



Democracy from Muzzle Loader to Atomic Bomb

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Article Summary: Wardell quotes political leaders and others who have spoken about democracy. Democratic goals were difficult to achieve in the period of western expansion, and they remain so in the new and dangerous age of atomic power.

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DEMOCRACY FROM MUZZLE LOADER TO ATOMIC BOMB¹

BY M. L. WARDELL

MODERN democracy is an institution and it is difficult to define. An institution is sometimes described as something by which we live and if democracy is a way of life there will be, therefore, as many definitions as there are interpretations of our various phases of life. Generally speaking, however, American people think of democracy first as a political institution and as such it is relatively easily defined and interpreted as long as it is confined to the political field, but when complexities arise, it becomes more difficult to explain. The time has come when we talk about democracy and health, democracy and education, democracy and pressure groups, in short, democracy and anything that is American living.

A few definitions by great men will probably be of value in tracing the historical development of democracy. If one were to take definitions chronologically the colonial period would call first for an explanation as the basis of our democracy. Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and other "Founding Fathers" would be expected to have contributed their definitions for this great American institution called democracy. There would then be the expressions of Jackson, Lincoln, Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and others. The period following World War I is filled with definitions and interpretations of democracy. That is because our living in this atomic age is complex.

American democracy has a chronological development. It is possible to show this by definitions and statements from great Americans who have experienced democratic problems through the decades of American history.

America's great democrat, Thomas Jefferson, whom we

¹ An address delivered at the seventy-second annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, held at Lincoln, October 8, 1949.

honor as a founder of one type of political democracy, expressed his feelings as follows: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them; but to inform their discretion by education." Jefferson had a vision of the need of informing the individual of his part in American government.

Abraham Lincoln stated: "As I would not be a slave so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this to the extent of the difference is no democracy." Lincoln was interested in human beings when he was president. This nation was then concerned with the problem of determining "human rights" although the term, human rights of 1860, does not have the same interpretation in 1949.

Woodrow Wilson saw democracy beyond the views of Abraham Lincoln. Wilson said, "I believe in democracy because it releases the energy of every human being." He would have individuals determine for themselves the manner in which they were governed, determine the laws by which individual energy could be expressed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt liked to think of Lincoln as a great democrat. His appreciation of Lincoln's views of the common man was expressed frequently and in many ways. Roosevelt said: "Democracy can thrive only when it enlists the devotion of those whom Lincoln called the common people. Democracy can hold that devotion only when it adequately respects their dignity by so ordering society as to assure to the masses of men and women reasonable security and hope for themselves and their children." Roosevelt goes beyond both Lincoln and Wilson. He looks for economic security for "masses." This is because he lived three quarters of a century later than Lincoln and a generation later than Wilson. Not only the United States but the whole world is different today.

Going back beyond the days of Lincoln another great democrat expressed his feelings in judicial decisions. John Marshall said: "The government of the Union, then, is

emphatically and truly a government of the people. In form and in substance it emanates from them. Its powers are granted by them and are to be exercised directly on them and for their benefit."

Men not concerned immediately with politics have given their impressions of democracy. Theodore Parker recorded his ideas in these words: "Democracy means not 'I am as good as you are,' but 'You are as good as I am.'" About the same time that Parker was writing, a visitor to America expressed his appreciation of American democracy as he saw the people at work. Alexis de Tocqueville writing about America in the 1830's said: "There is an amazing strength in the expression of the will of a whole people; and when it declares itself, even the imagination of those who would wish to contest it is awed."

A century later another view of democracy, involving its bases and its possibilities, is expressed by Harry Emerson Fosdick in this statement: "Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people." Fosdick would encourage people to express their energy in action and in thought. His conception of democracy is not wholly unlike that of Wilson. In keeping with the ideas expressed by Fosdick, Woodrow Wilson, speaking apparently not as a politician but as one who understood the place of man in society, said: "Democracy in the widest sense means much more than a form of government . . . it is indeed a system of social organization affecting almost every relation of man to man. It is a system which ideally, at least, attempts to equalize the opportunities and responsibilities of individuals in society."

In 1939 George S. Counts, who must be credited with seeing a broader democracy than many, was quoted as saying: "Democracy is a way of life and social organization which, above all others, is sensitive to the dignity and worth of the individual human personality, affirming the fundamental moral and political equality of all men and recognizing no barriers of race, religion or circumstances." The comprehensiveness of this statement shows the appreciation of the complexities which characterize our society today.

A significant statement is found in the writing of James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard University: "What is democracy? In part a fact, in part a dream, and the latter is as important as the former. Indeed, one of the characteristics of our culture is our need to talk about the future development of the nation: A group of questions is central to all discussions of America's fitness to survive. . . ." President Conant, a physical scientist, recognizes the need of projecting our thoughts into the future. This is a conception that is rather new to the average American. Yet, the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States is filled with the idea of providing for the future. Such an attitude, that of considering the future, is a modern concept of democracy. This is probably what the founding fathers had in mind.

A practical approach to the interpretation of democracy was recently made by Charles Edison, former governor of New Jersey. Mr. Edison said: ". . . But the ethical standards of democracy need constantly to be guarded, improved, enhanced. Part of the obligation of higher education to our country is to infuse the processes of politics with better ethical standards, to hold democracy to its best." These words seem to express not only what democracy is but what must be done to implement it not only now but in the future. It is a wise statement in that higher education is given the responsibility of helping to direct the future of democracy in America.

Thomas Mann, a refugee from German despotism, now lives in the United States. He appreciates freedom in America and the opportunity to live. He has given one of the best definitions of democracy—he should know. He writes: "We must define democracy as that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man." His emphasis upon the individual is almost unparalleled. His "dignity of man" is almost the keynote of his writings on democracy.

Cardinal Mindszenty, who did not escape the far-reaching hand of oppression, almost preaches a sermon in his

statement: "We are looking forward to a new life under the symbol of democracy and freedom. What beautiful words! Democracy means that each citizen, equipped with equal rights and duties, either directly or indirectly plays his part in shaping the common welfare." Mindszenty today is condemned to life imprisonment and hard labor because he dared to stand for freedom of religion.

Here then are words about democracy coming from Americans who helped to establish and administer our democratic form of government and words from two who have suffered because of the absence of democracy in totalitarian states. There are scores of statements and expressions concerning democracy, but the summary of all of them is the importance of the individual as he stands superior to the state. Democracy lives as long as the state is subordinated to the individual, but when the state subordinates the individual to itself, democracy will be written about as an institution of the past.

Democracy, as is the case with any institution, is slow in developing. It has a background, it appears, develops and faces a future. Democracy is never static. There must be constant progress. It is constantly changing, so one may not expect to find democracy of 1800 to be that of 1850, or democracy of 1850 to be that of 1900, or democracy of 1900 to be that of today. But one sure fact exists. There must be constant participation on the part of individuals or democracy does not properly function and will soon die.

The men and women who settled on the Atlantic seaboard were but Europeans transplanted. They soon recognized a new environment and their thoughts and actions were consequently affected by their surroundings. Colonial democracy in New England reflects the religious background of those who came for homes where freedom of religion might prevail—that is, freedom of religion as they desired it. There was sufficient land space for further westward expansion for those individuals who could not agree with the religious beliefs of those in Salem, Boston and Plymouth. Nevertheless, it was still religious freedom. The settlement

of Rhode Island is the result of a minority group not wishing to conform. Had there not been living space farther west, or in this case to the south, the minority would have had to conform. It is possible that a compromise, which is a basis of democracy, might have been made.

When the Dutch came to New York they had not only their own ideas of religion but also of economics. They developed the land as they wished. The Quakers in Pennsylvania likewise had their ideas of religion and economics as well as of culture. Maryland reflects individual and group differences. Its settlers were allowed freedom in practically every respect. In Virginia and other southern colonies men were cognizant of their worth as individuals and cultivated both individual rights and duties ever keeping in mind the sense of freedom.

All along the Atlantic seaboard was freedom. There were restrictions, of course, but nevertheless individuals who could not or would not conform were at liberty to move, but they must first fight for their material existence, clearing the forests and protecting themselves and families against Indian depredations. There was constant need of individual initiative. This is American democracy in the time of the muzzle loading rifle which not only provided food but protected the settler and members of his family so they might live.

Finally, with settlements reaching from the Atlantic coast to the mountains, the more adventuresome, restless and independent individuals crossed to look upon the headwaters of the tributaries of the Mississippi River. Separated by a mountain barrier these settlers in the eastern edge of the Mississippi Valley must, as their forefathers, live by their own ingenuity and ability where little formal education, culture or comforts of life were to be found. There was opportunity, however, to live as one wished. Always, of course, there must be a community spirit. The fort or blockhouse must be within reach of those who were in danger. Cooperation was essential if the frontier settlers were to live.

When the danger of Indian depredations became less pressing a more stable society occupied the area that was once the frontier. Down the rivers which were highways settlers might make further westward progress. Tennessee of this new West contributed presidents and other statesmen. Indiana and Ohio furnished presidents, law-makers and judges. Frontier justice was written into law and court decisions. Spiritual life came to be provided by colleges often patterned after those along the Atlantic seaboard.

The Mississippi River, which held back an eager people, was finally crossed and tongues of settlement pushed up the rivers. Territories were created by Congress and new states were admitted. American democracy was becoming of age. Territorial expansion was the order of the day.

Trade with the Spanish settlements in the southwest encouraged men to cross the Great Plains in spite of dangers arising from hostile Indians and unfriendly weather. For a number of years the Great Plains was but a home for Indians into which the hardy hunter and trapper ventured. Forts were established from Minnesota to the Rio Grande. Some protection was afforded those who left the older, settled areas and sought new fields of adventure. The rifle was always at hand. It again provided protection and food. Democracy was still being extended into a new environment.

California with its gold was an invitation to those who wished to seek wealth but with the knowledge that they were taking their lives in their hands when crossing the plains. In fact, life was cheap in the mining area unless one was a good citizen. Laws and decisions made on the spot governed the conduct of these hardy pioneers. Democracy was in the making in the mining areas as well as it had been on the early agricultural frontier. Enforcement of law was not necessarily by the rifle but with a sense of morality and justice. Though crude at times, it was extremely effective. Men wanted a place to live where they might work, have prosperity and liberty, and finally, a place where a good society would exist.

By 1880 settlement of the United States was practically

completed. Some areas were overpopulated even at that time. There was yet considerable experimentation to be carried out before the citizens of this great West could know what its natural resources would provide.

Long before the "backwash" of population from California eastward to the mountains of Wyoming and Colorado and from there, by the way of settling the ranch lands in the foothills, extending eastward into the Great Plains to meet the slowly westward extension of farmer and ranchmen in the area of the hundredth meridian, exploitation of our natural resources had begun. Our democratic government providing the method of disposal of the public domain and for its settlement, whether it be mountains, timbered areas, ranch or agricultural lands, may not have advocated exploitation, but certainly nothing was done to prevent it. Some processes of mining filled rivers with silt and ruined lands. Cutting and burning the forested areas destroyed the absorbing power of the thin soil and allowed the water to rush down mountain sides flooding and destroying thousands of acres of good land. Gold was wastefully mined. Stories current in the early mining areas tell of wasting the gold-bearing ore.

In the semi-arid regions homesteaders, attempting to force a living from a reluctant soil, plowed land which by wind and a small amount of water was soon eroded. The soil became moving sand dunes, and covered grass that was at one time ample for profitable grazing. Throughout the long stretches from the Dakotas to the Rio Grande, bordered by the foothills of the Rocky Mountains on the west and the hundredth meridian on the east, are literally millions of acres that now lie almost useless. Such exploitation of land was sheer waste. Engineers had reported to Congress that much of the land opened to farming should never have been plowed. In their reports are statements showing that if the land had been opened for small ranches it would have provided a living for settlers and at the same time would not be in the state of barren waste as much of it is today. Congress for reasons, or willful neglect or ignorance, gave

no heed to recommendations. Democracy was inefficient.

"Dust Bowl" days of the 1930's were not new. Such days had been seen before the immensity of the dust bowl area when the sun was hidden by clouds of soil, and hundreds of people made homeless was of larger proportions than ever before. Our national government was remiss in not keeping our resources productive for future generations. One may say, therefore, that our democratic form of government practically encouraged exploitation of our natural resources. It was not until after 1900 that conservation of natural resources was given serious attention. President Theodore Roosevelt was conscious of action needed to save this country from practical ruin. It was about this time that books were written, only as an introduction, to show that America must now look forward instead of keeping its eyes on the present alone.

With the opening of the twentieth century petroleum production began to be of tremendous commercial importance. With the perfecting of the internal combustion engine, making possible greater transportation facilities, new oil fields were discovered and opened. Wastefulness accompanied the production of oil the same as had been the case in early decades with timber, minerals and land. Not only was the oil wasted but thousands of acres of good farming land were ruined and streams were polluted. Millions of cubic feet of gas were allowed to escape. It took several years for petroleum engineers to find use for this particular product. Today, though natural gas still is wasted, the production is controlled to the point where there is relatively little waste. So with both oil and gas promising a precarious future for transportation, conservation has become a necessity.

It is significant that a brilliant young German when recently asked whether or not Germany might be able to understand American democracy replied to the effect that American democracy could never be applied to Germany. Two reasons were offered: first, he said the individual German could probably never understand personal initiative

as it is understood in America; and second, that Germany does not have such abundant natural resources as America. It is evident from this single observation, which could be multiplied many fold, that the United States has failed to understand its own characteristics—individual initiative and natural resources—in the development of its democracy. The day of wastefulness is by no means over though it has been checked. Now that we live in an age where the rifle has been superseded by the atomic bomb we must look forward to the day when our complicated civilization will be served by an efficient democracy.

There is a less tangible phase of American democracy than that just presented. The "building of America" is a phrase which has been carelessly used. Probably we understand what it means, but its implications are difficult to understand.

Between the first settlements along the Atlantic seaboard and the time of the Declaration of Independence, the people who lived in America were ceasing to be Englishmen and were becoming Americans. Their environment had produced thoughts and actions expressed by several freedoms—the love of liberty and above all individual initiative. It was necessary that man exert his greatest ability to control his environment if he were to keep his family from want and danger and at the same time make possible future happiness. It is little wonder that political institutions developed far beyond the economic and social. While we had such men as Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry and many others of their kind, the potential nation did not have men of comparable stature in the fields of social and economic activities. In fact, there was less need for economic and social leaders, at least as compared with the need for political leaders. Once the United States was an independent commonwealth, it was necessary to apply our fundamental law to guarantee further development of political and civil rights.

By 1820 such men as Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, aided by capable law-makers and

competent jurists, had brought the United States to the point where there was need of political development in another direction. The executive had been curbed in his power by state constitutions written in the first forty years of our nation's history. The legislators had been given ample authority to protect themselves. The courts under John Marshall's direction as well as other jurists of various courts were interpreting law to protect individual rights. Now it was necessary that the executive be strengthened. It is with Jackson that the strengthening of the executive's position is apparent. It was not "Jacksonian democracy" alone that enhanced the office. It was the belief of the common man that the executive must be invested and entrusted with greater responsibilities. From Jackson to Lincoln the office of the president of the United States assumes greater importance. Along with this executive development the courts continued to make secure their place in our nation.

A great change in our nation's history was on the horizon in 1850. Our great men in Congress, Clay, Calhoun, Webster and others, were unable to hold the more mature Union together. In fact there were questions as to whether or not there was a Union. The great debates around 1830 and 1850 show that there were honest differences of opinion. Whatever one may call it—slavery issue, the conflicting theory of government, or growing pains of a young democracy—the United States was to face its most critical period of history. The Civil War demonstrated our inability to solve problems, the solution of which were vital to our very existence. It was an experience of economic, social and political conflicts. Would there be slave labor in the the promoters of slave interests prevail over anti-slavery South, labor in the rising industrial North without social form two separate and distinct bodies? These questions could not be answered without a war.

When this war closed in 1865 a devastated South was destined to suffer many years and an industrial Northeast

was ready to go forward in great economic development. There was the Great Plains region lying beyond the wooded areas of Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas to be filled with young men and women seeking to build a democratic structure that would meet their needs. Vital and important political conflicts arose as railroads were built, farms developed, ranch lands extended and great areas cleared of an Indian population. For a quarter of a century following the Civil War Big Business controlled in large measure American life. There was democracy, but it was complex and sometimes hidden. Yet, one must say our democratic procedures were far from static. New problems presenting themselves had to be solved. New laws had to be passed. Court decisions that were looked upon by many as serving selfish interests had to be reconciled with precedents of former years. By 1890 a new field of living was being developed. Economic life was beginning to be controlled or at least laws were passed which if enforced would control it. Political democracy, fairly well developed, was giving way in its importance to an economic democracy that was having as much difficulty in finding its proper place as political democracy had in the first half of our nation's history.

Between 1890 and 1914 many reforms were instituted. Laws had been passed meeting demands made by an agrarian population of the West which had suffered at the hands of monopolies. The Interstate Commerce Commission was created to solve problems which Congress no longer had the time to manage. This Commission was strengthened ultimately with power that approached that of a court.

President Theodore Roosevelt brought about reforms attempting to check wastefulness and introduced the "Square Deal." President Wilson followed with the "New Freedom." Between the Square Deal and the New Freedom economic democracy was anchored more securely. More people benefited from legislation and court interpretations than at any other period. The United States was approaching the time when it would become the dominant Western power.

Then came World War I. Such phrases as "Make the

World Safe for Democracy," the "War to End Wars," and "Self-Determination for Racial Groups," characterized our periodical literature and textbooks. The United States had something to contribute. It was American democracy. Many people believed that the American freedoms guaranteed by democracy would be welcomed in all parts of the world. This was hardly the case. American isolationism prevailed to such an extent that we were soon totally unprepared to check dictators and their totalitarianism.

In the decade of the 1920's wild speculation prevailed. Men made money and some lost it overnight. The beginning of the depression of 1929 was a rude awakening to our short period of prosperity. Then came the depression to last for ten years. Every adult remembers the days when the federal government stepped in to provide employment, place supports under our trembling economic structure and to introduce a new age of social legislation. It is in this period, 1930 to 1940, that our democratic social structure takes the form of a permanent part of American life.

The day of rapid communication and transportation had arrived—at least rapid as we understand it today. In 1939 came World War II. The war years of actual participation, from December of 1941 to August of 1945, were trying ones for our democratic institutions. In order to save, so we thought, the American way of living it was necessary to produce the atomic bomb. The world was shocked by the humanitarian nation, the United States, indiscriminately killing men, women and children with the greatest agency of destruction man had ever devised. We went to lengths to preserve our way of life. American democracy in the atomic age has been introduced to new nations which we have helped to create.

Since the close of the shooting war in August of 1945 we have entered a technical age where politics, society, economics and culture are confused. We can no longer live in isolation. National frontiers overlap. Geographical points of conflict are characterized as "trouble spots" or "hot spots." "Cold war" may be confined to a single geographic area

but its implications extend to all parts of the world.

American democracy in the atomic age is on trial more than ever before. We have reached the day in this post-war period when democracy needs discussion. Historically one sees through the centuries institutions growing without conscious direction. One does not like to think that American democracy will enter a program of expansion without capable leaders. We are forced to ask ourselves what we mean by democracy and how many kinds of democracy do we have. Sidney Hook, chairman of the department of philosophy at New York University has summarized the status of democracy. It may be that the philosopher can do what the historian and other social scientists have apparently not been able to do; that is, analyze democracy, present its interpretations and forecast a few possibilities. It is forcefully evident that if American democracy in this atomic age is to live, expand and serve, someone must project his thinking into the future.

In evaluating American democracy today Sidney Hook lists two basic conceptions—political equality and political freedom. A distinction must be made between the two. Political equality is easily proclaimed. Political freedom is attained with difficulty. Yet the two cannot be separated if democracy is to succeed. Political democracy stands first. Other democracies, social, cultural, economic, as well as religious, cannot exist in their fullness without sound political democracy. The importance of the other phases of democracy is beginning to be realized.

Some of our columnists, of whom there are about a score, change their ideas about American democracy in action from decade to decade. We are confronted with the question of adequate leadership in a political democracy. The question arises then, shall we purposefully train political leaders or shall we take those who appear to be potential leaders, try them out and if they succeed, keep them, if they fail, discard them? In the past the United States has done this more or less. Time does not lend itself to such procedure today. Rapid transportation and communication, with complexities

increased and made more expansive and intensive by these agencies, will not allow a "wait and see" policy. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, who must be regarded as one who has seen political democracy in action and who has participated in both national and international affairs, has seen her way clear to define this great American institution: "Democracy is the freedom of people to learn for themselves and to act in cooperation with all others for the benefit of all." This is a good and comprehensive statement.

If there ever was a time when unity was needed among the American people it is now. They should be together on the meaning of American democracy. They should understand where it is going and help give it direction.

There exists in the minds of millions of Americans today an idea that their government must provide economic security. Probably this atomic age places our democratic form of government in the position of providing materially for all members of our population. We cannot escape consideration of the welfare state. The term *general welfare* as read in the Preamble of the Constitution may mean just that. Probably the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" has a real meaning today. The American people must re-evaluate the aims set forth in the Preamble. How we are to form a "more perfect Union" is a pertinent problem. Can we do that with absolute freedom of speech or have we reached the place where it must be curbed by trying to determine whether or not it is endangering the American constitution which guarantees that right?

How can we "establish justice" among the various groups in the United States where there are social, economic and racial classes?

Can we "insure domestic tranquility" with moral pressure or by relying wholly upon decisions of courts? Can we afford to spend three quarters of a million dollars on agitators in Kansas? In short, would the nation split and one trial to determine the guilt of those who have been charged with an attempt to overthrow the government?

How are we to "provide for the common defense" unless we know the dangers beyond our borders that threaten our

democracy? Must we continue to ally ourselves with other democracies in order to protect our own? Has "common defense" been enlarged in its conception to make it necessary to invite other democracies to join in a mutual defense pact?

If we are to promote "general welfare" who is to pay for it? Does this mean making a physically healthy nation at the expense of the federal government? The implications are apparent.

Can we "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" when we refuse to act intelligently? Can we provide means for the "blessings of liberty" for those who are to live in 1999?

These are the questions which face our democracy in the atomic age.

The increasing population of the world with no proportionate increase of food lays a burden upon the citizens of the United States. We feel an obligation to share our natural resources, manufactured products and money. This may be necessary to protect our own democracy. The Appalachian Mountains, the Mississippi River, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific coast, all of which were at one time the borders of our settlements, no longer limit the dynamics of American democracy. The rifle has been replaced with the atomic bomb. Hand power, horse power and water power will be replaced or at least aided by atomic energy. Democracy lives in a new and dangerous age.