Prescription for Democracy at Middle-Age:
A Healthy Regimen of Public Dialogue

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DEMOCRACY, STEPPING ONTO THE SCALE

In its early days in America, democracy was hardly democratic. With many held in slavery and servitude, women subjugated and disenfranchised, and the landed gentry controlling the ballot box as well as the newly developing government, democracy cried out for sustenance, for major interventions that would assure its healthy, long-term development.

In the 19th and 20th Centuries democracy began to grow up. Political reforms gave citizens greater access to the political process. As noted by Johns Hopkins University Professor Matthew Crenson in his "From Popular to Personal Democracy" in the *National Civic Review*, "the introduction of primary elections, the use of referendum and recall, sunshine laws, legislative mandates requiring agencies to give public notice and hold public hearings before making policy changes, freedom of information statutes – all would seem to have made the government more responsive to citizens than ever before."[1] Huge gains in civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s and other reforms largely abolished systematic disenfranchisement.

As the United States entered the new millennium, democracy, it seemed, had hit middle-age. On its face, democracy appears strong and healthy. We have inarguably made great strides, yet many democratic ideals remain only partially realized and there are signs that democracy's long-term health may be compromised by the poor lifestyle choices we're making today. The health of democracy is just like physical health in this way. We cannot rely on doctors – the experts – to maintain our own health. We must be educated and active in our own decision-making to maintain our democratic health as well.

At 58, I have taken heart from the new book, *Younger Next Year: A Guide to Living Like 50 Until You're 80 and Beyond* by Chris Crowley and Dr. Henry S. Lodge. The authors argue that health decline needn't be a given. They present strategies to re-energize body systems – to have the best advantages of life experience coupled with dynamic physical well-being. It is a common-sense framework that has significant parallels to democracy in middle-age.

Before addressing a number of democracy's current disconcerting health indicators and diagnoses, I must add to the previous list of "improvements in citizen access" a number of other positive signs. Voting rates in the last Presidential election were up, youth voting was up, information sharing and political organizing through the internet is increasing rapidly, the power of the "blog" is a fascinating phenomenon (at least in its ability to influence media discourse), Americans are more likely to contribute money to political and advocacy organizations than ever before,[2] "meet-ups" are taking off, and various models of public engagement promoted by both conservatives and liberals are gaining legitimacy, supporters, and a track record of success. The grassroots engagement campaigns during the 2004 election were most encouraging in this respect.

Public Agenda's research shows that Americans believe that the United States is one of the most democratic nations on earth, and their faith in the country and its founding principals is strong.[3] But is our democracy as healthy as most Americans perceive it to be?

Democracy doesn't take place at the ballot box alone. Elections are the most visible manifestation, but are overstated as indicators of healthy democratic participation. A strong democracy is one in which an informed citizenry is able to grapple with issues, weigh its options, voice its priorities, and have its choices advanced by a responsive system. Depending on your chosen reading list and core beliefs, you could easily come to the conclusion that democracy is facing a nearly unavoidable decline in well-being. But we need not fade quietly into sedentary old age. In order to avoid diminished democratic health, we need to first recognize the signs of potential long-term problems and try hard to commit to wiser lifestyle choices.

THE PROGNOSIS

Public Agenda co-founder and chairman Daniel Yankelovich got it exactly right (and also well ahead of many other contemporary political observers) when he said in the introduction to his 1991 book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*:

> *"Americans will be as free in the future as in the past to vote for the candidate of their choice, to speak their minds, and to enjoy the advantages of a free press. The danger, rather, lies in the eroding ability of the American public to participate in the political decisions that affect their lives. The fateful decisions are made in Washington, in corporate boardrooms, on Wall Street, in state legislatures, and in city halls. They are shaped by economic experts, military experts, scientific experts, trade experts, PR experts, media experts. Less and less are they shaped by the public."*[4]

Almost a decade and a half of discouraging developments add credence to his thesis that deferring to "expertism" is replacing public dialogue and engagement as the default authority on public decision-making.

Informed Citizenry

It has been said that the true essence of democracy is the continuous process of education and enlightenment.[5] For America to have an informed public, citizens must dedicate time to learning and information channels must provide enough substantial and accurate information to allow adequate consideration of the issues.

But despite the explosion of media outlets – broad access to hundreds of TV channels, the whole new world of information availability made possible by the Internet, etc. – most Americans are not better informed about the political issues that affect their lives than they were a few decades ago. Nor do they appear to be very motivated to become better informed. The fact is, relatively few Americans have ever taken the time to seek out substantial information sources. To expect that they will is wishful thinking and ignores the realities of most people's lives.

In addition to the hyper-marketing of entertainment media crowding out information on social issues, cost pressures and increasing media consolidation have actually decreased the resources dedicated to investigation and independent sourcing of the news. The recent reports about the use of video news releases by U.S. government agencies to promote Administration policies as "news" may surprise some, but corporate interests have been using this approach for years. It is highly likely that the majority of health features on nightly news programs, for example, are provided to the stations from outside sources, with no attribution.

The U.S. media, responding to loosened ownership requirements and public interest regulations in the 1980s, are now highly concentrated among six major conglomerates. In *The New Media Monopoly*, University of California at Berkeley journalism dean emeritus Ben Bagdikian documents the fact that the number is down from fifty in 1983 and twenty in 1992.[6] Mainstream corporate media giants control the information dissemination channels and respond primarily to profit-seeking impulses rather than public interests. Given the business model of advertisement-supported media, this is not surprising.

But perhaps there is really very little public demand for the media and information suppliers to respond to. It has been argued that many Americans have little interest because they are disconnected from the role that government plays in their day-to-day lives, and what they do hear, for the most part, is negative.[7]

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard some variation of this statement: "If only people were aware of the beneficial contributions that local, state, and federal government make to families and communities by providing health and social services, overseeing public schools, building roads and highways, etc, surely they would pay more attention. If the media did a better job of telling this story, the public would be more interested in listening."

As convenient as it is to lay blame for the public's lack of interest in government and political affairs at the feet of the media, it is not really the answer. If Yankelovich is correct, and I believe he is, the public is quite comfortable leaving all this to the experts. It only makes sense, we believe, that experts who deal with the issues and facts every day are better equipped to make good decisions – as long as they don't take us off track from what we believe in our gut. But we may have become much too comfortable in our passive role as mere spectators and not actors in our nation's democratic system.

Weighing Options, Voicing Priorities

In the past, there were more prominent social purpose driven organizations that got people actively involved. Remember when "interactivity" meant face-to-face discussions with other human beings instead of talking back through your computer? But lodge meetings, visiting with neighbors, and church socials now compete unsuccessfully with what one particularly dispirited writer called "a calculated campaign of amusement designed to capture an audience for commercials."[8] Organizations like the National Civic League still try valiantly to involve citizens in day-to-day political decision making, but their efforts seem harried and fail to capture broad interest. As the University of Michigan's Troy Murphy noted in "Romantic Democracy and the Rhetoric of Heroic Citizenship" in *Communication Quarterly*, the "inadequacies of contemporary citizenship are numerous and varied: electoral practices too often create citizens who are passive clients of an alienating and elusive system; "horse-race media coverage encourages citizens to be spectators who vote; [and all this produces] too many passive spectators who don't vote."[9]

Crenson argues that increasing individualism, combined with the casting of government as a "service" provided by knowledgeable experts where citizens are "customers," changes in the way politicians gain support for office:

> *"Citizens become politically engaged because states and political elites need them and mobilize them. If they remain passive, politically indifferent, or preoccupied with private concerns, the reason may be that our political order no longer furnishes incentives for collective participation in politics. The state may no longer need citizens as much as it once did, or perhaps citizens have become a nuisance to political elites."*[10]

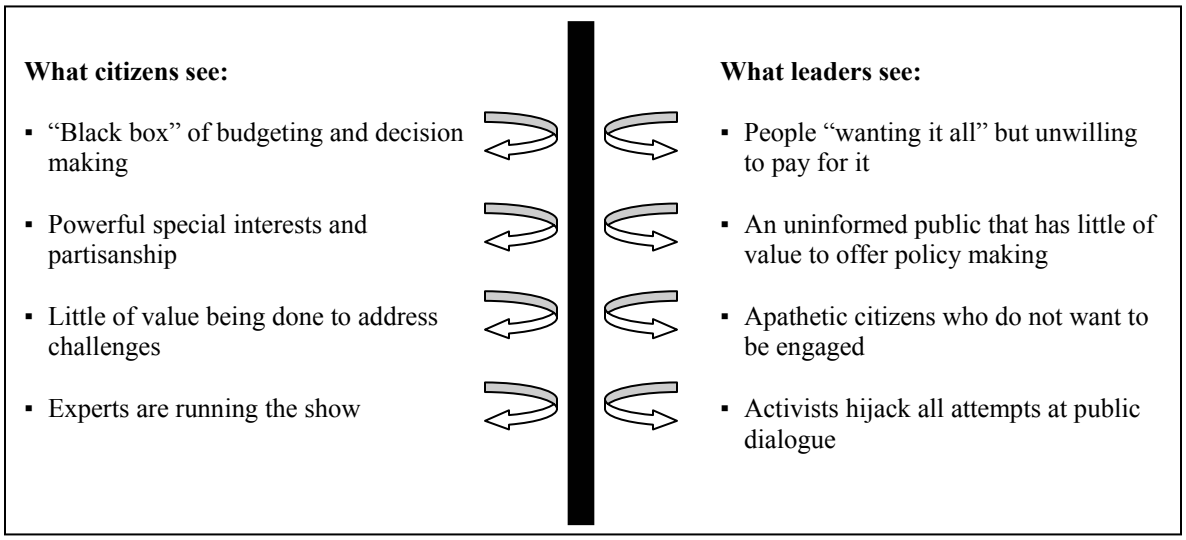
But both the cynical idea of the public being manipulated by the media for commercial gain and a nostalgic Norman Rockwell romantic vision of citizen participation miss the actual choice that Americans appear to have made in democracy's mid-life: Deferring to the experts is o.k. It is a rational choice for many important matters in life – until the experts miss the mark entirely or take advantage of our passivity to advance their own interests. Let's face it, most of us don't want to take on complex tasks if we don't have to. But just as with physical health, the doctor's ability to make an accurate diagnosis is compromised when the patient is non-responsive.

With many mass protest movements fading into history, the power of the Internet to mobilize and motivate public action not yet fully realized, and public dialogue marginalized, civic engagement in the political affairs of the United States is suffering a stasis that threatens to become chronic.

A Responsive System

Even if the public were fully informed, thoroughly weighing the issues and voicing its beliefs, would the political system listen? Several trends significantly diminish the effectiveness of an engaged public and may mute it entirely.

The first and most obvious challenge to an engaged public is the wide and serious disconnect between leaders and citizens. Yankelovich has characterized the disconnect in this way:[11]



Political leaders, in general, do not seek out substantial dialogue with citizens. The information that political leaders receive about public opinion usually comes from hastily executed polls, screened messages from constituents, and lobbying from special interest groups. It is not surprising, given the quality of this type of "public feedback," that leaders hold the messages in relatively low regard and instead turn to their own "experts."

Certainly we need people who have expertise on issues that require government and civic attention. But experts increasingly supplant, rather than add to, citizen input. Yankelovich describes another aspect of the problem inherent in this usurpation:

> *"Experts respect the institution of democracy and would be chagrined if their good faith were challenged. At the same time, however, their view of the general public is that it is ill informed and ill equipped to deal with the problems to which*

they, the experts, have devoted their lives. Few experts attempt deliberately to mislead the public. Unwittingly and automatically, they use technical jargon that excludes the public. They dismiss the views of citizens who do not command their factual mastery of the subject. Often without realizing it, they impose their personal values on the country because they fail to distinguish their own value judgments from their technical expertise."[12]

And so, political leaders who rely on elites and experts to inform their decision making are relying on the value systems of those experts as well as their technical knowledge. And that seems to be a critical and widening disconnect between the public and its leadership. The public may defer to experts for technical advice and knowledge, but they are much less passive on the values they believe should guide political behavior. When dialogue occurs among citizens about the core principles that drive civic activity, the discussion is anything but passive. It is here that the opportunity to engage citizens has real energy and the highest value.

Another manifestation of the public/leaders disconnect is the current acceptance by political leaders of the concept of "polarization" in our nation. While many have debunked the idea – noting that political diversity exists in every state and that the vast majority of people in every region gravitate toward centrist positions on even the most contentious issues when given the opportunity to weigh a variety of solutions – an increasing number of political leaders champion extreme positions under the banner of representing their "red" or "blue" constituency.

Seeing the nation only in "red" and "blue" blinds leaders to the value of compromise and makes it seem all right to push an ideological agenda without seeking actual public support.[13] Political leaders who operate from an ideological play book eschew consensus building and disregard public input, making the system even more unresponsive. The stasis continues.

THE PRESCRIPTION

Public Agenda's prescription for American democracy at middle-age is as straightforward as you might get from a medical doctor: a consistent and healthy diet of information and exercise that comes from public engagement. We need to spend less time on the political equivalent of fad diets, like campaign finance reform, and get serious about a consistently healthy diet of public dialogue about core principles. And just like caring about human health, the right solution is not trendy or easy. It is about making serious choices about priorities and resource allocation that fundamentally change the way we conduct our daily lives.

Too often public dialogue is seen as the health equivalent of eating broccoli or flossing teeth. It is time to use much more creativity to inject dynamic options into the exercise. The public gets to choose to participate, so we have to motivate the body politic to want to genuinely engage.

What other mechanism available today can simultaneously introduce people to each other, inform and even entertain them, help them grapple with issues, "learn the ropes" of citizenship, voice their opinions, and make the political system more responsive? Public dialogue is not just talk, and it doesn't have to be boring or unpleasant. It is a specialized form of interactive behavior that imposes discipline on the participants, but it also injects discovery, possibility, and even passion into these social encounters. As Dan Yankelovich argues in his book *The Magic of Dialogue*:

"The magic doesn't work if you substitute a different form of talk for dialogue. The magic of conversation? The magic of discussion? The magic of debate? None

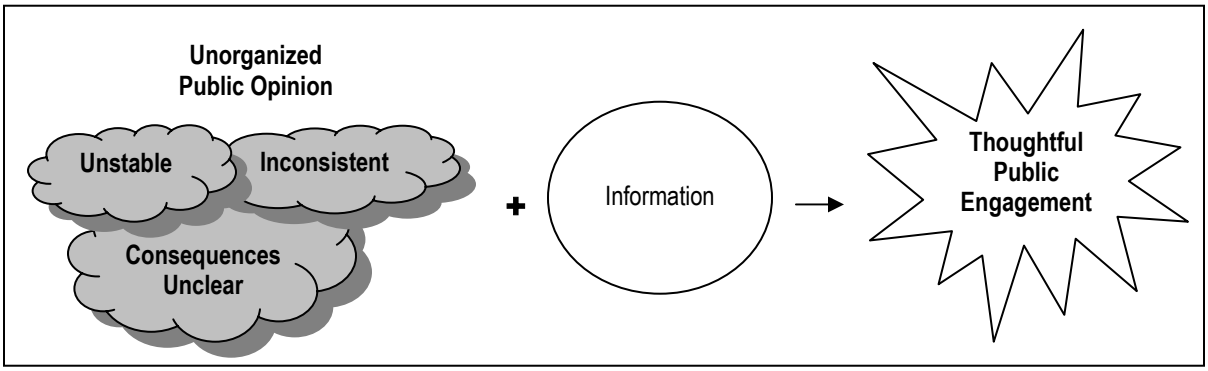
of these phrases ring true. But dialogue works its magic because it alone has unique capabilities other forms of talk do not possess… In dialogue, we penetrate behind the polite superficialities and defenses in which we habitually armor ourselves. We listen and respond to one another with an authenticity that forges a bond between us… When dialogue is done skillfully, the results can be extraordinary: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened."[14]

As one example, a dynamic public engagement process in the form of a Citizens Tax Assembly in New Jersey was able to advance citizen interests that had been stymied by entrenched political ideologies for decades (see short story at the end of this paper). But great progress was made, the public's voice found resonance, and participants were energized. And it happened, in part, because funders committed to nonpartisan citizen engagement provided the resources to organize the Citizens Assembly and to communicate its message.

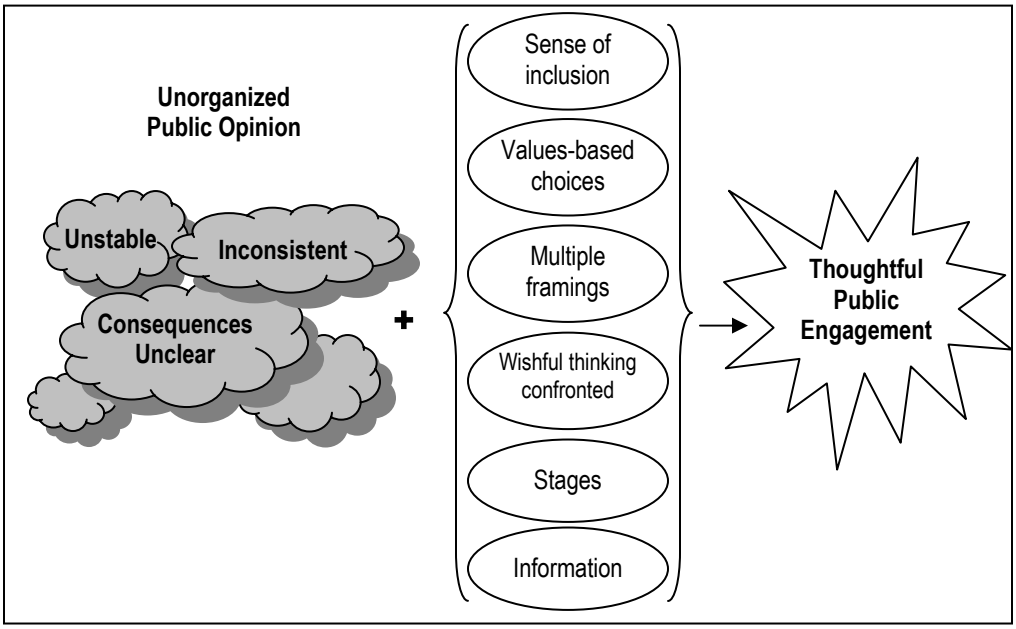
There are a number of reasons why this doesn't occur more frequently. One is that the generally understood practice of "public engagement" does not actually *engage* citizens. Two "models" are often employed. In the first, information is thrown out at citizens and that alone is expected to produce "thoughtful citizen engagement." In the second, the tired town hall format is trotted out, which is usually hijacked by the most disaffected citizens or the loudest advocates, leaving the moderate voices running for the exits.

This is how Yankelovich sees the difference between the existing model and a model that would actually improve democratic functioning:[15]

The Existing Model of Public Engagement



The Broader Model of Public Engagement



Real citizen engagement takes work. It requires a great deal of organizing and the resources to bring citizens together to deliberate. It necessitates the kind of creativity that can keep a distractible public enthusiastic and excited. It needs to debunk wishful thinking and offer up fair and accessible options that people can wrestle with, including both benefits and trade-offs. It also requires effective communications to get the public's views across to leaders.

Public deliberation has had a long experimentation and development period, but that doesn't mean it is ready to live independently. It needs a lot of nurturing and support. Philanthropy must be a devoted steward for a new model of "Dialogue Democracy," providing sustenance, guidance, and creativity. There are several ways the philanthropic sector could work to advance "Dialogue Democracy's" acceptance and utilization.

First, foundation leaders who believe dialogue works must get serious about championing it and work aggressively to bring more funders into the fold. If ever there were a case for collaborative funding, this is it. Second, funders of deliberative democracy projects need to better coordinate the sector's resources to develop a system of well-recognized, on-going citizen engagement efforts occurring in every state on a few core issues. A community meeting on healthcare here and an issue forum on public education there isn't going to save democracy. We need to create ongoing nationwide public engagement programs that get large swaths of the American people involved in the most important issues facing our nation. And at the same time, we need to focus media attention on public concerns raised by national public engagement projects and work hard to ensure that the system controlled by political leaders and corporate interests heeds their concerns.

While there are many localized examples of the potential impact of "Dialogue Democracy," I believe one or two major national dialogue campaigns need to be funded, ones that can stand as shining examples of how regular people across America can reassert their belief in the great possibilities for improving their lives. We need to show that "American Idol" isn't the only type of public input that excites Americans. "National conversation" projects have occurred in the past, but I believe none has been adequately funded at the necessary scale (or with the necessary creativity) with

appropriate resources dedicated to communications and advancing the public's voice on the core principles that really matter to them.

Public dialogue on a large scale, we believe, is the very best method to engage "regular, non expert" Americans in learning, discussing, and demanding an active response from our political system. But its greatest contribution will be equipping citizens with new lifestyle options for improving democratic health. Only some will choose these options at first, but that's how behavior change starts. This kind of preventive health measure is always a money-saver in the long run.

Half-measures and a diet of democracy-lite fad-dieting won't cut it. We need to try to wisely alter our democratic lifestyle with a healthy regimen of energizing public engagement and dialogue. Otherwise America may find the aches and pains we are experiencing in our democracy's middle age become more than just a nagging annoyance.

With Help from Public Agenda, New Jerseyans Take Action on Taxes

In 2003, New Jersey relied more heavily on property taxes than all but one other state and property-valued tax assessments kept rising at alarming rates.

In September 2003, Public Agenda and the Coalition for Public Good, a group of New Jersey legislators, business leaders, and civic activists, brought over 100 New Jerseyans to the state capital to discuss ways to lessen the state's reliance on property taxes to fund education and other government services.

The Citizens Tax Assembly was designed to provide a stronger public voice on New Jersey tax issues. The state constitution requires a constitutional convention to change the tax code, and New Jersey legislators had never dared to consider that, fearing ballot box rejection. But the citizens assembly served as a safe "trial run" for such a convention. The delegates, who met in small groups over the course of a weekend, came to consensus that reform must occur. Assembly delegates generally acknowledged that in order to reduce property taxes, other forms of government income would have to rise. That would mean greater reliance on impact fees, "sin taxes," and higher sales and income taxes. Many delegates also called on local governments and school districts to reduce costs by sharing services.

The Citizens Tax Assembly was conducted with support from the Fund for New Jersey, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and The Schumann Fund for New Jersey. Results of this Assembly's discussions were compiled in a report that was presented to the governor, state and local elected officials, and the broader public. Shortly thereafter, tax reform along the lines suggested by the Citizens Tax Assembly took off and became a priority for the governor and many key legislators. Serious reforms have been drafted and are now moving through the legislature.

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

Ruth A. Wooden *became the President of Public Agenda in August 2003. Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1975. The organization provides research to bridge the gap between American leaders and what the public really thinks about issues ranging from education to foreign policy to immigration to religion and civility in American life. Before joining Public Agenda, Ruth was Executive Vice President-Senior Counselor at the international public relations firm of Porter Novelli where she led the Advertising and Cause-Related Marketing Practice. Before joining Porter Novelli, she served as volunteer President of the National Parenting Association. From 1987 to 1999, she was President of The Advertising Council, the nation's leading producer of public service announcements. Ruth currently serves on the Boards of U.S. Trust Company; Research!America; Phoenix House Foundation; Demos; and Civic Ventures, San Francisco. She is a member of Advisory Committees serving America's Promise; the Office of National Drug Control Policy; the Harvard Business School Initiative on Social Enterprise and Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and School of Health Sciences. Ruth attended Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and she received a B.A. in Sociology and History from the University of Minnesota. In 1994, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Northeastern University.*

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PACE INVITES YOUR COMMENTS

This essay is one of a set of eight essays that ***PACE*** commissioned in 2005 for our first national gathering, titled ***The Condition of Democracy in America and What Philanthropy Can Do About It***. ***PACE*** - Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (www.pacefunders.org) is an emerging community of donors and grantmakers committed to strengthening democracy by supporting pathways for individual participation in civic and community life. We hope this and the other essays in the series will stimulate productive conversations across different groups and different philosophies about how to unleash the power of individual participation in solving the problems of our communities and nation.

I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

Jill Blair
PACE Executive Director
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ENDNOTES

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