

An Urgent Appeal for Democracy and Citizenship

“The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything.”

Albert Einstein

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing reality obsolete.”

Buckminster Fuller

“The Obama Foundation is a living, working start-up for citizenship — an ongoing project for us to shape, together, what it means to be a good citizen in the 21st century.”

<https://www.obama.org/your-voice/>

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency is the latest symptom and direct result of a disease process that has been festering in our body politic since at least 1980. The Republican Party has been gradually captured by extremist elements, the archetypical example of which is the National Rifle Association but where the real power brokers are corporate interests, which have the intention of establishing a one party dictatorship in this country. This trend began with Reagan’s attack on government as the problem, not the solution. With each election cycle, this attack on the public sphere became ever more extreme to the point where satire is now policy. The Democratic Party has been so hapless in opposing this trend that it could be considered a coconspirator. The real problem is not government, which is both a problem and a solution, but the institution of election.

The media are incapable of addressing the cause and potential cure of this disease because they are focused on the pathological elements of the Trumpian personality. Eliminating this symptom may provide temporary relief, but it won’t provide a cure. The root cause of the disease is the conflation of the institution of election with the idea and ideal of democracy. The adolescence, in the most pejorative sense of that word, of the last presidential election may well be a terminal symptom. This disease process is most obviously illustrated in our foreign policy where we invade a country to throw out the regime, throw up an election, and call it a democracy. It appears that the Trump administration is seeking to emulate some of those values that we are trying to defeat militarily. Not only is this hypocrisy bringing out our worst elements, but there is also a real possibility that we will lose those things that make living life desirable in this country, from civil society to the natural beauty of the physical landscape.

I realize that as an individual who has successfully won election to the senate and then the highest office in the land, you will find this argument difficult to accept. But if you step back and think about it, even though you were successful and your administration admirable, you may come to realize that election is actually destructive of democratic citizenship. Citizenship, properly understood, is both a property of individual natural persons and a process that engages them in politics, such that there is a mediation of the tension between the individual and the community. Citizenship, in the next stage of its evolution, may be defined as that secular ethic which establishes membership and participation in the political community and which provides

the cooperative context within which political competition takes place. It is also the one identity that we have in common, something we have lost sight of in this era of identity politics. To achieve this ideal of citizenship, it is necessary to resurrect the Aristotelian concept of the citizen as one who governs and is governed in turn. In our society this means that citizens will have to accept the responsibility for their own governance by: (1) serving in the legislature of their state when called by a process of random selection, or (2) serving as a randomly selected elector to choose the constitutional officers of their state.

The emerging citizenship project through your foundation provides an ideal place and time to begin a dialog on the meaning of citizenship, not in the context of immigration or the trivialized, feel good platitudes of high school civics, but in terms of creating a culture of democracy for those of us who are already citizens. I am enclosing a copy of my book where citizenship and political representation are discussed in detail. It is not an easy read, and you may prefer to read it online at www.ethicofcitizenship.com. Unfortunately what were intended as footnotes ended up being printed as endnotes. Online you can use links to move back and forth to read the footnotes in context. You may also want to take a look at this link: www.ethicofcitizenship.com/ECS.htm. There is no internal link to this page, but it contains some ideas pertaining to an unsuccessful attempt to establish an Ethic of Citizenship Society.

I sincerely hope your citizenship project will help move us out of these dark ages into an era of liberty and responsibility. Since it will require an especially enlightened generation to initiate these changes, your efforts will need to focus on the young. If the solution suggested here is deemed inadequate, then the challenge is to come up with a better one. Given the worldwide breakdown of governance, our long term survival on this planet may depend upon it.