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The challenge to democracy I. Democracy on trial

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The Challenge to Democracy

1. Democracy on Trial

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The Challenge to Democracy

The democratic way of life is being challenged today all over the world. Its superiority is widely denied, and its security is seriously imperiled. The American people consequently are interested in understanding the dangers that confront them and in guarding against them. Democracy needs strengthening both internally and externally, and farm people can and must and will help do the job, both because of their numbers and because they know better than many other groups what it means.

It is the purpose of this series of bulletins to show what produced the present situation and suggest some of the things that need to be done about it—not by farm people alone but by rural America and urban America working together. Eight bulletins are included in the series:

2. John H. Powell—The Citizen and the Power to Govern.
3. L. B. Schmidt—The Family Farm in the Machine Age.
4. V. Alton Moody—The Test of Citizenship.
7. H. C. Cook—Improving Public Administration.
The Challenge to Democracy

I. Democracy on Trial

By John A. Vieg

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS

One of the simplest and best ways to discover the meaning of democracy is through what great men have said about it.

The English barons who secured the Magna Charta were aristocrats, but they prized one element in democracy when they demanded government according to law in place of arbitrary action by the king. The authors of the Declaration of Independence defined democracy as a government deriving its just powers “from the consent of the governed.” To the framers of the Constitution of the United States it meant “to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty” for themselves and their descendants. The objective of the leaders of the French Revolution was “liberty, equality and fraternity.”

Jefferson said in his first inaugural that democracy betokened “equal rights for all” and special privileges for none. Lincoln, at Gettysburg, described democracy as “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Pasteur held it to be “that form of government which leaves each man free to contribute his best to the general welfare,” and Mazzini defined it as “the government of all through all under the leadership of the wisest and best.”

1 This bulletin is the first in a series entitled “The Challenge to Democracy” written by members of the Department of History and Government at Iowa State College.

2 Associate professor of government.
KEY ELEMENTS IN DEMOCRACY

Values

The most basic things about any political or social system are the ideals or values in which people believe. Many people assume that democracy is simply a form of government. It does involve forms, to be sure, but they are not its essence. Democracy has so many important elements that it is almost impossible to get them into a few words. The combination is what is significant, and the best phrase for the combination seems to be a “way of life”—the free way.

The new despotisms of the modern day claim that the future lies with them because they represent the “master races” of the earth. In contrast, the democracies represent what may be called the “master idea” in this world—that of the freedom of man.

Democracy is at its core a belief in the dignity and perfectibility of human beings, an insistence that personality is sacred and an assumption that government exists for man rather than man for government. It holds that most people are possessed of good will, and it argues that “the gains of humanity are mass gains” to be distributed generally among all ranks and conditions of men. The democratic creed calls for equality of opportunities and obligations for all persons—in proportion to ability and industry—whatever their race, color, sex, economic status or social position. Finally, it emphasizes the spirit of fraternity and the common good, placing the general above the individual welfare.

Processes

Democracy is grounded in the values or beliefs stated, but these beliefs can live only if embodied in appropriate forms and processes. Several of these are of basic importance. One is an elective assembly or popular forum in which the chosen spokesmen of all the people can hammer out decisions on matters of public policy. Democracy cannot be employed directly for the government of a nation of millions of people; it can only operate indirectly, through the use of representatives.

If these representatives are to be selected wisely and fair-
ly, one of the forms or processes needed is a system of par-
ties contending openly for public support which is register-
ed in free and honest elections. If the policies the repre-
sentatives adopt are to be successfully carried into effect, 
there will be required a competent and responsible admin-
istration. Other essentials are a free press, a system of 
free public education, an enlightened system of taxation 
and independent courts for the regulation of economic in-
terests and the protection of personal rights.

Results

To believe in values is one thing, to attain them is another. 
If democracy is to be practical, it must have more than 
ideals and procedures. Promises and intentions alone can-
not make a good way of life. They must be followed by 
results. It is as true of political systems as of anything 
else that “by their fruits ye shall know them.” The fruits 
expected of democracy are mainly two: (a) A free and 
fluid society in which everyone may make the best use of his 
talents and (b) a social order in which everyone who works 
will have some tangible stake. As long as a democracy as-
sures its men and women the opportunity to develop each 
his particular abilities and to make a decent living from 
their employment, it will hold their loyalty. If it should 
fail for any length of time or for any great portion of its 
people to provide such opportunity, the people will be want-
ing in enthusiasm for its support.

It is a hard but fair statement that in the light of these 
thruths the recent history of the United States is not alto-
gether encouraging. For a period of more than a decade 
there have been by no means inconsiderable groups of Amer-
icans—such as the sharecroppers in southern cotton farm-
ing and the families of the unemployed in the great cities of 
the industrial East—for whom the promise of democracy 
has been mostly a mockery. Most of the people have had 
and have now the chance to get the training and education 
they want and to gain something by way of economic secur-
ity, but they have not fully realized the importance of re-
moving the limitations blocking the attainment of these 
goals for the unprivileged minorities in the population. De-
HOW OUR NATIONAL INCOME IS DIVIDED

Lowest Fifth Gets

Second Fifth Gets

Third Fifth Gets

Fourth Fifth Gets

Highest Fifth Gets

Each unit represents 2,500 million dollars

Democracy in America can do better for its "lowest third"—and it will. It is not likely that the people of the richest country on earth will be satisfied until they reach the level of what the economists call "optimum results."

CAUSES OF STAGNATION

LOSS OF FAITH: GENERAL DISILLUSIONMENT

At the time of the American and French Revolutions, democracy was the greatest missionary force in the world. During the century and a half that followed, it spread over most of Europe, North and South America and Australia and even made some in-roads into Asia and Africa. Now, however, its expansion has been arrested. There even has been a loss of ground, and doubts have arisen as to what the future will bring.

Watching the rise and the "successes" of the dictators and seeing the indecision and ineptitude of a few of their own leaders, some Americans have become disturbed and troubled about "the American way." Having assumed, perhaps too easily, that democracy had solved all its problems, they are now somewhat disillusioned, and the fire of their faith is low.

Civilized life is possible, however, only upon the basis of faith. Democracy must fashion a bellows to bring that fire of faith to a new glow in all who have been chilled by the winds of discouragement. It can and must rekindle the belief of its citizens in its high destiny.
"FINDING THE WAY" IN A STRANGE NEW WORLD

During the last 75 years, while radicals of one ilk or another have talked about remaking the world, scientists and technicians have actually remade it. They have created a strange new world in which mankind has not yet found its way. Democracy was cradled in America amidst rural and agrarian surroundings; today's problem is that of making it work in a country of which part is highly urbanized and industrialized and all has felt the impact of technology.

This would be difficult enough in any event, but it is all the harder because science has meanwhile forced men to doubt the reliability of many older truths and principles. This intellectual uncertainty has led to confusion and bewilderment. Modern inventors have produced machines of such power and magic that ordinary people do not even try to understand how they work but simply content themselves with pushing the buttons that start and stop them. Small wonder it is that they do not always use them wisely. Men are troubled further because hunger and poverty continue to stalk the land even though there are resources enough—especially in agriculture—to provide a good life for everyone. Why such appalling want in the face of latent abundance? Why so much misery and unhappiness when
science and technology daily accomplish miracles? The world has, in a measure, ceased to "make sense."

CONFLICT AMONG ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Democracy asks of its citizens that they place the common good ahead of the welfare of any individual or group. It cannot be fully successful on any other basis. Over the years there have grown up in America scores and hundreds of what are called pressure groups, each centering about some interest. All of them strive, legitimately enough, to advance the welfare of their own members, but some of them go too far by pursuing their own advantage beyond what is desirable for society as a whole.

The critical element in the situation in the United States today is the tendency of one group to insist that whatever will promote its own welfare will also insure the common welfare. Bankers and industrialists argue that "what's good for business is good for everybody." Farmers claim that "what's good for agriculture is good for everybody." Workmen insist that "what's good for labor is good for everybody."

When properly defined and qualified, all of these statements are true, but the disturbing thing is that more people have not caught the vision, as W. W. Waymack has phrased it, that "What's good for everybody is good for business, and agriculture, and labor."

Here is a field where farm people can contribute materially to the strengthening of democracy—if they will. Before any group loudly claims that what it wants will help everybody, it should at the very least examine the probable effects of such a course of action on a few of the large unprivileged minorities in the nation—the sharecroppers of the Old South, the Negroes everywhere, the Mexicans in Texas and the Southwest, the unemployed in the great cities of the Northeast. There is probably enough humanity in everyone to make this a salutary experience.

CONFUSION OVER THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

From the beginning it has been the habit in America to be suspicious of government. As the Declaration of Independence makes plain, the experience of our forefathers was
such as to cause them to think of government as an enemy rather than a friend. They were right. The governments under which they lived and under which their grandfathers had lived before them had sought to promote the welfare, not of the common people, but of the royal family and the ruling class. When our forefathers finally created, after 1776, a government devoted to their own welfare, they naturally developed something of a new attitude toward it, yet the old suspicions lingered—and still linger. The newer service and welfare functions have long since come to outbalance the older police and regulatory functions, but distrust of government is still a very common thing.

Americans have almost an obsession regarding the question of political power. They assume to start with that, regardless of how much or how little power be given to government, there ought always to be left for the individual a great “sphere of privacy.” Then they confer on their government the least possible measure of power that will enable it to perform the services expected. Next they divide this minimal grant of power among three levels of government—national, state and local—and on each level, between three branches—legislative, executive and judicial—checking and balancing one another.

It is a fair question to ask if they are not overcautious. Too many safeguards may add up to inaction—and there are times when government must play an active and positive role in society. Was James Bryce right when he wrote in *The American Commonwealth* that these arrangements cause the American people to focus attention on the legal aspects of their public problems rather than on the problems themselves? Are Americans in the 1940’s failing to exhibit that Yankee practicality for which their forebears were famous? Are they expecting to get their problems solved and still refusing to vest the necessary authority in some government or official competent to solve them?

It has happened not a few times that cities and counties have not been able either legally or financially to satisfy some need of the people of their locality, and the state has stepped in to do the job rather than let it go undone. Likewise it has happened that the states have been lacking in
power and resources to meet certain serious problems, and the national government has filled the gap. With what result? Instead of receiving credit, the state is accused of wanting to destroy local self-government. Instead of being commended, the national government is likely to be condemned for violating states' rights and charged with an intention to “centralize all power in Washington.”

This is not to suggest that any government on whatever level should be free, without regard to law, to engage in any line of activity it might deem useful. It is simply to observe that in the name of caution it is possible to leave problem areas over which no government will have effective jurisdiction.

In an age when only powerful states seem able to survive, democracies will be seriously handicapped if their people are confused regarding the problem of power. Many persons in the United States appear to be so confused today. There are those who say even at this late hour that “it can’t happen here.” They are wrong. It most certainly can. Dictatorship may come to America. If it does, it will probably come as a receivership for a democracy which has failed to function. To refuse to make those adjustments which will grant government the power necessary to meet whatever problems may arise is to court disaster.

NEGLECT OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Democracy offers the individual more liberty than he can get under any other system of government. It expects in turn that he will use it constructively and that he will at all times be on guard to preserve it not alone for himself but also for others who enjoy it with him. Democracy is a two-way proposition, but some try to get by on a one-way basis. They want rights, privileges, advantages and opportunities, and they take them. They forget that on the other side these things mean duties, obligations, qualifications and responsibilities. One cannot continually get the good things in life without giving an equivalent in return, yet many carelessly neglect that part of the bargain.

Democracy depends for its success upon the willingness of the individual to fulfill obligations—to himself (for the
proper use and development of his talents), to his family, to his church, to his school, to his job or profession, to his neighborhood or community, to his party, to his country and ultimately to humanity itself. To avoid, neglect or belittle any of these responsibilities is to undermine in some degree the whole social order. A democratic society cannot rise above the level of the quality of its citizens.

ATTITUDE TOWARD POLITICAL PARTIES

As systems of government, democracies stand or fall by the quality of their political parties and the intelligence and integrity of their legislatures. Unfortunately there is in the United States something of a defeatist attitude with respect to both. Political parties are the key to popular government, but it is not everyone who appreciates the fact. Fifty million voters would be lost without organizations such as the parties to clarify the issues of the day, to make preliminary selections of candidates and to conduct—or loyally criticize—the government for them.

American parties are not what they ought to be, but they are as good as the American people really want to have them. As T. V. Smith has said, "The politicians are at once the hope and the despair of American democracy." Recently the Congress passed, somewhat ostentatiously, the Hatch acts "for the prevention of pernicious political activities." What their effect is going to be, it is too early to say, but this at least may be observed: The acts were supported quite as much in the hope of their embarrassing the other party as because of any genuine concern over the corruption which is known to exist within the arena of politics. What is really needed is a crusade for the promotion of propitious political activities—not only in the great urban centers but out on the broad countryside as well.

MISTAKEN ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Business, says Thurman Arnold, is usually judged by its successes, government by its failures. Public administration may or may not have a long way to go to reach the level of efficiency attained by private enterprise; what is more to
the point is that regardless of where it now is, many people think that it is hopelessly inefficient—and destined always to be that way. As a matter of fact, there are great differences in efficiency as between the hundreds and thousands of governmental offices and establishments representing public administration in the United States, just as there are enormous differences in the levels of efficiency among the several hundred thousand firms that collectively comprise what is known as American business.

Both public and private administration have improved down through the years, and both are steadily getting better. Public administrators, however, often fail to gain popular recognition for the advances they make, because their reward for improving the method of performing a service frequently comes in the form of a request to take on some new job. Thus they are made to appear inefficient again just when they have succeeded in becoming efficient. How many times has it not happened that an administrative agency in agriculture has perfected its technique in providing a service only to find when done that the legislature has assigned it two or three new and more difficult tasks?

Without any doubt, American democracy must enlarge the competence and improve the calibre of its administrative personnel. Though the level of efficiency in public administration has been raised materially in the period since the passage of the Civil Service Act in 1883, it is not yet high enough. Probably the root of the difficulty is the failure to recognize that there are in government two separate realms, one of politics, in which the public should be encouraged to participate and which it should control through the voting process, and one of administration, entrance into which should be permitted only upon the basis of honesty and competence and within which there should be security of tenure for a public servant so long as he is efficient and faithful in the discharge of his duties. “Better government personnel” should be the watchword all along the line. Those who want to make democracy function effectively must insist that the merit system be extended “upward, outward and downward” to cover all non-policy determining posts on all levels of government.
DELAY IN PERFECTING INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Even if the American people should succeed in solving all of their internal problems, it would not be enough to insure for them the future of democracy. For there are external, as well as internal, dangers which challenge democracy. This nation faces as one of its knottiest tasks that of finding a way to live in harmony with the people of other nations on a shrinking planet. In all the realm of government there is no harder problem than this. It is, first of all, a problem of conducting international relations on the basis of peaceful dealing rather than on the basis of force or war. But it is also, and importantly, a problem of eliminating barriers to economic exchange and social cooperation. Means can and must be found to enable men and women everywhere to have the advantages of a free movement of goods, of ideas and of persons.

Science and technology have made the world so small that its various peoples are going to have to live together on one basis or another. The big question is whether that basis shall be one of cooperation or conflict. Whether or not mankind is capable of effectuating such cooperation depends on a number of things, each of which comprises a real obstacle: Are Americans going to be able to rise above their nationalism and join some "over-national" organization for disposing amicably of political difficulties between nations, be it a world court, a revived League of Nations or a federal union of democratic peoples? Are Americans prepared to open wider their domestic markets to foreign producers in return for a willingness on the part of other peoples to purchase American goods? Will Americans participate more fully in common efforts to raise health and labor standards the world over, or have they now gone as far as ever they intend? Upon the answers to these questions will depend the solution to the towering problems of perfecting a constructive and workable system of relations among nations.
TOWARD A SOUNDER, STRONGER DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a symphony, unfinished and incapable of being finished. It has no blueprint which once satisfied will bring its consummation or its doom. It is the way free men live together, and the way can be made finer and richer with every passing year.

The new despotisms lay claim to being revolutionary movements—harbingers of the future. They are in fact primitive and reactionary, for what they do is to beat a return to the oldest pattern in the long annals of government. Using the term in its best sense, democracy is the only system which is truly and permanently "revolutionary"—because what it implies is a continual evolution toward the "good life" for every citizen.

If the analysis of the nature of the challenge to democracy presented in this bulletin is correct, there is much that needs to be done, and there is no time to lose. It behooves every citizen to get busy and do his part, whether as leader or follower, to put the house of freedom in order. As for farm people generally, they will want to join hands with their fellow Americans in the cities to direct and guide the use of science and technology so that these powerful forces will be harnessed to construction rather than destruction. They can watch themselves individually and collectively so that no person and no group among them will seek to press his or its own advantage beyond a point which they would be unwilling to have a business or labor organization reach. They could endeavor to secure for their local and state governmental units the legal power, financial resources and competent personnel which would reduce the necessity of "looking to Washington" for help.

While continuing to fight political immorality in the big cities, farmers might also try to drive out incompetence and eliminate corruption from the countryside where, as has been shown in a recent book on the government of a prairie state, they will not have to dig very deep to find them. It might not seem important, but rural people, and their urban brethren as well, can make a genuine contribution to the strengthening of democracy simply by joining the party of
their choice and working for it, helping it to live up to its highest possibilities instead of letting it fall to its lowest ones. They can help nail the fallacy, for that is what it is, that a democracy because of its very nature must resign itself to inefficiency. And they can insist on stiffer and stricter qualifications for employees in all branches and fields of administrative work—especially on the state and local levels. Finally they can show in dozens of ways—by the stand they take, for example, on tariffs, on immigration and on international organization—that they are ready and willing to make whatever contribution may be required of them in getting this nation and other nations to live together and work together as the normal practice.

Finally, they will remember that, being farmers, they are in a special sense the heirs of those who established democracy in this land and that they have as much or more at stake in strengthening democracy than any other group in America.
# HOW THE SYSTEMS DIFFER

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<td>1. Power and glory of the state, human happiness having only minor importance.</td>
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<td>2. Basic equality of individuals and races.</td>
<td>2. Insistence on racial and national inequality.</td>
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<td>10. Censorship, suppression, persecution and expulsion as methods of dealing with dissenters.</td>
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<td>11. Education kept free to insure its vigor and integrity.</td>
<td>11. Education “coordinated” to insure “political reliability.”</td>
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<td>12. Major and minor parties, flanked by legitimate pressure groups.</td>
<td>12. Only one party, supplemented by a “labor front” imposed on workers and other “fronts” imposed on other interests.</td>
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<td>16. Executive given limited term and subjected to checks.</td>
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<td>17. Supremacy of civil over military power.</td>
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<td>18. Secret police forces—with regular use of torture and terror.</td>
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<td>20. Government by majority rule but with minorities recognized as having definite rights.</td>
<td>20. Governance by a self-selected ruling class in the name of the state with minorities under discrimination.</td>
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