

## Preface

Has the American democratic experiment run out of steam? Have we replaced our democracy, through our inattention to it, in conjunction with politicians lustful for power, with a form of centralized authority so out of touch with the needs of the common people that it is hardly accurately described as a true democracy anymore? It is the thesis of this book that the last eight years in particular have shown us that our democracy has largely evaporated (except for our voting rights, of course), and has left behind only an exoskeleton that once was its original vertebrate of ends and principles.

The reflections contained in this book come from a series of weekly radio essays done for KVMR-FM in Nevada City, California, between October, 2005 and December, 2008. While some of the specific events referred to in these essays are perhaps now relegated to the annals of recent history, the principles and concepts that these events have instantiated are eternal. The ideas of freedom, equality, human rights, civil liberties, constitutional values and issues, and the founding principles of our country are now and always will be topics for discussion. The occasions may and will change, but the issues discussed in these essays will always be a part of our cultural dialogue. More importantly, because each essay was written at the time in which it was fundamental to the national dialogue, each event discussed presents, when taken together, a panoramic view of how democracy itself has come under direct attack since 9/11/01.

Specifically, the issues that I continually attempt to keep alive in these essays come in the form of two questions: First, how true to our founding values are we staying in our national actions and dialogue? Second, how consistent and universal is our application of the principles and standards we claim to hold dear? During the years covered by these essays, the answer to these questions, were they to be given by even the most objective observer, must be mixed, at best. Therefore, as a philosopher, it is my task to ask questions and point to ways in which we might more consciously pursue the fulfillment of the values that have made us the great nation we have been.

It is my deepest conviction that, at the very least, we have gotten very far off track as a country in fulfilling our deepest democratic convictions concerning our governance. The reason for this is that we have made a detour from those primary values that at one time united us. Where and how this happened is a matter of

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some conjecture, but why it happened is, in the main, caused by three distinct, but related issues: a replacement of moral values with capitalist interests (values), the fusion of capital interests with lust for political power to protect those interests, and the opening provided to Christian religious fundamentalism to fill the moral gap left in our public governing philosophy. That is, by drifting from a country which understood that the values of freedom and equal opportunity were to be extended to all, we have become a nation in which the values of money and personal self-interest (and sometimes narrowly religious values) have replaced our primary values. Into the gap between the shift in governmental priorities from concern for moral principles and the common good, and a slumbering citizenry, the forces of a decided financial and sometimes religious minority has stepped, advocating a certain set of very narrowly-defined values which they believe should be forcefully applied on everyone. This has had its most significant expression in the movement our government (both federal and state) has made over the last twenty years, from a democracy in which the people are heard and by and for whom legislation is created, to one that is what I frequently call a “corporatocracy;” i.e. in which the values of the CEO and the interests of those who have amassed large amounts of capital are those whom the government hears and those by and for whom legislation is created. When this monied elite melds with government, as it has in especially pertinent ways during the presidency of George W. Bush, the process of democratic reduction is complete.

That the Bush-Cheney administration married capital with political power in a most intense way may be seen by the philosophy of incredibly centralized power, the number of private, no-bid contracts handed out to those special few companies with influence in Washington such as KBR, Halliburton, and Blackwater, and then the massive bailouts to Wall Street in late 2008, with no strings attached. When one adds to this consolidation of capital-political power in the notion of the “unitary executive,” in conjunction with the PATRIOT Act, along with the numerous other pieces of draconian legislation which has sailed through Congress since 9/11/0, one can easily perceive the pattern of the devolution of democracy into a corporate power state.<sup>1</sup> But we must add one more observation to these.

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<sup>1</sup> The “unitary executive” is a philosophy of concentrated power in the hands of the Executive branch of government. Under the Bush regime, it has meant that the President is above the Legislative and Judicial branches of government. For more on this, see for example John Dean, *Broken Government*, or his *Worse than Watergate*. For more on the PATRIOT Act and the other-mentioned “draconian” pieces of legislation since 9/11, see my book *A User’s Guide to the USA PATRIOT Act and Beyond* (Maryland; University Press of America, 2005).

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When torture of arrested foreigners is ordered from the top, as Vice President Cheney has recently admitted, and when the Attorney General of the United States creates a special category of person (“unlawful combatants”) so that torture laws and other human rights-based international laws cannot apply to these persons, democracy has in effect been transformed into a new form of government. Unresponsive to its citizens, contemptuous of human rights, and averse to the very mention of the common good, this government now has become what I call toward the end of these essays an “authoritarian state.” This descriptive title emphasizes the concentration of political power while at the same time implying disinterest in protecting citizen rights as well as the common good. It presupposes the marriage of capital to it, as most authoritarian governments in history have done.

This book traces this reduction of democracy to an authoritarian state in a step by step, story by story process, in the particular incidents by and in which it has happened during the past four years in particular.

We must add to this theme another one that is every bit as pertinent to our understanding of the devaluation of democracy by those in positions of great wealth and political power. This notion is that it is the same persons who devalue democracy use the military of our government to protect their own interests (i.e. capital investments, profit-making abilities, market expansion) and to keep the people silenced (e.g. witness the distance so-called “free speech zones” are from the events they are target, and witness the violence used against protestors at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions). This issue will likely be an important one in the years to come, as our own troops begin to turn toward the citizenry of our country while also continuing to invade the lands of those whose philosophies are adverse to that of unobstructed profit.

The combination of these movements—corporate government and consolidation and centralization of federal government power, along with the use of the military to protect and guarantee its continued unfettered existence, along with the aversion to citizen and human rights—are the movements most threatening to a healthy form of democracy. These movements are the ones dealt with in these essays.

As to solutions, there are a number of them contained within this text. They sometimes tend to read as a litany of liberal aspirations and values, but taken together, they represent the necessary conditions not only for a vibrant and

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functional democracy, but also a healthy planet earth. Immediate attention to the environment, as well as the return to constitutionalism domestically and the rule of law abroad are all advocated for in this text as necessary conditions for a return to democratic health.

I would advocate even more strongly now than I did at the time of the writing of most of these essays that the value-systems that are now firmly in place in American governance are precisely contradictory to both the spirit and the letter of democratic governments. As such, it behooves us to be acutely aware of them and to fight them whenever and wherever they reveal themselves, most frequently behind and underneath the public proclamations and machinations of those who seek such control of society. That is the motivating theme of these essays. It is critical to our form of democracy in the United States that citizens once again become active participants in the issues of the day. Nothing less than the reclamation of our democracy is at stake.

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