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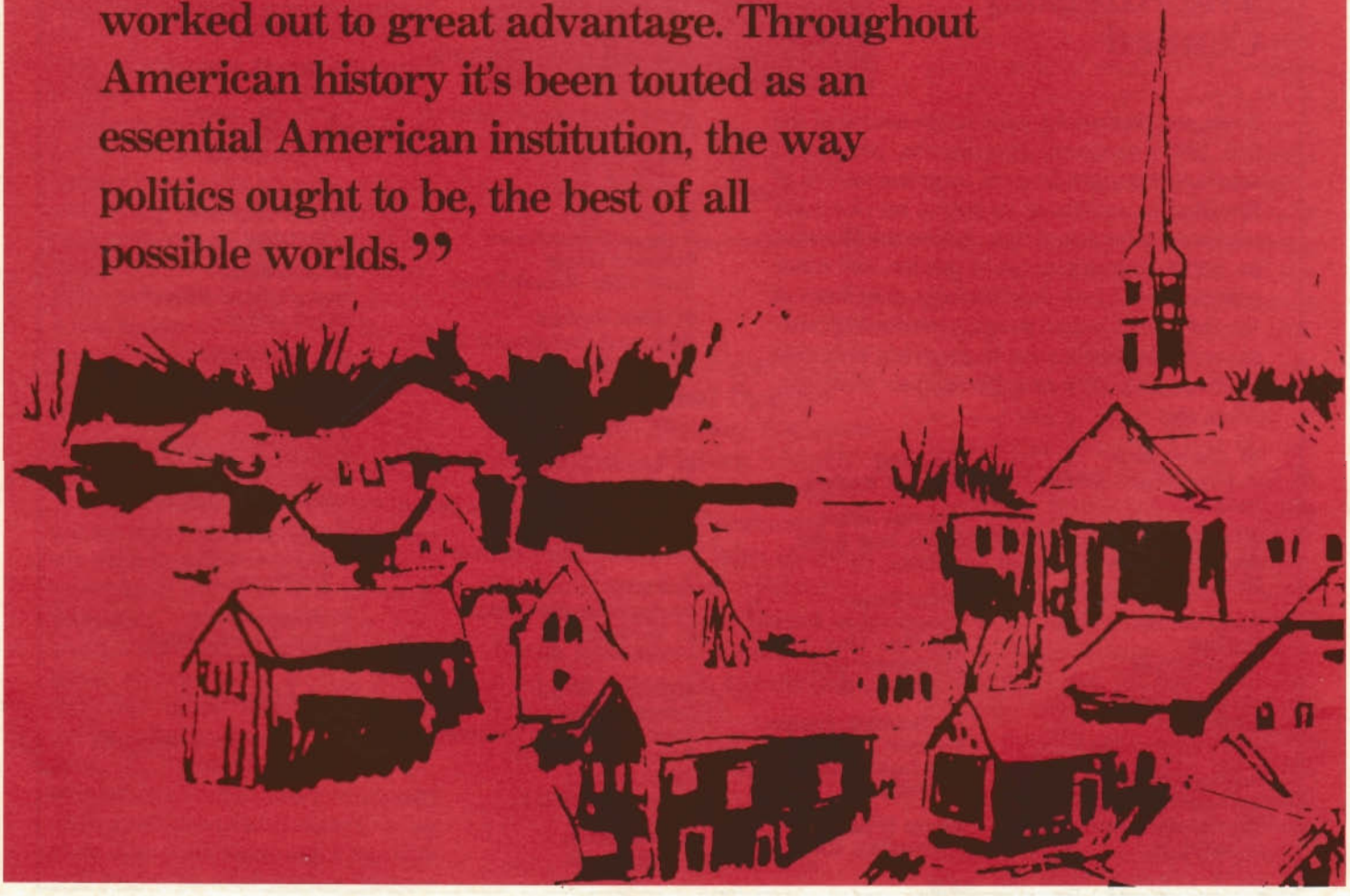
"Talk about the town meeting in terms of American political values. Town meeting is one of the true habits of the American culture consciousness, a 'habit of the heart,' where that underlying conflict between the self and the commune has been worked out to great advantage. Throughout American history it's been touted as an essential American institution, the way politics ought to be, the best of all possible worlds."



"Town Meeting"

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Opening the New England segment of Symposium IX: *Regional Culture and Public Policy - Myth, Reality, the Future* was this paper by Professor Bryan; joining him later in the day of November 12, 1986 were Judson Hale, editor of *Yankee* and Dartmouth historian Dr. Jere Daniell.

First of all, I want to sympathize with the students here who were assigned to read my first book *Yankee Politics in Vermont*. Whoever made that assignment was truly sadistic. An editor of an important Vermont newspaper once called Chapter 2 "the boringest chapter ever penned by human hand." I hope this evening's lecture will vary from that rather ominous assessment!

Well, I am from New England; the part of New England that Toynbee said was "above the optimum climatic area" of the United States. This great historian of American culture actually said that Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were so out of touch with the United States they had contributed little or nothing to the mainstream culture of America. Right there we may have a partial answer to one of the questions posed by this conference: "Is there a New England?" Perhaps there's a northern New England and a southern New England. I, as you might guess, reject Toynbee out-of-hand and point to the taking of Fort Ticonderoga a year before the Declaration of Independence was signed as evidence. After a Vermonter named Ethan Allen captured the largest British fort in North America, the Continental Congress was so worried, thinking that we might actually not go to war, they actually wrote Ethan Allen a note saying in effect: "Look, you captured this huge fort, but we may have to give it back and we want you to write down a list of everything that you have taken or damaged." Allen did. In the Vermont Historical Society there is a letter with a list of all the things they had taken from Fort Ticonderoga. Rum was the prominent item. It, of course, was not destroyed, but immediately consumed with great gusto and cheers to the New Republic. Some say Allen was still feeling its effects when he later charged the city of Montreal with less than 100 men. The British captured him on the spot and gave him several years to sober up as a prisoner of war in England. The cannons from Fort Ticonderoga, by the way, were the same cannons that drove General Gage out of Boston the next year. Take *that*, Mr. Toynbee.

Anyway, I am here to talk about the town meeting, another great contribution New England has made to American democracy and one that still lives and breathes pretty much as it always has in many of the hill towns of Vermont. I want to talk about the town meeting by discussing a series of conjectures about it.

First of all, let me talk about the town meeting in terms of American political values. A very important new book on that subject, which I think everyone in this room should read (if you haven't already) is called *Habits of the Heart*. It's a book about contemporary American culture that sees a struggle between our classic drive for individualism and our contemporary need for community. Town meeting is one of the true habits of the American culture consciousness, a "habit of the heart," where that underlying conflict between the self and the commune has been worked out to great advantage. It is known as, and in fact it is, the last vestige of direct democracy left on the planet, unless you want to count Yugoslavian Workers' Councils or other kinds of work place democracy. Throughout American history it's been touted as an essential American institution, the way politics ought to be, the best of all possible worlds. Jefferson said that the town meeting was the wisest invention ever "devised by the wit of man" for the practice of self-government. Throughout American history, leading scholars of American political thought from De

Toqueville to Lewis Mumford have made this point again and again and again. There is a strong mythology here, an incredible cultural support system for town meeting. In short, my first point is that we are looking at an institution that's steeped in history, tradition, and mythology.

Secondly, just what is a town meeting anyway? What is the major conceptual element that separates it from other forms of government? The town meeting is to a town what the Congress is to the United States. It is the legislative body. There's a misconception about town meetings in the contemporary period that the town meeting is kind of a "public hearing"—a place where people gather (or are called) to give advice and opinions. Not so. The town meeting is a legislature designed to pass laws, create policy, and rule on public issues. The fascinating thing about town meetings is that if you live in a town that has a town meeting, YOU are a legislator. You don't vote for representatives because you represent yourself. There is no separation of powers. The people truly are the government! This is incredibly different from all other forms where you elect someone to a city council or a board of county commissioners or state legislature or to Congress or the Senate. You are the *lawmaker*.

Thus town meetings are, first and foremost, decision-makers. You go to a town meeting and you make a decision and then you walk away and something is different—in a recent article in *Newsweek* I put it this way:

For three centuries now, New Englanders have preserved the commandments of democracy by assembling as free citizens in town meetings. In these open gatherings the public good is still fashioned to the tune of unrestricted debate, the air charged with face-to-face political conflict.

Decisions are made on the spot. Kindergartens are created (or denied). Roads are paved (or abandoned). Funds are appropriated to "observe" Memorial Day or fix a town truck. Revenue-sharing funds are distributed. The tax rate is fixed. The people go home. Pure democracy.

Remember, these are face-to-face decisions. If you throw someone out of office, you may have to have lunch with them. If you defeat a leash law, it may be your kid that gets bitten by the neighbor's dog! In a town meeting you can't back off, you can't avert eyes. Your neighbors are going to know your politics. Let me give you an example of that. Last year I published an article in *Vermont Life* (which is to Vermont what *Yankee* is to New England) that began with this little story:

Things were going smoothly at the Starksboro Town Meeting. Too smoothly. One after another the usual list of out-of-town requests for small amounts of money to fund public services for the region were being approved. I was voting "aye" along with every one else when it struck me. If this keeps up, we'll be out of here by noon. Where was the debate, the skepticism Vermonters are known for?

What was needed was a little strategic cussedness.

"No," I guffed on the next item, a call for a few hundred dollars to help support a dental clinic. Several others must have sensed the danger of creeping benevolence along with me and voted no, too. The "yea" forces, lulled by success, had managed only a perfunctory murmur and the moderator called for a standing count.

Oh m'god.

Dilemma: should I retreat into cowardly silence and stare at the floor—or rise grandly and vote for tooth decay?

OH M'GOD!

"All those in favor, please stand," intoned the moderator. My wife Melissa's eyes twinkled her most delightful "now what are you going to do, smarty?" as she rose (along with nearly everyone else in the hall) then cast her vote in the affirmative.

As the count went on, my mind raced ahead. There is safety in numbers. Wouldn't the moderator see

that the ayes clearly had it? Why waste time with a count of "no's." I wanted to yell triumphantly, "Stop the count! Stop the count! The ayes have it!"

"All those opposed," said the moderator. Standing before my fellow townspeople for the cause of plaque, cavities, and root canals, I looked around me and gained a new appreciation for two words: "minority" and "chagrined." I had also confirmed in one fell swoop the very worst suspicions of my friends and neighbors: He is to the right of Genghis Khan!

One of the clear strengths of town meeting is the linkage between input and output. The American public is rapidly tiring of voting for people that seem to forget the people exist until the next election. It seems to be TRUE—there *isn't* much of a difference among candidates. You vote and very little happens! Or you go to a public hearing, voice your opinion, go home and nothing happens. It isn't like that in a town meeting; there's an instant link between what you do and future events. Most importantly, in a town meeting you can

see democracy from beginning to end. You may moan about a bad decision, you may not like what occurs, but at least you can see it happen in real time. That immediate connection between input and output, between "promises and accountability" is the soul of true democracy. Town meeting is not only opinion. It is power. It is not only planning. It is consequences.

The third thing I want to talk about is the empirical record. I'm working on a book about town meeting now and in the introductory chapter I make the statement that "there is no political institution in America about which so much is said and so little is known as the town meeting." We simply don't *know* much about town meeting. We don't know, for instance, even such basic information as the number of people who attend and speak out. This leads to a grand myth surrounding town meeting. I call it the "Rumpelstiltskin Dilemma." You remember the story of Rumpelstiltskin. The father of a peasant girl made the claim that she can spin straw into gold. When it was discovered that she could not, she was—as they say—in *deep* trouble. The point of this: you can claim too much for town meeting. Then, when the facts don't square with the claim, the town meeting's credibility is destroyed.

For instance people that defend town meeting all too often say things like: "everybody in town goes to town meeting." They say that the town meeting is heavily attended by citizens who really care what is going on; that "they go to vote on most of the things that affect their lives," as a recent Vermont publication put it. Both of those statements are flat out Rumpelstiltskin brags. Most of the people in the towns don't go to town meetings; and they don't even come close to deciding on "most" of the issues that affect their lives. What I want to do this evening is to put the town meeting into empirical perspective. I want to share with you a few (don't panic—it's a *very* few) descriptive statistics on hundreds of town meetings I've studied in Vermont towns of under 3500 population over the past 20 years. Remember, I'm talking about meetings in prime environmental conditions. These towns are small, somewhat isolated communities boundaried with a strong sense of social consciousness. If town meetings can't work in Vermont, they can't work anywhere.

The average percent of registered voters attending town meetings in these Vermont towns is 22. Thirty-seven percent of the attenders actually speak out and participate verbally. The range of attendance is quite wide. Of the 124 towns in this particular sample, the lowest attendance was 8 percent of the registered voters and the highest was 42 percent. Verbal participation by those that attended town meeting varied from a low of 12 percent to a high of 80 percent. On average 47 percent of those attending were women and 53 percent were men. Yet only 24 percent of the women that attend participate, so women participate verbally at a substantially lower rate than do men. By the way, that gap seems to be declining over time.

Now. What about it? Is 22 percent attendance good or bad?

Let's put that statistic in perspective. Once every four years in America we elect a person who, on a bad day, could make an error of judgment and destroy the planet. That election is preceded by two full years of hype. Millions are spent urging us to vote for one candidate or another. In the same election we elect Congressmen, Senators, governors, state legislators and thousands and thousands of other local officials. For months organized political parties engage in "get out the vote" campaigns. On average it takes about 30 minutes to vote in this election.

Still, about one out of two of us do not bother. Only slightly more than 50 percent of the eligible voters in America show up at the polls! Typically, when items are put up for popular vote in America on community referenda, less than five

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percent vote. Cities are consolidated, schools closed, taxing power increased or decreased with seldom more than ten percent turnout.

In this context, 22 percent begins to look better. Consider these points:

- The state government in Vermont has been snatching power away from the towns. There is increasingly less *reason* to attend town meeting.
- Citizens spend over three hours at town meeting. When you include an hour for lunch, this pretty much uses up a whole day. Would you give up a whole day to participate in a national election?
- Town meeting day in Vermont is *not* a legal holiday. For many Vermonters, attendance would cost them a day's pay. How many Americans would vote in presidential elections if it cost them a day's pay?
- Town meeting takes place every year, year in and year out. But we only ask Americans to vote once every four years. How many of us would do so if we had to do it once a year?

In short, I am perfectly willing to consider the empirical *reality* of a town meeting and say on balance it's "pretty damn good." I guess my message to you is "beware of the mythology about town meetings," they're no where nearly as "pure" as the defenders say. I am reminded, however, of Winston Churchill's

definition of democracy. He said it was "the worst possible political system imaginable except for all other political systems."

Fourth. Is town meeting in trouble? How's it doing under the best of conditions—in Vermont, in the hill country of New England? The town meeting *is* in trouble. Deep trouble. In fact it is on the ropes. It can be saved but if it is to be saved, it must be in the eleventh hour. Or, to mix a metaphor already hopelessly entangled anyway, it must be saved by the bell!

Why is this? There are several reasons. Number one is because the whole notion of citizenship in America is in trouble. The basic idea of *how* to be a citizen is on the wane in America. We are raised to be selfish; to look after our own interests first, to "look out for number one." We have forgotten that within a democratic system of government there is no such thing as "number one." Our strength is a communal one. But we have forgotten this. Our representative institutions at the national level are in eclipse because we no longer have communal governments at the local level. We no longer have training grounds for citizenship. Thus there is a geometric progression away from democracy at work here. The more town meeting-type structures fade away, the fewer citizens are available to defend those that are left. In America today we are desperately holing up in interest groups to save what's left of our capacity to make a difference. We are abandoning this critical "habit of the heart": our view of politics as consensual decision-making. In a nutshell we are abandoning the entire notion of citizenship.

The second problem is the structure of the community itself. Driving here from Springfield today, coming down 91 and getting off the Mass Pike, it was awfully hard for me to tell when one town ended and another one began. I could tell because there was a sign there that said Sturbridge and then there was another one that said Southbridge. Except for that, I couldn't tell the difference. It's awful hard in Vermont now to say "Hey, we are out of Newbury. Now we are in Bradford." People work in one town, they live in another. They have social relationships in a third town. The whole concept of community in America is on the decline. We have to reestablish that. Town meeting suffers when community "boundariness" is obscured. Town meeting depends on *community* politics, not interest group politics.

Thirdly, there is the problem of the American fascination with bigness. Sinclair Lewis once said "I like Vermont because it is quiet, because you have a population that is solid and not driven by the American mania—that mania which considers a town of 4,000 twice as good as a town of 2,000." With town meetings; small *is* beautiful. It has got to be face-to-face and human scale. If you want big, efficient government and don't want to spend much of your time making decisions, hire yourself a philosopher king. If town meeting is pure democracy, it's only as pure as the people themselves because it reflects real people. Are people pure? Hell no, they're not pure. We must entrust decisions to real people, on a small, human, scale, and give them the freedom to make mistakes. These three reasons: the eclipse of citizenship, the decline of community, and the refusal to give up our fascination with mega-government and accept the risks involved when real people rule themselves, stand behind the deep trouble town meeting is in today.

The fifth thing I want to do this evening is come to grips with the single strongest case to be made against town meeting—that it discriminates against the "have nots" in society. Jane Mansbridge has recently published a book that I recommend to you highly called *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. In that book she has a chapter on town meeting and tells the story of a certain Clayton Bedell. Clayton Bedell is an old Vermont farmer who's milking Jerseys up on his hill farm in a small Vermont town Mansbridge calls Shelby. Bedell goes to the Shelby town meeting. On the warrant is a zoning ordinance. Bedell is against zoning and decides to speak out against it.

A psychologist once pointed out that of all the fears we have in the world, the thing people fear the most is speaking in public—even more than death itself. Bedell shares that fear. He is nervous and scared to death. As is often the case, these emotions were translated into defensiveness and negativeness. In short Bedell made an ass of himself. He had no education, he didn't know how to speak well, and he was opposed by a slick, young lawyer who had brought some "visual aids"—to show why zoning was good and how it would make the town look beautiful. Bedell and the young lawyer really got into it. Guess who won? The lawyer of course. Finally, Bedell in a fit of anger called the lawyer a "communist." People booed him. He sat down knowing he'd made a fool of himself. The younger, smarter, newcomer with the capacity to speak well in public and trained in debate had easily put him down. His last words to Bedell were smooth and deadly: "One more remark like that, Bedell," he said, referring to being likened to a "communist," "and I'll see you in court." Mansbridge claims that there is an inequality among the participators at town meetings that translates directly into power.

There may be. But let me tell you another story about a fellow named Pete Rafferty. Pete Rafferty lives in Newbury, Vermont. You all know who he is, he's got a pickup truck with a shotgun in the rear window. It has a bumper sticker that says "If you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns." Pete is hard as nails, a tough man—a logger and construction worker. Pete Rafferty used to go to the town meetings in Vermont just to sit in the parking lot in his pickup truck and sass people as they went in. Here was a guy with no concept of citizenship. He worked on construc-

tion in the summer until deer season and then he quit work, went hunting and after that went on welfare for the winter. You know who Pete Rafferty is. He was an outsider, estranged from the community, even hostile to it.

He did one other thing—he raised heifers. A heifer is an unbred cow. It's a cow that hasn't had a calf. Heifers were taxed as property. Every year the listers come to his barn and valued each heifer and he paid property taxes on them. I was sitting in the Newbury town meeting when Pete Rafferty came in. He had some beer out in the truck and he was feeling damn good. He came up to the balcony of the little town hall and sat down and began to talk—just loud enough to embarrass me. People began to look up at the balcony. We were old friends but I had to shut him up. However, you don't *tell* Rafferty to shut up. You figure out a way to negotiate. Just at that point the issue of whether or not to tax heifers came up and I said, "Pete, if this thing passes, you're not going to have to pay taxes on those heifers of yours." Even after a few beers and as feisty as he is, he understood that. He is, after all, a Yankee. He went out to the car, got six of his cronies, brought them in to vote and the law passed by five votes.

Is that democracy? I think it is a glorious testimony to democracy. Here's a guy who didn't give a damn. Yet *he* changed policy. Better. He saw himself do it. He came to town meeting an outcast and left a citizen. I'm not going to romanticize him: Pete Rafferty doesn't go to a town meeting every year now but he goes every now and then when something interests him. He goes in and sits down. He doesn't participate verbally, but he listens and he votes. He cares about the town, he knows that when push comes to shove, he can have an effect even though he's of a very low socioeconomic status. Who's right, me or Mansbridge? I suspect there are a lot of Clayton Bedells. But there are a lot of Pete Raffertys too. On balance I'd argue we can find a way to make it easier on people like Clayton (secret ballots are often used) and we *must* preserve opportunities for the Pete Raffertys.

Finally, what can we do to save the town meeting? First of all, we've got to protect it from special interest politics. A lot of special interest people like to go to town meetings and get their own thing passed and then leave; we have that happen a lot in Vermont—nuclear freeze votes, abortion votes—whatever it is they like to go to a town meeting and get the issue on the warning, pass it and then go home. The town meeting is not a place for special interest politics; it's a place for citizens politics. We've got to get rid of this mentality in America that the only thing in the public that should concern us is our own special interest. We've got to be interested in the community as the community.

Secondly, we've got to return real decision-making power back to the communities. We've got to return power to the people. Whenever I say this, I don't say it as a conservative, in fact, I often consider myself a local socialist. If the town of Starksboro, Vermont, wants to have a public radio station, a public power company, I say "go ahead" as long as I have got a reasonable chance to effect that policy. The great issue in America today, my friends, is not the issue of whether or not the government is going to act or not, because the government *is* going to be involved. It's got to. The question is on what scale is this going to occur? In order to save town meeting we must insist that policy decisions are made on a human scale.

Finally, what we have to do is accept the notion of political risk. We're trying to build in America a society whereby we are perfectly safe from risk. The notion of democracy, it seems to me, entails the notion of risk and risk is more acceptable on a small scale. Risk is not as acceptable on a mass scale. If we centralize education and we make a decision on a new way to teach math, for instance, and everyone adopts it and it is the wrong way, everyone gets hurt. If we make a decision about education in Newbury, Vermont, and Newbury makes a mistake, who gets hurt? The students in Newbury, Vermont get hurt. There can be no variety without risk. And risk is more palatable at a local level. Carl Hess once said that "Adoph Hitler as the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany was a horror. Adolph Hitler in a neighborhood would be a bully." Of one thing I am certain: it was *far* easier for Hitler to take over Germany than it would be for him to take over Newbury, Vermont! I am reminded of Rick Blane's (Humphrey Bogart's) remark to the German Major in *Casablanca*. Sitting at a table in the Cafe Americain, the Major asks, "Can you imagine the Germans in New York?" Rick answers with a raised eyebrow and a half smile, "Well there are certain sections of New York, Major, that I wouldn't advise you to try to invade."

Town meeting pays people the ultimate compliment. It trusts them. Variety is necessary to progress. The capacity to be a genius is impossible to maintain without maintaining at the same time the environment whereby one can become a damned fool! Town meeting provides the opportunity for geniuses and asses to work out their common humanity. It is willing to risk error based on a faith that by and large and over time, the communal exchange of individual views will establish a commonality of purpose and provide an environment in which comparative variety will lead to *public* progress.