

## Tam St. Claire's Introductory comments at LWVBC Democracy Discussion

March 23, 2024

—*Madeleine Albright, Former Secretary of State, said: "While democracy in the long run is the most stable form of government, in the short run, it is among the most fragile."*

While her book wasn't on the resource list to read for your pre-meeting prep. Madeleine Albright ended her book, *Fascism: A Warning*, by referencing leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, who helped their countries move past periods of intense violence and division.

Democracy's problems can, Albright assured us, be overcome — but only if we recognize history's lessons and **never take democracy for granted**.

She notes in a quote from Sheri Berman, professor of politics at Barnard College, Columbia University:

"The temptation is powerful to close our eyes and wait for the worst to pass, but history tells us that for freedom to survive, it must be defended, and that if lies are to stop, they must be exposed."

I consider myself to be an amateur political scientist. I learned to love political history after being fortunate to have an engaging American history teacher in high school and was inspired by President John F. Kennedy who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." I took those words to heart. Make my country and world a better place for having lived here.

After the 2016 election, I grew increasingly worried about the state of our democracy and that worry escalated even more in September, 2019, when the Ukraine whistleblower scandal hit the news. I know.....there have been so many...but that was when President Trump had his quid pro quo conversation with newly elected Ukrainian President Zelensky. President Zelensky was told that he just had to say he was "investigating" the Bidens...he really didn't have to follow through and do an investigation.

Around that time, I stumbled across the books by Professor Heather Cox Richardson, specifically her newest at that time: *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continued Fight for the Soul of America*. It gave me a new perspective of the influential and often destructive threads that have been running through our country that can be traced back to the Civil War. Those threads were gaining strength in our current era...growing racism, consolidation of money in fewer hands, increasing power by wealthy elites, and **blowback** toward various demographic groups who had gained improvement in equality over the past 150 years.

At that time Professor Richardson was just starting, at the encouragement of her students, to write her daily *Letters from an American* on social media. These posts were all footnoted with trusted resources. She looked at the daily news with an historian's eye and referenced similar events of the past.

For me (and many others), this made the crisis and chaos that was escalating bearable to understand and follow. The daily posting on important current events gave me historical context and lowered the panic I was feeling from reading, watching, and listening to the daily news. This helped me view and follow the news more cerebrally than emotionally. I could see the growing threats to our democracy more clearly. Much of the cable media...with both right and left slants...have become known as "The Outrage Media" churning up our anxiety, anger, and fears of "the other." Some politicians are playing for the sound-bites that get them on these programs.

If there was one message Professor Richardson was relating it is that we can't fully understand and survive the challenges to our democracy here and around the world without historic context. History doesn't fully repeat itself but there are repeated themes and lessons to be learned.

### **What is democracy?**

Let us not forget that the Greeks gave us the word democracy. "Demos" means people and "cracy" means to rule. People rule. The same Greeks who gave us the word *democracy* understood its pitfalls. It is, therefore, no coincidence that they also gave us the word *demagoguery*, which literally means a leader of the people but it has come to mean "a person, especially a political leader, who wins support by exciting the emotions of ordinary people rather than by having good or morally right ideas."

Angie Hobbs, a professor at the University of Sheffield, offers Plato's chilling account of how a democracy can be subverted by an opportunistic demagogue:

The demagogue gains power by democratic means, claiming to be a champion of 'the people' and making wild promises . . . Anyone who opposes the demagogue is labeled an 'enemy of the people' and exiled or killed. Such tactics naturally create genuine enemies, and the demagogue quickly acquires a large bodyguard, and eventually a private army. External conflicts are also stirred up to keep the people in need of a strong leader.

### **Republic v democracy**

There is often the comment that we are a republic, not a democracy...As Professor Richardson so often responds to that comment...it is like saying that a 4-legged animal is a Cavapoo not a dog. Democracies and republics are both forms of government in which supreme power resides

in the citizens. The republic refers specifically to a government in which those citizens elect representatives who govern according to the law. Our democracy is based on the Constitution that is the supreme law of the United States. We are a nation of laws, we are equal, and no one is above the law.

How many here think the stability of our democracy is in trouble?  
You would be right and there is data to back that up.

The *Economist Intelligence Unit* is a trusted and accurate resource for global academic research and forecasting trends and developments. The EIU is part of the Economist Group that was created in 1946 to address questions economists were asking with backed up rigorous analysis of the world around us.

**The Democracy Index**, published by the Economist Group, is an index that measures the quality of democracy around the world and is concerned with democratic rights and democratic institutions. To quote from its description:

“The index is based on 60 indicators grouped into five categories, measuring pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture. In addition to the numeric score and a ranking, the index categorizes each country into one of four regime types: **full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.**”

Reports are now published annually. It includes 167 countries and territories....164 are UN member states.

In the newest released index (2023), the **United States is ranked 29 and listed as a flawed democracy.** It dropped from being a “Full Democracy” to Flawed Democracy” in 2016. Canada is listed as a “Full Democracy” and ranked 13<sup>th</sup>. The #1 Ranked Full Democracy is Norway and #2 is New Zealand, #3 is Iceland, #4 is Sweden, #5 Finland....the index is really very interesting to explore.

The 2023 Democracy Index begins:

“It was an inauspicious year for democracy with the average global score falling to its lowest level since the index began in 2006. Less than 8% of the world’s population live in a full democracy, while almost 40% live under authoritarian rule---a share that has been creeping up in recent years. The increasing incidence of violent conflict has badly dented the global democracy score and prevented a recovery after the pandemic years of 2020-22. The world's democracies seem powerless to prevent wars from breaking out around the globe. EIU’s Democracy Index report analyzes the relationship between democracy, war & peace, and looks at the geopolitical drivers of conflict. It also provides an explanation of the changes in the global rankings and an in-depth regional overview.”

The data is clear that there is a weakening of democracies worldwide including here in the USA, the oldest continuous democracy, a superpower, and to whom much of the rest of the world looks. And authoritarianism is on the rise.

Scholars have picked up on our weakening democracy publishing books like “How Democracies Die”, “How Civil Wars Start”, “Democracy in Chains” and “On Tyranny” to name a few.

As Ben Franklin said in 1787 at the end of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia when asked about our country’s new government, he said we have **“A republic, if you can keep it.”**

Franklin knew that the resulting product of that Constitutions Convention was not perfect and he signed the document anyway. After all, this new government, was ground breaking, written by founders who were greatly influenced by the enlightenment period. It was a solid beginning to refine further...it was not an end in itself.

The men in that hot room in Philadelphia knew that the world would change and our democracy would need to grow with the changes to come. I am pretty sure that they didn’t imagine: Artificial Intelligence, the Internet, social media, modern weapons, computers in the palm of our hand that can communicate with another instantly on the other side of the world ...and so on.

The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was like our nation’s mission statement...

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all men are created equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable **Rights**, that among these are **Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness**.

That to secure these rights, **Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...**

The mission was to have a nation that recognized all men with property, and the government should be beholden to the people for its power. Since those words were written, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King and many others have pushed to expand the narrow definition of those who are equal to be more inclusive so all people without limitation to race, religion, or gender identification are created equal.

So in a democracy, the people are the boss and we hire the individuals who hold office. Every two, four or six years...according to the operational rules established in the Federal and state Constitutions...the by-laws for our nation and states... these office holders get a performance review by the people. Either leaders get replaced or their position and title is renewed.

This is why it is essential that “the people” keep track of what our representatives, our political leaders, are actually doing, not just what they are saying.

## **Historic Reminder:**

The Constitution of the United States came into being during the chaos after the Revolution. After it was passed, James Madison felt there still needed to be more protections. So in 1791, the nation amended the Constitution with the 10 Bill of Rights. As the nation grew and the world changed, more amendments were added to now total 27 expanding rights, freedoms, and laws.

Additionally, over the years, we have established institutions, traditions, and norms that have added to our guardrails to help protect against demagogues. But they are not impenetrable. Importantly, we have career civil servants who work in branches of our government that transverse the various leaders in elected office. They carry the institutional knowledge and are the critical but often unseen grease that figure out how to implement new laws and keeps our government running while the politicians debate and argue.

Personal note: While we have 27 Amendments, the Constitution is still not finished. I am particularly thinking about the need to add the Equal Rights Amendment.

## **Tensions throughout our history**

There has been tension from the beginning around the word “equality” in the Declaration of Independence. Despite the request by Abigail Adams to her husband to “not forget the ladies”, the customs and times initially gave the vote to white men with property that was equated with wealth. Lincoln zeroed in on that word in his push to end slavery. His famous Gettysburg Address was a reframing of the Declaration of Independence. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony designed the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls after the Declaration of Independence focusing on equality for women...their list of grievances were more than the lack of the vote.

Defining and establishing equality in practice is still unfinished business.

A number of recent Supreme Court’s decisions have been a blow to the quest for equality.

The 2010 Citizens United decision opened the doors to a flood of dark money into politics and gave more political influence to the wealthy who got politicians to change laws and policy to benefit the top of the economic ladder.

The 2013 Shelby v Holder brought back barriers to voting again targeting people of color.

And 2022 Dobbs v Jackson attacking women’s liberty for control over their bodies.

I was struck the other night listening to an interview of Former NJ Senator Bill Bradley. Quoting his mother, he said, “Never look down on people you don’t understand.” He went on to say we

have common humanity. We need to reconnect to the underlying American human spirit; the respect for others even if we disagree with them.

Equality is the key word we all struggle around. Politicians, Republicans, Democrats, citizens...Americans don't have to agree or even like each other but to have democracy work, we have to believe we are equal; we all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We can hope that our democracy will always survive, but hope will not make it so because democracy requires active participation by the people. The League has always known that.

So, as I look at the state of our democratic republic in 2024, I see a perfect storm that has been brewing for the past 40 years and now coming to a head. The Supreme Court isn't going to save us. Hope and prayers aren't going to save us.

Functioning Democracy is an ongoing process and it takes attention, work, and perseverance. It's never finished, It's always vulnerable.

It needs YOU.