible belt”), and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Madison, Wisconsin. Two of the groups were held with self-described conservatives and strong supporters of President Bush,
and the others with self-described liberals or progressives and strong supporters of Senator John Kerry. Each group was asked its views about four of the country’s most polarized issues: abortion, homosexual rights

A precondition for democracy is that the public shares a wide array of core values.

(including gay marriage), affirmative action, and the war in Iraq.

As anticipated, the groups’ starting points were miles apart. The groups in Miami and Tulsa strongly opposed gay marriage while the other two groups were in favor. A Miami woman said that “To legalize [gay marriage] is the beginning of the end.”

But as people in the more conservative groups deliberated about the rights of homosexuals, it became apparent that their views were not as far from the more progressive groups as first impressions might suggest. For example, almost no one in either Tulsa or Miami said homosexuals should be fired or discriminated against on the job. Many talked easily about their homosexual acquaintances, neighbors, friends, and family members, saying homosexuality is part of life. Most strongly felt that people should be treated as equals. A Tulsa man said, “I don’t like the lifestyle [but what’s important is] … treating people as equals.”

Perhaps most instructive is that in these focus groups, deliberation seemed to reduce polarization. Near the end of the discussions, the groups were asked to imagine they were on a jury with people who had diametrically opposite views on cases involving a U.S. service member accused of abusing an Iraqi suspected of being a member of Al Qaeda and a right-to-life activist accused of murdering a doctor at an abortion clinic. People in all four groups said that no matter how they felt about the accused, they would acquit or convict if that’s where the evidence led them. “We’re not deliberating about abortion,” said a Miami woman who strongly opposed abortion, “we’re deliberating about murder.” A Pittsburgh woman said:

If the evidence shows that no matter how much you may hate everything [the accused] stands for—and he’s spouting murderous things left, right, and center [in court]—if there’s a reasonable doubt that he actually pulled the trigger, then I think we could all probably acquit him.

Even more important, people in all four groups were confident that their ideological opposites would, like themselves, also honestly strive to reach a just verdict. “All Americans called to jury duty know what their duty is,” said a Miami woman. A woman in Madison said, “People are sincere enough actually to look at what’s happening, and talk about it, and talk through it. It might take an hour; it might take two days; but it will get done.”

Despite the values issues that divide people so deeply, there are a host of other deeply held values that are widely shared or subscribed to. Polarization then, while real, obfuscates what unites us. Additionally, it seems to be a function of both the political framing of an issue and whether people have time to deliberate about it after considering other voices and points of view.
Today, the public’s mood may still be shifting. Polls show that in some respects, polarization is decreasing rather sharply. While abortion, the rights of homosexuals, and gay marriage continue to be divisive issues, they played a far less important role in the 2006 election than they did just two years earlier. Public sentiments about the war in Iraq also seem to be crystallizing, with most saying the war was a mistake but also hesitant about precipitous withdrawal. Some observers see hopeful signs—including Richard Harwood, who has spotted what he calls “pockets of progress” at the community level—of people joining together to deal with common problems.

Evidence also emerged in the past year’s “Democracy’s Challenge” forums in 2005-2006 in which National Issues Forums participants seemed to clearly recognize and acknowledge the importance of citizenship and the responsibilities, as well as the rights, that should accompany it. Many believe, after all, that rekindling a sense of citizenship is necessary for people to come together and resolve public problems. As such, people called for the reinstitution and revamping of civic education, primarily in the home but extending to the schools, to instill in America’s youth the importance of civic engagement and an understanding of what citizenship truly means. Many supported initiatives like community service and volunteer work at the high-school level as ways of driving home the value of participation. Regardless of how to achieve it, it was clear that the responsibilities of citizenship and bringing the government back to the people were viewed as essential to mending what they clearly recognized as a troubled system. A man from Newark noted, “The concept of a country coming together to do something is a wonderful thing.”

Yet despite such wafts of enthusiasm for the “rebirth” of citizenship, cynicism and skepticism persist. Indeed, as they deliberated in meetings across the country, some considered the idea of rekindling citizenship to be less and less realistic, with participants identifying barriers to building civic muscle, including apathy, practical constraints, such as balancing work with the responsibilities of everyday life and limited time, structural barriers, a mistrust of the public—themselves and their fellow citizens—to work towards the common good, and the inability to imagine what an effective public would look like or what it would do. In short, these “obstacles” blocked participants from viewing a strong citizenry as realistic and made it impossible for them to imagine how such citizenship would be truly discovered.

By the end of many forums, however, participants had clearly at least concluded that their initial take was not quite right. While initially seeing only forces beyond their control—eroding values, a decrease in community, and an unresponsive political system—many had decided by the end of the forums that all these issues that challenge democratic achievement were connected to a larger challenge: the challenge of maintain-
ing a healthy, vibrant democratic community and country. And they decided that they, after all, therefore had a role to play in dealing with our democracy’s challenges. In some forums, participants started discussing the issue not as “government’s problem” but as “our problem.” In effect, many—though by no means all—forum participants across the country had, by the end of the two-hour deliberation, claimed the issue as their own and saw democracy’s challenge as a challenge facing citizens like themselves.

The forums suggest that the future is unclear. But there are unmistakable signs that a new mood is possible. While some could not piece together a model of citizenship and people—themselves and their neighbors—to confront the troubles their government had evidenced, others recognized the potential power of an engaged public and left the deliberations feeling more efficacious and empowered to understand the thorniest problems facing our communities and our country—and even to tackle them. As a Delaware woman stated, “This is where it’s at from the beginning: ‘Of the people, by the people, and for the people.’ It started that way, and that’s where it should stay.”

John Doble, whose Doble Research Associates specializes in analyzing public and leadership opinion on complex policy issues, has recently rejoined Public Agenda as senior vice president. His own work has appeared in major research publications and includes an annual report from the National Issues Forums.
“Within a democratic deliberation, all parties should become more aware of their interests.”

To make deliberation work in democratic politics, particularly when a group is deliberating to a decision binding on all participants, we need to find ways of discussing not only the common good but also the self-interest of the participants.

Many commentators on deliberation have argued that deliberation should make us speak in terms of “we” and not “I.” But if we can never speak of our own self-interests, including our narrow material interests, we will not be able to put on the table some of the most important issues that as a group we need to address. Facing and understanding self-interest is particularly important in distributive issues, when the group must hammer out a solution based on distributive fairness.

Recognizing and asserting self-interest has at least four functions in deliberation. Most important, it informs the search for a common good, in some cases forming the only basis for an aggregative common good. It helps participants figure out what they want and need. It also helps them become understood and respected for what they want and need. And it helps unveil hegemonic understandings of the common good when those understandings have evolved to mask subtle forms of oppression.

Today’s deliberative theory needs to integrate thinking about self-interest with thinking about the common good. It needs to integrate negotiations and even bargaining with deliberation. In short, it needs to integrate conflict with commonality.
To understand the role of self-interest in the search for a common good, consider the planning for what became the first U.S. “teach-in” against the war in Vietnam. William Gamson recalls a meeting of 46 faculty of the University of Michigan who had committed themselves to a daylong antiwar moratorium in which faculty called off their classes. The university administration and several influential state legislators considered this action illegal. In response to this strong opposition, some of the committed faculty had suggested instead a 24-hour session that they called a “teach-in,” which did not require canceling classes. In the intense deliberation that ensued, lasting until 4:00 in the morning, Gamson remembers vividly one of his colleagues, “a new assistant professor,” saying, “I’m in favor of the alternative but it’s not because I think it is more or less effective as a protest against the Vietnam War. It’s because I’m scared. I’m afraid of losing my job. I could repeat some of the arguments for switching that others have given, but that’s not the real reason.” As every person in the gathering spoke, a clear majority began to emerge for dropping the original plan. Eventually the supporters of canceling classes, although disappointed, pledged their support for the alternative.

One can easily imagine a deliberation in which the new assistant professor felt so constrained by norms proscribing arguments based on self-interest that he could not speak his thoughts aloud. The explicitness with which he underlined his “real reason” suggests that even at this meeting he felt some pressure from such norms. Yet a deliberation in which he could not express that self-interest would not have resulted in as close an approximation to the participants’ common good. After its inauguration at the University of Michigan, the innovation of the teach-in spread to more than 50 campuses in the United States, an unlikely outcome if the form of protest had required faculty to breach established academic practices.

In addition, in some cases the common good of a community is aggregative, composed of no more than a sum of the individual goods of the members. In such cases we cannot know what that sum is if we do not know what the individual goods of the members are. And it would be hard to know what those individual goods were if the individuals could not tell us.

Similarly, communities often need to distribute relatively fair, scarce goods that many want. Many such cases are zero-sum, so that a good for me inevitably entails the
loss of a good for you. A budget process with a fixed income often has this characteristic. To allocate zero-sum goods justly (that is, accounting for relevant considerations), a group needs to know what its different segments need. In this process, different individuals from different segments of the community usually have to articulate what they need. It is not useful in this process to have norms that no individuals or groups should think about or articulate what they need in terms of their own self-interest.

Consider in this context a couple deciding whether to move to Chicago or Boston, when one member of the couple has a good job offer in Chicago and the other a good offer in Boston. One or another city may be best for both members of the couple in the long run. If so, those arguments should be made and should carry great weight. But those arguments may not be dispositive. Then the norms of discussion should allow both individuals to recognize and articulate where their individual self-interest lies, in order to work out some fair arrangement. For example, if the couple moves to Boston, the one who has to turn down the job in Chicago could gain some offsetting good or accumulate “credit” for a future decision. Both individuals may agree, for example, that the person who “loses” in this decision should “win” in the next big career choice.

If in the deliberations neither member of the couple thinks it legitimate to recognize and articulate his or her self-interest, the two may end up making the decision entirely on the basis of a common good that does not encompass all of the issues involved. They may, for example, phrase the entire deliberation in terms of what is good for the children. In this case their discussions of what is good for the children will probably be freighted, at least unconsciously, with the other issues that have normatively been ruled off the table. Ideas about the “good of the children” will take on an intensity the basis of which the parents will not let themselves recognize. Although

Interests, or enlightened preferences, can change with changes in one’s identity.

the failure to articulate individual self-interest may produce a communal spirit, that spirit comes at the risk of future problems. It also may result in injustice to the individual who accepts a loss without compensation or explicit acknowledgement.

Similarly, in an academic department to which the dean gives one new faculty position, the greatest weight in a discussion over where to allocate that position should be given to arguments that an allocation to one or another subfield will promote the excellent work or even the external reputation of the department as a whole. But it may not be obvious which allocation will be best for the department. When no greater good of this sort is clear, the good of the department may be best served by giving one subfield the position and giving the others some other good or promising them the next available free position.

The expression of self-interest (as the constituency’s interest) rightly enters into much of the deliberative work of parliaments.
Whenever the specific choices at hand have individually a zero-sum character and a unitary common good on which everyone can substantively agree cannot be achieved, a negotiated deal can produce an aggregate or composite common good (for example, an outcome in which each party is better off than in the status quo). In these circumstances, the discussion of how to compensate for losses in other areas or extend trade-offs over time will be a central feature of the deliberation. Thus, when just distributions are at stake, both the “I” voice and the voice of self-interest may be normatively required. Legitimating self-interest does not imply that either preferences or interests need be static. Even one’s interests, or enlightened preferences, can change with changes in one’s identity, as reasons, arguments, and facts join with one’s perceptions of one’s own experiences to affect one’s identity.

Self-interest has, secondly, a role in forging self and mutual understanding. To create a common good that appropriately recognizes self-interest, any deliberation that encompasses conflicting interests must also include some assessment of the intensity of preferences around each component of those interests. In these cases, self-understanding and mutual understanding increase when participants can discuss their own and others’ interests directly. Honest talk about these matters can help members discover more accurately and deeply what they themselves really want and need. In the process, they may also come to understand better what others want and need. As the partners talk, and particularly as they negotiate, they can come to understand where the indissoluble conflicts lie between their wants or needs and those of others as well as what commonalities can be forged between their own wants or needs and those of others.

It is not always easy to understand what one really wants, even within the horizon of one’s own narrow self-interest. The task becomes harder as one begins to experience the good of others as one’s own. As each of us tries to figure out what we want most and what is best for us, in our most expansive as well as our narrow selves, thinking alone can get us only so far. At some point we also need the thoughts of others, including those who stand to lose by our gains and gain by our losses.

In a dyadic negotiation, for example, each negotiator has an incentive to help the “opposing” negotiator find ways of satisfying his or her constituency’s needs at less cost and more gain to the needs of the first negotiator’s constituency than either had originally imagined. Assume that you need x and y, and come into the negotiation thinking that to satisfy these needs you need $x'$ and $y'$, which are costly to me. If I can show you correctly that $x''$ and $y''$ will satisfy your needs equally
well or better at less cost to me, then we can settle for \( x^2 \) and \( y^2 \) and both be better off. In this interchange I have an incentive to work with you creatively to see if we can together come up with \( x^2 \) and \( y^2 \).

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**They understand where conflicts lie as well as commonalities.**

Jürgen Habermas and others have contrasted deliberation with bargains and negotiations, giving bargains and negotiations a negative normative status. Yet a form of deal making in which I work with you, for my own narrow self-interest, to help you find a form of your narrow self-interest that costs me less or gives me greater gain, is a process that in a free, equal, respectful, and nonmanipulative setting can deepen my self-understanding, your self-understanding, our mutual understanding, and our understanding of the world. It is thus an important and integral component of deliberation properly understood.

Greater awareness of self-interest also improves deliberation in instances of “the Abilene paradox,” in which all members of a group go along with a suggestion because they think it will help the others even though they do not want that outcome themselves. This paradox is one form of the larger phenomenon of “group-think,” in which members of a group come to agree with a perceived group consensus even when each harbors unexpressed doubts about that consensus. In this case altruism about others’ interests prevents the expression of self-interest, to everyone’s detriment.

Third, bargains based on an explicit recognition of the interests of self and others can even create a form of solidarity based on the mutual respect of individuals who know that their counterparts understand them and their own situation realistically. Studying constituent assemblies, Jon Elster (in *Deliberative Democracy*) found that political actors engaged in more bargaining behind closed doors than in open assemblies. Coding legislative transcripts in four countries, Steiner and his colleagues (in *Deliberative Politics in Action*) found that legislators expressed more respect toward the claims of others behind closed doors than in open assemblies. It would not be far-fetched to conclude that the processes of bargaining and negotiation in closed sessions generated not only the external expressions of respect that the coders measured but also actual respect for the claims of others. In good negotiations, negotiators often report this effect. Yet the literature on deliberation has not noted this potential for creating mutual respect in the process of negotiation.

Finally, acknowledging and respecting self-interest helps to unmask the ways that a reigning definition of the common good can make less powerful members of a community
either less aware of their own interests or convinced that they ought to suppress those interests for the common good, even when others are not doing their just share. Banning from deliberation or from legitimate democratic procedures either the expression and pursuit of self-interest or the process of bargaining and negotiating over conflicting material interests makes it harder for those whose preferences are induced by hegemonic external conditions to probe and clarify their own underlying interests.

Consider a group of workers who mistakenly think their interests are congruent with those of their employers and who uncover, through discussion with those employers, facts that undermine assumptions that their employers’ greater power to set the terms of the debate have led the workers to make. These workers would not be able to reach their greater self-understanding if the norms of deliberation precluded their thinking in self-interested terms. Early in the debates over participatory democracy, Peter Bachrach pointed out that in some circumstances democratic participation should produce more conflict, as workers, for example, discover that the reality they experience is not what the management or owners had said it was. That insight is as important today as when Bachrach first voiced it. When members of a subordinate group are kept in their place in part by dominant assumptions that their subordination is natural, only by talking together about their experiences can they even develop a language for thinking through and understanding their interests. In such cases, deliberation produces more conflict along with more self-understanding.

Rousseau and others have rightly warned against factions. But subgroups of likeminded or similarly situated participants, regardless of their status, may need to caucus together before a larger deliberation to examine mutually what they think their interests are. After deliberation within the subgroups, a fuller deliberation with others who have conflicting interests lets the members of each group understand the costs to others of what is good for them, the practical constraints of their desires, the possible joint solutions available, and the things each party holds most dear. Earlier caucusing of this kind is particularly important for individuals who might be disadvantaged by a dominant ideology. Members of subordinate groups often need to develop counterhegemonic ideas and understandings of their interests by finding a space for deliberation sufficiently removed from the usual sanctions and incentives to develop, through

By talking together they develop a language for thinking through.
intense and redundant interaction, challenges to the existing worldview. Talking together in this “safe space,” or “enclave,” some members of groups marginalized in the larger society may create a variety of ideas, interpretations, and symbols that challenge existing ways of thinking. Those who are less protected from the sanctions and incentives of everyday life then select from the variation produced in the enclave the ideas that they will use to challenge the existing order. The dynamic is an evolutionary one of variation and selection. The process of a separate caucus, which conduces to factionalization and thus can undermine an orientation to the common good, is nevertheless often necessary for the members of some groups to become appropriately aware of their interests.

In short, my argument is that within a democratic deliberation all parties should become more aware of their interests—including their most narrow, material self-interests—and should communicate those interests effectively to others. There are four reasons for this practice:

1. acknowledging self-interest can inform the search for a common good;
2. it can help participants understand their interests and the interests of others;
3. it can promote mutual respect;
4. and it can help members of subordinate groups penetrate false definitions of the common good.

The historical opposition to self-interest has not generally recognized these four reasons for acknowledging and exploring self-interest in deliberation. Democratic theorists have often handled the relation between concern for one’s narrow self-interest and concern for the common good by simply declaring illegitimate the motivation of narrow self-interest. Aristotle set the stage for this kind of theorizing in his Politics, when, undoubtedly reflecting the consensus of his time, he declared, “The law is reason unaffected by desire.” That thought, which became the mainstay of the European natural law tradition, greatly affected deliberative theorists of the early and mid-twentieth century. Jürgen Habermas, for example, explicitly opposed “the concept of law as an expression of will,” promoting in contrast “the concept of law as an expression of reason.” He approvingly quoted Carl Schmitt as saying, “law is not the will of one or of many people, but something rational-universal; not voluntas, but ratio.” Hannah Arendt also explicitly contrasted deliberation over conflicting opinions with voting (and implicitly negotiating) over conflicting interests. “Opinions,” she wrote in On Revolution: are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate…. The same is not true for questions of interest and welfare,…where the need for action and decision arises out of the various conflicts among interest groups.

In these matters, the voters act:
with respect to interest, that is, at the expense of the wishes and interests of other groups of voters. In all these instances the voter acts out of concern with his private life and well-being, so that the residue of power he still holds

Deliberative theorists can learn here from practitioners.

in his hands resembles rather the reckless coercion with which a blackmailer forces his victim into obedience than the power that arises out of joint action and joint deliberation.

In my analysis the best discussions clarify both conflict and commonality in material interests, allowing into the discussion desires, wills, and interests that include concerns for private life and well-being. Although admitting self-interest of this sort into deliberation is not always compatible with forging genuine commonality and promoting concern for the common good, the best deliberations manage both. Less successful deliberations obscure the outlines of underlying conflict either by exacerbating animosity or promoting false community.

The problem in practice is that the institutions and procedures that help individuals engage in conflict can also obscure the possibility of a common good, just as the institutions and procedures that help individuals discover or create a common good can also obscure their underlying conflicts. As Archon Fung has pointed out:

Discussions aimed at fostering and clarifying individual preferences, for example by airing conflicts and advocating conflicting principles, may advance individual rationality while rendering participants less flexible and more self-interested.

The institutions of adversary democracy often impede the discovery and creation of commonality while facilitating the emergence of conflict. Similarly many deliberative processes, designed to aim at understanding, in practice suppress dissent. Without the voices activated by adversary democratic institutions, public deliberation can be severely curtailed and conflicting interests suppressed rather than clarified.

Deliberative theorists can learn here from practitioners. Practitioners in the field of conflict resolution often work to help their groups explore both conflict and commonality. Functioning legislatures of long standing have also evolved their practices on the basis of implicit normative criteria that foster commonality, as well as illuminating conflict. Let us make these implicit criteria explicit. Few if any practitioners consciously see their efforts as a matter of preserving the best in both conflict and commonality or exploring the necessary trade-offs between the two. Few deliberative groups that successfully achieve both ends describe their processes as fusing conflict and commonality. Nor have democratic theorists made the question of integrating conflict and commonality a central focus of their concern.

Recently, Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers have agreed that statements of self-interest
can play an important and legitimate role in deliberation. They write:

Deliberation does not preclude statements of self-interest. The deliberative view holds that expressions of self-interest do not qualify as justifications for anything—as statements of reasons in the desired sense. But it admits them as ways to present information. For example, a relevant consideration in deliberation, and a possible justification or reason for a policy, is that it represents a fair accommodation of the interests of all, or advances the good of those who are in greatest need. But to know that it does either of these things, we need to know what those interests are, and expressions of self-interest by relevant persons are one way to find that out. Where the deliberative norm cuts is simply that saying “this policy is in my (my group’s) interest” is not itself a reason for adopting a policy, but again it may be very relevant information in choosing among different policies.

The problem with this analysis is that when the group has an aggregative common good (one calculated by summing individual goods or based on a negotiated outcome superior for all to the status quo), simply stating that something is in one’s interest is a justification. In a deliberation in which each individual serially said, “This policy is in my (or my group’s) interests,” and each identified the same policy (further discussion involving only means and no others being affected), the group would, through this process alone, have discovered a common good. That a policy meets everyone’s interest counts in these circumstances as a reason “in the desired sense.” Indeed, when the common good is a sum of individual interests, such a reason appropriately counts as dispositive, none other being necessary.

Archon Fung has recently suggested a two-stage analysis of deliberation that legitimates self-interest in the first stage of the deliberation, when participants clarify their interests, but requires at the second stage, in the moment of decision, that participants consider only the common good. This formula mirrors Habermas’s “two-track” process of deliberation in the public sphere and the legislature. The first stage of public opinion and will formation makes it possible for individuals, in Fung’s words, to “realize and effectively assert [their] rational self-interests” and practice a kind of “instrumental rationality” in which they advance their own ends as well as collective ends through discussion. This stage appropriately includes “testimony, storytelling, relating needs, principled advocacy, and the airing of conflicts and tensions.” Only in the second stage of “reasoned social choice” (or “reasonableness”) do participants “constrain the pursuit of their own self-interest according to the norms of justification.” In this stage:

Reasonableness may require partici-
pants to restrain themselves when others offer compelling reasons based on common group interests or commonly held norms such as respect, reciprocity, and fairness. For example, reasonableness may require someone to withdraw his support from a proposal that would best advance his own self-interest because others are more needy.

In this second stage of deliberation the common good should prevail over self-interest: “[W]hen each participant decides what the social choice should be, she should choose the proposal backed by the most compelling reasons.”

Of course, even at this second stage Fung allows a fair bargain, based on both self-interest and political equality, to enter the deliberation. His example, “You do for me this time, and I do for you the next time around,” suggests that when choices are inherently zero-sum and in other contexts of fundamental conflict, reasonableness can include fair aggregative formulae that balance narrow self-interests. The subtle way that bargains slip into Fung’s second stage suggests that cordoning off self-interest to a separate first stage fails to acknowledge fully the importance of self-interest even in the moment of choice.

One could perhaps embrace both self-interest and classic deliberative goals by postulating that interest clarification may legitimately go on up to the very instant of social choice, with legitimate social choice including both the outcomes of fair bargains and fair aggregation. Then the appropriate normative principle could be:

In deliberation, clarify common and conflicting interests; in choice, vote 1) for the substantive common good or, if this is not available, 2) for the outcome of a fair bargain or negotiation, and if these are not available, 3) for your self-interest in a voting scheme that aggregates interests fairly.

Such a principle would encompass the full range of legitimately democratic options, including negotiation and majority rule. It would acknowledge that when there is no obvious common good other than aggregation, simply voting for one’s self-interest can further the fair aggregative process.

This incorporation of self-interest and negotiation generates what might be considered a neo-pluralist conception of deliberation.
The first generation of pluralism focused largely on the aggregation of competing interests and tended to ignore concern for the common good. In my own past work I have argued against the dominance of this “adversary” democratic view of politics, pointed out how critical it is to democracy for the members of the polity to be able to deliberate about and choose a common good, stressed the communal goals that most people have for their polities and for their own characters, and demonstrated how polities that were in fact able to approach a common good on many issues could function well and satisfyingly on a conceptually different democratic basis from those polities that assumed conflicting interests. Yet even in that early work I also urged members of any democratic polity, small or large, to move as fluidly as possible back and forth from assumptions and procedures geared toward the common interest to assumptions and procedures geared toward handling irresolvable conflict, and to consider both sets of assumptions and procedures legitimate forms of democracy.

My current proposal for incorporating self-interest and negotiation into our conceptions and practice of democratic deliberation—at least when we are deliberating to a binding decision—follows the lead of my earlier work. It is not easy at one time both to elucidate conflict and encourage commonality. It is not easy to allow, or even encourage, the expression of self-interest and also to encourage fellow-feeling, duty, and the pursuit of the common good. I never thought it easy to segue from the assumptions and procedures of a democracy aimed at the common good to the assumptions and procedures of adversary democracy and back again. I do know, however, that successful functioning democracies actually manage these feats, some better and some worse. It is vital, I believe, for empirical political scientists and scholars of negotiation to study the practice of successful processes that combine the common good and conflicting interests. Democratic theorists should not get in the way of this investigation by declaring one or the other strand in the combination illegitimate.

Deliberative democrats have always placed a high value on contestation. Conflict in opinion was the very stuff of politics for Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin, Benjamin Barber, and many others. It is not conflict per se but the conflict of material self-interests that for these theorists contaminated the “political.” I argue here that a major goal of democracy itself—of the political, of legitimate democracy, and of deliberation—is to produce well-reasoned and fair decisions in conditions that reflect as closely as possible the equality and freedom of each individual. Those conditions must include the normative legitimation of self-interest.

Jane Mansbridge, Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values at Harvard’s Malcolm Wiener Center, has written extensively on democratic deliberation and public understanding. This essay elaborates ideas earlier expressed in her chapter for Deliberative Democracy and Its Discontents, edited by Samantha Besson and José Luis Martí.
hat does it take for democracy to work as it should? 
Or, put another way, what does it take for citizens to make sound decisions that will lead to effective action? That has been the subject of every issue of the Review. And this issue completes a trilogy published in tribute to the contributions that deliberative forums have made in answering this fundamental question. Many of these forums have used the issue books in the National Issues Forums series, and a host of forum organizers in civic, educational, and other organizations have just celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary. Anniversaries are occasions for reflection and, in that spirit, I want to sum up what seem to me important contributions of deliberative forums, drawing on Review articles that point to the larger significance of what might otherwise appear to be little more than nostalgia for the town meetings of early America.

Forums using the NIF issue books have encouraged reasoned deliberation on polarizing issues, such as abortion and race relations, and they have brought the voice of citizens to bear on critical problems, such as terrorism and the high costs of health care. (John Doble has done a splendid job of capturing the outcomes of these deliberations.) Yet nothing has been more useful than the insights that have come from public deliberations about democracy itself and about what citizens can do to make the difference they would like to make in our political system—even if they doubt that they can.

“... afterthoughts
by David Mathews

“... If the collective public doesn’t really exist, then the entire democratic enterprise is in serious trouble.”
Much like Alice in Wonderland, Kettering has followed public deliberation down into a rabbit hole and discovered a political world underneath the major institutions of government. The rabbit hole didn’t take the foundation into a fantasy world; rather we saw how a democracy actually engages its citizens, generates political will, informs judgment, and amasses the powers needed for effective action. We were seeing democracy in its most elemental form.

What the foundation found may not look like politics as most people understand the word, for what we found is rooted in family life and social relations. It is more organic than institutional. We found pathways to public participation that are open, though full of twists and turns, and beyond campaign rallies, voting booths, and council meetings. This public world is very much a political world and is just as Iris Marion Young recently described it in the Review—decentered. It isn’t located in just one set of institutions or confined within the machinery of government.

Democracy at this level is discounted in institutional politics. The reason, as I wrote in an “afterthoughts” last spring, may be that the differences between the two are extreme. In organic democracy, networks are more important than scale; power is relational, not legal; and a shared sense of direction trumps a majority vote. The public is not simply a consensual body; it is a primary source of political energy. That said, the institutions we use in governing ourselves rest on a foundation in this public world: schools, government agencies and their programs, even the media, draw their support from it. As a result, the insights about democracy that have come from forums have migrated into college classrooms, professional associations, and legislative bodies . . . as they should.

Public deliberation taps into a democracy of everyday life—the politics we don’t like to call politics. It opens doors for people who say, I don’t know how to get meaningfully involved, I really don’t. These doors can be opened without pressure from a powerful lobby and without the money for a major campaign contribution. All that’s needed is, first, an opinion about what should be happening around us; and second, a willingness to consider the opinions of others. These two provide the motivation for an exchange of views that leads to the collective decisions that are needed for effective collective actions.

What makes the choices difficult is that the things we citizens hold dear—like our security and freedom—are at stake. We can’t have everything we want, however, because an action that protects our security might curb our freedom. Consequently, we have to choose. And to choose wisely, we have to face up to the consequences of our preferences; we have to work through the inevitable trade-offs that must be made. Making these choices is hard work; it is a real struggle. Yet making choices with other citizens is the first step toward making a difference.

Forums doing such “choice work” strike participants as unique. Observing an NIF forum, a journalist on a Washington talk show asked what had happened. “I’m not sure,” a participant answered, “but it was the opposite of what happens on your show.” Debates don’t do choice work because choice work isn’t done to determine a winner; it is to solve a problem. Discussions don’t do choice work either, because choice work requires more than sharing opinions. And to do choice work, people have to do more than ex-
amine factual information, win approval of their positions, or mediate competing interests.

People do choice work by doing what the ancients called deliberation. That is the kind of talk people use to teach themselves before they act. People have deliberated around the world and throughout human history. (There is even a symbol for deliberation in Egyptian hieroglyphics.) Deliberation goes beyond critical reasoning about what is efficient or technically sound. It has been called moral reasoning because it takes into account what people value. Things that we hold dear are at stake in the choices we make about acting on a societal problem, and they have to be taken into consideration. From the forums we learn that deliberation is basically a weighing of options for acting against what people consider most valuable in the context of a given problem. Deliberations recognize the significant differences that exist about what is most valuable.

To be sure, differences over what is valuable often pit humans against one another. But public deliberations have shown ways that people can disagree without polarizing conflict, for although the things people value are the source of disagreements, they are also shared. In deliberations, citizens confront the most basic of human motives, which psychologists have called the ultimate purposes or ends of life, and the means to attaining those ends. People value them, even as they differ over which is more important in a specific situation.

The insight that citizens value many of the same basic ends and means comes from hearing people describe the concerns they bring to forums. People respond with heartfelt stories that name the difficulty in ways that reflect what is important to them personally. As one story prompts another, citizens realize that they share many of the same concerns. This commonality of “things that we hold dear” may be one of the reasons why Jane Mansbridge found that a common good could be constructed out of related self-interests.

What citizens hold most dear does not go out of fashion. Such things are enduring. Safety, for instance, is always valuable; citizens don’t have to be induced to care about their safety. Such bedrocks distinguish deliberation from the ever-changing topics that pass in and out of people’s attention. NIF issue books expose these bedrock concerns, so that people have opportunities to decide, in a given situation, whether their safety (for example) is more or less important than something else.

Rediscovering deliberation may become a point of departure for learning more about the political world and where public deliberation fits within it. Deliberation is but one in a series of public practices that are essential to self-rule, and as people come to identify these other practices, they have been able to see the whole of democracy, enabling them to respond to many of the legitimate questions that critics raise about people’s ability to rule themselves wisely.

Critics may admit that people will become passionately involved in political matters out of personal concern, yet insist that citizens’ participation isn’t well informed. Doubts about people’s abilities to recognize what is best for themselves have grown as modern society has become more dependent on expert, professional knowledge. Without denying the importance of specialized information, deliberative forums have demonstrated the importance of another kind of knowledge essential in making
sound choices. Cole Campbell calls it public knowledge: it informs public judgment, and it turns hasty reactions into more shared and reflective conclusions, as Dan Yankelovich explained in last fall’s Review.

Public knowledge is socially constructed in deliberative settings. Factual information is necessary though not sufficient to make sound choices about what should be done. There are no experts on what should be, but forum organizers have helped distinguish public knowledge from expert knowledge and have validated its importance. This has been important at a time when the attraction of research-based knowledge threatens to devalue other time-tested ways of knowing and deciding.

Critics persist, however: if people are capable of making sound decisions, they still don’t have the power to act on their decisions. Power, it is assumed, lies in legal authority and wealth. Most citizens have neither; and if deliberations don’t lead anywhere, people say the meetings are educational, not political. They are right. In politics, the question of power is inescapable, and power is the ability to act. So the question of what happens after forums is also inescapable.

With his sense of the importance of place-based communities, Dan Kemmis might have predicted that the answer to this question would come from forums on local issues. The answer is, in one word, action: the purpose of deliberating is to make a decision about acting, either directly by citizens themselves or through governments. In communities, deliberative decision making has been used to launch various kinds of civic action that have often also prompted governmental or institutional action. And as citizens have deliberated and acted, they have discovered other types of political power.

Communities have used public deliberations to act on two types of difficulties that require public action. One is the polarization that immobilizes the political system and prevents action as partisan battles end in stalemates. Public deliberations can’t prevent these battles, but they can set in motion counterforces. When citizens rename problems in terms of what they value, they find that people have more than one or two concerns; there are typically several major concerns triggered by an issue, each suggesting a different course of action. Consequently, deliberations begin with more options on the table than the usual two that set the stage for polarizing debates. The approach to a potentially polarizing problem that emerges from forums tends to be pragmatic. And because the specifics of what people decide may not be as important as changing the spirit in which a problem is addressed, taking a pragmatic approach to a polarizing problem is itself a type of action.

In other situations, citizens have deliberated to make decisions on problems that require a community as a whole to act. Such problems arise from multiple sources and need to be met by an array of responses from different sectors; no one group of people and no one institution can manage “wicked” problems, as they are called. The purpose of public deliberation, then, is obvious: the community can’t act collectively unless there is a collective decision about how to act. And since a variety of actions are required to deal with problems that have multiple points of origin, deliberations have to provide the
shared sense of direction needed for varied efforts to reinforce one another, rather than compete. Deliberation and action are necessarily intertwined. The need for collective action leads to deliberative decision making; the two are as one.

As people have deliberated to act on wicked problems, they have discovered sources of power other than money, position, and legal authority. The relationships that are built by doing choice work carry over into other collective efforts. Participants in deliberations uncover power in the commitments people make to one another to implement what has been decided. Commitments have been the source of covenants going back to the Mayflower Compact; they are key to any collective effort. As citizens have come to realize that they can generate power themselves, they have come to see that democracy operates on multiple generators.

Community forums have shown that, contrary to what some political theorists have argued, public deliberations don’t have to end in consensus in order to generate power. In fact, they seldom do—and that is because deliberations almost always broaden the definition of a problem. When people bring different ways of naming problems to the table, the names themselves suggest multiple options for action, and multiple options require a variety of resources as well as commitments from the people and organizations that control those resources. No one group of citizens or single institution can adequately respond to a multifaceted problem. So rather than attempting the impossible, deliberations over a period of time have been used to hammer out a general approach to a problem or sense of direction. A shared sense of direction doesn’t require full agreement, yet it makes for a coherent response. In other words, public deliberations help communities bring together a wide array of resources and launch complementary initiatives across a broad front. Kettering has described this multifaceted response as “public acting.”

Public acting, a Harvard study found, isn’t always done by the forum organizers who convene the initial community deliberations; participants in these forums have sometimes regrouped into ad hoc associations and followed up on the forum results. More commonly, decisions have been implemented by forum participants who act through civic organizations that already exist. Forum convenors see their deliberations in the context of the larger civic universe and have built relationships with other local organizations. As a result, deliberation has begun to move from initial forums, which demonstrate the nature of choice work, to all the places where collective decisions are being made, which is where deliberation belongs in democracy.

Thanks to what has been learned from local forums with strong community ties, it has become obvious that deliberation isn’t just a different way of talking about issues. It is at the center of a different way of doing politics—a citizen-based politics. In order to explain what is different about this politics, Kettering borrowed a term from Harry Boyte and Nan Kari, calling all that happens before, during, and after forums “public work.” Public work is work done, as Cole Campbell explains,
by, not just for citizens. The objective of this work is to produce public goods—the goods shared by all, such as better education for young people, safer streets, and a beneficial economy. The tasks that make up the work are interrelated; they fit together. For instance, naming problems in terms of what citizens hold dear is integral to deliberating, just as deliberating is an integral part of acting publicly across a broad front.

The tasks in public work are “practices” as distinguished from “techniques.” The ancient Greeks made the same distinction between techniques, which are used for purely instrumental reasons (hammering a nail), and practices that have both a practical benefit and an intrinsic value (playing a piano). In the practice of deliberation, people do choice work, but deliberation itself has a value apart from just making choices: it builds relationships among citizens that are satisfying. In other words, public deliberation is not another of the numerous techniques that are available to facilitate group processes. Those processes can be useful, but they don’t serve the purpose of public deliberation. Public deliberation is a political act; it forms the polis.

The impact of deliberative forums and the other practices that make up public work may seem less obvious on global or international issues. How can people do anything about problems so complex and distant from their daily lives? Although citizens generally doubt that they have much influence on the “big” issues, participants in deliberations have persisted in looking for connections between what they might do locally and what is happening globally. The assumption that there are problems citizens can’t affect isn’t exclusive to international issues. The assumption is also made in solutions proposed for some of the more important domestic issues, where remedies professionals advocate tend to have little to say about what work citizens can do. For example, the first options for restoring New Orleans after Katrina dealt largely with flood control measures, such as giant sea walls that only engineers can build, but rebuilding a community isn’t just an engineering challenge. On another issue, combating drug abuse, forum participants insisted on adding preventative actions by families and communities to options that only law enforcement agencies and prisons can do. Omissions of this sort have become obvious in forums when descriptions of the options on the table have failed to include consideration of citizens’ roles.

Americans also have a great deal to say about what representative governments should do. And that raises the question about what the relationship should be between the work of a deliberative citizenry and that of officeholders and the institutions they direct. Responding to that question has led to the most important insight from deliberative forums. It is about the nature of “the public.”

The loss of our collective identity as a public is so widespread that people talk most often about a public when they mean groups formed around a particular identity or interest. That’s fine as far as it goes, but if the collective public that the Constitution says is the sovereign authority for our country doesn’t really exist, then the entire democratic enterprise is in serious trouble. Public deliberation has done immeasurable service in making “We, the People” something other than an abstraction because it reveals a collective citizenry actually going about its work.
The indication that there could be a collective public—and not just “publics”—came from efforts to convey forum outcomes to elected representatives. The forums demonstrated that the citizenry is capable of speaking in a collective voice that is not a monotone, but is nonetheless coherent. This voice is different from those of interest groups or of constituents and voters, and it is different still from the majoritarian voice in polls. The public voice is highly nuanced, and it is created in deliberations. Early on, forum organizers learned that just reporting the outcomes from their meetings had little effect on representatives. Yet officeholders would listen more attentively when it became clear that people had faced up to the tensions between competing options and could describe how they weighed trade-offs. When real choice work had gone on, representatives were able to hear what one U.S. senator called “honest conversations.” Officials discovered what public thinking is like, as contrasted with the public opinions that polls attempt to measure. The voice coming from deliberative forums conveys the moral reasoning that goes on when citizens make up their collective mind.

A public voice isn’t a command voice; it doesn’t tell officials what they must do. Yet officeholders can gain a better sense of what people value and how citizens evaluate the effect that various options for action would have on the things that are dear to them. That is only possible when the value dimension of issues, and the tensions among them, have been made clear in public deliberations. Otherwise, there isn’t anything special for officeholders to hear.

The public that is visible in the forums can be seen as a dynamic force rather than as any particular body of people. This force is generated by citizens doing their work, and these dynamics occur in small groups of heterogeneous citizens who join forces to produce public goods. The scholar, Michael Warner, has a similar explanation of a democratic public: a sovereign public can’t be sovereign if it’s created by some other force, he argues, and so the public is created through the act of organizing itself. This organizing goes on in choice work. Like individual athletes who become a baseball team by playing baseball, the team is in the playing. The public is in the work.

In concluding these reflections, I am reminded that public deliberation’s full significance can’t be judged apart from the circumstances facing democracy today. The forums have a great deal to say to what might be called the megachallenges to self-rule. The political climate is changing; authoritarianism is returning; growing corruption violates one of the principles of self-government—the equal application of laws; ethnic and religious conflict abounds.

The machinery of modern institutional democracy doesn’t seem able to deal with these challenges. As Randa Slim, and before her, Lani Guinier, have written for the Review, the mainstay of representative government, voting, isn’t enough. Electoral campaigns can exacerbate conflict by promoting wedge issues that divide and polarize. Seeing these shortcomings, citizens grow cynical and withdraw from the political system to look for security in private enclaves.

Reform initiatives—flying under the banners of public participation, communitarianism, and public engagement—share Dan Kemmis’ conviction that we are at the end of
one era and moving toward another. And although they aren’t exactly sure what is wrong, citizens also sense that something fundamental is amiss in our political system. They suspect that they have been sidelined—a suspicion that authors for the Review have said is justified.

The central challenge, therefore, is to put the public back into the public’s business. Obviously, I believe that deliberative forums are providing insights into the kind of public that can govern itself. I am also aware that these aren’t the only notions about what the public is and does; there is no fully comprehensive or “correct” definition of “the public.” As Vincent Colapietro explained in a recent Review, what citizens should do lives within the question of democracy. Future generations may find that our generation was shortsighted, unrealistic, or just plain wrongheaded about democracy. But they should not find that we didn’t realize how important the role of the public is; or that we didn’t examine the consequences of our implicit assumptions about the citizenry.

John Stuhr hit the mark when he wrote for the Review, “Being a citizen encompasses the need to deliberate about what it means to be a citizen.” But we do not make decisions about our citizenship in the abstract; we decide in the context of major issues of the day. Ultimately, the role of the public will be determined by what citizens expect of themselves. So decisions being made in deliberative forums aren’t just about which civic actions or government policies are best; they are also about what we will do as citizens. And these decisions are going to define the kind of democracy that will characterize this century. This is why the last 25 years of deliberative forums have been so important; and why they will be critical in the future. It isn’t melodramatic to say that the meaning of democracy hangs in the balance; in fact, it does.

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