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Democracy as a Verb: An Action Word

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We the people. This is a phrase we all know. Perhaps it's because we were forced to memorize the preamble to the Constitution of the United States when we were in eighth grade. Perhaps we truly grasp the meaning: "We the People" has come to represent two values every American holds dear: Freedom and Democracy. These go hand in hand as our forefathers intended: freedom, democracy, and "We the People".

But have you thought about it? "We the People". It's just three words. But who are these people? You and me? Our parents? Maybe it includes everyone in New Hampshire, or maybe just those who are old enough to vote. Is it everyone in the United States, or do we limit it to citizens? Are these people the ones who work 9-5 at minimum wage or Mr. Trump in his 5th Avenue tower? Does our democracy represent us, if we truly are the people referenced in so simple a phrase?

I think in order to call ourselves a democracy, which we as US citizens do, it sure as hell better represent us. We ARE "THE PEOPLE". And as the longest standing and largest "democracy" in an ever-shrinking world, we have a lot at stake. So in my interest, and your interest, and in the interest of all citizens of the world and "our posterity", lets take a look at what exactly is going on here.

Before I can criticize our "democratic" government for leading us so awry, I have to hold up the mirror. Democracy, as

established by the Athenians centuries ago, is based on public participation. You have to care. I know with school and papers and hangovers and exams and work and girlfriends and boyfriends and best friends and LIFE sometimes it's hard to actually do something. But sometimes you have to step back and realize that just because your life is comfortable and you are provided for, not everyone in this world has that luxury. And good for you, you got lucky enough to be born into it. The revolutionaries who wrote "We the People" intended it to be so. But they also intended for you know something about politics, to know who's running for what position in government and what their opinions are on key issues; they expect you to vote and not do it "because I always vote Republican" but because you think Mr. Huckabee has a point about stopping illegal immigration from the Mexican border¹. They expect you to make sure that who won actually won, and then hold them accountable for their actions as they represent you². Our founding fathers never intended for us to be so damn lazy.

That aside lets brush up on our history for a moment. As a new democracy, the United States was interested in maintaining "isolationist" positions internationally and working towards perfecting the democratic model not for the world, but for ourselves.

¹ Memmot, Mark and Jill Lawrence. (2007). "Huckabee unveils his immigration plan." *USA Today*. www.usatoday.com. Accessed on 28 January 2008.

² Barbara Gray, "Conditions Facilitating Interorganizational Collaboration," *Human Relations* 38 (1985):930-931.

We emerged triumphant despite all doubts the rest of the world had regarding our success, and we maintained this position of stability and growth. Newly formed nations chose to model their democracies after ours, often adopting constitutions similar to “We the People”. We largely maintained this isolationist position through the world wars, which we were tactfully late to enter and quick to save. But as the new leaders of the world, what have we done?

We partook in an arms race with Russia, beginning with commissions to develop the A-bomb, which were held in secrecy during World War II with money that was secretly allocated toward its creation without any accountability to the public³. According to our Constitution, “...a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time”⁴. How can our democracy function without the checks and balances our forefathers gave us, derived from their tyrannical experiences with the British Empire? The government has gone on to continue with its secret military initiatives, such as sending Special Forces that report directly to the president on missions in places we don’t even know about. How about Reagan’s “War on Drugs”? Did you know that crop dusters from the United States were sent to Colombia to distribute poison over Colombian fields to exterminate possible cocaine plants? This was done without discretion, and killed much more than a bad drug habit, which it never succeeded in anyway. It killed the livelihoods of some of Colombia’s poorest communities, all the while representing you and me⁵. But how

are we to object if the reports are “top secret”, or worse, if we don’t bother to care? I mean, it’s cool for James Bond and Tom Clancy, but when these troops go overseas and overthrow governments that our president doesn’t approve of then it quickly loses its appeal. It’s not fighting for freedom like they tell you; it’s to maintain the control that the United States government has come to enjoy. Notice how I mentioned that the checks and balances we inherited and are slowly losing were derived from experiences from the British Empire. Empire. That’s what we are becoming.

Accountability. It’s a big word, but it’s meaning is even bigger. Maybe I’m reading into this all wrong, maybe my meager examples aren’t enough to convince you that what the United States is becoming is the exact opposite of what we stand for, and I invite you to look into it further. But what is pivotal here is accountability. As Thomas Jefferson once said, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance”⁶. What our politicians do, whether it’s our town mayor or president of the United States, their actions directly represent us and we need to watch them and hold them accountable. To be honest, I don’t think that their decisions reflect our best interests anymore. Decisions are made with aims of military conquest and power and money for few. Look at the trends. The middle class is shrinking, and it’s the classic case of the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer. So who’s benefiting? “We the People”? Our policies, internationally, domestically, economically, and militarily are no longer in our interest. Why is that? Where did we go wrong? Was it September 11th? That day, my dad had a meeting at 9:00 on the 53rd floor of the tower that fell

³ Chalmers Johnson. *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004). Metropolitan Books. Pp. 12.

⁴ U.S. Const. art. 1, § 9, cl. 7.

⁵ Branford, Sue and Hugh O’Shaughnessy. (2006). “Colombia’s Killing Fields – The First Bio-War of the 21st Century”. *The Ecologist*.

http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=589 accessed January 27, 2008.

⁶ www.hillwatch.com. Accessed on 29 January 2008.

at 9:03. Last minute his boss told him to stay at his office a block away for another meeting. It was the worst day of my life, but that doesn't mean I want my phones tapped as allowed in the Patriot Act⁷. That doesn't mean that I think every Muslim entering the country should be searched, and I don't think that the tragedy that took place justifies any of our monumental failures in the Middle East or our outrageous military budget derived from our taxes and my generation's inherited debt. Nor does it justify the secrecy of where our money is going or where the prisoners of war we take end up. And in the end, the dwindling supply of oil we gain as a result will choke us in our waste rather than raise us to the bar set by real democracy. Because the oil companies and multinational corporations will be the benefactors while the rest of us will pay for being so forgetful of our duties as citizens.

So then, back to our little phrase. "We the People". Does this phrase then encompass those in other countries, since the United States is dictating more and more on the global scale? The United States has, after all, unilaterally started wars, trained foreign armies, supported rebellions, and contributed more than any other nation to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, all in the name of democracy. So are the people of Iraq and Afghanistan included in "We the People"? If they are to be included, then are the Sudanese, the Rwandans, the Koreans, and the Bolivians? Is there room for them in this three-word statement?

Before we can enlighten the world on the finer points of democracy and freedom, I think we need to get a few things straight ourselves. It's a fine mess we've found ourselves in, but there's a light at the end of

every tunnel. We have the finest documents in the world, The Constitution of the United States, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence to back us up. So get involved. Read a newspaper or watch the news, but afterwards think critically, "is this pure rhetoric or is this true? Whose opinion is it, and why would they hold that opinion? Is maybe some of this true, and some a bit embellished?" Think for yourselves and know what's going on. We are the People, and if democracy and freedom are to exist then we need to act like we deserve it.

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⁷ In House Report No. 3162, 107th Cong., 1 Session (2001).

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