

On My Mind
11/08/02

Can there be too much democracy? According to at least one writer, the answer is yes. A Steve Chapman, in an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, as reprinted in Tuesday's *Variety*, says that on the mainland too many government positions nowadays are filled by election. Defining democracy as the freedom to cast votes, Chapman says that people are being asked to vote on candidates for so many government positions that they can't possibly keep track of who they are, or how much experience they have, or what their performance records show.

In California, claims Chapman, it takes 71 pages to print out a list of all the state's certified candidates.

Every imaginable office, from judge, soil and water district director, trustee of sanitary districts, insurance commissioner, state treasurer, county surveyor to railroad commissioner, state comptroller and school superintendent is on a ballot somewhere. As Chapman says, "No one - no one who is sane anyway - could possibly have an informed opinion about so many offices.... We might as well fill these offices by picking names out of the phone book."

He seems to feel most strongly about the trend to elect judges, saying in this case democracy is not just pointless, it is downright dangerous. He notes that "Not many judges get elected by promising to scrupulously respect the constitutional rights of every defendant."

He concludes: "Americans love democracy, but do we need so much of it?" At least insofar as election of judges is concerned, the CNMI might well take note.

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On the other hand, Howard Zinn, professor of history and political science emeritus at Boston University, Massachusetts, argues that the system governing the United States is far from being a democracy. He cites the length of time it has taken - under our "democratic" form of government - to bring an end to segregation based on race, to give women the right to vote, to prove his point.

In his book *Declarations of Independence*, Zinn says that one problem is the role money plays in elections. Another problem with representative government - with voting for others to represent people's interests - is the inability to affect foreign policy. Zinn maintains that after an election, the president "does what he likes" as regards foreign policy. Neither does Congress work as a representative agency; Zinn accuses Congress of being a "feeble, often nonexistent factor in decisions of war and peace, usually following helplessly along with whatever the president decides," rather than acting on what voters have expressed. His book, it should be noted, was published in 1990.

Direct democracy - without intermediate representatives - only works in small groups, though a network of small groups could conceivably develop national consensus on major issues. "Lively

participation and discussion of the issues by citizenry would be a better, more democratic, more reliable way of representing the population than the present stiff, controlled system of electoral politics," writes Zinn.

But ultimately, "no changes in procedures, in structures, can make a society democratic," he continues. "The experience of black people in America (also Indians, women, Hispanics and the poor) instructs us all. No Constitution, no Bill of Rights, no voting procedures, no piece of legislation can assure us of peace or justice or equality. *That* requires a constant struggle, a continuous discussion among citizens, and endless series of organizations and movements, creating a pressure on whatever procedures there are." [emphasis in the original]

Writing of the U.S. mainland experience, Zinn does not take into consideration the effect of family on elections. But his thesis - that justice, equality, freedom from fear and want come not so much through elections as through demonstrations and protest and public pressure - is valid even here.

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Given the results of this week's mid-term elections in the U.S., Zinn's skepticism as to the value of representational government would certainly seem to be justified. It defies imagination that the current policies of the Republican Party - from privatization of social security and opening of oil reserves in Alaska to unilateral action in Iraq, lowering of automobile fuel economy requirements and rejection of international pollution control protocols - could possibly reflect the position of the majority of the U.S. population. And yet, Republicans have won a majority in both the House and the Senate.

The prospect is not very reassuring. It would be nice to think that the demonstrations throughout the world against U.S. threats to invade Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein have had some effect in softening the U.S. position on Iraqi weapon inspections in the UN Security Council, even without the support of the U.S. electorate. And perhaps they have. But the notion of war is still very much alive.

There seems no compunction among the policy makers, the war makers in Washington, D.C., about planning to send thousands of husbands, fathers, brothers, and yes, daughters, wives and mothers, to their deaths in a battle that many say is about oil and vengeance, rather than some lofty goal. While everyone mourns the death of the recent sniper victims in the States, the deaths of terrorist attack victims in Japan, Bali, the Philippines, Israel and Palestine, no one seems exorcized at the prospect of war in Iraq, where deaths can be expected to be in the thousands, many of them innocent civilians.

Zinn is eloquent in his condemnation of war, and insists that war is never justified - even World War II, ostensibly fought against the Nazi idea of superior and inferior races, against Axis aggression. Rather, wars have been motivated by financial gain, national ambition, interpower rivalries, revenge. At its most elemental level, war can be defined as the massive use of lethal weapons to promote, protect, preserve national interests.

Zinn offers, as substitute for high-tech warfare with massive non-discriminatory killing devices, guerrilla warfare with conventional weapons, non-cooperation, underground movements, sabotage, clandestine propaganda for the organization of larger and larger opposition, as well as non-violent direct action such as boycotts, economic sanctions, demonstrations, marches and strikes. He notes that forbearance, logic and diplomacy can also serve as deterrents.

Zinn's book spells out in great detail the basis for his beliefs about the futility of war, the shortcomings of democracy. It is challenging, provocative, and timely - and very readable.

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Would it make a difference if one substituted the phrase "the mass murder of fellow human beings" for the word "war"? So that the talk would not be of war against Iraq or North Korea, but of "the mass murder of fellow human beings"? Would that stop the war hawks? Might it at least motivate the rest of the people in the nation to increase their protests against going to war? Think about it. Don't say "war." Say "the mass murder of mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives." And then ask if the U.S. should go to war.

This is not to take away from the respect and honor due to those who gave their lives in defense of America, to those veterans who have survived, whose bravery and loyalty will be commemorated on Monday. But war is, among other things, immoral. There should be no more.

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Short takes: Ten months after Governor Babauta took office, the government is still in turmoil, thanks to the hasty passage of Public Law 13-1, which embodies his ill-conceived grab for more power. While the controversy over whether agency directors should be civil service members - which was only enabled some ten months ago - is grabbing headlines, the more egregious issue of whether the governor, rather than agency secretaries, should have the authority to appoint their directors seems to be totally ignored. What kind of micro-management is this?

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The <I>Variety</I> reported that a CUC survey showed that customers would have no objection to a \$25 monthly increase in utility fees if they were provided with potable water. For the record, this customer would object, loudly. It only costs me \$6.00 a month to obtain potable water delivered to my house. It's certainly not worth paying four times as much to have it flow from the tap - and flush my toilet and wash my clothes - just so I don't have to push a lever to get my drinking water from a bottle.

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The fantasies we delude ourselves with are sometimes comic. The Saipan Chamber of Commerce, for example, recently held an election for new officers, and the results were dutifully carried in both papers. In reality, the officers could have been elected by acclamation, without the farce of filling out and counting ballots and announcing the final vote count. All four candidates ran unopposed.

