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### Author

Lakoff, George

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# Why Democracy Is Public: The American Dream Beats the Nightmare

by **George Lakoff & Glenn W. Smith**

Democracy, in the American tradition, has been defined by a simple morality: We Americans care about our fellow citizens, we act on that care and build trust, and we do our best not just for ourselves, our families, and our friends and neighbors, but for our country, for each other, for people we have never seen and never will see.

American Democracy has, over our history, called upon citizens to share an equal responsibility to work together to secure a safe and prosperous future for their families and nation. This is the central work of our democracy and it is a public enterprise. This, the American Dream, is the dream of a functioning democracy.

Public refers to people, acting together to provide what we all depend on: roads and bridges, public buildings and parks, a system of education, a strong economic system, a system of law and order with a fair and effective judiciary, dams, sewers, and a power grid, agencies to monitor disease, weather, food safety, clean air and water, and on and on. That is what we, as a people who care about each other, have given to each other.

Only a free people can take up the necessary tasks, and only a people who trust and care for one another can get the job done. The American Dream is built upon mutual care and trust.

Our tradition has not just been to share the tasks, but to share the tools as well. We come together to provide a quality education for our children. We come together to protect each other's health and safety. We come together to build a strong, open and honest financial system. We come together to protect the institutions of democracy to guarantee that all who share in these responsibilities have an equal voice in deciding how they will be met.

What this means is that there is no such thing as a "self-made" man or woman or business. No one makes it on their own. No matter how much wealth you amass, you depend on all the things the public has provided -- roads, water, law enforcement,

fire and disease protection, food safety, government research, and all the rest. The only question is whether you have paid your fair share for we all have given you.

We are now faced with a nontraditional, radical view of "democracy" coming from the Republican party. It says that "democracy" means that nobody should care about anybody else, that "democracy" means only personal responsibility, not responsibility for anyone else, and it means no trust. If America accepts this radical view of "democracy," then all that we have given each other in the past under traditional democracy will be lost: all that we have called public. Public roads and bridges: gone. Public schools: gone. Publicly funded police and firemen: gone. Safe food, air, and water: gone. Public health: gone. Everything that made America America, the crucial things that you and your family and your friends have taken for granted: gone.

The democracy of care, shared responsibility, and trust is the democracy of the American Dream. The "democracy" of no care, no shared responsibility, and no trust has produced the American Nightmare that so many of our citizens are living through.

Nightmare it is, but there is no denying credit to Republicans for their skills at framing. The recent Republican "Contract from America," for instance, begins with a statement of their moral principles. The recommendations are special cases of those principles. It is a strategic initiative. Instead of a laundry list, each recommendation is a special case of a general strategy -- to defund our American government.

Furthermore, they understand that about 20 percent of the electorate consists of people who are conservative in some ways and progressive in others. These are biconceptuals, sometimes referred to loosely by political professionals as "independents" or "swing voters." Republicans know their job is to activate the conservative part of the brains of the biconceptuals, and they do that by sticking strictly to conservative moral principles and a clear conservative strategy. They never make the mistake of ignoring biconceptuals.

Progressives too often fail to clearly state the moral principles behind the American tradition. Our arguments often sound like an abstract defense of distant "government" rather than a celebration of our people, our public, and the moral views that have defined our tradition and the real human beings who work every day to carry them out.

There is a distinction between government as the administration of what we, as a public, provide each other, as opposed to government control. The Right wants to focus only upon control, not upon all that our tradition has given us. They do not just

hide the vast positives, but they also hide the fact that governmental control, control over our daily lives, is more private than public. Private government for profit runs our lives -- the health care we receive, the food we eat, the cars we can drive and the gas to fuel them, the news we get, loans for our homes, and on and on. Public government is for the benefit of all of us. Private (especially corporate) government is for the private profit of top management and stockholders. If you are concerned about your life being controlled for the benefit of others, look to the private sphere.

The institution of government, however, is not the point. We must instead defend the moral principles we seek to advance through our American government -- and through ethical business practices, voluntary associations etc. The traditional view of American democracy sees government as embodying these moral goals, to protect and empower everyone equally.

If we are to successfully overcome the Republican demonizing of government and shared responsibility, we must restore faith in the mutual enterprise itself. Rather than simply defend government or government programs, we must positively advance the moral values of American democracy and the Dream, not the Nightmare.

That is why we support a renewed focus on public life, a public life that includes all Americans. We should focus on the public nature of our shared responsibilities.

Public life means meeting our shared responsibilities, caring for one another, and building the mutual trust upon which democracy depends. The recommendations below are special cases of these moral principles. They also represent a special case of a general strategy -- to restore public life to American democracy.

We must return the public to our political system and end the corrupt influence of selfish interests that have abandoned our shared responsibilities. This means public finance of campaigns, strict enforcement of the highest ethical standards in public life, and protection of the sacred right to vote.

Our nation has vast national wealth: a huge continental landmass with wealth in minerals, agricultural land, forests, cities, beautiful places, as well as its public wealth, that is, the creative wealth of its educated citizenry and the collective wealth of all its citizens and corporations. We, the public, can put our nation's vast wealth to use in creating jobs that make the lives of all better: building, educating, curing, and imagining. That is the Dream.

To realize the Dream, we must end the Nightmare.

We must turn back the Right's assault on public and higher education and meet our traditional commitment to education. Our children are tomorrow's public. The future of democracy depends upon them.

We must rebuild our public infrastructure, a fancy term for the necessities we share: roads, bridges, dams, parks, fair grounds, water mains, sewers, and the power grid; public agencies that monitor disease, weather and food safety. Government that works for all of us can and should create jobs that serve us all by rebuilding our shared necessities.

We must come together publicly to mutually ensure the health of all America. Health is not a private matter. It is public one.

We must protect the prior earnings of American workers set aside in Social Security or private pensions. They have been earned through hard work and discipline. Taking these earnings away is theft, despite the Right's use of the word "entitlements."

A public of unequal voices is not a democratic public. We need a progressive tax system through which all Americans pay their fair share and a business ethics that fairly rewards those whose work creates productivity and profit.

We must put the American individual above abstract corporate entities. We must end "corporate personhood," which gives transnational corporations a greater voice than individuals in our public deliberations.

We must end the move to "privatize" institutions through which we meet our shared responsibilities. When the public is removed, the private sphere takes over, charging more, and often creating unaccountable monopolies that bilk the public. Privatization of the public typically means that most citizens just pay more, often a lot more.

Discrimination of all kinds must be overcome. Public life depends upon recognition of our equal humanity.

This is why Democracy is, and must remain, public. This is why America has traditionally been a beacon to the world. This is the example America has set. We dare not give it up. The alternative is the Nightmare.