

# THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL VERSUS THE STATE OF THE UNION

by Fred Edwards

Near the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War, the people of Athens conducted a funeral to honor those fellow citizens who had fallen in battle. The bones of the heroic dead were placed in a public sepulcher and Pericles, the annually elected military chief, delivered the closing eulogy. We don't know the actual words he uttered on that day in 431 BCE but we have the account of the Greek historian Thucydides. This funeral oration is considered among the most eloquent in literature and it represents one of the earliest expressions of the democratic ideal. Those who died, Pericles argues, hadn't been fighting for king and country or hearth and home; they had toiled in the service of a profoundly humane way of life.

That's how the ancient Athenians saw it. *Democracy* wasn't merely a practical procedure for passing laws and placing government officials in office. The concept extended well beyond to embrace a deeper notion: the general empowerment of the governed by the governed, and the consequences and ramifications that logically follow from that. Relevant parts of Pericles' funeral oration clarify this and, more importantly, provide a benchmark against which modern societies can be measured.

Pericles' funeral oration reads:

It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty an obstacle, but a man may benefit his country whatever the obscurity of his condition.

In these few words we find three democratic concepts: equal justice under the law, political inclu-

siveness, and public service as a civic duty—all in a context that recognizes the value of accomplished (and, by implication, competent) public officials. Pericles next offers a description of a reasonable social tolerance for the varied expressions of individual freedom, along with some recognition of privacy:

There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private business we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbor if he does what he likes; we do not put on sour looks at him which, though harmless, are not pleasant.

And he espouses respect for the rule of law, a concern for victims, and a community conscience:

While we are thus unconstrained in our private business, a spirit of reverence pervades our public acts; we are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authorities and for the laws, having a particular regard to those which are ordained for the protection of the injured as well as those unwritten laws which bring upon the transgressor of them the reprobation of the general sentiment.

Pericles further asserts that quality of life is important enough that it should be fostered by government, commercial trade, and society:

And we have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil; we have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year; our homes are beautiful and elegant; and the delight which we daily feel in all these things helps to banish sorrow. Because of the greatness of our city the fruits of the whole earth flow in upon us; so that we enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as our own.

He offers a bold affirmation of the open society:

Then, again, our military training is in many respects superior to that of our adversaries. Our city is thrown open to the world, though, and we never expel a foreigner and prevent him from seeing or learning anything of which the secret if revealed to an enemy might profit him. We rely not upon management or trickery, but upon our own hearts and hands.

Such an affirmation is revolutionary in any age, especially given the focus on freedom of access for foreigners and an absence of government (especially military) secrecy and disinformation. Then, in stating

our strength lies, in our opinion, not in deliberation and discussion, but that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action. For we have a peculiar power of thinking before we act, and of acting, too, whereas other men are courageous from ignorance but hesitate upon reflection.

he expresses the ancient Greek commitment to reason, unfettered freedom of inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge.

One can, of course, legitimately ask how well Periclean Athens lived up to such noble sentiments. And the answer is that it failed in many ways. Slavery was an accepted institution; political empowerment was limited to free adult males who were of pure Athenian descent. Full membership in society was thus denied to the majority of the Attic population. And Athens under Pericles had become an imperial power that economically oppressed other Greek city states, a situation that led to the very war in which the eulogized Athenians had died—a lengthy internecine conflict of Greek fighting Greek. Nonetheless, even the level of democracy attained was highly unusual for the time. And such a clear statement of the ideals and aspirations wasn't only unique but powerful enough in its influence to transcend centuries and continents to become the basis for the proliferation of democratic ideals in our time.

If we conceive of democracy, then, as the empowerment of the governed by the governed we will see that it leads logically to a host of characteristics included in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*: “government by the people”; “political, social, or economic equality”; “the absence or disavowal of hereditary or arbitrary class distinctions or privileges”; and “a state of society

characterized by tolerance toward minorities, freedom of expression, and respect for the essential dignity and worth of the human individual with equal opportunity for each to develop freely to his fullest capacity in a cooperative community.” The democratic ideal thus includes freedom, personal fulfillment, social justice, inclusiveness, and the enfranchisement of the disenfranchised.

Today, the sole superpower status of the United States, together with the nation's impact on trade, is reminiscent of that which had been attained, on a smaller scale, by ancient Athens prior to the Peloponnesian War. But we needn't depend on such an analogy to justify making a comparison between the Greek democratic ideal and the current American reality. Recent developments cry out on their own for such an analysis.

For example, when we review the opportunities for citizens of ordinary means to fulfill a civic duty of public service, we see that the merging of money and politics in America has made it next to impossible for all but a few to run for significant public office. Furthermore, the mainstream media's focus on celebrity journalism, and away from issues affecting the community, has generated widespread political apathy. Though there has been progress in the area of social tolerance for individual freedom of expression, it continues to be resisted by the forces of tradition and faith, both inside government and out. Meanwhile, respect for the rule of law has been undermined by the criminalization of a number of harmless or minor activities. This, together with draconian “three strikes and you're out” sentencing laws, has placed millions of Americans in prison. As for quality of life, for many of people this has been reduced to a trivial pursuit of consumption. Regarding the open society, the federal government has turned its back on this ideal and embraced secrecy. And finally, political ideology in the centers of power has replaced a commitment to reason, inquiry, and knowledge.

Much more can be said on each of these points. But a sufficient exercise will be provided if we limit the application of the democratic ideal to the present administration in the White House, comparing its realities to just three Periclean principles: the open society, individual freedom, and the triad of reason, inquiry, and knowledge.

Immediately after George W. Bush assumed the presidency of the United States, federal agencies were directed to freeze more than three hundred of President Bill Clinton's pending regulations until they could be reviewed. That, in itself, wasn't surprising. This is a common practice of new presidents. The surprise was that this review process, according to the December 22, 2003, *U.S. News and World Report*, "expressly precluded input from average citizens."

Then, three months later, the White House Office of Management and Budget notified federal officials that they could no longer make information publicly available about federal government spending on information technology. And fees for government documents that remained available soon skyrocketed from hundreds of dollars to thousands. The intent was to "preserve the confidentiality of the deliberations that led to the president's budget decisions."

*U.S. News* further reports that in May 2001 Vice President Dick Cheney's energy task force called for an increase in gas and oil drilling, including on public land. Two activist organizations—the Sierra Club and Judicial Watch—sought access to the task force's records, expressing a suspicion that lobbyists from energy companies had unduly influenced the process. The organizations found it necessary to file suit—and won an order from a federal judge that the government produce the records. But the Bush administration has appealed the case to the Supreme Court, arguing from the standpoint of the separation of powers.

These are just some of the changes in the level of government secrecy that commenced before 9/11. Afterward, government curtailment of the free flow of information increased dramatically until today it is difficult to secure details on many federal programs, the specifics of certain federal civil and criminal court cases being pursued by the justice department, and much of the business and consumer information that private entities must report. Large numbers of documents previously available under the Freedom of Information Act have been declared secret or returned to a former classified status, and the administration is even seeking a narrowing of the act itself. This reversal of a previous trend toward openness has been accelerated by an increase in the number of government officials who are empowered to classify records.

The overall impact has been particularly strong on environmental groups. They have found it more

and more difficult to learn about not only the environmental effects of government activities but also those being carried out by businesses which must report to federal agencies. The party line is that information on the nation's infrastructure would be valuable to terrorists and therefore must be hidden. Unfortunately, hiding it from terrorists also means hiding it from concerned citizens, consumer groups, and even local and state governments.

Fighting terrorism isn't the only rationale, however. The free flow of information is also being affected by the administration's religious and social doctrines. As Joaquin Cabrejas writes in his 2003 American Humanist Association monograph, *Bush, The New Face of the Religious Right*:

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) was pressured to remove the findings of a study from its website that contradicts the fundamentalist myth that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer. Further, the NIH and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have also removed fact sheets on condoms and a sex education curriculum called "Programs that Work" from their websites, replacing them with information on condom failure rates.

Related to the concept of an open society is a free society in which the civil liberties of citizens are recognized and protected. But civil liberties in the United States have fallen on hard times, sacrificed to the fear manufactured by the promoters of the war on terror. Much has been written about the Patriot Act, which dramatically increases the police power of the state. The worst part is that the public doesn't really know the extent of civil liberties violations occurring under the Patriot Act because the act—complete with provisions seen by civil libertarians as compromising or in violation of the First Amendment—has secrecy and gag orders written into it, making it difficult to learn just how it is being used and against whom.

Given this, it's no consolation that a recent investigation into possible rights abuses under the act, conducted by John Ashcroft's Justice Department, found little more than a few Arabs and Muslims who received some verbal or physical abuse in U.S. prisons. Since Ashcroft was the original force behind the Patriot Act, this is akin to a self-investigation. And it's all part of administration efforts to discourage Congress from letting the law

expire in 2005. Moreover, Patriot Act provisions, carried out as written, aren't regarded by the government as civil liberties violations, no matter how unconstitutional they might later prove to be. Finally, of the 1,266 complaints considered, the Justice Department investigated only seventeen.

But now there is the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004, quietly signed into law by Bush on December 13, 2003, while the world was watching a newly captured Saddam Hussein getting checked for lice. Under this expansion of the original Patriot Act, the FBI acquired the power to check the financial records of any citizen, even if that citizen isn't suspected of involvement in terrorism or other crimes. This is accomplished through a redefinition of *financial institution* to include not only banks but any other businesses with cash transactions that "have a high degree of usefulness in criminal, tax, or regulatory matters." This means that such entities as airlines, brokerage firms, car dealerships, casinos, credit card companies, insurance agencies, and even the U.S. Post Office can be tapped. And to secure the desired records, the FBI doesn't need to go before a judge or show "probable cause." Without check or balance, it only needs to issue a "National Security Letter" making the demand. Such letters come with a gag order, too, preventing the financial institution from informing the individual whose records are being investigated. At the end of the day the FBI doesn't even have to report to Congress how many times National Security Letters are used.

This new law got through because the administration used a number of legislative stealth tactics that prevented alarms from going off in Congress or among the public. Thus the principles of a closed society were used to jeopardize the privacy rights of citizens—to remove protections against unreasonable searches and seizures.

Further in the direction of monitoring people in the United States, the federal government will require airlines, as well as companies booking air travel, to reveal passenger records to officials. This is so an air traveler database can be created that will rank passengers according to their perceived threat to the aircraft they intend to board. Frequent flyers who volunteer personal information for this database will be eligible for quicker airport security processing. These efforts supplement a program already in place of fingerprinting and photographing travelers who enter the United States.

Beyond this, there already exists a secret FBI list of people who are to be prevented from flying. American Civil Liberties Union attorney Jayashri Srikantiah has told CBS 2 that, despite litigation aimed at getting the facts, the FBI won't explain the criteria it uses to place people on the list. "So we don't know how someone gets on the list," he said or "how they can get off the list if they're on it incorrectly." Furthermore, "if the government monitors the list, we don't know if any of this makes us any safer." Nonetheless, "hundreds, maybe thousands, of passengers are being routinely hassled" because of the FBI's no-fly list. This has included peace activists with no criminal records.

With programs such as these, the police power of the state can be used in ways that silence dissent.

What is it that drives so vigorous a rejection of democratic ideals? The first and most natural answer, of course, is a desire by a privileged or opportunistic few to consolidate power and money in their own hands. And this charge isn't easily dismissed. However, disconcertingly often there is a sincere desire at work to make the world better—even if the effort is ruthlessly carried out. In other words, the driving force can also be a misguided ideology.

This is the thesis that runs through Ron Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill*, released in January 2004. In this book the saga of former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill unfolds, recounting how he struggled to apply the ideals of reason, inquiry, and knowledge to the Bush/Cheney administration—but generally met a brick wall of foregone conclusions drawn from political ideology.

These warring concepts were first revealed early in the administration by the way loyalty was defined. O'Neill's sense of loyalty was directed to a core principle of inquiry: learning all the facts you can and then "telling someone what you really think and feel—your best estimation of the truth instead of what they want to hear." By contrast, the Bush White House relied on "loyalty to a person and whatever they say or do." In such an environment, reasoned analysis was often taken as disloyalty.

What also became clear was Bush's lack of engagement in the inquiry process. According to Suskind, Christine Todd Whitman, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, had never heard Bush

“analyze a complex issue, parse opposing positions, and settle on a judicious path. In fact, no one—inside or outside the government, here or across the globe—had heard him do that to any significant degree.” Furthermore, “O’Neill had been made to understand by various colleagues in the White House that the President should not be expected to read reports. In his personal experience, the President didn’t even appear to have read the short memos he sent over.” Bush also didn’t read newspapers, preferring instead to have key staffers verbally report relevant news to him. As a result of this cloistering and management of the president, cabinet meetings and other important gatherings of advisers became carefully scripted events in which Bush rarely asked questions.

A most dramatic example of the president’s non-engaged approach occurred on March 13, 2001, when Whitman began outlining the compelling scientific evidence on climate change behind the Kyoto Protocol. Cutting her off, Bush said, “Christie, I’ve already made my decision.” Then he read to her portions of a previously written official letter declaring the administration’s sudden opposition to Kyoto (which President Clinton had supported) and a reversal of his own campaign promise to regulate the carbon dioxide emissions of U.S. power plants. Thus ended a “decade of dialogue about the evidence of climate change and a responsible international response,” says Suskind, “along with the hard work to find a middle ground between economic progress and environmental good sense—a conversation that had been progressing with sound results since [President Richard] Nixon created the EPA.”

From this development, Whitman and O’Neill began to see the pivotal nature of the behind-the-scenes role played by Cheney. Bush’s letter wasn’t only written in Cheney’s style but it laid out Cheney’s central precept: that a first priority be given to energy production, which necessitated protecting coal and lifting energy regulations regarded as burdensome. In this wise, limits on carbon dioxide emissions were seen as constraining American free enterprise.

But it wasn’t just Cheney who was keeping Bush immersed in political doctrine and away from dialogue. There was a tight circle of neoconservative advisers around the president promoting an agenda that involves, among other things, a foreign policy of *pax Americana*, a domestic policy of deregulation, and a social policy of conservative religion.

So, in O’Neill’s view, as explained by Suskind, a “strict code of personal fealty to Bush—animated by the embrace of a few unquestioned ideologists—seemed to be in collision with a faith in the broader ideals of honest inquiry.” And because Bush didn’t ask enough questions, he was, said O’Neill, “clearly signing on to strong ideological positions that have not been fully thought through.”

The most well-known was the war on Iraq.

Official consideration of an invasion began on January 30, 2001, a mere ten days after Bush assumed the presidency. At the first meeting of the National Security Council, the CIA provided a briefing and, before the meeting had ended, Bush had given all the major players specific assignments for gathering more information or drawing up plans. One of those in attendance later told Suskind:

In the Clinton administration, there was an enormous reluctance to use American forces on the ground; it was almost a prohibition. That prohibition was clearly gone [now], and that opened options, options that hadn’t been opened before.

Corroborating Suskind’s book, a subsequent ABC News report quoted a White House official who had been in attendance at the same meetings as O’Neill and who declared that Bush’s order “went beyond the Clinton administration’s halfhearted attempts to overthrow Hussein without force.”

Therefore, this wasn’t as the Bush administration has claimed, a simple extension of the pre-existing Clinton policy. Furthermore, significant additional action was taken immediately so that, at the second meeting, held February 1, 2001, the State Department summary of the Iraq issue proposed a two-track approach: “one track is to intensify sanctions and enforcement and the other is to implement UN Security Council resolution 1284.” The summary included the suggestion of “a possible regime change.” O’Neill and others would later recall that the entire discussion at this second meeting focused not on whether such a change was desirable but merely on finding a way to accomplish it.

Within the month the Defense Intelligence Agency was mapping the oil fields of Iraq and making a list of companies around the world that would likely be interested in oilfield contracts. This work, along with other planning and research, continued on through the spring and summer.

Then, at the National Security Council meeting of September 12—the day after terrorists crashed airliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania—Rumsfeld argued that any initiative against international terrorism would have to include the overthrow of Hussein. Three days later, at a special Camp David meeting to decide precisely how to respond, the hawkish neo-conservative Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense, boldly proposed action in Iraq instead of Afghanistan. But that argument didn't prevail. Plans for Iraq took a temporary back seat to Afghanistan.

All of this, together with the eventual invasion of Iraq, demonstrates the power of doctrine to shut out a free exchange of ideas. O'Neill experienced the same phenomenon when it came to the budget. As secretary of the treasury he inherited from the Clinton administration an unprecedented surplus that could have amounted to \$5.6 trillion over the next ten years. It had taken almost two decades to recover from the deficit left by President Ronald Reagan but now the country was ahead of the game. O'Neill had hoped to use some of this money to rescue Social Security. But, despite his presentation of the facts to Bush, he watched that surplus disappear in two years, to be replaced by a new deficit.

As the January 23, 2004, issue of the *National Catholic Reporter* puts it, O'Neill knew "it was a bad idea to squander a \$5.6 trillion surplus on tax cuts that disproportionately aided the wealthy." But the ideologies of deep tax cuts and preemptive war were, he would later say to Suskind, "impenetrable by facts." That's the difference between ideology and philosophy, he concluded, because "an ideology comes out of feelings and it tends to be non-thinking"—an absolutism. "A philosophy, on the other hand, can have a structured thought base" and, being "always a work in progress, is influenced by facts."

O'Neill tendered his resignation on December 6, 2002, after learning on the phone from Cheney that the president had "decided to make some changes in the economic team," with O'Neill as part of the change. But getting rid of an inside critic like O'Neill didn't make reality conform to doctrine. The administration is now taking congressional and public heat for the very military and budgetary decisions that its disregard for reason, inquiry, and the pursuit knowledge made possible.

In response, Bush has felt the need to order an investigation of sorts into supposed intelligence inaccuracies affecting his war on terror—getting

out in front of the process so he can minimize its impact on the November 2 elections. (The administration actually had accurate and detailed intelligence data; it had been provided by Hans Blix and his Iraq weapons inspectors.) Also, in his budget, proposed February 1, 2004, Bush has had to slice programs and make a new promise, as voiced in his State of the Union Address, to "cut the deficit in half over the next five years"—a deficit that will hit a record \$477 billion this year and has been projected to reach almost \$2.4 trillion over the next decade.

**T**he costs of abandoning the Periclean ideal are indeed dear. And those affected aren't only the citizens of an undemocratic society (or a society incrementally letting go of its democratic principles) but sometimes the leaders as well. The latter can suffer failures that usher in their own loss of power. But the suffering doesn't end there. History shows that less-than-democratic societies are more inclined to make war on other societies. Thus they spread the suffering to other populations.

This has become increasingly clear in the case of the U.S. war on Iraq. Take, for example, the role of women in Iraqi society. *Washington Post* Foreign Service Correspondent Pamela Constable writes on January 16, 2004, that what legal protections were enjoyed by Iraqi women over the past four decades—such as prohibitions of marriage below age eighteen, arbitrary divorce, and male favoritism in child custody and property inheritance disputes—have dissipated as the U.S.-backed Iraqi Governing Council "voted to wipe them out, ordering in late December that family laws... be 'canceled' and such issues placed under the jurisdiction of strict Islamic legal doctrine." According to Constable, "Outraged Iraqi women—from judges to cabinet ministers—denounced the decision... saying it would set back their legal status by centuries and could unleash emotional clashes among various Islamic strains that have differing rules for marriage, divorce and other family issues."

Democratic values, therefore, are a global, not just a national, issue. This is why it is imperative in this dawning millennium that we reassert the democratic ideal. Born in the ancient world (both East and West), revitalized in the Renaissance, nurtured by the Enlightenment, and matured in today's international age, democracy remains the best hope for humanity. ☪

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