**A Recipe for an Improved American Democracy: 3 Parts Locke, 2 Parts Jefferson**

American democracy is under siege. According to the Freedom House, the U.S. freedom score has fallen dramatically in the last decade and now ranks behind countries like Argentina and Mongolia in terms of the total freedom index and is tied with Panama (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021). There are many compelling and actionable ideas, from voting right expansion to universal income, that can have meaningful impacts on improving the state of American democracy. However, to strike at the root of the issue, what America truly needs is a history lesson in the theoretical origins of our democracy, most notably through John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Americans need a combination of Lockean and Jeffersonian philosophy in order to save and improve the U.S. democracy. Locke's principles of morality, civility, and reason, along with the Jeffersonian concepts of "happiness" and the belief that "the earth belongs in usufruct to the living," are the key ingredients needed to improve American democracy (Princeton University).

In John Locke's seminal writing, *Second Treatise on Government*, he covers many principles that have become the bedrock of the American democratic system. However, over the past nearly 250 years, Americans seem to have forgotten about many vital principles that Locke offered. On the subject of morality, Locke believed that it was necessary to hold society together (Locke, Editor's Introduction, *Essay* Book I, Ch. 3, Sect. 10). Without morality, man's unchecked appetites would destroy society (Locke, Editor's Introduction). Locke noted how this was an issue during his own time (1632-1704) when he stated, that "Before the Golden Age, Men had more virtue and consequently better governors" (Locke, Section 111). Locke could not have been more succinct or prophetic. Americans must seek out a moral compass that considers the will of all the people and not simply individual self-interest.

Locke's approach to civility is sorely needed in America today. Locke believed civility, even when one vehemently opposes another viewpoint, was paramount to civil society. Locke advocated for the exclusion of people deemed "uncivil" for the sake of the greater society. I recognize that this type of language of "exclusion" stands in contradiction to the tenet of "freedom" in American democracy. However, as Locke also famously noted, "freedom is not a liberty for every man to do as he likes" (Locke, Section 57). The lack of civility in American politics is beyond outrageous. The former president's refusal to concede an election he lost, his support of white supremacists and his call for an insurrection are all illicit forms of behavior that besmirches the legacy of American democracy. This lack of civility from the highest levels of democratic leadership is precisely the type of behavior that must be eradicated to improve American democracy.

Finally, and most importantly, Locke's philosophy on the importance of reason is desperately needed to propel America forward and alleviate many of its most divisive elements. Locke begins his argument on the importance of reason by noting how god used "the law of reason" to govern Adam in the Garden of Eden (Locke, Section 57). Locke expanded the use of reason beyond biblical terms. He detailed how all humans have the shared capacity to reason. We need to use reason and determine how much credibility people should be given concerning the statements and positions of others. If Americans would use reason as a litmus test for our politicians, would it be possible for QAnon supporter Majorie Taylor Greene to be elected to Congress? Would Donald Trump's spurious claims of voter fraud, despite no actual evidence and being wholly rejected by over 60 court cases, be a reasonable position to take? I think not. The cancerous element that threatens to tear democracy to its core and encapsulates all of Locke's concerns regarding morality, civility, and reason is exemplified today in social media. Social media's role in constantly and ubiquitously pushing false narratives and propaganda has become toxic to American democracy. Many people in the American public cite information from social media to form their beliefs or, even worse, persuade others about specific political issues. We must apply Lockean standards to combat social media's ills, so people need to form their own opinions from credible sources.

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote one of the most famous phrases in modern political history, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." While happiness is a very subjective word, Americans would be wise to emulate what Jefferson's contextual view of happiness would have been during his time. According to Professor Richard Matthews, a political scientist at Lehigh University, Jefferson described a pursuit of a "meaningful life through meaningful work" (Matthews). If Americans took this to heart and society held in the highest esteem those that pursued careers in areas that served others, such as teachers, doctors, and front-line workers, would this country not be a more robust democracy? Would this not lead to our best and brightest students pursuing "meaningful" endeavors instead of a pursuit of the almighty dollar? If Americans elevated those in society that dedicated their lives to helping others, America would be a far better society than a culture that reveres wealth, power, and celebrity, which in turn would mean a far better functioning democracy.

Another Jeffersonian concept that Americans would be well served to understand and implement would be the firm belief that each generation needed to leave the nation in an equal, if not better, shape than the one prior. Each generation should have the chance to "make the Constitution what they think will be the best for themselves" (Jefferson and Peterson, 560). If today's leaders would place the next generation's interests ahead of their own, there is little doubt that our democracy would be served and function more smoothly. Would issues such as global warming, the total national debt, class inequities, and social unrest not become more of a pressing concern? Could any reasonable leader, more concerned with leaving the country in an improved position than when she or he took over, honestly say that climate change is not real? Would a president of the United States ever declare, "I do not think science knows," as Donald Trump did when asked if global warming is an issue for future generations (British Broadcasting Corporation). The answer to all of these questions is a resounding no. Instead of leaving the next generation with over $28 trillion in debt, civil and social unrest, and a failing planet, a Jeffersonian approach would surely improve the state of American democracy.

There is little doubt that American democracy is not without its flaws and shortcomings. As eloquently stated by Ingersoll, Matthews, and Davison in *The* *Philosophic Roots of Modern Ideology*, the "lofty ideals of American democracy have not always been put into practice” (page 94). However, this reality does not make the ideals any less powerful and meaningful; citizens should strive to attain these meaningful goals. Nor has there been another form of government that has been developed to usurp democracy. A synthesis of Lockean and Jeffersonian ideals can go a long way to help improve American democracy.

Works Cited

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