

REMARKS
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In a Democratic system, criticism is healthy, indeed, it is essential to the process of self-government. A measure of discontent is the fuel for change and growth. But there is another side to the equation, as well. We must be equally candid -- equally forthright -- in recognizing the progress that is achieved. If our Democratic system is to remain healthy, the people themselves must retain their faith in the system's ability to achieve the fundamental goals we set for ourselves.

In a brief quarter century we have travelled farther in fulfilling our nation's ideals and promise than in any other period of our history.

Yet a spiritual isolation is possible in today's world that was hardly possible in a less organized, less technological age. Science and technology may have made the world into a global village, but a neighborhood to be a community must become a brotherhood. Man today is farther removed from the fruits of his labors than ever before -- and his unhappiness in the face of economic success has shown that material comforts alone do not guarantee a satisfying and rewarding life. Crowded by multitudes, yet he feels lonely. Flooded by goods and things, he thirsts for happiness.

The threat of nuclear war; the draft; rising rates of crime and violence; fear of impoverishment through illness; and the rapid changes in all aspects of our public and private lives -- these are shocks that few men in any age have had to bear so continuously and relentlessly.

Is it any wonder that so many of our people retreat into conformity -- and reject the new freedom that our material achievements seem to offer? Is it any wonder that many of those who oppose what they call the "system" also tend to conform to inflexible social patterns and "systems" of their own? There is uncertainty in freedom -- and uncertainty few of us are equipped to handle -- freedom demands the daring of an explorer and the dedication of a patriot.

But there is an alternative -- one that can give individuals greater meaning in their lives and, at the same time, preserve the essence of Democracy.

This alternative is found in a single word: participation -- a challenge to our democratic system no less than the one posed by the great depression.

Some will say that this is too simple and obvious. Perhaps. But the undeniable fact is that in today's world the chance to take part in society and government is limited indeed. The forms of participation have expanded manyfold, as barriers preventing access to social and political institutions have been lowered. More people vote; more people go to college; more people are able to travel and communicate with others.

Yet the substance of participation -- a sense of being able to have a say in what happens -- seems to have remained the province of a very few. The question remains, how can the powerless share in power? How can the governed give their consent or exercise their right of dissent?

We need first to gain a more accurate view of the individual's role in our mass society. Few of us can be satisfied if we are continually judging ourselves -- and being judged -- by standards encompassing two-hundred million people, and it may be difficult to find meaning in what we do, if only certain problems or activities are said to be worthwhile or glamorous -- or if we take too seriously what others think of our concerns. Too often we discover that "where the action is". . .we aren't. . .and perhaps rightly so.

Just yesterday, it seems, the nation's attention was focused on racial injustice; then it is Vietnam and the urban crisis; yet now we discover that popular attention is focused on the crisis of our environment. Indeed, as the focus of mass attention has shifted, many activities of great importance -- such as the search for racial justice -- no longer attract the popular interest and commitment needed to continue and finish the job.

Today it has become popular to talk of "doing your own thing." At worse, this is an effort to abdicate from social responsibility, to "drop out," or to obscure the hard work of social change beneath simple slogans.

But at best, "doing your own thing" is a healthy development, urging each person to develop his own sense of personal worth - his own commitment and involvement.

It is ironic that this idea should be cherished as though it were new. For it surely is not. On the contrary, it is the highest expression of all our efforts, in two centuries of American political and social development. This is what we have always been about as a nation. John Adams referred to this personal involvement -- "doing your own thing" - as "the spirit of public happiness - a spirit which is reflected in the life of the people, in participation in public discussion and public action." He described this spirit of public happiness as "a joy in American citizenship, in self government, in self control, in self discipline, in dedication."

We need to channel the development of individual integrity into activities at the level of families. . . neighborhoods. . . communities.

What we do at home may not make headlines, but it should make for greater personal happiness, as well as greater fulfillment and tranquility for us all.

We need a renewed awareness that true freedom comes not from withdrawing from society, but from taking part -- Democracy is not self-executing. We have to make it work. It is the people's business and the people must take care of their enterprise. We need to remember with justice Holmes that "every calling is great when greatly pursued."

And like it or not, individuals must act through institutions much of the time. And there are few institutions more pervasive than government and politics. The role they play is the key to the individual's ability to take part in Democracy.

Only through access to our representative institutions -- to the political process -- can each one of us be guaranteed our right to help chart the future course of our country. Only in this way will we have a real say in decisions that most intimately affect the course of our lives. There is no party, no executive, no cabinet or legislature, wise enough to govern without constant exposure to informed criticism. Freedom is hammered out on the anvil of discussion, debate, and dissent, which ultimately yields to a decision that can be supported by the public.

This will require some reform, if we are to insure access, equal participation and effectiveness. Starting with the political parties, we need to improve the method of delegate selection, and to modernize the rules and procedures of national party conventions.

The nomination of a president: and the adoption of a platform are too important to be the result of a process that is unrepresentative, undemocratic, or unfair.

The vitality of the political process also demands the removal of every unnecessary barrier to exercising the franchise, including:

- -Granting eighteen year-olds the right to vote in Federal and state elections;
- -A national election holiday;
- -A national election commission to insure fairness in all elections;
- -A program of national registration for all eligible voters;

- -The elimination of all vestiges of voting discrimination based on race through the extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 now pending before the congress; and

- -The election of president and vice-president by direct popular vote.

The processes of Democratic politics must not be restricted to those who have the wealth, the time, the education, and the opportunity for political participation. Everyone -- the worker, the housewife, the student -- must have an equal chance to take part.

We must change -- yes, clean up -- the method of financing political parties. Whether through tax credits, deductions, or general revenues from the U. S. Treasury, we must eliminate special privilege, corruption, and suspicion from the multi-million dollar business of running for public office.

Television stations should make free time available to all qualified candidates on airwaves owned by the public.

The process of revitalizing politics must not stop here. Ineffective government is also a source of frustration, and produces increasing resistance to the intrusion of bureaucracy in our private lives.

We must face some harsh truths about the congress and our state legislatures. Can we deny that congress is unresponsive to the public interest -- that it discourages individuals from taking part -- when it takes seventeen years to pass medical care for the aged? Can we deny this when programs to provide economic opportunity are always funded after the defense budget is settled? Must we continue to choose congressional committee chairman solely on the basis of seniority?

Or do we have the wisdom to find a better way?

The executive branch of the government, as well, must be made to respond more quickly to current problems and concerns of our people, and must have a more systematic approach to long-range planning. In the President's office, for example, we need a council of social advisors analogous to the council of economic advisors. Just as the latter seeks to inform and advise the President and the congress on all economic matters, so the council of social advisors would act in areas of social and environmental concern - - including housing, health, education, civil rights, crime, welfare, and poverty. And this capacity for judgement and decision is needed at every level of government - - Federal, State, and local.

The executive branch also has an active role to play in developing new techniques of involvement in community life. This can be an active partnership with private groups and individuals. This is the heart of the new federalism.

We recognized this need when we passed the economic opportunity and model cities acts. Unfortunately, public attention has been focused on the extremes -- on isolated violence at one end, and incidents of public apathy at the other.

But in the main, these efforts brought large numbers of people into the mainstream of activity -- giving them something to do for themselves. . . their neighborhoods. . . their communities -- many of them for the first time in their lives.



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