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Greider**

WHO WILL TELL THE PEOPLE

**The Betrayal
of American
Democracy**

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**For Cameron McClure Greider and Katharine Smith Greider,
with love and awe**

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Introduction: Mutual Contempt

The decayed condition of American democracy is difficult to grasp, not because the facts are secret, but because the facts are visible everywhere. Symptoms of distress are accumulating freely in the political system and citizens are demoralized by the lack of coherent remedies. Given the recurring, disturbing facts, a climate of stagnant doubt has enveloped contemporary politics, a generalized sense of disappointment that is too diffuse and intangible to be easily confronted. The things that Americans were taught and still wish to believe about self-government—the articles of civic faith we loosely call democracy—no longer seem to fit the present reality.

This dissonance between fact and faith is so discomfiting that many naturally turn away from the implications. The visible dysfunctions in politics are dismissed as a temporary aberration or explained away, cynically, as the way things always were. The reluctance and evasion are understandable: Some unwanted truths are too painful to face.

The blunt message of this book is that American democracy is in much deeper trouble than most people wish to acknowledge. Behind the reassuring facade, the regular election contests and so forth, the substantive meaning of self-government has been hollowed out. What exists behind the formal shell is a systemic breakdown of the shared civic values we call democracy.

Citizens are cut out of the politics surrounding the most important gov-

erning questions. The representative system has undergone a grotesque distortion of its original purpose. The connective tissues that in different ways once linked ordinary people to governing—political parties, the media, the secondary mediating institutions—no longer function reliably.

At the highest levels of government, the power to decide things has instead gravitated from the many to the few, just as ordinary citizens suspect. Instead of popular will, the government now responds more often to narrow webs of power—the interests of major economic organizations and concentrated wealth and the influential elites surrounding them. These organizations and individuals manage to shape the largest outcomes to the extent anyone does, while they neutralize or deflect what ordinary people think and believe.

In place of a meaningful democracy, the political community has embraced a permissive culture of false appearances. Government responds to the public's desires with an artful dance of symbolic gestures—hollow laws that are emptied of serious content in the private bargaining of Washington. Promises are made and never kept. Laws are enacted and never enforced. When ordinary people organize themselves to confront the deception, they find themselves too marginalized to make much difference.

Governing elites, not surprisingly, tend to their own self-interest but, even when their intentions are broadly public-spirited, the result is generally the same: The people are missing from the processes of self-government and government itself suffers from the loss. Disconnected from larger public purposes, people can neither contribute their thinking to the government's decisions nor take any real responsibility for them. Elite decision makers are unable to advance coherent governing agendas for the nation, however, since they are too isolated from common values and experiences to be persuasive. The result is an enervating sense of stalemate.

In sum, the mutual understanding between citizens and government necessary for genuine democracy is now deformed or neglected. While democracy's decline has consequences for everyone, certain sectors of the citizenry suffer from the loss of political representation more severely and personally than everyone else. In general, they are the people who already lack the advantages of higher education or social status. Their political influence cannot depend upon private wealth since they have little or none. The atrophied political system has left them even more vulnerable to domination by others.

While none of these complaints can be regarded as exactly a secret, there is a deeper dimension underlying the democratic problem that is not so easy for ordinary citizens to see. Democratic expectations are now confined and debilitated by the new power relationships that surround government and are buried in the everyday context of the nation's politics—tacit understandings that determine who has political power and who doesn't. These power relationships are rooted in the complexities that have changed American politics

so profoundly over the last few decades, either the deep tides of culture and economics or the conscious political action of interested parties.

Uncovering the patterns of these underlying power realities will be the principal task of this book. They are difficult to discern amid all the bewildering daily facts, but they represent the real source of the general discontent with American politics. They are, likewise, the unpleasant truths that people wish not to face.

Many citizens, especially those closest to power, will be reflexively inclined to resist this diagnosis. Partisans typically claim that the governing problems can be blamed on the people now in power—either Republicans in the White House or the Democrats who control Congress. Others will observe that, whatever obvious flaws now exist, American democracy has always been afflicted by large imperfections and contradictions. Both claims are narrowly correct, of course, but they are also ways to evade the present reality. The roots of democratic decay, as this inquiry will demonstrate, are deeper than personalities or parties and the familiar ideological arguments; the system will not be cured by an election or two that change the officers of government. Furthermore, the nature of the civic breakdown is peculiar to our own time, reflecting our contemporary conditions and failures; the questions cannot be answered by reciting the shortcomings of previous eras.

Another reason why the actual condition of democracy is difficult to grasp is that the form and facade of self-government remain elaborately in place and functioning. In fact, the mechanics of electoral democracy are now more highly developed (and more costly) than at any other time in history. Collectively American voters will select more than five hundred thousand people to represent them in the public's business, from local sewer commissions to the White House. The results, as everyone knows, are so unsatisfying that the active electorate has been steadily shrinking for a generation and "reforming" elections has become a major preoccupation of public-spirited debate.

The distinguishing premise of this book, however, is that the democratic problem originates from a different source—the politics of governing, not the politics of winning elections. Most political inquiries focus their analysis on campaigns and candidates, the techniques of persuasion and of assembling electoral majorities, the contest of slogans and ideology and so forth.

This book is centered on the complicated politics that lies beyond elections—the practical questions of how and why some interests are allowed to dominate the government's decision making while others are excluded. After all, this is the realm of politics that matters to people in their everyday lives. And this is the realm where we will find tangible explanations for their discontent.

Politics is not a game. It exists to resolve the largest questions of the society—the agreed-upon terms by which everyone can live peaceably with

one another. At its best, politics creates and sustains social relationships—the human conversation and engagement that draw people together and allow them to discover their mutuality. Democracy promises to do this through an inclusive process of conflict and deliberation, debate and compromise. Not every citizen expects to speak personally in the governing dialogue, but every citizen is entitled to feel authentically represented.

The substance of governing politics is the stuff that election campaigns and standard political commentaries mostly ignore—the nettlesome facts of decision making behind the rhetoric and slogans. Typically, political reporters separate “politics” from substantive “issues” as though they were two different subjects. Yet, in government, even the dimmest member of Congress understands that the substance *is* the politics. No one can hope to understand what is driving political behavior without grasping the internal facts of governing issues and asking the kinds of gut-level questions that politicians ask themselves in private. Who are the winners in this matter and who are the losers? Who gets the money and who has to pay? Who must be heard on this question and who can be safely ignored?

Thus in order to examine the condition of democracy, this inquiry will explore the contours of a lengthy list of governing issues, some familiar and some obscure, asking the same kinds of questions. Economics, taxation, the environment, education, national defense, financial regulation, wages and working conditions, labor law and corporate citizenship—all these and some others will appear as the raw material. In every case, the overriding purpose is to plot out patterns of behavior that are general in governing politics. As the evidence accumulates from different examples, the central goal is to reveal the deformed power relationships that explain why this democracy regularly disappoints its citizens.

This critique does not rely upon any idealized notions of what democracy means, but on the elementary principles everyone recognizes. Accountability of the governors to the governed. Equal protection of the law, that is, laws that are free of political manipulation. A presumption of political equality among all citizens (though not equality of wealth or status). The guarantee of timely access to the public debate. A rough sense of honesty in the communication between the government and the people. These are not radical ideas, but basic tenets of the civic faith.

Nor does this analysis pretend that American democracy once existed in some perfected form that now is lost. On the contrary, Americans have never achieved the full reality in their own history or even agreed completely on democracy’s meaning. The democratic idea has always been most powerful in America as an unfulfilled vision of what the country might someday become—a society advancing imperfectly toward self-realization. In that sense,

democracy is not so much a particular arrangement of government, but a difficult search. It is the hopeful promise the nation has made to itself.¹

The search itself is now at risk—the democratic promise of advancing toward higher ground. From the beginning of the Republic, the redeeming quality of American politics—and the central virtue of democracy—has been the capacity for self-correction. That capacity is now endangered too.

A democratic governance is able to adjust to new realities because it is compelled to listen to many voices and, sooner or later, react to what people see and express. In the American experience, the governing system has usually found a way to pull back eventually from extreme swings or social impasse and to start off in new directions. Not perfectly, perhaps not right away, but in time it did fitfully respond. This capacity was more than a matter of good luck or great leaders. As American democracy evolved, multiple balance wheels and self-correcting mechanisms were put in place that encourage this. They promote stability, but they also leave space for invention and new ideas, reform and change.

These self-correcting mechanisms are such familiar features of politics as the running competition for power between the two political parties, the scrutiny by the press and reform critics, the natural tension inherent in the coequal branches of government, the sober monitor imposed by law and the Constitution, the political energies that arise naturally from free people when they organize themselves for collective expression. People are counting on these corrective mechanisms to assert themselves again, as they usually have in the past.

The most troubling proposition in this book is that the self-correcting mechanisms of politics are no longer working. Most of them are still in place and functioning but, for the most part, do not produce the expected results. Some of the mechanisms have disappeared entirely. Some are atrophied or blocked by new circumstances. Some have become so warped and disfigured that they now concretely aggravate the imbalance of power between the many and the few.

That breakdown describes the democratic problem in its bleakest dimensions: Instead of a politics that leads the society sooner or later to confront its problems, American politics has developed new ways to hide from them.

The consequences of democratic failure are enormous for the country, not simply because important public matters are neglected, but because America won't work as a society if the civic faith is lost. Unlike most other nations, the United States has always overcome the vast differences among its people, the social and economic enmities and the storms of political disagreement, through the overarching bond of its democratic understandings. If these connections between the governed and the government are destroyed, if citizens can no

longer believe in the mutuality of the American experience, the country may descend into a new kind of social chaos and political unraveling, unlike anything we have experienced before. The early symptoms of such deterioration may already be visible.

Naturally enough, most people focus on narrower, less disturbing explanations of what is wrong. In the standard political dialogues, especially among elites, the discussions generally settle on three familiar ways of explaining the current political distress. The problem is diagnosed, for instance, as the failure of ill-informed citizens and the exaltation of fickle public opinion. Or the problem is attributed to the format of modern election campaigns and the elaborate electioneering technologies surrounding candidates. Or it is defined, more bluntly, as a problem of dirty money, the millions of dollars in campaign contributions that flow to the politicians.

None of these is entirely wrong, but all are inadequate to the true scope of the democratic problem. In order to proceed with an examination into deeper causes, let us first take up these conventional ways that people think about the troubled democracy and explain why each falls short. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that the only way out of the political distress is to address the democratic problem in its fullest terms, whole and direct, as though the civic principles still matter to us.

Many years ago, when I was a young reporter covering the Kentucky state legislature, I witnessed for the first time a spectacle of democracy that is not mentioned in the civics textbooks. In the midst of debate, the legislators erupted in noisy chaos—shouting wildly at one another and throwing papers in the air, charging randomly around the House chamber like angry children in a group tantrum. As I later learned, any representative assembly may occasionally experience such moments of bedlam, from city councils to the Congress. They occur on especially divisive issues, when the emotional frustrations boil up and overwhelm decorum.

At the time, I was quite shocked, a measure of my youthful innocence. A jaded old statehouse reporter noticed my astonishment and offered some perspective on the unruly behavior of the elected representatives.

“If you think these guys are bad,” he said, “you should see their constituents.”

His wisecrack was wickedly funny but, as I came to understand in subsequent years, it also stated an inescapable truth about representative democracy. At its best moments and its worst, the democratic system is a kind of two-way mirror between the people and those who are chosen to represent them. It reflects the warts and virtues back and forth between them. Sometimes, as if in a funhouse mirror, the image of politics becomes grotesquely

distorted and mocks the public's virtuous sense of itself. At other moments, the mirror reflects political behavior that confirms and even exalts the public's self-esteem.

Either way, people cannot easily escape from the connection. If Washington is a city infested by fools and knaves, where did they come from and who sent them? If citizens do not like what they see in the mirror, what do they intend to do about it?

This tension is as old as the Republic, but a peculiar dimension has developed in modern politics. Politicians are held in contempt by the public. That is well known and not exactly new in American history. What is less well understood (and rarely talked about for the obvious reasons) is the deep contempt politicians have for the general public.

Politicians, rather like priests or police officers, are regularly exposed to the least attractive qualities of human nature—gaudy dimensions of greed and confusion and mindless fear. It requires strong character for a politician to resist cynicism and retain an idealistic sense of the democratic possibilities. The speeches invoking “the people” as the sacred source of political power have taken on a mocking ring for many.

A Washington lobbyist, a former congressional aide with close relations to influential Senate Democrats, described the perspective with more candor than is allowed to politicians. “This city is full of people who don't like themselves, don't like their jobs and don't like their constituents—and I mean actively don't like their constituents,” the lobbyist told me not long ago. “I'm convinced one of the reasons they are in session so long is that members of Congress have gotten used to being here and they don't like going home where they have to talk to a bunch of Rotarians and play up to local leaders who are just dumb as stumps. They prefer to be here, to be around people they know and like and who understand them—lawyers, lobbyists, the press and so forth.”

Alienation, in other words, runs both ways. The mutual contempt that divides the governed from the governing authorities is the attitude underlying everything else in modern politics, both a symptom of the decay and an active agent in furthering the deterioration. In many private quarters of Washington, Alexander Hamilton's derisive dictum—“The People! The People is a great beast!”—has become an operating maxim. Survival in office requires a political strategy for herding “the beast” in harmless directions or deflecting it from serious matters it may not understand. Now and then, to the general dismay of political elites, Hamilton's “beast” breaks loose and tramples the civility of the regular order, though this usually occurs on inflammatory marginal issues that have little to do with the real substance of governing.²

Political elites, nonetheless, complain constantly of their own powerless-