



While Democracy Sleeps:

A White Paper on Democratic Citizenship in
the United States

September 2005

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FOREWORD

Thirty years ago, Samuel Huntington joined two other scholars in examining what they called the crisis of democracy in Japan, Europe, and the United States. According to Huntington's analysis of the United States, this crisis resulted from a number of factors. Citizens had grown less public-spirited and more 'privatistic.' Democratic processes had enabled these self-serving citizens to ply the state with new demands, leading to a costly expansion of government activity. And a stratum of 'adversary intellectuals' had emerged in higher education and elsewhere, spreading their oppositional fervor and suspicion of government to students, the mass media, and the culture at large. On Huntington's view, these factors and others threatened to undermine the viability and governability of democracy in America.

Looking back on Huntington's analysis, the crisis he envisioned seems to have passed. The adversary intellectuals have been contained, hemmed in on one side by a parallel stratum of conservative analysts and media, and on the other by calls for accountability from the people – the job-seeking students, the business interests, and the government leaders – who provide the funding for our cash-strapped universities. The expansion of government activity is no longer the obvious outcome of democratic ferment, as politicians routinely court votes by promising to cut taxes and shrink government. And almost forty years after the riots and protests of 1968, in an era defined by the PATRIOT Act rather than by still-smoldering cities, the governability of American democracy hardly seems in question.

The viability of our democracy, though, is still in question. It is in question partly because of the decline in public-spiritedness that Huntington discusses. But it is also threatened by our failure to create and sustain the conditions that make active citizenship effective, practical, and possible. Lapses in individual behavior, in social organization, and in the design of political institutions routinely prevent laypeople and public officials alike from discharging the duties that democratic life imposes on them. The members of both groups too rarely achieve the condition of true democratic citizenship.

This white paper examines the citizenship gap that survived Huntington's crisis, and outlines the strategy that the members of the Jamestown Project will pursue in response.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is not doing democracy very well right now. It takes work, in several different ways, and the job simply is not getting done.

While Democracy Sleeps explains this sad trend in fresh ways and offers vibrant ideas for renewing the American experiment in the United States.

We see three central challenges – the debilitation of political society, the enervation of civil society, and the degeneration of public character.

Democracy, to our hearts and minds, is about much more than universal suffrage and free, fair, and regular elections. It is about committing to certain core values, to a system of belief and action that is best captured by Lincoln’s maxim: democracy of, by, and for the people.

“Of the people” means community life, an egalitarian notion that values everyday people as highly as elites. “By the people” means the citizenry must be *truly* free to govern themselves, and must accept the burden of that responsibility. “For the people” means that the exercise of democratic power must be accountable to the common good.

Living this vision is not simply a matter of voting more often. Democratic conditions must exist throughout society. To our mind, they must become manifest in four dimensions: politics, culture, character, and action.

Formal politics requires democracy, and democratic states require formal politics – campaigns and elections, legislation and lobbying. But formal democracy alone is a mere shell without the social networks of civil society. The collaborative relationships of neighborhood groups, schools, and other institutions provide the trust, dialogue, engagement, and cooperation that are the lifeblood of democracy.

Virtue has an essential place too. Democracy calls us to the better angels of our natures, but we cannot be democratic unless we answer the call. We must each cultivate the integrity, conscience, and commitment needed to make democracy lively.

And finally, we must act. We must engage, decide, organize, *do*. Our citizenry must be restless and energetic, alert enough to sense change, active enough to create it, responsible enough to manage it.

These dimensions intersect. Yes, we have the structure for formal democracy, but do we have the virtues to make it sing? Do we have a vibrant civil *demos* to bring about potent but thoughtful action? And when we act, is the voice of our better angels in our ears?

These are the questions of the hour for democracy in the United States. And too often, too consistently, we have to answer “no.” Our democracy is not virtuous enough, vibrant enough, active enough. It appears to be stuck in a self-satisfied slumber.

The Jamestown Project believes that an effective democracy can never sleep. A vigorous democratic culture fights off the seductions of comfort and repose. It hungers to improve itself, to survive and grow despite changed circumstances and unforeseen challenges. It struggles, it lurches, it gets confused – but it keeps trying.

We intend to help awaken our democracy. We want to achieve our country, to actualize the idea of America, the idea of freedom and fairness that the United States has haltingly sought to embody. There are conditions under which this democratic idea can take root and flourish. We intend to promote them.

Our nation needs new forms of communication and information. We also need to identify with each other better and to connect in ways that transcend expected norms. We must find inspiration as well, to provide motivation for the challenges of community life. And we must promote and reward character and integrity.

In these soaring pursuits, we must also have the courage to be candid about our “night side” – America’s continuing struggle with race, and its ongoing reinvention by people who have long been relegated to the shadows by our official narratives and institutions. We must not deny our moral failures, the suffering they have inflicted, or the contributions that suffering people have nevertheless made to America’s economic, moral, and cultural life. Doing so would be as foolish as denying the promise of democracy. Our history involves both triumph and trouble, prosperity and problems; it has been made by oppressor and oppressed, elite and mass, black, white, red, yellow, and brown. Making our history this complex may dim our glowing self-image, but it also makes it more realistic – and useful.

We will use the standard forms of political activity to advance these conditions – policy analysis, advocacy, organizing, and debate. But we will dig deeper. The Jamestown Project will immerse itself in *storytelling*, perhaps the heart of democratic life. In democracy, as in life, we tell ourselves and each other how things are, how they should be, and what it all means to us. Perhaps people of color understand this especially well, and certainly they will benefit greatly from living democracy through their storytelling traditions.

We will also work to identify new voices from underrepresented populations and connect them to the mainstream media. Stories without multiple voices end up as monologues.

True to our desire to wake democracy from its slumber, we will act with vigor. We will work to highlight, explore, and develop the connections between democratic life and certain characteristic features of our social worlds, including parenting, racism, health and health care, and the criminal justice system.

America is always an ideal awaiting the work of our hands. Bruised sometimes, now and again arthritic, often untrained – but hands always seeking, restless, looking to another hand to hold, for guidance. The Jamestown Project will be one of those guiding hands. We invite others to link fingers, hopes, and faith with us.

1. Introduction

Democracy is not a thing done but something a nation must always be doing.
- Archibald Macleish

1.1. Three challenges

The United States is not doing democracy very well right now. For a variety of reasons, in a variety of ways, and at a variety of levels, too few people are both willing and able to work at sustaining our democracy. This situation has multiple causes, and many of them remain obscure to our leaders and aspiring leaders. But there is plenty of evidence that this is the situation.

Consider the familiar problem of detachment and disaffiliation from US political campaigns and governmental institutions. Only about half of the people who are permitted to vote for president manage to do so, and even fewer vote during the ‘off-years’ between presidential elections. We can chalk some of this up to laziness or apathy, but there is of course more to it. Many people find their paths to the voting booth blocked, whether by the tangles of obligation that define contemporary life or by the partisan gamesmanship that corrupts the oversight of elections. And many more people reasonably suspect that their votes would not matter anyway, either because ‘their’ representatives have gerrymandered them into irrelevance or because people with deeper pockets have seduced these same representatives into indifference.

Consider also the problem of declining civic engagement. Democracy requires active citizens, in the public sphere as well as in the voting booth and the halls of government. And it requires interacting citizens, to create the networks of reciprocity and ties of trust that prepare us for the give and take of democratic engagement. But more and more Americans are ‘bowling alone’: joining fewer civic associations, getting to know fewer neighbors, and working in support of fewer community causes. As our possibilities for multiple interpersonal connections dwindle, we forget how to reach beyond ourselves, and how to think of public life as involving anything but the provision of services to consumers.

Finally, consider the widespread worries about political corruption. Our elected representatives seem to be more responsive to corporate campaign contributions than to the needs of their constituents, and they seem devoted, as one writer put it, to “strengthening the institutions that make voters irrelevant” (Ed Rubinstein, “The Vanishing Voter,” *National Review*, 11/19/90, Vol. 42, Issue 22). Our regulatory agencies are too often staffed and run by representatives of the industries they are meant to regulate. And our civic leaders struggle to support their causes and their families honorably in a world that confers influence and wealth on the selfish and duplicitous.

1.2. The Jamestown response

The previous section introduced three central challenges – the debilitation of political society, the enervation of civil society, and the degeneration of public character – as evidence of our democracy’s disappointing performance. Later sections will offer some specific suggestions for responding to these challenges. But first it is necessary to explain how and why our general mode of response differs from some others. We have to explain why we think of these conditions as challenges, and why we find them disappointing and in need of solution.

Many people will remain unmoved by the three challenges. In particular, neither enthusiasts nor cynics about democracy are likely to appreciate the depth and importance of the attendant problems. Enthusiasts hardly notice the problems in their haste to celebrate the upward march of freedom and justice in American history. The Civil War, after all, ended slavery and gave Lincoln his place in history; and the geopolitical intrigue and domestic distortions of the Cold War defeated godless communism and left liberal democracy standing alone bestride the theatre of world history. Enthusiasts avoid disappointment, then, by downplaying the evidence that their expectations have not been met.

Cynics, by contrast, have such low expectations that they are nearly impossible to disappoint. Why worry about apathy and isolation if democracy requires only that voters enjoy a legally – if not actually – clear path to the voting booth? Why complain about corrupt and opaque electoral processes if they follow unavoidably from the operations of massive state bureaucracies? And why puzzle over any of these problems if mass politics just complicates the tasks of governance, either by making it harder for elites to lead or by making it harder for the state to express the single, seamless, and static culture that demands its allegiance? None of these cynical perspectives on democracy demand any response to the challenges of debilitation, enervation, or degeneration.

The members of the Jamestown Project approach democracy not from a cynical perspective but with a robust commitment. While we see the importance of formal democratic protections, we also see the possibilities for vibrant democratic life. While we grant the difficulties of making nation-states answer to individuals, we find the purpose of democracy in the struggle to surmount these difficulties. While we recognize that governing is complicated, and that empowering ordinary citizens may make it more so, we assume that avoiding complications is less important than fairness, legitimacy, and right. And while we understand the value of cultural traditions, we recommend America’s multifaceted democratic tradition as a key resource for our pluralist nation.

Just as we eschew cynicism for robustness, we reject unbridled enthusiasm in favor of a tragicomic vision. As contemporary intellectual Cornel West describes it, a tragicomic vision accepts the permanent possibility of failure while persisting in the struggle for success; it envisions the prospect of triumph without assuming that triumph is assured; it receives the inevitable reversals of life with a light heart, a heart capable of a song or a smile, instead of with hostility, despair, or the false bravado of mystical guarantees. In

this spirit, the members of the Jamestown Project appreciate the profound successes of the American experiment, but we also insist on recalling and learning from the failures. We recognize that our America is the home not just of the Emancipation Proclamation, but also of the Chinese Exclusion Act. We remember not just that the original colonies flowered into a continent-straddling nation, but that they also metastasized into a hemisphere-throttling superpower, supporting brutal dictators and distorting local economies throughout the Americas.

Before we sought to express our robust and tragicomic vision in the argument of this white paper, we sought to capture it in the name we chose for our organization. We call ourselves ‘The Jamestown Project’ because we put the Jamestown colony, the first permanent settlement in the English colonies that became the United States, at the beginning of the story of American democracy. Doing this allows us to historicize, dramatize, and anticipate the complexity that has come to mar and mark our history.

The Jamestown colony hosted the first representative assembly in the English Americas, a milestone in the history of freedom. But no women or servants participated in this assembly, and this all-white affair barely preceded the colony’s first recorded purchase of stolen Africans. Some backers and participants imagined the colony as a more humane alternative to Spanish colonization. But this humanism soon gave way to years of outright warfare against the surrounding Amerindian peoples. Freedom and democracy coexisting with patriarchy, elitism, and slavery; militarism and imperialism coexisting with humanism and revolutionary ferment: the history of democracy is full of incongruities like these. Our project hearkens back to Jamestown in order to remember this fact, and to root the story of American democracy in a moment as full of contradictions – and of ethnic and racial diversity – as our history has been.

Our history is also full of failures and missteps. Starting with Jamestown reminds us of this as well, since the colony itself ultimately failed. This fact might seem to undermine its usefulness as a source of inspiration. But quite the opposite is true. The failure of the colony reminds us that success is never assured, that democratic life is an ongoing task – a project – that requires constant vigilance and effort. And the colony’s current status as an archaeological site reminds us that our actions today are subject to the verdict of history, and open to the scrutiny of those for whom we have prepared, or failed to prepare, the way.

We respond to the challenges of enervation, debilitation, and degeneration because we expect more from our democracy. Our disappointment does not flow from the sense that the United States has regressed from some golden age. To the contrary, the United States has never fully realized the possibilities of democratic life. But it has sustained and challenged many people who have tried to bring the reality closer to the ideal. The efforts of these people represent some of the high points in the uneven tradition of American democratic thought and action. The members of the Jamestown Project hope to build on these efforts, and to vindicate our tragicomic hope for a better future.

1.3. The agenda, with qualifications

This white paper broadly describes the current threat to democratic citizenship and outlines the key elements in the Jamestown Project's response. Our response will necessarily be partial, just one component in what we hope will be a broad revitalization of democratic life. But this partial response has definite features that correspond to certain of our country's very definite and pressing needs.

The next section of the paper will outline the conception of democracy that we find most faithful to America's democratic traditions and most useful to those who would address the current challenges in the United States; it will discuss the four dimensions in which democracy works; and it will consider three examples of the interconnectedness of these four dimensions. Section Three will identify the political space that the Jamestown Project will occupy, a space of alternative engagement in a politicized civil society of cross-cutting polities; it will explain our emphasis on communication, connection, commitment, and character, and on a chastened and historical conception of American democracy; and it will discuss the Project's distinctive approach to analysis, advocacy, and action. Section Four will explore in more detail how our commitment to action leads to unitary action projects, and how our basic concerns motivate and shape our interest in parenting, race, social health, and criminal justice. The final section will summarize our main conclusions and hopefully prepare the way for further discussion.

Before we get to any of that, we have to qualify the ambitions behind this exercise. A paper as broadly conceived as this one cannot hope to do justice to its subjects the way a book or research article might. We have to some degree sacrificed depth and precision for accessibility and brevity. We hope this approach leads to a thoughtful but open-ended discussion, one that deals with its subjects responsibly while leaving room for further elaboration. But we realize that this approach may miss the mark. A space for further elaboration may seem to result from simple ignorance, and brevity may seem to indicate indifference. A few words at the outset may help to forestall three worries along these lines with regard to our intentions and methods.

First, we mean to focus on politics in the United States, while nevertheless remaining attentive to the way political affairs here shape and are shaped by the wider world beyond our borders. Common English usage complicates this task by using the term 'American' most often to indicate some relationship to the United States of America – as, for example, when we speak of US citizens as Americans. Of course, America includes lands beyond the borders of the United States, and the ideas that America stands for resonate with people in all of these places. Cuban thinker and activist José Martí eloquently made both points in the nineteenth century, when he distinguished the US from what he called, on behalf of Cubans and other residents of the former Iberian colonies, 'Our America.' There are creative alternatives to the linguistic chauvinism that equates America with the US. We might, for example, borrow a term from Latin American Spanish and refer to US citizens not as Americans but as *estadounidenses*. But in the interest of accessibility, we will by and large comply with the common English usage. We will, however, observe the distinction between the country called 'the United

States of America' and the part of the world, and the idea, called 'America' – at least where it is possible to do so in user-friendly prose.

Second, in this white paper we draw from and extend the American democratic tradition, but we offer little argument for our understanding of this tradition. We will explore certain challenges that confront the US, the responses that seem necessary, and the values that frame these analyses and recommendations. But we will leave for another occasion the question of how to interpret the texts, characters, and events that help us arrive at these analyses and recommendations. Our burden here is to articulate a vision of American democracy that sustains a critical and proactive engagement with the present, not to defend or document a way of memorializing the past.

And finally, about the many references to citizenship and to citizens in the pages to follow: we will most often have in mind those persons whom the law recognizes as American citizens – the people who can, other things being equal, receive US passports and vote in US elections. This focus on legal citizenship is as it should be, since one of our aims is to inspire people to vote more reliably and more responsibly. But we recognize that the US has always depended on adults who don't qualify as full citizens. Historical examples of these shadow citizens include enslaved Africans and their descendants under Jim and Jane Crow, or legally free but paternalistically constrained white women. Contemporary examples include the many undocumented immigrants who pay taxes but lack legislative representation, or the imprisoned felons who, like many undocumented immigrants, do indispensable jobs for unconscionable wages. There is an ongoing debate about the degree to which our shadow citizens are entitled to the title and the privileges of legal citizenship. By declining to say anything about this question, we in no way mean to suggest that there is some obviously correct answer to it, that it has no bearing on the core cases of legal citizenship, or that the category of legal citizenship ought to be limited by the answers most frequently found in mainstream public opinion. Our silence on the point flows strictly from the recognition that taking up the issue would far exceed the optimal scope of this paper.

2. The meaning of democracy

To claim that democracy is sleeping or that democratic citizenship is in peril is to claim that a certain conception of democracy is or ought to be at the forefront of our thinking and practice. If democracy involves nothing more than universal suffrage and free, fair, and regular elections, then the US may not be in such bad shape (though even here there is much room for improvement). But democracy requires more than this.

Voting and elections are the key elements of a minimal and formally political conception of democracy, a conception that has much to recommend it. But that conception resonates with us today because its elements are crucial means to important ends. And focusing just on those means, to the point of fetishizing them as the essence of democratic life, does little to prepare us for the broader task of achieving the true ends of democratic life.

It is important to begin, then, by specifying the ends and aims of democracy, and by identifying the various dimensions in which we might work to achieve those ends.

2.1. Core values

Anyone attempting to describe the real meaning of democracy can appeal to an extensive collection of familiar expressions. We are taught to connect democracy to the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people, or to an arrangement in which each counts for one and none for more than one, or to majority rule, or to the conviction that those who are affected by policy should help make policy. Unfortunately, we rarely bother to reflect on the basic ethical and political values that these adages express. To focus with Lincoln on the idea of rule of, by, and for the people is to focus on the core values of equality, autonomy, responsibility, and community, and on certain ways of understanding these values. Deriving these core values from the language of Lincoln's maxim may help us to see just what the commitment to democracy entails.

The maxim's recurring emphasis on 'the people' is of course a gesture toward the ideas of community and equality. As the renowned educator and democratic theorist John Dewey said in the early twentieth century, the word 'democracy' expresses the very idea of community life, of a people united by a shared commitment to at least some joint projects. And since Lincoln speaks of rule of, by, and for *the* people, not by the *best* people, or by *some* people, the joint project must be an egalitarian one.

Calling for the rule *of* the people deepens this egalitarian thrust in two ways, especially against the backdrop of the traditional division of state forms in western political thought. Democracy is the alternative to monarchy and aristocracy; it is the political form in which those who are not kings or nobles rule. The people, then, are the *ordinary* people, the common folk – the *demos*, as opposed to the monarchs and aristocrats. And, as nineteenth century writer Ralph Waldo Emerson said, rule *of* the people will embrace the common and the low. It will not simply lift its leaders to elite status from the lower ranks, or pawn off elites as commoners (which we might call rule among but not of the people). In the words of progressive-era activist Jane Addams, democracy means identifying with the common lot, and not with the oligarchs, princes, or other elites who would dominate, or rule *over*, the *demos*.

The idea of rule *by* the people indicates that the people have to be autonomous and responsible. They must be autonomous in at least two senses. They must be self-governing, or willing to organize their lives for themselves, and they must be undominated, or free to organize their lives for themselves. We might unite these two senses of autonomy together under the heading of *effective freedom*, and we must recognize that they require constant vigilance and care. This demand for vigilance entails that the people must also be responsible: they must accept the burdens of self-governance and do their part in public life.

Finally, insisting on rule *for* the people is a way of demanding that power be accountable to the common good. As before, this commitment to the common good opposes the forms of elite or tyrannical domination that seek to use public power for private or otherwise narrow purposes. And it does so under limits imposed by the idea of rule *by* the people. That is: only the people can decide what is good for them, which means that the values of autonomy and commonality preclude even well intentioned forms of princely, aristocratic, or otherwise elite paternalism.

The values of equality, autonomy, community, and responsibility are important democratic aspirations or ends. Unfortunately, they do not by themselves pick out the best means for their actualization. There are many different ways of working for these core values. The way we will recommend begins with the realization that democracy involves more than the official politics of elections, voting, and government bureaucracies.

2.2. Multi-dimensional democracy

Democratic conditions can exist in multiple registers or dimensions. In fact, democratic conditions *must* be achieved across multiple dimensions in order for the core values in any single dimension to win out. Four such dimensions are most salient for the purposes of this white paper: politics, culture, character, and action.

Democracy is clearly important in the domain of *official politics*, of elections and campaigns, of lobbying and legislation. Our general consensus on this point may be the most obvious legacy of democratic thought and action in the United States. Like our founding father and fourth president James Madison, many Americans have struggled to create the institutional conditions under which all citizens can exercise autonomy and responsibility. And like civil rights activist Ella Baker, many more have fought to ensure that only morally relevant considerations define the community of equal citizens. So democracy seen from one angle is a mode of governance or a political form, one marked by such features as universal suffrage and fair elections.

But democracy in official politics is likely to fail unless supported by the *unofficial politics* of culture and civil society. From Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey, Americans have insisted that democratic modes of official governance cannot function without the right sort of underpinning in the unofficial public sphere. Seen from another angle, then, democracy also involves culture or a way of life, where we find voluntary associations, social networks, schools, and other relationship structures that cultivate trust, dialogue, engagement, and cooperation.

Similarly, democratic political institutions and cultural practices must depend upon and support the *political virtue* of individual citizens. From our founding father and second president John Adams to writer and critic Ralph Ellison, Americans have argued that character, virtue, and personality are central to the establishment and consolidation of truly democratic social conditions. So we should recognize what the nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman would call a personalist dimension to democracy, where we find

citizens predisposed to employ and cultivate the integrity, flexibility, commitment, expressiveness, and self-assurance – Emerson called it ‘self-reliance’ – that individuals need to meet the demands of democratic life. Seen from yet another angle, then, democracy also involves persons for whom the values of autonomy, equality, responsibility, and community are second nature, people who as a matter of character and conscience are inclined toward cooperation and the continual cultivation of democratic virtues.

Finally, a democratic personality is of little use, and has little connection to civil or political society, unless it manifests itself in *political activity*. From the Boston Tea Party to the abolitionists, from the women’s club movement to the civil rights and environmental movements, Americans have continually borne out nineteenth century social theorist Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous description of the restless and energetic US citizenry. We have also forged relationships and acted locally, even while thinking globally. We should recognize, then, that one dimension of democracy consists in specific and ongoing activity, in repeatedly determining what to do here and now, especially as conditions change over time.

In some ways, concrete action is the most basic of the four dimensions of democratic politics. Governance, of course, is an activity, as is working at a local food bank. Less obviously but just as important, the shaping of one’s character is an activity, conducted over time as we make and reflect on the choices with which we are continually presented. In this connection it is important to note the distinctive importance of a specific kind of action.

Storytelling is a profound and unavoidable influence on the development of individual character, cultural life, and political society. If we characterize and celebrate our democracy with stories that fail to account for the good *and* the bad features of our past and present, if we fail to enshrine in word and memory the struggle between democratic and anti-democratic forces that has defined our nation since its inception, we will produce a provincial public culture that promotes blind dogmatism instead of democratic character. All the dimensions of democratic politics, then, are crucially bound up with the specific activities of description, interpretation, and narration.

2.3. Examples

We can speak of democratic conditions existing in all four of these dimensions, in official politics and unofficial politics, in political virtue and political activity. More than this, we must be able to locate it in multiple dimensions simultaneously in order for it to have a lasting impact in any one. Three examples may make this point clearer.

Elections. We usually say that free and fair elections with universal suffrage make for democracy in official politics. But the elections have to be overseen by election officials. If the guardians of our electoral processes are not personally committed to the system, and if they lack the integrity, the political virtue, to manage the system impartially, then universal suffrage may become merely formal – and, as people have alleged more

vehemently in recent years, election officials may improperly purge voter rolls to enhance a particular candidate's chances of winning.

Popular rule. Similarly, there is a paradox embedded in the idea of rule by the people. The people, the common folk, the demos, are precisely those who do not have the leisure or resources to give their all to politics. Especially in modern nation-states, the people must rule episodically and indirectly, through representatives and bureaucracies. As advocates for term limits and critics of 'Washington insiders' have rightly noted (whatever one thinks of the policies they recommend), these bureaucracies create their own hierarchies, elites, and entrenched interests, thereby also putting themselves in tension with the core values of popular rule. As a consequence, democracy in the modern state is less a fixed political form, less a finished blueprint offered in answer to the timeless question of how to design a polity, than a dynamic political commitment. This commitment consists in the willingness to monitor our ongoing struggle to embody democracy's core values in the institutions of state and society. And it requires continually mobilizing the grassroots and frequently renewing the relationships, networks, and energies that define life outside political society.

Religion. The phenomenon of religious faith seems to undermine the idea of locating democracy in multiple dimensions at once. After all, when powerful faith communities like the Roman Catholic Church refuse to select their leaders through deeply democratic processes, this does not obviously endanger democracy in the sphere of official politics. In light of this, why not have democracy in official politics but not in civil society? Similarly, the democratic openness to argument and negotiation seems incompatible with the importance that many religions place on faith. In light of this, how can we not limit democracy to official politics while removing it from considerations of personal virtue? Despite appearances to the contrary, these anti-democratic aspects of religious civil society and character are not so much objections to a multidimensional approach as opportunities to clarify its meaning.

The institutions of civil society, religious or otherwise, need not be democratic all the way down, not even in the contemporary world's pluralist democracies. But they must allow their members to disaffiliate at will. I may have no say in electing the pope, but I must have some say in whether I will remain a Catholic. This minimal democratic requirement – call it the free exit requirement – guarantees that the institutions that make up civil society remain on the proper footing, so that members of groups remain members and not subjects, and so that religious believers remain connected to their creeds by faith and not by force. And this gives citizens the space to cultivate the participatory instincts and ethical sensibilities on which democracy depends.

Similarly, there is no need for democratic citizens to argue about all of their beliefs with all comers. All of us depend on faith claims, religious and otherwise, at some point, because these claims provide the backdrop to our experience of the world. In a pluralist democracy, though, with its multiple religions and cultures, believers must accept the possibility that this backdrop, whatever its content, cannot settle in advance the outcome of all our encounters in the public square. We must accept the possibility of conversation

and debate with people who decline to share our basic moral and theological assumptions. As religion scholar Jeffrey Stout points out, believers confronting this possibility have created some of the high points in the history of American ethical reflection. Many nineteenth century abolitionists and twentieth century black civil rights activists declared the Christian foundations for their arguments, but then moved on to argue in more broadly moral terms for their positions. We learn from these examples that religious faith can help shape and articulate democratic moral arguments, and that democratic openness, even to faith-based arguments, can play a crucial role in gaining wider acceptance for moral positions.

3. The Jamestown Project

Reawakening our democracy to its core values requires attending to all four dimensions of democratic life. In order to make good on Lincoln's ideal of rule of, by, and for the people, we must promote the conditions under which democracy can flourish in political society, in civil society, in personal character, and in political action. This four-pronged approach is especially important given the challenges with which this paper began.

We focused at the outset on the debilitation of political society (the domain of official politics), the enervation of civil society (the domain of unofficial politics), and the degeneration of public character (the domain of political virtue). Each of these trends involves a failure to act sufficiently or properly (the domain of political action). In addition, they all reflect and contribute to the widespread disaffection with political and public life in the US, and they help create obstacles to the effective political expression of the citizenry's democratic energies.

But democracy is resilient, especially when it remembers the active engagements of civil society and political virtue. Citizens incessantly labor to build and sustain ways of resisting domination by elites and effacement by bureaucracies. From the Moral Majority to MoveOn.org, citizens continue to mobilize and organize. They continue to identify and reclaim sites for political work outside of and alongside official politics, and to make the politicians and bureaucrats take notice.

The future of American democracy depends on these and other attempts to create and sustain these alternative sites of political engagement. These *parallel polities* can serve many valuable purposes: they can generate new ideas, cultivate new leaders and voices, establish or renew the associative bonds that define civil society, provide models of engaged citizenship, and infuse the moribund institutions of official politics with new personalities, energies, and issues.

The Jamestown Project is one of these alternative sites of political engagement. Its members propose to support the revival and renewal of American democracy with analysis, advocacy, and action. We will generate new ideas and nurture the people who have those ideas. We will work to connect those ideas and people to policy debates and

public conversations. And we will operationalize our ideas by developing and facilitating local projects and initiatives.

3.1. Analysis: four emphases

The members of the Jamestown Project regret the feebleness of public thinking about the limits and requirements of democracy, and therefore seek to create and promote better ways of thinking. Our alternative approaches will of course insist on the traditional values of autonomy, community, equality, and responsibility. But our analyses will focus in particular on five areas of difficulty and opportunity.

The first four focal areas may be somewhat familiar. We will join media justice activists and advocates for deliberative democracy in focusing on *communication and information*, because democracy requires free flowing information and substantive public discourse. We will join communitarian thinkers and social capital researchers in exploring the prospects for *connection and identification*, because citizens must identify with each other and with the joint projects that democratic life calls them to undertake. We will join students of civic republican traditions in seeking out the resources for *commitment and inspiration*, because citizenship is hard work, requiring the perseverance and creativity to respond to the perennial and perennially changing challenges of democratic life. And we will join all of these people and many others in calling for *character and integrity*, because leadership and citizenship are noble callings in a democracy, demanding virtue, vision, and the willingness to serve.

These are areas of difficulty and of opportunity in the United States today. For example, certain narrow interpretations of religious doctrine, particularly in certain Christian and Muslim communities, have had corrosive effects on secular politics. But these radical fundamentalisms became influential in part because they recognized and exploited religion's ability to connect people, inspire them, and move them to stake their personal integrity on definite courses of social action. We have to join Whitman, Dewey, and others in demanding that democracy accommodate and learn from this passionate spirituality.

In another example, recent trends in the businesses of delivering news and entertainment seem to many to undermine the prospects for truly democratic communication and connection. But the revolution in communications technology that has made possible the consolidation of media ownership, the retreat from the public square to the home theater, and the collapse of journalism into 'infotainment' also has encouraging aspects. Many people see certain fruits of this revolution – for example, the 'mobile revolution' of text messaging devices and multi-function cell phones – as nodes in a faster, more fluid, and less centralized network for delivering information, exchanging ideas, and, sometimes, mobilizing political actors. We have to learn to use these resources to communicate and connect, and to fight those who would use them to obscure and to isolate.

The Jamestown Project will conduct and support analyses in the four crucial areas of democratic communication, connection, commitment, and character. We will undertake

and encourage work that explores America's current problems in these areas, and that suggests ways of seizing opportunities in these areas. We will be particularly concerned with those domains of contemporary life that join religion and communications technology in presenting these opportunities and obstacles in particularly striking or pressing forms.

3.2. Historicism and the night side

Our fifth area of emphasis may be less familiar than these first four, and as such represents perhaps the most distinctive contribution the Jamestown Project can make. We are particularly determined to conduct and encourage analyses in the spirit of a *chastened historicism*. We use this inelegant phrase to indicate our interest in history, our disdain for prideful American chauvinism, and our equal disdain for shortsighted and ethnocentric American nationalism. Instead of averting our eyes from America's past mistakes and seeing only the good in our unevenly shared present, we will root our analyses in history, in the humility that comes from awareness of our failures, and in the openness that comes from accepting the role that ethnic and other forms of diversity have played in making the US what it is.

The American idea – of freedom, equality, democracy, and more – has often been at odds with the reality of the places with which it shares its name. The Americas became modern under the pressures of colonial exploitation and racial subjugation, a fact that people in the United States often buried beneath uniformly rosy narratives of national founding and cultural progress. This oversight is important not because the idea of America is useless, and not because the US version of American society is irredeemably at odds with the idea. The idea is useful, and societies can usefully try to embody and express it. But the kinds of stories we tell ourselves about our society must reflect the darker dimensions of our past and present if we are to forge a truly democratic national character.

America's democratic history is darker than we are usually taught in three ways. First, it involves the indispensable contributions of innumerable dark peoples. Alongside the stirring narratives of European ethnic groups becoming American, we should celebrate the experiences and remember the struggles of Africans, Amerindians, Asians, and others. These people wrestled with the idea and the promise of America not just in the United States but also in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific. And in the process of becoming American, they gave 'the new world' much of its distinctive culture and character, from jazz and gospel music to surfing and the samba.

Once we restore the experiences of these dark peoples to our history, we find that the American story becomes darker in another sense: it loses some of its traditional luster. Remembering the struggle to disentangle the idea of America from the nightmarish realities of white supremacy severely complicates the mythology of American righteousness and moral progress. Our triumphant march toward freedom, equality, and inclusion becomes a series of halting advances and retreats, with nearly as many dead ends as steps forward. The universalist and libertarian arguments that fueled the

revolutionary campaign against Great Britain differ radically from the racist and authoritarian arguments that enabled the seizures, just over a century later, of Hawaii, Haiti, and the Philippines. Insisting that both sensibilities are part of our history shades our glowing self-image – while also making that image more realistic.

Once we remember the dark peoples that have helped shape America and the dark times that have toughened us, it is hard not to notice that much of US history takes place on the night side of our collective experience. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley points out, the night has many meanings for a people fighting for justice. The night can inspire and embolden agents of terror, like the Ku Klux Klan. But it can also bring the regeneration and renewal of domestic rituals, of sleep – and of rent parties. Freedom fighters like Harriet Tubman have done much of their work under cover of night, out of the spotlight of official scrutiny. And moral prophets like Martin Luther King have compared the task of imagining a better world to the nighttime practice of dreaming. Dark peoples and their allies have helped to regenerate and renew American ideals and culture, dreaming of freedom and beauty while being forced into the shadowy margins of mainstream society.

All this is what the night side means, and why it and its inhabitants are indispensable to an adequate understanding of the American temper and situation. If democracy means embracing the common and the low, if it means identifying with the common lot, then we have to pay more attention to those who have historically found their pursuits of happiness complicated by poverty, disenfranchisement, enslavement, and dehumanization – and by the systematic appropriation of America's might by agents of these injustices.

But insisting on the night side in no way means ignoring or downplaying the profound successes of the democratic experiment – including the anti-racist successes of the multiracial movements for abolition, civil rights, and human rights. It simply means tempering our pride with criticism. It means honoring the profound idea of America by holding reality up to the standards that the idea entails. It means making room for humility and irony, for the thought that not everything we do and have done is right. And it means refusing to view our democracy as something static, as an inheritance that comes to us ready-made and complete. This is the tragicomic approach discussed above, an approach that endorses the achievements of the American tradition, but tempers this endorsement by humbly recognizing the historical fact and the future possibility of failure, especially in connection with questions of diversity.

The three-fold commitment to history, humility, and diversity that defines our chastened historicism profoundly shapes our pledge to provide action-guiding analysis. We will encourage creative intellectual work from different perspectives – from academics, community leaders, ordinary citizens, policy-makers, and others – and in a variety of forms – from scholarly articles and social criticism to novels and lay sermons. And we will ask tough questions, explore new trends and possibilities, and analyze old problems in novel ways.

3.3. Advocacy

The Jamestown Project's analytic commitment to history, humility, and diversity – to chastened historicism – must bear fruit in our approach to advocacy. This approach will in some ways resemble traditional approaches. Like other organizations, we will declare positions on questions of public policy and political morality. Among other things, we will commission studies, distribute issue primers to legislators and pundits, and attempt to place opinion pieces in influential periodicals. Using the talents, access, and expertise of our fellows, founding members, and advisors, and working with strategic partners at the local, state, regional, and national levels, we will impact policy initiatives by generating novel approaches and engaging in discussion and debate.

But along with these familiar lines of conduct, the Jamestown Project will also undertake two less familiar ventures. We will introduce and amplify voices that are not currently being heard, and we will provide new languages for characterizing political questions. Accordingly, we are committed not just to changing policies, but also to the strategies and ideals of connected communication and media diversification.

Connected communication. We are convinced that new ways of communicating, new languages for engagement and advocacy, are needed not just to redirect policy discussions, but also to engage and inspire civic participation, interest, and understanding. We will work toward the development of these new languages, different ones for different settings; and we will work toward using them to communicate better ways of thinking about pressing issues and about the duties of democratic citizens. There are three keys to this work, each of which will receive further specification in the next section: storytelling, engaging in dialogues and listening sessions, and connecting more deliberately with people at the local level.

This focus on narrative, dialogue, and connection – call it a politics of *connected communication* – is an essential step toward increasing the quantity and quality of democratic participation. But it is also essential to promoting and securing social, political, and civic opportunities for historically disenfranchised communities, including communities of color. We can invite the members of these communities to join narrative-enriched and dialogue-driven attempts to evaluate and envision our democracy, thereby availing these communities of the modes of communication that many of their members will find most familiar and accessible.

Media diversification. Along with our emphasis on connected communication and on policy debate, the Jamestown Project is also committed to diversifying the production of elite opinion and analysis. In light of studies demonstrating the relative scarcity of women and people of color among media pundits and other shapers of public opinion, we will identify new voices from these underrepresented populations and work to connect them to the mainstream media and independent press. We aim to change the complexion of the media for three reasons. We hope to help cultivate a new generation of leaders in underrepresented communities; we aim to reach multiple and diverse audiences; and we

are determined to advance the public discussion of issues related to the inclusiveness of our democracy, particularly as that discussion bears on issues of diversity and difference.

3.4. Action

Just as official and unofficial politics combine with political virtue in the demand for political action, our interest in analysis and advocacy must be expressed in a commitment to action. We cannot generate new ideas without supporting the people who have these ideas. And the ideas remain abstract and empty unless they are tested on the ground and employed by leaders in public life. Consequently, we will cultivate leaders, nurture thinkers and public thinking, and collaborate on action projects.

Cultivating leaders. The Jamestown Project will identify and develop opportunities to promote a collective new leadership primarily consisting of people of color, women, and young people. This in no way entails a rejection of more established leaders, on whom we will gladly and respectfully rely for support and guidance. The objective is just to create room for even more people to work together to build the relationships, networks, and organizations that will direct our country into the future. We want to cultivate more leaders, and more leaders with non-traditional class and vocational profiles – leaders who happen not to be lawyers, preachers, professors, or businesspeople.

Nurturing thought. We also intend to create spaces where people from all walks of life can engage the issues and arguments that connect with our analytical work. We will sponsor and convene workshops, strategy sessions, forums, retreats, and occasions for informal dialogue. We aim to communicate our ideas, stimulate the development of other ideas, debate plans for achieving our future, and translate these intellectual innovations into forms that people other than the original authors can understand – whether author and audience do their thinking in law libraries, in legislative chambers, on shop floors, or in pre-school classrooms.

Action projects. In addition to cultivating leaders from all walks of life and nurturing public deliberation, the Jamestown Project will creatively implement certain of the proposals that result from our analysis and advocacy. After identifying strategic partners or building working coalitions, we will conduct *action projects* that attempt to put new ideas and proposals to work on the ground in promising local settings. These action projects will operationalize our ideas and connect them to the practical concerns that shape the lives of our fellow citizens.

4. Action projects and guiding issues

The details of our action projects will arise from the work of our fellows. But two projects are already on the drawing board, awaiting refinement and implementation. And four broad issue areas are of particular interest to us.

4.1. Action projects

Parents Vote. “Parenting” as a concept fully encapsulates most of the concerns and priorities held by American families. Additionally, it is an affirmative concept: parenting is a positive role in American society, and as such supports the definition of issues and solutions with positive language. The concept of parenting has the potential to speak to an audience that holds significant voting power, and it cuts across demographic subgroups, allowing for a multiplicity of organizing strategies. After all, parents may be men or women, married or single, young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight – and from any ethnic, racial, or national group. This approach easily allows for discussion of children’s issues, and it can be expanded to include community interests. “Parenting” can easily speak to the two major social shifts – a changing workforce and changing family composition. “Parenting” captures issues of professional obligations (and how those obligations often conflict with family commitments), values, the institution of marriage, and ideas of building for the future (wealth, opportunity). “Parenting,” as a specific issue, is a gateway into a host of other social issues ripe for exploration and redefinition.

The expectation is that this work will highlight the value of engaging all parents as democratic stewards, to provide new perspectives to the issues that this engagement brings to light, and to help parents, collectively, and as individuals, use these issues to become an organized constituency. The Jamestown Project will work with strategic partners and all parents to unite in building local, state, regional, and national networks with the goal of providing accurate and important information on issues, training on how and when to take action, and connections with others that are ready to act to protect and benefit children and their families.

Storytelling sessions. The racial and class disparities in our society today pose a fundamental threat to the ideals of a true democracy. A first step towards challenging these disparities is learning how to retell our American story in ways that explain how these disparities came about, what they mean today, how they are harming the average citizen’s ability to live the American dream, and how in the future these disparities will continue to threaten our democratic ideals.

A vital part of effectively sharing ideas, strategies, and recommendations with advocates, policy makers, academics, and the public is identifying and utilizing effective methods of communication, methods that reach and speak to people while simultaneously reminding them of the values we share. The technique of storytelling transcends race, class, and other differences and allows people to communicate on common ground. We aim to research and compare various methods of storytelling, and then consider how these methods can be used most effectively to disseminate information – from narratives to policy recommendations.

To this end, we hope to host storytelling sessions that will bring together members of a community to tell their stories. These sessions will be community-building exercises that will hopefully encourage ongoing discussions about democracy, motivate

participation long into the future, and serve as a way to gather information to rework our common narratives. We will collaborate with institutions and individuals across local, regional, and national boundaries to organize and implement these sessions. Target populations for the collaboration will include citizens, storytellers, academics, political leaders, advocates, policy makers, media personalities, and community leaders.

4.2. Issue areas

Race and stewardship. The basic agenda of the Jamestown Project involves empowering and encouraging citizens to discharge the duties of democratic citizenship. One of these duties is the duty of stewardship: of protecting the resources that make democracy and social life possible. These resources come in many forms, including the human and social capital of individual talents, social connections, and moral traditions. And one of the recurring obstacles to the effective, judicious, and fair use of these human assets has been the invidious use of racial distinctions.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the black nationalist-cum-human rights activist tells the story of a black numbers runner, prevented by American racism from finding a more respectable outlet for his undeniable mathematical genius. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass used a Fourth of July address to explain the absurdity of a slaveholding nation enshrining freedom as its central value. And contemporary advocates for African-American reparations have tried to explain in detail the economic contributions that enslaved and oppressed blacks made to this country's unparalleled wealth. Our society has a penchant for indifferently wasting its human potential, blithely ignoring its rich moral traditions, and ruthlessly exploiting its human energies, all because of racism. This tendency has undermined social harmony, diminished the US in the eyes of the world, and made our declarations of moral authority ring hollow.

The Jamestown Project will explore and expose the ways in which race-thinking continues to interfere with the duties of democratic stewardship. This will involve connecting with those who have been systematically and historically excluded because of race, making a special effort to reach them as we cultivate leaders and promote connected communication. But it will also involve finding ways to use race-thinking critically, for example, to highlight the systematic inequities and exclusions that still mark our society.

Expressive democracy. We use the idea of expressive democracy to indicate certain of the conditions that any society must satisfy if it truly aspires to embody Lincoln's dictum. In order to go beyond the minimal political conditions of regular elections and universal suffrage, a robust democracy requires, among other things, 1) the relatively free flow of information and opinion, 2) open and substantive public discourse, 3) voting systems that fairly register the preferences of citizens, and 4) participants who are willing and able to cultivate and employ the skills and virtues of democratic citizenship – including the capacity to make one's preferences publicly articulate, and to articulate and weigh for oneself the claims that society puts in competition with each individual's desires. These are all in some sense expressive requirements, and they are all thought by many people to be imperiled by current trends. The movements for media justice, the scholarly work on

social capital, and the public outcry over improperly purged voter rolls all suggest that our democracy has grown increasingly inexpressive.

We propose to take up the question of how we can reestablish and sustain the conditions for an expressive democracy of effective and responsible citizens. The proposal is not to create magical new solutions from whole cloth. Plenty of people outside the public spotlight have been hard at work imagining, analyzing, and testing possible solutions for a long time. We plan instead to act as a clearinghouse and critic for these existing solutions. This will involve making public statements, principally in writing, that 1) prepare the ground for the proposed solutions, first by (a) making clear the need for them, with detailed descriptions of the relevant problems, and then by (b) debunking bad arguments, especially bad moral arguments, for the status quo or for flawed alternatives; the public statements will also 2) gather and publicize evidence on the likely effectiveness of possible solutions, which may involve reporting the results of technical studies or of unheralded policy experiments; and 3) weave the proposals and the evidence into an accessible narrative about possibilities for democratic change and renewal.

Social health and health care. Health is to some degree a product of human behavior, created, maintained, and, unfortunately, undermined by social practices, institutional patterns, and individual behavior. Most people agree that society exists at least in part to manage certain consequences of human interaction, the consequences that exceed any individual's capacity for oversight or control. If this is right, then health care, in some sense, must be among the most basic social functions.

There are three reasons for this fact to be of particular interest to the members of the Jamestown Project. First, health and health care are among the issues weighing most heavily on the minds of US citizens today. The specific occasions for this worry are plentiful, from asthmatic and obese children to adults who are uninsured or unable to take time off from work to care for family. These concerns and others should come to the fore in a democracy that empowers its citizens to set its political agenda. We hope to help push the US to embody this sort of democracy more fully and effectively. Second, health and health care are social goods that, like others, too often get distributed in accordance with identity. Accordingly, the lack of care options for new Americans and the substandard care options for minority patients have become familiar refrains in discussions of public health. Issues like these take on special importance for the members of the Jamestown Project, who aim to help America see and overcome its racist failings. And third, parents, families, and communities play important roles in establishing and supporting healthful lifestyles and practices. This fact dovetails nicely with our interest in empowering parents as guardians of democracy.

Issues of cultural perceptions in diagnosis and treatment, discrepancies in language access, racist and culturally incompetent providers, and disrupted or undernourished care networks are all in need of exploration. As was said in the discussion of expressive democracy, we do not propose to invent new solutions from nothing. We propose instead to publicize, synthesize, and, where feasible, test in action the approaches that people outside the spotlight are already developing.

Criminal Justice. The procedural safeguards that we erect to protect those accused of criminal behavior speak to the values that underwrite our democratic commitments. The American adversary system of justice enshrines and expresses these values in a familiar litany of rights against the state, including the presumption of innocence, effective assistance of counsel, equal protection under the law, and the requirement that criminal liability attach only upon the government proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Constitutional theorist Laurence Tribe reminds us that these rights, which are conferred to the guilty and innocent alike, serve as “a reminder to the community of the principles it holds important.” These principles, he continues, are “affirmations of respect for the accused as a human being – affirmations that remind him and the public about the sort of society we want to become and, indeed, about the sort of society we are.”

The Jamestown Project plans to explore ways to make our criminal justice system more just and humane, ensuring that the quality of legal representation does not correlate with wealth and privilege. Also, the Jamestown Project intends to focus on the myriad ways in which race skews criminal justice in America. Toward that end, we will focus on two projects. The first will create and suggest effective state-wide models for the provision of indigent defense services. This research will include both qualitative and quantitative aspects of state provided representation. The second project will focus on the re-integration of formerly incarcerated persons into the community. The Jamestown Project’s focus on an engaged citizenry cannot be fully realized when a substantial part of the population is effectively barred from participating in civil society due to the collateral consequences that entail criminal convictions. Prohibitions ranging from inability to qualify for public housing to preclusion from receiving a student loan for collegiate studies to disenfranchisement laws hinder re-entrants’ ability to function in society.

How we treat the accused in our society demonstrates how deeply we respect the dignity and autonomy of the individual. Perhaps the American Bar Associations says it best:

The continued existence of a free and democratic society depends upon recognition of the concept that justice is based upon the rule of law grounded in respect for the dignity of the individual and his [or her] capacity through reason for enlightened self-government. Law so grounded makes justice possible

The Jamestown Project seeks to make justice possible for all.

In all of these areas, the Jamestown Project will conduct wide-ranging research to identify the issues our fellow citizens find most pressing. We will collaborate with experts internal and external to the project to produce solid analyses and recommendations on the issues. We will communicate these analyses and recommendations to policy makers, peers, and the public by means of dynamic mechanisms of communication and connection. We will put the most promising strategies to work on the ground by supporting innovative leaders and by inaugurating action projects in selected sites around the country. And we will do all of this in the

appreciative but critical spirit that comes from thinking about America's promise from the night side of its history.

5. Conclusion

“Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands: we have no right to assume otherwise. If we... do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

This line from the twentieth century writer James Baldwin reflects the fact that America is a process. It is an ideal awaiting the work of our hands, and the strength to wrestle with racism and other forms of moral blindness, to become a reality. It may be better to think of this ideal, and all ideals, by analogy to the stars, as something to steer by, not to steer to. If we think of it as a destination we can reach, as a goal we can achieve once and for all, then we may become complacent, inured to our failures and shortcomings. But if we treat it as a target of aspiration, then we can encourage people to steer by the ideal in its fullness, to orient their thoughts about policy and our common life by appeal to the successes, and failures, of our attempts to actualize the governing ideal of America.

John Dewey once wrote, “every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself.” We passionately believe that our democratic form of life is in need of renewal. We have become jaded and self-absorbed. But the ideals of this fragile experiment still can move us to work diligently to secure the promises of our country. Emerson captures our position powerfully:

“[T]he existing world is not a dream, and cannot with impunity be treated as a dream; neither is it a disease; but it is the ground on which you stand, it is the mother of whom you were born. Reform converses with possibilities, perchance with impossibilities; but here is the sacred fact. This was also true, or it could not be: it had life in it, or it could not have existed; it has life in it, or it could not continue.”

The Jamestown Project believes that our nation has life in it, and insists that democratic hope can be found in the powerful voices of everyday, ordinary people – those whom many people mistakenly think of as sleepwalkers. The obstacles and opportunities that surround us are the ground on which we stand. This ground is true, and real, but incomplete: its completion, its continuation, depends on our effort. We must engage in conversation, in the risky and profound democratic conversation that transcends the exchange of ready-made and inviolable opinions. We must recognize our connection and identification with one another, despite the facts of diversity and pluralism. We must commit to work imaginatively to secure the values that make up our cherished form of life. And we must insist on the noble calling of active citizenship, as well as on the institutional conditions that make that calling possible. All of this, we truly believe, will enable us to accomplish our democracy over again.

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