

2020 FIU Global Public Humanities Forum Reading

Jill Lepore, "The Last Time Democracy Almost Died" *The New Yorker*, February 3, 2020.

The last time democracy nearly died all over the world and almost all at once, Americans argued about it, and then they tried to fix it. "The future of democracy is topic number one in the animated discussion going on all over America," a contributor to the *New York Times* wrote in 1937. "In the Legislatures, over the radio, at the luncheon table, in the drawing rooms, at meetings of forums and in all kinds of groups of citizens everywhere, people are talking about the democratic way of life." People bickered and people hollered, and they also made rules. "You are a liar!" one guy shouted from the audience during a political debate heard on the radio by ten million Americans, from Missoula to Tallahassee. "Now, now, we don't allow that," the moderator said, calmly, and asked him to leave.

In the nineteen-thirties, you could count on the Yankees winning the World Series, dust storms plaguing the prairies, evangelicals preaching on the radio, Franklin Delano Roosevelt residing in the White House, people lining up for blocks to get scraps of food, and democracies dying, from the Andes to the Urals and the Alps.

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson's Administration had promised that winning the Great War would "make the world safe for democracy." The peace carved nearly a dozen new states out of the former Russian, Ottoman, and Austrian empires. The number of democracies in the world rose; the spread of liberal-democratic governance began to appear inevitable. But this was no more than a reverie. Infant democracies grew, toddled, wobbled, and fell: Hungary, Albania, Poland, Lithuania, Yugoslavia. In older states, too, the desperate masses turned to authoritarianism. Benito Mussolini marched on Rome in 1922. It had taken a century and a half for European monarchs who ruled by divine right and brute force to be replaced by constitutional democracies and the rule of law. Now Fascism and Communism toppled these governments in a matter of months, even before the stock-market crash of 1929 and the misery that ensued.

"Epitaphs for democracy are the fashion of the day," the soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote, dismally, in 1930. The *annus horribilis* that followed differed from every other year in the history of the world, according to the British historian Arnold Toynbee: "In 1931, men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of Society might break down and cease to work." When Japan invaded Manchuria, the League of Nations condemned the annexation, to no avail. "The liberal state is destined to perish," Mussolini predicted in 1932. "All the political experiments of our day are anti-liberal." By 1933, the year [Adolf Hitler](#) came to power, the American political commentator Walter Lippmann was telling an audience of students at Berkeley that "the old relationships among the great masses of the people of the earth have disappeared." What next? More epitaphs: Greece, Romania, Estonia, and Latvia. Authoritarians multiplied in Portugal, Uruguay, Spain. Japan invaded Shanghai. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. "The present century is the century of authority," he declared, "a century of the Right, a Fascist century."



In 1922, Benito Mussolini (center) marched on Rome. A decade later, he declared, “The liberal state is destined to perish.” Photograph from Getty

American democracy, too, staggered, weakened by corruption, monopoly, apathy, inequality, political violence, hucksterism, racial injustice, unemployment, even starvation. “We do not distrust the future of essential democracy,” F.D.R. said in his first Inaugural Address, telling Americans that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself. But there *was* more to be afraid of, including Americans’ own declining faith in self-government. “What Does Democracy Mean?” NBC radio asked listeners. “Do we Negroes believe in democracy?” W. E. B. Du Bois asked the readers of his newspaper column. Could it happen here? Sinclair Lewis asked in 1935.

Americans suffered, and hungered, and wondered. The historian Charles Beard, in the inevitable essay on “The Future of Democracy in the United States,” predicted that American democracy would endure, if only because “there is in America, no Rome, no Berlin to march on.” Some Americans turned to [Communism](#). Some turned to Fascism. And a lot of people, worried about whether American democracy could survive past the end of the decade, strove to save it.

“It’s not too late,” Jimmy Stewart pleaded with Congress, rasping, exhausted, in “[Mr. Smith Goes to Washington](#),” in 1939. “Great principles don’t get lost once they come to light.” It wasn’t too late. It’s still not too late.

There's a kind of likeness you see in family photographs, generation after generation. The same ears, the same funny nose. Sometimes now looks a lot like then. Still, it can be hard to tell whether the likeness is more than skin deep.

In the nineteen-nineties, with the end of the Cold War, democracies grew more plentiful, much as they had after the end of the First World War. As ever, the infant-mortality rate for democracies was high: baby democracies tend to die in their cradles. Starting in about 2005, the number of democracies around the world began to fall, as it had in the nineteen-thirties.

Authoritarians rose to power: [Vladimir Putin](#) in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, [Viktor Orbán](#) in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, [Jair Bolsonaro](#) in Brazil, and Donald J. Trump in the United States.

“American democracy,” as a matter of history, is democracy with an asterisk, the symbol A-Rod’s name would need if he were ever inducted into the Hall of Fame. Not until the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act can the United States be said to have met the basic conditions for political equality requisite in a democracy. All the same, measured not against its past but against its contemporaries, American democracy in the twenty-first century is withering. The Democracy Index rates a hundred and sixty-seven countries, every year, on a scale that ranges from “full democracy” to “authoritarian regime.” In 2006, the U.S. was a “full democracy,” the seventeenth most democratic nation in the world. In 2016, the index for the first time rated the United States a “flawed democracy,” and since then American democracy has gotten only more flawed. True, the United States still doesn’t have a Rome or a Berlin to march on. That hasn’t saved the nation from misinformation, tribalization, domestic terrorism, human-rights abuses, political intolerance, social-media mob rule, white nationalism, a criminal President, the nobbling of Congress, a corrupt Presidential Administration, assaults on the press, crippling polarization, the undermining of elections, and an epistemological chaos that is the only air that totalitarianism can breathe.

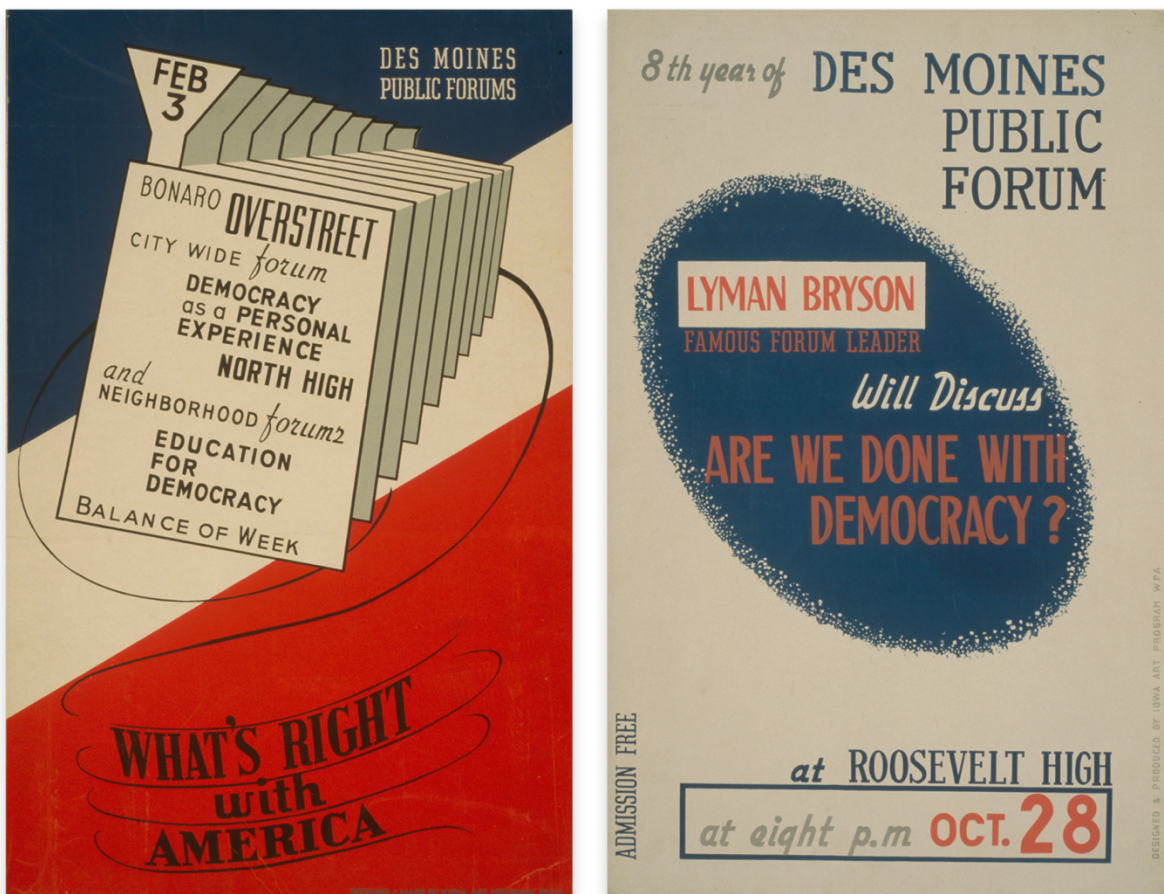
Nothing so sharpens one’s appreciation for democracy as bearing witness to its demolition. Mussolini called Italy and Germany “the greatest and soundest democracies which exist in the world today,” and Hitler liked to say that, with Nazi Germany, he had achieved a “beautiful democracy,” prompting the American political columnist Dorothy Thompson to remark of the Fascist state, “If it is going to call itself democratic we had better find another word for what we have and what we want.” In the nineteen-thirties, Americans didn’t find another word. But they did work to decide what they wanted, and to imagine and to build it. Thompson, who had been a foreign correspondent in Germany and Austria and had interviewed the Führer, said, in a column that reached eight million readers, “Be sure you know what you prepare to defend.”

It’s a paradox of democracy that the best way to defend it is to attack it, to ask more of it, by way of criticism, protest, and dissent. American democracy in the nineteen-thirties had plenty of critics, left and right, from Mexican-Americans who objected to a brutal regime of forced deportations to businessmen who believed the New Deal to be unconstitutional. W. E. B. Du Bois predicted that, unless the United States met its obligations to the dignity and equality of all its citizens and ended its enthrallment to corporations, American democracy would fail: “If it is going to use this power to force the world into color prejudice and race antagonism; if it is going to use it to manufacture millionaires, increase the rule of wealth, and break down democratic

government everywhere; if it is going increasingly to stand for reaction, fascism, white supremacy and imperialism; if it is going to promote war and not peace; then America will go the way of the Roman Empire.”

The historian Mary Ritter Beard warned that American democracy would make no headway against its “ruthless enemies—war, fascism, ignorance, poverty, scarcity, unemployment, sadistic criminality, racial persecution, man’s lust for power and woman’s miserable trailing in the shadow of his frightful ways”—unless Americans could imagine a future democracy in which women would no longer be barred from positions of leadership: “If we will not so envisage our future, no Bill of Rights, man’s or woman’s, is worth the paper on which it is printed.”

If the United States hasn’t gone the way of the Roman Empire and the Bill of Rights is still worth more than the paper on which it’s printed, that’s because so many people have been, ever since, fighting the fights Du Bois and Ritter Beard fought. There have been wins and losses. The fight goes on.



In the thirties, community leaders across the country ignited debate on the meaning and the future of democracy, inviting Americans to assemble in the same room and argue with one another—to stretch their civic muscles. Courtesy Library of Congress

Could no system of rule but extremism hold back the chaos of economic decline? In the nineteen-thirties, people all over the world, liberals, hoped that the United States would be able to find a middle road, somewhere between the malignity of a state-run economy and the mercilessness of laissez-faire capitalism. Roosevelt campaigned in 1932 on the promise to rescue American democracy by way of a “new deal for the American people,” his version of that third way: relief, recovery, and reform. He won forty-two of forty-eight states, and trounced the incumbent, Herbert Hoover, in the Electoral College 472 to 59. Given the national emergency in which Roosevelt took office, Congress granted him an almost entirely free hand, even as critics raised concerns that the powers he assumed were barely short of dictatorial.

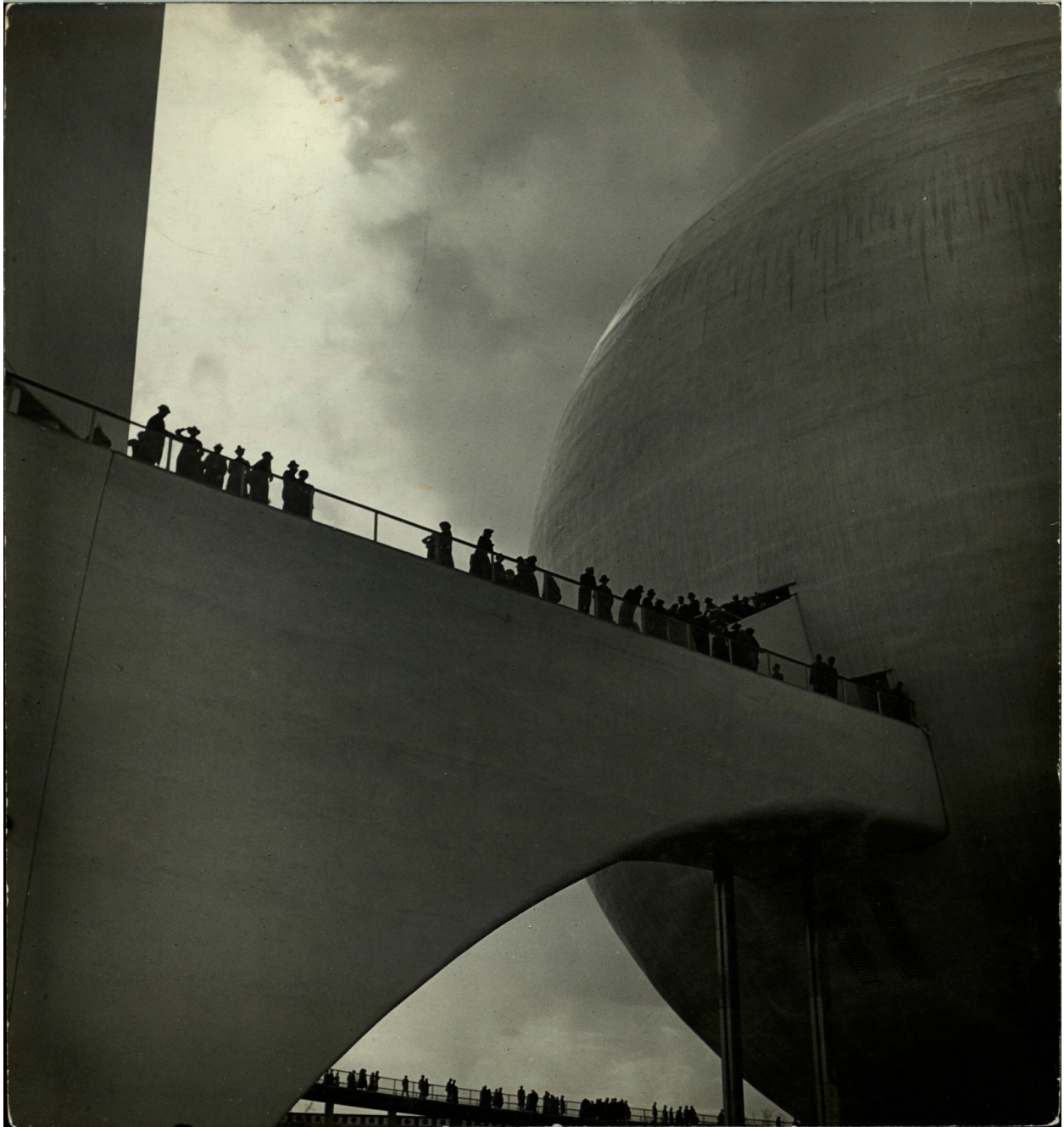
New Dealers were trying to save the economy; they ended up saving democracy. They built a new America; they told a new American story. On New Deal projects, people from different parts of the country labored side by side, constructing roads and bridges and dams, everything from the Lincoln Tunnel to the Hoover Dam, joining together in a common endeavor, shoulder to the wheel, hand to the forge. Many of those public-works projects, like better transportation and better electrification, also brought far-flung communities, down to the littlest town or the remotest farm, into a national culture, one enriched with new funds for the arts, theatre, music, and storytelling. With radio, more than with any other technology of communication, before or since, Americans gained a sense of their shared suffering, and shared ideals: they listened to one another’s voices.

This didn’t happen by accident. Writers and actors and directors and broadcasters made it happen. They dedicated themselves to using the medium to bring people together. Beginning in 1938, for instance, F.D.R.’s Works Progress Administration produced a twenty-six-week radio-drama series for CBS called “Americans All, Immigrants All,” written by Gilbert Seldes, the former editor of *The Dial*. “What brought people to this country from the four corners of the earth?” a pamphlet distributed to schoolteachers explaining the series asked. “What gifts did they bear? What were their problems? What problems remain unsolved?” The finale celebrated the American experiment: “The story of magnificent adventure! The record of an unparalleled event in the history of mankind!”

There is no twenty-first-century equivalent of Seldes’s “Americans All, Immigrants All,” because it is no longer acceptable for a serious artist to write in this vein, and for this audience, and for this purpose. (In some quarters, it was barely acceptable even then.) Love of the ordinary, affection for the common people, concern for the commonweal: these were features of the best writing and art of the nineteen-thirties. They are not so often features lately.

Americans reelected F.D.R. in 1936 by one of the widest margins in the country’s history. American magazines continued the trend from the twenties, in which hardly a month went by without their taking stock: “Is Democracy Doomed?” “Can Democracy Survive?” (Those were the past century’s versions of more recent titles, such as “[How Democracy Ends](#),” “[Why Liberalism Failed](#),” “[How the Right Lost Its Mind](#),” and “[How Democracies Die](#).” The same ears, that same funny nose.) In 1934, the *Christian Science Monitor* published a debate called “Whither Democracy?,” addressed “to everyone who has been thinking about the future of democracy—and who hasn’t.” It staked, as adversaries, two British scholars: Alfred Zimmern, a historian from Oxford, on the right, and Harold Laski, a political theorist from the London

School of Economics, on the left. “Dr. Zimmern says in effect that where democracy has failed it has not been really tried,” the editors explained. “Professor Laski sees an irrepressible conflict between the idea of political equality in democracy and the fact of economic inequality in capitalism, and expects at least a temporary resort to Fascism or a capitalistic dictatorship.” On the one hand, American democracy is safe; on the other hand, American democracy is not safe.



In 1939, the World's Fair opened in Queens, New York, featuring an exhibit called the Democracy, a model of utopia that was in keeping with the event's chipper motto, "The World of Tomorrow." Photograph by Fritz Goro / Getty

Zimmern and Laski went on speaking tours of the United States, part of a long parade of visiting professors brought here to prognosticate on the future of democracy. Laski spoke to a crowd three thousand strong, in Washington's Constitution Hall. "*Laski Tells How to Save Democracy*," the *Washington Post* reported. Zimmern delivered a series of lectures titled "The Future of Democracy," at the University of Buffalo, in which he warned that democracy had been undermined by a new aristocracy of self-professed experts. "I am no more ready to be governed by experts than I am to be governed by the ex-Kaiser," he professed, expertly.

The year 1935 happened to mark the centennial of the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's "[Democracy in America](#)," an occasion that elicited still more lectures from European intellectuals coming to the United States to remark on its system of government and the character of its people, close on Tocqueville's heels. Heinrich Brüning, a scholar and a former Chancellor of Germany, lectured at Princeton on "The Crisis of Democracy"; the Swiss political theorist William Rappard gave the same title to a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago. In "The Prospects for Democracy," the Scottish historian and later BBC radio quiz-show panelist Denis W. Brogan offered little but gloom: "The defenders of democracy, the thinkers and writers who still believe in its merits, are in danger of suffering the fate of Aristotle, who kept his eyes fixedly on the city-state at a time when that form of government was being reduced to a shadow by the rise of Alexander's world empire." Brogan hedged his bets by predicting the worst. It's an old trick.

The endless train of academics were also called upon to contribute to the nation's growing number of periodicals. In 1937, *The New Republic*, arguing that "at no time since the rise of political democracy have its tenets been so seriously challenged as they are today," ran a series on "The Future of Democracy," featuring pieces by the likes of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey. "Do you think that political democracy is now on the wane?" the editors asked each writer. The series' lead contributor, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, took issue with the question, as philosophers, thankfully, do. "I call this kind of question 'meteorological,' " he grumbled. "It is like asking, 'Do you think that it is going to rain today? Had I better take my umbrella?'" The trouble, Croce explained, is that political problems are not external forces beyond our control; they are forces within our control. "We need solely to make up our own minds and to act."

Don't ask whether you need an umbrella. Go outside and stop the rain.

Here are some of the sorts of people who went out and stopped the rain in the nineteen-thirties: schoolteachers, city councillors, librarians, poets, union organizers, artists, precinct workers, soldiers, civil-rights activists, and investigative reporters. They knew what they were prepared to defend and they defended it, even though they also knew that they risked attack from both the left and the right. Charles Beard (Mary Ritter's husband) spoke out against the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, the Rupert Murdoch of his day, when he smeared scholars and teachers as Communists. "The people who are doing the most damage to American democracy are men like Charles A. Beard," said a historian at Trinity College in Hartford, speaking at a high school on the subject of "Democracy and the Future," and warning against reading Beard's books—at a time when Nazis in Germany and Austria were burning "un-German" books in public squares. That did not exactly happen here, but in the nineteen-thirties four of five

American superintendents of schools recommended assigning only those U.S. history textbooks which “omit any facts likely to arouse in the minds of the students question or doubt concerning the justice of our social order and government.” Beard’s books, God bless them, raised doubts.

Beard didn’t back down. Nor did W.P.A. muralists and artists, who were subject to the same attack. Instead, Beard took pains to point out that Americans liked to think of themselves as good talkers and good arguers, people with a particular kind of smarts. Not necessarily book learning, but street smarts—reasonableness, open-mindedness, level-headedness. “The kind of universal intellectual prostration required by Bolshevism and Fascism is decidedly foreign to American ‘intelligence,’ ” Beard wrote. Possibly, he allowed, you could call this a stubborn independence of mind, or even mulishness. “Whatever the interpretation, our wisdom or ignorance stands in the way of our accepting the totalitarian assumption of Omniscience,” he insisted. “And to this extent it contributes to the continuance of the arguing, debating, never-settling-anything-finally methods of political democracy.” Maybe that was whistling in the dark, but sometimes a whistle is all you’ve got.

The more argument the better is what the North Carolina-born George V. Denny, Jr., was banking on, anyway, after a neighbor of his, in Scarsdale, declared that he so strongly disagreed with F.D.R. that he never listened to him. Denny, who helped run something called the League for Political Education, thought that was nuts. In 1935, he launched “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” an hour-long debate program, broadcast nationally on NBC’s Blue Network. Each episode opened with a town crier ringing a bell and hollering, “Town meeting tonight! Town meeting tonight!” Then Denny moderated a debate, usually among three or four panelists, on a controversial subject (Does the U.S. have a truly free press? Should schools teach politics?), before opening the discussion up to questions from an audience of more than a thousand people. The debates were conducted at a lecture hall, usually in New York, and broadcast to listeners gathered in public libraries all over the country, so that they could hold their own debates once the show ended. “We are living today on the thin edge of history,” Max Lerner, the editor of *The Nation*, said in 1938, during a “Town Meeting of the Air” debate on the meaning of democracy. His panel included a Communist, an exile from the Spanish Civil War, a conservative American political economist, and a Russian columnist. “We didn’t expect to settle anything, and therefore we succeeded,” the Spanish exile said at the end of the hour, offering this definition: “A democracy is a place where a ‘Town Meeting of the Air’ can take place.”



Public forums that began in Des Moines grew so popular that the programming became a part of the New Deal. The federal government paid for it, but everything else fell under local control, and ordinary people made it work. Photograph from Alamy

No one expected anyone to come up with an undisputable definition of democracy, since the point was disputation. Asking people about the meaning and the future of democracy and listening to them argue it out was really only a way to get people to stretch their civic muscles. "Democracy can only be saved by democratic men and women," Dorothy Thompson once said. "The war against democracy begins by the destruction of the democratic temper, the democratic method and the democratic heart. If the democratic temper be exacerbated into wanton unreasonableness, which is the essence of the evil, then a victory has been won for the evil we despise and prepare to defend ourselves against, even though it's 3,000 miles away and has never moved."

The most ambitious plan to get Americans to show up in the same room and argue with one another in the nineteen-thirties came out of Des Moines, Iowa, from a one-eyed former bricklayer named John W. Studebaker, who had become the superintendent of the city's schools. Studebaker, who after the Second World War helped create the G.I. Bill, had the idea of opening

those schools up at night, so that citizens could hold debates. In 1933, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation and support from the American Association for Adult Education, he started a five-year experiment in civic education.

The meetings began at a quarter to eight, with a fifteen-minute news update, followed by a forty-five-minute lecture, and thirty minutes of debate. The idea was that “the people of the community of every political affiliation, creed, and economic view have an opportunity to participate freely.” When Senator Guy Gillette, a Democrat from Iowa, talked about “Why I Support the New Deal,” Senator Lester Dickinson, a Republican from Iowa, talked about “Why I Oppose the New Deal.” Speakers defended Fascism. They attacked capitalism. They attacked Fascism. They defended capitalism. Within the first nine months of the program, thirteen thousand of Des Moines’s seventy-six thousand adults had attended a forum. The program got so popular that in 1934 F.D.R. appointed Studebaker the U.S. Commissioner of Education and, with the eventual help of Eleanor Roosevelt, the program became a part of the New Deal, and received federal funding. The federal forum program started out in ten test sites—from Orange County, California, to Sedgwick County, Kansas, and Pulaski County, Arkansas. It came to include almost five hundred forums in forty-three states and involved two and a half million Americans. Even people who had steadfastly predicted the demise of democracy participated. “It seems to me the only method by which we are going to achieve democracy in the United States,” Du Bois wrote, in 1937.

The federal government paid for it, but everything else fell under local control, and ordinary people made it work, by showing up and participating. Usually, school districts found the speakers and decided on the topics after collecting ballots from the community. In some parts of the country, even in rural areas, meetings were held four and five times a week. They started in schools and spread to Y.M.C.A.s and Y.W.C.A.s, labor halls, libraries, settlement houses, and businesses, during lunch hours. Many of the meetings were broadcast by radio. People who went to those meetings debated all sorts of things:

Should the Power of the Supreme Court Be Altered?

Do Company Unions Help Labor?

Do Machines Oust Men?

Must the West Get Out of the East?

Can We Conquer Poverty?

Should Capital Punishment Be Abolished?

Is Propaganda a Menace?

Do We Need a New Constitution?

Should Women Work?

Is America a Good Neighbor?

Can It Happen Here?

These efforts don't always work. Still, trying them is better than talking about the weather, and waiting for someone to hand you an umbrella.

When a terrible hurricane hit New England in 1938, Dr. Lorine Pruette, a Tennessee-born psychologist who had written an essay called "Why Women Fail," and who had urged F.D.R. to name only women to his Cabinet, found herself marooned at a farm in New Hampshire with a young neighbor, sixteen-year-old Alice Hooper, a high-school sophomore. Waiting out the storm, they had nothing to do except listen to the news, which, needless to say, concerned the future of democracy. Alice asked Pruette a question: "What is it everyone on the radio is talking about—what is this democracy—what does it mean?" Somehow, in the end, NBC arranged a coast-to-coast broadcast, in which eight prominent thinkers—two ministers, three professors, a former ambassador, a poet, and a journalist—tried to explain to Alice the meaning of democracy. American democracy had found its "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" moment, except that it was messier, and more interesting, because those eight people didn't agree on the answer. Democracy, Alice, is the darnedest thing.

That broadcast was made possible by the workers who brought electricity to rural New Hampshire; the legislators who signed the 1934 federal Communications Act, mandating public-interest broadcasting; the executives at NBC who decided that it was important to run this program; the two ministers, the three professors, the former ambassador, the poet, and the journalist who gave their time, for free, to a public forum, and agreed to disagree without acting like asses; and a whole lot of Americans who took the time to listen, carefully, even though they had plenty of other things to do. Getting out of our current jam will likely require something different, but not entirely different. And it will be worth doing.

A decade-long debate about the future of democracy came to a close at the end of the nineteen-thirties—but not because it had been settled. In 1939, the World's Fair opened in Queens, with a main exhibit featuring the saga of democracy and a chipper motto: "The World of Tomorrow." The fairgrounds included a Court of Peace, with pavilions for every nation. By the time the fair opened, Czechoslovakia had fallen to Germany, though, and its pavilion couldn't open. Shortly afterward, Edvard Beneš, the exiled President of Czechoslovakia, delivered a series of lectures at the University of Chicago on, yes, the future of democracy, though he spoke less about the future than about the past, and especially about the terrible present, a time of violently unmoored traditions and laws and agreements, a time "of moral and intellectual crisis and chaos." Soon, more funereal bunting was brought to the World's Fair, to cover Poland, Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. By the time the World of Tomorrow closed, in 1940, half the European hall lay under a shroud of black.

The federal government stopped funding the forum program in 1941. Americans would take up their debate about the future of democracy, in a different form, only after the defeat of the Axis. For now, there was a war to fight. And there were still essays to publish, if not about the future, then about the present. In 1943, E. B. White got a letter in the mail, from the Writers' War

Board, asking him to write a statement about “[The Meaning of Democracy](#).” He was a little weary of these pieces, but he knew how much they mattered. He wrote back, “Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is.” It meant something once. And, the thing is, it still does. ♦

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[Jill Lepore](#) is a staff writer at The New Yorker and a professor of history at Harvard University. Her latest book is “[These Truths: A History of the United States](#).”

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