

A Weapon of Mass Construction

If there is a unifying theme within the Bush Administration, it certainly must be “destruction.” This theme is not only evident in the administration’s obsession with and search for “weapons of mass destruction,” and its concurrent desire to create the same for “defensive purposes”; but it is also evident in the administration’s desire to destroy the natural environment in the name of “economic growth,” its desire to destroy our civil liberties in the name of “national security,” and its desire to destroy the truth in its quest for power. What is particularly cynical about the administration’s destructive tendencies is its attempt to hide them under religious rhetoric. It is also noteworthy that the Republican desire to dismantle the public sphere contradicts the name of the party itself, which contains the term “public.”

Democracy cannot be built and maintained by destruction. A democracy is a political community that is constructed upon the foundation of citizenship. Citizenship implies a minimal level of trust among the members of the political community so that they can come together and work toward resolving the problem of governance through deliberation focused upon a common—i.e. public—purpose. The tools required to build this foundation of citizenship are reason, rights, and responsibility. When these tools are employed, they culminate in “representation” through which political ideas are discussed, refined, and presented to the political community for consideration. To build a democracy we need citizenship. But to activate the tools of citizenship we need a “weapon of mass construction.”

There are two ways such a weapon will construct citizenship. First, it will transform “the masses” into “the citizenry.” The term “masses” is usually used in a pejorative sense that implies moral depravity. When one looks at our culture today with its hyperactive emphasis on commercial activity that uses various forms of mindless entertainment to promote hedonistic consumption, there is much to support this view. In contradistinction, “the citizenry” implies the Aristotelian ideal in which man achieves his highest end when engaged in politics. In this conception “the polis” precedes and gives meaning to “the individual.” A democracy requires citizens engaged in public purpose, not atomized individuals captivated by private pursuits of self-interest. The second way this weapon will construct citizenship is by building the “critical mass” necessary to bring about fundamental change.

There is a weapon available through which “the masses” may pull themselves up by their bootstraps and start to become “citizens.” That weapon is the National Initiative for Democracy. The Initiative is a project of the Democracy Foundation—an institution created by Senator Mike Gravel (D. Alaska, 1969-1981) to help solve the problem of governance. As a result of his public service, the Senator was able to observe first hand the shortcomings of our elective system of government. He came to realize that fundamental solutions can only be brought about by the people themselves. The National Initiative for Democracy is a step in that direction. The initiative is a tool that is already available in 24 states. The National Initiative for Democracy will make this tool available in every jurisdictional level within the United States. What this means is that citizens will

have the ability to either initiate legislation directly or to correct legislation that has been enacted. The tool is not perfect—no tool is—but the Foundation refined its proposal through a deliberative process over the past decade. In February of 2002 that process culminated in the Democracy Symposium, which brought together constitutional and political science scholars to prepare the final draft of the National Initiative. In September of that year the National Initiative became a major step toward the creation of an ethic of citizenship when it was submitted to the voters. The voting process will take several years to achieve the critical mass necessary for its enactment.

The initiative has received some bad press lately as a result of its association with the recall election in California. However, that election had a greater turnout than the actual gubernatorial election, which is a sign of voter engagement and a step toward greater political maturity. That is precisely what the initiative is supposed to accomplish. The National Initiative does not involve the recall of elected officials; its emphasis is upon the legislative aspect of representation. By engaging citizens in the legislative process directly, it will begin the process of building a democratic political community.

The creation of a democracy requires a steep learning curve on the part of the citizenry. Like all learning curves and transitional processes involving change, there is pain and discomfort. But to grow and mature, it is necessary to go through this pain and discomfort. Of course the National Initiative entails risk; but life itself entails risk. By assuming this risk with open eyes and an open mind, we can deploy this “weapon of mass construction” to achieve the higher purpose of building a genuine democratic political community.

Information about the National Initiative for Democracy may be obtained from the Democracy Foundation, and, in addition to information about the Initiative, the web site provides an opportunity to vote on the Initiative.

The Democracy Foundation
1600 North Oak Street, Suite 1412
Arlington, VA 22209-2757
Voice: (703) 516-4056
Fax: (703) 516-4057
Web Site: www.ni4d.us

William K. Dustin
7171 Mid Oaks Ave.
Stillwater, MN 55082
Occupation: Retired
651-430-3933
william.dustin@ethicofcitizenship.com
<http://www.ethicofcitizenship.com>

