

# UNDER COVER

## Endowing Democracy

Mr. Reagan still has hopes for his plan to teach democracy to foreign peoples through a National Endowment for Democracy, intended to channel public money through private agencies—now chiefly the AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce—to encourage the development of democratic ideas and institutions. This spring the House of Representatives scrapped the Endowment, but Mr. Reagan's friends in the Senate voted \$21 million for the project and will, presumably, fight for it in conference. They may succeed: It sounds like a nice idea, and while the program is boondoggish, the amounts involved are minute in relation to the Federal budget. Nevertheless, Congress should advise the president to tend to democracy at home.

In the first place, Reagan's Project Democracy has too many echoes of what Mark Twain called "the Blessings of Civilization Trust." The National Endowment for Democracy does not suffer from philosophic uncertainties. It aims to promote Western democracy, and specifically democracy as exemplified by the institutions and practices of the United States. Intellectually, this is a reasonable practical judgment; American institutions, if not the best, are at least a good model for contemporary democracies. Politically, the Endowment's ideological purpose is bound to be a liability. Its supporters, like Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, advertise the Endowment as an anti-Communist counter-offensive, a defense that is likely to confirm the suspicion that Project Democracy would, if necessary, sacrifice democratic norms in order to beat out the Reds. Where the CIA has not succeeded, acting covertly and with less ethnocentrism, Project Democracy is unlikely to improve on its example.

There is a more basic problem with the president's plan. The fact that the United States is a democratic regime does not qualify Americans to teach democracy. The argument is at least as old as Plato's *Apology*: The citizens of a democracy—even its public-spirited citizens—do not necessarily understand what is required to found or maintain a democratic political society. Founders must be bold and creative, new princes in new states; but their inheritors are inclined to take the regime as a given, contenting themselves with circumspection rather than daring, preferring practice to theory. In practice, good citizens are so busy working within the system that they take the system itself for granted. Day-to-day political action directs attention to arguments at issue, to things that are subject to conflict and discord. Yet these choices and alternatives are defined and shaped by fundamental principles, the inarticulate foundations that are the vital center of democratic life.

To most Americans, democracy means certain institutions, such as the right to vote, "checks and balances," and the Bill of Rights. For the AFL-CIO, democracy requires a strong trade union movement, free of state control; with less justification, the Chamber of Commerce associates democracy with the free market and the right of property. Up to a point such judgments are correct. Democracy needs the strength and force of democratic laws; and over the long

haul, institutions can shape the character of a people. Even the best democratic laws, however, depend on opinions and feelings. The first Constitution of the Mexican Republic mirrored that of the United States, but it did not bring democracy to Mexico. Institutions frame a body politic, but they do not give it a soul.

Those who hope to found democracies must realize that democracy is a government of a people through laws and that a government of laws is possible only where a people reveres words. It is no accident that so many democracies grew up in association with a faith in the Word. The cornerstone of democratic life is an aesthetic of political speech.

Democracy deliberates and argues. It is, necessarily, a slow and inconsistent system, full of contradictions and changes of mind, without the efficiency of less discursive regimes. Capitalism reduces all things to the bottom line of profit and loss; totalitarian regimes turn politics into a ruthless calculus of power. Democracy is less suited to promote economic development because it gives a relationship—political equality—priority over products. It is more concerned with configurations than with consequences because it values deliberation over action and being heard over being seen.

We appear to be losing both the power of public speech and our appreciation of its beauty. Tocqueville praised Americans for fostering "arts of association" as a counterweight to the feelings of helplessness and isolation engendered by mass democracy. He was referring to the ability to translate informal discussions into formal organizations. Today, Tocqueville would have scorned associations made up of members unknown to each other, united through computer mail and by the contribution of money. Such organizations are oriented toward goals, not speech. We can refuse to donate money or we can increase our contribution, and our leaders will pay attention when such complaints reach a certain mass; but at no level will our fellow members hear our reasonings, nor will we hear theirs. A politics based on PACs and direct mailing approaches oligarchy, the rule of money, displacing the democratic rule of speech.

Similarly, Speaker O'Neill was rightly outraged when new wave Republican rightists began to deliver ideological diatribes to an empty House, addressing TV cameras free from the fear of rejoinder. Like their opposite numbers on the Democratic side, these Republican right wingers do not see speech as a deliberative act: For them speech is a way to be seen more than a way to be heard. Increasingly, sight dominates sound in American politics. Mr. Reagan and the Reverend Mr. Jackson perform, and it is only incidentally that they speak. In sharp contrast to Dr. King, Mr. Jackson's words are rarely memorable, and all of President Reagan's years on the national stage have left us with no great or echoing phrase. Americans seem to be growing content with a politics intended, like Victorian children, to be seen but not heard. Yet we know, nowadays, that such a rule is beneath the dignity of children. We are less and less suited to teach democracy to others; there is too much we need to remember and to relearn.

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