

# *What is American Democracy?*

by  
**Dr. Manford George Gutzke**

## **What is American Democracy?**

The man who lives in America enjoys many benefits. None is more wonderful than the way he is treated as a person. By common consent his fellow citizens guarantee that he shall have certain rights and privileges which give him his opportunity to live in freedom. Within the limits which protect the rights of others he can live as he wishes and as he can. In this situation he is challenged to become an independent responsible citizen, with personal dignity and self respect.

We call our society a "democracy." The Founding Fathers of our country fought for liberty from any form of arbitrary coercion by force. Because they had certain convictions as to the nature of the world and the nature of man, they developed a system of government "of the people by the people for the people." This government secured for each one of us the rights and privileges we have commonly agreed to respect for each other.

### **AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS UNIQUE**

Other nations in the world have appreciated and envied the benefits we enjoy as Americans. In their own efforts to gain similar benefits they too have promoted revolutions to destroy systems of government by force. They have developed their own governments based upon the willing consent of the governed. They have used the word "democracy" because some such system as ours was what the people wanted. Yet what they have developed and what they have called "democracy" is often very different from ours. It is a tragic mistake to think that human beings acting in human nature, if free to do as they please, will naturally and surely develop a system of living together which will be like "the American way of life."

To be sure, Americans are as human as other people. But the principles of our society were derived from certain definite convictions which were directly based upon the religious beliefs held by the early Americans. Not every Founding Father held these beliefs, but all shared in the convictions which produced the system of government we have inherited. The nation as a whole adopted the Constitution which describes and secures the way of living which is American democracy. This includes features which are not natural and which must therefore be maintained by the will of the people according to certain basic principles commonly held.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES TO OTHERS**

Democracy means government. This means it is a regulated way of living together. Because it is government "by the people," each man has his share in the management of common affairs. This leads easily into the error that each man can do as he pleases. But this is definitely a mistake. Our penitentiaries are grim evidence that no American can do as he pleases.

## **EACH MAN GETS HIS TURN**

Another easy misunderstanding is to think we mean that one man is as good as another. This is a gross error. Both of these wrong ideas can come indirectly from one common principle basic to our way of life. This principle is that each man gets his turn. Our system does give every man a chance – his chance – to do what he can as he lives his life. And it is this which we say is not natural.

The truth of the situation can be seen by watching boys as they play games together. The great American game of baseball is an excellent example of democracy in operation. Boys making up their own games will follow natural patterns of behavior. The big boys tell the little boys what to do. The strong, the smart, the boy who owns what is needed for the game, is naturally accepted as the main performer. Others may seek his favor for advantage, but generally a boy's opportunity to participate is based upon the will of the leader of the gang. In the same way the leader may set down the rules all others must follow, because he is "boss." But this is not the case in our game of baseball. Here the rules are agreed upon by common consent all over the country. Such rules provide that each player, whatever his ability, gets his turn at bat. The rules are enforced by an umpire who takes charge of the game at our request. He must abide by the rules also. Without these rules, there would be no game. There could be a riot, but no game. And these rules secure for each player his personal opportunity to play his part the way he wants to play it, and can play it. This is the essence of our democracy.

The same principle works in traffic. For common safety and to avoid traffic jams with delay and confusion, we have laws and police. Traffic is controlled and directed for the benefit of all. The poorest jalopy gets its turn as well as the most expensive limousine. No matter how different are the individual drivers, each one gets his turn.

Think about our use of the telephone. The most trivial conversation has the right to hold the line until it is finished, regardless of who is waiting. And think about the way anybody and everybody can use our sidewalks, our street lights, our pavements, our parks and all our public works. Even persons who never pay taxes, who never do anything to help keep up our public facilities, have full free use of everything by our common consent. This is the way we live. I like it. This is our democracy in action.

## **CONTRARY TO HUMAN NATURE**

And yet, no matter how familiar all this may be to us, it is still not according to human nature. Our way of living together is based upon certain affirmations we make. We say we will count some things to be true, even though they actually are not that way. We may realize these things are not the way we are going to play them, but we agree to act as if they were real, because of certain beliefs we have.

For example, we affirm the idea "All men are created free and equal." Actually we are not so much saying this is really true, as we are telling the world we are going to consider this as if it were true, for us. The evidence is plain that there are differences among men, but the Founding Fathers believed that the God of the Bible is "no respecter of persons." They believed that the Savior died for all men, and that the Gospel promises "whosoever will may come." Since they believed "God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth," they were inclined also to believe God meant that each man should have his chance. Because they could say "In God we trust," they intended to act that way and so they set up their government to make sure every man would get his turn, believing that God would help to overcome the difficulties due to individual differences, and bless the nation for living this way.

But this affirmation "All men are created free and equal" we must admit is not realistically true in nature. Every American should face it. Doubtless one can say "All men are created." But when one goes on to say "free" one has said too much. Many men are not free. Some were not even born free. Many men are in bondage. Some are slaves to their own appetites. Some are in bondage because of their own habits. And certainly men are not "equal." One might as well say all men are the same height and the same weight. It's just not true. We all know one man is not as smart as another. Nor is every man as strong as

everyone else. There is a difference in people. The Fathers of this country knew this very well. Then why did they make such a statement? They made this affirmation deliberately, in the face of all the human nature evidence against it, because of their religious convictions. We have noted they were influenced by their belief that "God is no respecter of persons," and the Gospel is for all men. They felt that in dealing with God every man is permitted to stand on his own feet. This made them feel that every man should have his turn in our society to do what he can, even though they know some would be better and stronger than others.

### **A CALCULATED RISK**

The Founders of this nation felt that the future of such a society, working on a basis not true to human nature, would be precarious. It would be risky. However, they believed the grace of God could overcome the human limitations and inequalities you and I can see when we look at people, Jefferson himself wrote that this government of ours would continue and be successful as long as the citizens were virtuous. He went on to say that if the people of this country ever lost their virtue they "would fall to eating each other as they did in the old country." We may smile when we read that he went on to say they would remain "virtuous as long as they stayed in the country." But we can know for sure he realized human nature as such by itself would never promote the American way of life.

When Jefferson prepared the first draft of the preamble in the Declaration of Independence he listed as the "inalienable rights" of man "life, liberty and property." His committee felt that "property" sounded too mercenary so they substituted as we now have "the pursuit of happiness." Probably Jefferson saw little difference since any man must have some "property" if he is to be at all "happy." Even now it is easy to think a man must "have" something in order to "be" somebody. The leaders of the Mexican revolution evidently saw this when they tried to give land to the peons. They doubtless realized that a government controlled by citizens who owned land would be stronger than a government controlled by peons, who owned nothing. To be reliable and loyal a man must own something – must belong somewhere outside himself. He must have roots in something that is his. Human nature can be strengthened in character and confirmed in virtue if a man has "property."

For whatever it may be worth to us, we may note that here can be seen the national significance of our labor unions. For a great many Americans, a man's "union card" is his "property." This is something he "owns." For many a man this is his "stake in his country." Regardless of whatever abuse may handicap organized labor, this principle may well have been recognized by our statesmen who have encouraged collective bargaining. To belong to a union makes a man a member of the team, and this helps him to be more reliable.

The problems of American democracy arise in the human nature of the people in their individual differences, and greed, and pride. The Founding Fathers realized a government "by the people" would be wasteful, extravagant, inefficient with overlapping in some services, and omission and neglect in others. But with all such faults and failings they believed it was worth the price. They were committed in confidence to the idea that the common sense of the common people would be the best guide in the government of national affairs. They recognized there would be problems, but they were hopeful that the intelligent use of certain principles would lead to the solution of these problems to the benefit of the whole nation. It is most important for our own generation to recognize and follow these principles in order that we may be successful in handling the problems facing us in our country today.

### **THREE UNNATURAL PRINCIPLES**

The three principles which seem so essential to the effectual operation of democracy have been phrased in the classic expression: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." Each of these is an achievement. Not one of these three comes naturally. There must be intelligent, deliberate, diligent effort in each case. Let us

examine them briefly to see what each means to us now.

## **LIBERTY**

Here the star of democracy shines the brightest. At no time does democracy look as impressive as when the people are in revolt against oppression. It is then men are at their best! Even to this day the immortal words of Patrick Henry "Give me liberty, or give me death!" ring their message of challenge down to our very bones. In rallying to this clarion call to burst any shackles of repression we rise in all the dignity of independence to march in the common cause of freedom.

But the issue we face today is not as simple as the overthrow of foreign tyrant. Our problem would be so much easier to handle if there were some alien George III to depose. Our trouble is that the tyrant who opposes us in bondage is not from the outside at all! The master that enslaves us and impoverishes us is from within ourselves. We languish in our public affairs because of our own self interest. "Everyone is given over to covetousness." Each man is for himself. Party interest, class interest, regional interest is clutching at the very throat of our nation. We are in danger of losing our liberty because we are being enmeshed gradually in the bondage of self-interest and self indulgence. The whole future of our American way of life is in jeopardy at this very point.

Our forefathers laid down their lives to secure freedom. We cherish the heritage. We maintain the world's greatest military power to be able to protect freedom from coercion by arbitrary force. We are ready to go to the ends of the earth to help anywhere that men strike for freedom. But right here at home we are tending to turn our freedom into license. The American way of life gives every man his chance – but did we ever mean this should be his chance to do wrong? "Freedom" is never rightly understood as the privilege to do evil, to do wrong, to dissipate, to waste. As long as, as far as, we abuse our freedom in self-will, in self-indulgence, in self-seeking we are compromising and endangering the "liberty" we must have if we would live successfully in the American way of life!

Time is running out for us! All our glorious tradition of "liberty and justice for all" will be but an empty shell unless we come to grips with ourselves, and achieve a discipline of our human desires and greed that will secure for us such freedom from appetite and lust, passion and vice as will permit us to live with each other in true liberty. To throw off external control shines as glorious achievement, but to fail to grasp our own steering wheel as we careen selfishly and carelessly to the very brink of disaster is criminal folly. It would seem as though our whole nation is asleep in this perilous hour. It would be the mercy of God if some modern Paul Revere would ride through the lanes of our national life and call us now "To Arms! To Arms!" No one can exaggerate the risk we are taking as we put off the day of reckoning with ourselves!

## **EQUAITY**

Here is democracy's greatest pitfall and most serious danger. Men are so different. What is meant when we say we will consider all men as "equal"? Just now we are confronted in the world by an ideology that claims every man is *actually* equal to every other man. And truly, if each man were to be stripped of all individual liberty, so that he would actually be treated as a zero, then all men would be alike: they would all be zeroes. But if you give each man his own choice to be and to do what he can and will, men will turn out differently. There will be strong men and weak men, wise men and foolish men, just as there are tall men and short men, big men and little men. Actually here is the very origin of democracy's strength and resourcefulness. Our nation will be strong and progressive just because the strong men are free to exercise their strength, and the wise men are free to apply their wisdom. To have such freedom the weak men will have freedom to fail in their weakness, and the foolish men will have freedom to act in their folly. And yet there is no real loss to us as people because the strength of the strong can more than overcome the weakness of the weak. There is no actual handicap to us in that we give freedom to excep-

tional men. It is only important that such able men relate themselves to the whole of society, and in their capacity help us all. This is one practical problem which democracy must and can handle.

Perhaps we should look seriously at the danger involved. In our system of government, decisions are made in large measure at the ballot box. We allow each citizen one vote. Only those who vote have any positive influence. But here one man's vote is as big as another's. One man studies the issues and votes with intelligence; a second voter may cast his vote without any idea of what he is voting for or against. The second vote is just as big as the first because of our system. One man who pays big taxes votes on a bond issue which will raise his taxes; another who pays no taxes and is supported by government relief also votes on that same bond issue. Each gets one vote. It is hard to see equity in such an arrangement, yet this is our way of life. Each man gets his turn. The Founding Fathers recognized the danger here since the intelligent conscientious voters might be in the minority. They counted on the able citizens to influence others by their leadership.

There is always a practical problem arising from the presence of both strong and weak in the same public group. The weak can become so discouraged they will not even try to do their best. This calls for the procedure to overcome the difference between the strong and the weak in group performance. There must be a sense of communion in the community which will act as a cohesive to produce one united group. And this can be done by a simple, well-known procedure. How can one promote a race between a 15 year old boy and a 12 year old boy? The 15 year old won't run as fast as he can; he doesn't have to. The 12 year old won't run as fast as he can; he couldn't win if he tried. There will be no race! But if you give the 12 year old a 15 yard handicap in a 100 yard race, the 12 year old will run as fast as he can, because now he thinks he can win! The 15 year old will run as hard as he can because he "knows" he can win! And thus you will have a real race, and both boys will perform at their very best.

This illustrates what actually happens in our society through Our Income Tax program. The man who makes the most, pays the most; the man who makes the least, pays the least; the man who makes nothing, pays nothing. As a matter of fact, according to his need, our society may give him money. Of course this is unfair. It gives advantage to the weak, and places a burden upon the strong. And yet this is the real solution of the problem arising from individual differences. If the nation as a whole is to live and work as a united people, the weak must be helped to keep up or the common life will be slowed down because of their weakness. To be sure, the strong are placed under extra burden, but this they are able to carry. And it is as they carry just such burden that our common life as a people is raised to a better standard of living. We "handicap" the men who make money easily in order to give an advantage to the men who cannot support themselves.

In this procedure of achieving "equality" in public affairs where there is actually inequality in individual private capacity, we must depend upon the voluntary leadership of the strong and the wise. Unless our strong men are minded to do things this way, the weaker citizens, even though they may be more in number, will never be able to force such performance. And this leads us urgently to consider the third principle essential to our American way of life, which we call "fraternity."

## **FRATERNITY**

This is the most needed element in democracy, and the hardest to find! Certainly we do not mean the "Campus" variety where the membership of our fraternal societies is so carefully screened. Nor even the sort of fellowship which appears in a service club where the membership is restricted and selected. We mean the kind of "brotherhood" which exists in a family when you recognize that your "poor relations" belong to you. It is the attitude of heart in which you acknowledge that all members of the society belong to all other members.

The frame of mind that considers all persons in our society as belonging to each other leads to the conviction that the fortune and welfare of each individual is the proper concern of all. Here the burden

comes directly and immediately upon the wise and the competent. The strong must willingly accept the responsibility of caring for the weak in order to promote and to secure the common welfare. No one can force anyone into such an attitude. The wise man in his wisdom must be willing to tolerate the folly of the foolish if democracy is to function at all.

At this point it is very obvious that human nature in itself will not achieve American democracy. All over the world human beings deal with each other on the basis of power and advantage. The strong and the fortunate take what they want of the best. The weak and the unfortunate are often deprived of what may have been theirs at the outset. The conflict of self-interest rages on in a process where the strong become stronger, and the weak become weaker, until inevitably society itself is wrecked by internal strife and bitterness. The only successful solution is possible when the attitude of fraternity prevails. It has been coined in the phrase "All for one, and one for all." The principle was stated long ago:

*The strong must bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please themselves.*

Canadian-born, I have shared our common admiration of the Father of this country, George Washington. In my life time I have been privileged to visit Mt. Vernon and to see the many evidences preserved there of the personal situation in which Washington lived. I was prepared to see that he was wealthy, the descendant of an English family, and that he moved in the ranks of gentlemen. I was not surprised to see that he was well-educated, and associated with the best circles of society. I was startled to learn that he retired from public office before he was thirty years of age because he disliked politics. I sympathize with his decision to apply himself to the management of his estate and to the development of animal husbandry. As a matter of fact he did much to promote the development of the American mule. It seems obvious that this well educated, wealthy, well-bred young man could have lived comfortably in the Colonies without ever engaging in any such venture as the American Revolution.

His career must forever shine as an example of the leadership our society must have if we are to maintain our way of life. Not for himself, but for others, according to his personal capacity, he accepted the leadership of men not as competent, not as strong, not as dedicated as he, that he might help them achieve the liberty he believed to be essential for their welfare. He had more to lose than any of his followers, and in a practical personal way, less to gain. He took this calculated risk because he felt responsible and because he was able.

Here stands before us in the history of our nation, with majestic simplicity and courageous poise, the perfect example of our most vital need: strong, able, competent men who will accept responsibility in public affairs to the extent of their personal ability; men who will serve all people in their nation because every individual counts in our society; men who will exercise themselves to see that each man gets his turn even as all work together for the common welfare; men who will expend themselves and apply their means in dedication to the interests of our nation as a whole, and to the personal freedom of each individual in it.

Personally, I do not see how such men can arise in their service apart from the same personal convictions shared by our Founding Fathers. I am personally committed as a witness in my generation anywhere and everywhere I go, to the One who came into this world "to seek and to save the lost." The whole world looks upon the Cross as a symbol of Him who "gave Himself a ransom for many." I address you in the name of Jesus Christ who suffered in His own body for the sins of many, who were not worthy to untie His shoes! He set a pattern for all human affairs. "The strong shall bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please themselves."

When this performance is activated among us in capable, wise, unselfish men who accept responsibility to the extent of their ability, the future of American democracy will be assured. Such is the desperate need of this urgent hour in which we live. If you love this nation, if you appreciate the American way

of life, if you have any faith in the God of our fathers, let us humble ourselves before Him in earnest prayer that He will pour out upon us all the grace we need to live in American democracy.