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the issue at hand

by Fred Edwards

A single concept—democracy—unites all the articles in this issue.

In "Our Brave New World of Voting," award-winning journalist Michael I. Niman intimates how fallout from the Florida debacle that gave us a minority president could end up giving us one again.

When that state's infamous "chads" led to passage of a law that forced a voting-system overhaul across the nation, the changes put new, computerized voting machines in place that effectively gave corporations—instead of the people—oversight of our elections. And those corporations are generally run by Republicans. Now, in the light of suspicious developments in recent elections in various states, a number of European observers are predicting the end of American democracy.

In "Public Participation and the Erosion of Democracy," Ralph Nader demonstrates how the mass-market culture of consumption and the corporate control of American media has made civic virtues and town meetings largely a thing of the past. Today the general public cares little about the politicians who quietly affect their lives and hardly notices the civil liberties that are, one-by-one, slipping away.

Barbara Dority goes into detail about that loss of civil liberties. In "Your Every Move" she shows how the Patriot Act, along with documented abuses of its provisions, have made Americans less free—and how new legislation promises to take away even more individual rights. Then Erik Anderson Reese takes a closer look at how freedom is also taken away by mass-market culture. In "Epicurus at the Food Court" he shows that the modern shopping mall, despite its image as a public gathering place designed for the pursuit of pleasure and other personal interests is, in fact, a place where people are manipulated to pursue superficiality and the goal of impressing others. He goes on to offer an alternative model for the mall—one that promotes liberty and democracy—inspired by the humanistic philosophies of Epicurus and Thoreau.

Democracy, however, like everything else, has its downside. As Emrys Westcott demonstrates in "Americans Don't Really Believe in the Ten Commandments," the public can, for no legitimate reason, make a fetish of religious rules they don't actually practice and then attempt to impose them on everyone. The public can also set a mean-spirited tone, calling for an increased use of capital punishment and thereby unwittingly worsen the level of violence in society. Robert Grant discusses this in detail in "Capital Punishment and Violence."

But the best solution to the problems of democracy is often more democracy. People who see clearly need to make themselves heard and thereby inspire the public to re-evaluate its fetishes, attitudes, and prejudices. Witness the massive changes over the past few decades in how the public views gays. Gregory Schafer reviews this transformation, comparing it to an earlier one, in his Culture War column, "Ten Years from Now."

Other humanistic transformations are also possible. The areas of the environment, war, the criminal justice system, and religious liberty cry out for alternative voices. Carl Coon gives us a specific example regarding foreign policy in his International Humanism column, "Interstate Relations and the Golden Rule." He thus shows that humanist thought, by its very nature, provides uncommon views toward the goal of common betterment. With such ideas we can also reverse the present trend of American "Bushocracy," which Edd Doerr details in his Church and State column, and thereby foster more democracy and freedom.