Public Argument And Civil Society: The Cold War Legacy As A Barrier To Deliberative Politics

The often dramatic happenings in Eastern and Central Europe a decade ago, as well as subsequent events in the Soviet Union which resulted in its eventual rupture, made for a revival of interest in the idea of civil society with all of its historical and philosophical meanings.

Thus, for example, Karl E. Birnbaum wrote in 1991: "In a Europe where democracy is finally writ large all over the continent, the present major tasks of political reconstruction more than ever requires the active participation of individual citizens, of civil society" (84).

In the political arena, Vaclav Havel, shortly after his election as President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, affirmed the importance of the idea: ". . . the principle of civil society represents the best way for individuals to realize themselves, to fulfil their identity in all the circles of their home, to enjoy everything that belongs to their natural world, not just some aspects of it" (1992: 32).

In later years, Havel expanded the notion of civil society to serve as the guarantor of political stability. When he addressed the Parliament and Senate of the Czech Republic on December 9, 1997, partially in response to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, Havel used the occasion to reflect on the progress of the Republic: "The more developed all the organs, institutions, and instruments of civil society are, the more resistant that society will be to political upheavals or reversals" (1998: 45). A truly democratic system would not be threatened by a scandal, a crisis or some banal event. "In my opinion," Havel said, "this can only happen because we have not yet created the foundations of a genuinely evolved civil society, which lives on a thousand different levels and thus need not feel that its existence depends on one government or another or on one political party or another" (45).

In another part of the world, former U.S.A. Senator Bill Bradley, a popular and well-regarded politician who decided not to seek re-election in 1996, views civil society as key to the American experience: "American civilization is like a three-

legged stool, with government and the private sector being two legs and the third being civil society, the place where we live our lives, educate our kids, worship our God, and associate with our neighbors" (412). Like Havel, Bradley views civil society as containing the seeds for democratic renewal: "Within civil society lies the zest to deal with what ails us as a nation" (414).

Finally, in Jürgen Habermas' recent works in communication, political and sociological theory, he argues the need for an enlightened civil society in order to make deliberative politics function. To Habermas, "civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere" (367). Without minimizing the difficulties of a viable civil society, Habermas stresses its importance to basic constitutional guarantees. He argues: "The communication structures of the public sphere must rather be kept intact by an energetic civil society. That the political public sphere must in a certain sense reproduce and stabilize itself from its own resources is shown by the odd self-referential character of the practice of communication in civil society" (369).

In this paper, I want to examine the potential for civil society to serve as a mediating force in democratic practices. I will argue that civil society is culture-specific and that its potential can only be explained, understood and utilized within a particular national or ethnic setting; that current discontent in the American situation may well be attributed to a fractured and decaying civil society. Finally, I believe that the cold war as a dominating idea had a particular and debilitating impact on American civil society, damaging the argumentative practices necessary for meaningful deliberative politics to have cogent meaning.

Christopher Bryant provides a useful and somewhat realistic notion of civil society as "a space or arena between household and state, other than the market, which affords possibilities of concerted action and social self-organization" (399). Michard Bernhard argues a similar meaning for civil society: "It constitutes the sphere of autonomy from which political forces representing constellations of interest in society have contested state power" (307). These definitions realize that civil society is more than a place where one learns associational and civic lessons, but also the sphere where contestation and concerted action find their social and political realization.

A meaningful civil society must advance beyond mere civic association to remove it from the realm of nostalgia. While not necessarily a bad thing and sometimes

useful for strategic rhetorical purposes, nostalgia seldom has sustaining value for dealing with modern conditions such as an internationalized economy, market forces which have eroded community, demographic changes, and a technological transformation of leisure. Given both the excesses of the market and the distance of government, civil society must be about resistance as well as habit formation.

Having said these things, it is also important to note that habit formation in the sense of democratic practices must precede resistance. Associational membership enhances civil society. As Luis Roninger notes, "Civil society can be nurtured through involvement in participatory activities and grassroot organizations, through the establishment of centers of sociability like coffee houses, clubs and voluntary associations; through increased public interaction – in the framework of open lectures, recreational locales, and museums; by means of communication – written and electronic that empower and substantiate the citizens' sense of autonomy from the logic of regulation by the state" (208-9).

Civil society is also culture-specific. Neither its successes nor failures are easily transferable. Civil Society occurs in cultures which include their own distinct histories, customs, mores, rituals, myths – a series of shared understandings, often taken for granted, merely assumed. Its separability from the state and the economy is never exactly distinct.

There is a final requisite for a meaningful civil society: its dependence on both a somewhat engaged citizenry with opportunities for democratic participation. Without at least a theoretical responsiveness to public opinion and arenas for citizens to express opinions, it is difficult to imagine scenarios for civil society to have a routine and sustained impact on political possibilities. As Krishnan Kumar notes, "The establishment of a democratic polity and a public sphere of political debate and political activity are the primary conditions for a thriving civil society of independent associations and an active civic life" (391). Michael Walzer makes the claim in even simpler terms: "Only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society; only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state" (104).

In addressing, now, the American experience, it is important to note first the limitations of traditional political settings and spaces capable of enhancing the sorts of practices necessary for the making of democratic citizens.

Charles Taylor establishes the problem in broad terms: "The average citizen feels power to be at a great distance and frequently unresponsive to him or her. There is a sense of powerlessness in the face of a governing machine which continues on its way without regard to the interests of ordinary people, who seem to have little

recourse to make their needs felt" (207).
Public opinion findings confirm this sense of powerlessness and lack of confidence. In 1964, seventy-six percent of Americans believed they could trust the government in Washington to do what was right most of the time. Three decades later only twenty percent did (Sandel: 297).
Daniel Yankelovich expands this loss of confidence to other centralized and hierarchical national institutions: "In the past few
decades, the medical profession has slipped from confidence ratings of 73 percent to 26 percent. Institutions such as big business, organized labor, and the press all have confidence ratings below 30 percent" (61).
In his book on Congress, written after his self-imposed retirement, Congressman Timothy Penny relates that in 1956 five thousand special interest groups existed in Washington. By 1993, the number had grown to more than twenty-three thousand. As Penny notes, "The special interest industry employs five hundred thousand full-time workers, roughly the same number as are employed by the steel, computer or airline industry" (104).
Citing a 1990 survey of the American Society of Association Executives, Penny writes that seven of ten Americans belonged to at least one special interest group, and one of four Americans belonged to at least four (105).

These modern versions of civic association have become part of the political process. Only the nature of activism has changed. Citizens in ever larger numbers do join communities, but communities designed to protect their individual niches in a more perplexing world. Associational membership is largely designed to support some aspect of the market or some attempt to preserve a government program that may have outlived its usefulness. There are few common bonds. The act of citizenship is to write a check, and then let others argue some particular cause.
This interaction with both the market and state has created not only a perverted political process but a sameness of discourse that mimics the notion of self-governance. As Lewis Lapham writes, "The trick is to say as little as possible in a language so bland that the speaker no longer can be accused of harboring an unpleasant opinion" (30).
Thus, at election time, many Americans fall prey to the latest quick fix: prayer in schools, the restoration of family values, checks on cultural elitism, terms limitations, balanced budget amendments, the sanctity of the flag, a tougher policy towards Cuba, the death penalty. As the philosopher Richard Rorty noted,

“the choice between the two major parties has come down to a choice between cynical lies and terrified silence” (87).

It is now fashionable in political circles to attribute all sorts of things to the end of the cold war. Senator Howell Heflin, for example, on his retirement from the U.S. Senate in 1997, wrote as follows: “Our victory in the Cold War did not seem to have the resonance around the country that one would expect. For decades, our entire defense and foreign policy had been formulated around the goal of fighting communism. It was truly astounding that our resources could now be channeled elsewhere. And yet, the passion, the excitement, the relief just didn’t seem to be there. Almost immediately, a sizable segment of the population seemed to begin searching for another enemy” (78).

Mark Gerzon describes how Washington has become a substitute for Moscow: “No longer able to portray Moscow as the Evil Empire, some of our fellow citizens now portray Washington that way. Since the end of the cold war, we often act as if we are our own worst enemies” (xiii).

Lewis Lapham recently described the American experiment as a series of tensions between competing interests and ideas, namely the city versus the town, labor versus capital, matter versus mind, and government versus the governed (30). Although I do not have time to develop the point here, such were the similar terms of debate between the Federalists and the Anti-federalists on “how best to constitute popular government” (Schambra, 37). In more modern times, it is to understand the tension between civic republicanism with its emphasis on citizenship and community, and modern liberalism with its concern for individuals and their procedural rights.

Mistrust of a strong central government has always been part of the American political lexicon from both the left and the right. Indeed, Seymour Lipset argues in his recent work on American exceptionalism that the failure to have a significant socialist movement in the United States is based less on class than “the lower legitimacy Americans grant to state intervention and state authority” (23).

Michael S. Joyce and William A. Schambra argue that strong faith in centralized power only works in times of national crises such as the Great Depression, World War II or the Cold War. Moral equivalents such as the war on poverty or a war on the energy problem cannot substitute for the real thing. So, they note: “Today, with the end of a long and exhausting cold war, Americans seem distinctly unwilling to rally around the ‘national idea’” (25).

This is not surprising. After all, the cold war became a frame of reference through which to view and evaluate all things that happened during its life span. Additionally, the cold war needed a coherent and inclusive vocabulary in order to promote a variety of not only security concerns, but economic interests, self-images, and personal ambitions. The cold war was a dominating idea, and thus accumulated a legacy that permeated every aspect of American culture. But a rhetorical construct only works when steam is generated to fuel its engine. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dominating idea no longer had a rationale. With the fall of the Berlin Well, and the rapidity of events that followed, the pieces no longer fit together. Joy endures for a night, but darkness comes in the morning.

Wars, of course, never really end. They live on in the memories of those who fought them, the generations who observed and learned from a distance, and the legacy retained as part of a national consensus and culture. Differences between the United States and its adversaries would be cast in a harsh rhetoric characterized by magnified and expansive terms; a divisive and uncompromising tone which exaggerated differences and minimized common interests; and an active narrative which redefined events and claimed the superiority of the American experience. All of this was bound to have an impact on discursive practices.

If the cold war was meant to be real, it had to be fought as though it were an actual war, and one consistent with the nation's view of itself. As Seymour Lipset recently wrote, "To endorse a war and call on people to kill others and die for the country, Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side against Satan – for morality against evil, not in its self-perception, to defend national interests" (20). The cold war tended to ignore debatable national interests, economic as well as political, because in an atmosphere of national emergency, deliberation became secondary to patriotism. Dissent over legitimate topics came at a heavy price.

The foundations for the cold war were set immediately following the end of World War II, and its details need not be repeated here. I want, however, to make special note of NSC-68, drafted by a Department of State and Defense study group in early 1950. Their seventy single-spaced page report was signed by President Truman later that year. Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis note its importance: "NSC 68 constitutes the most elaborate effort made by United States officials during the early Cold War years to integrate political, economic, and military considerations into a comprehensive statement of national security

policy" (383).
Equally important to the policy implications of NSC-68 is the language used to describe their rationale. Nothing less than the future of mankind was at stake: "The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself. They are issues that will not await our deliberations. With conscience and resolution this government and the people it represents must now take new and fateful decisions" (386).
The, threat, however, was more than external. The Soviets meant to destroy us from within: "It is quite clear from Soviet theory and practice that the Kremlin seeks to bring the free world under its dominion by the methods of the cold war. The preferred technique is to subvert by infiltration." They will try to turn our institutions against us: labor unions, civic enterprises, schools, churches, and the media. The doubts and diversity that are the merits of a free system, they will use against us, making them "sources of confusion in our economy, our culture and our body politic." They will use our freedoms against us as "all are but opportunities for the Kremlin to do its evil work"(413).
NSC-68 called for quadrupling the defense budget from $12.9 billion to $50 billion. The report warned that the American government should be prepared for the adverse psychological effects of such a rapid buildup both at home and abroad. Thus, the document advises: ". . . in any announcement of policy and in the character of the measures adopted, emphasis should be given to the essentially defense character and care should be taken to minimize, as far as possible, unfavorable domestic and foreign reactions." (434).
Finally, the document warns against "internal developments" which could jeopardize and weaken these national security objectives. Among them, the authors mention: serious espionage, subversion and sabotage, prolonged or exaggerated economic instability, and internal political and social disunity (439). Although not exclusively so, devaluation of dissent and deliberation, and the desirability of secrecy and expertise are among the legacies of NSC-68. While the structures themselves were already in place for the rhetorical construction of the cold war, NSC-68 gave a comprehensive rationale for the utilization of these structures. Americans could not be trusted to deliberate about their own affairs.

Almost fifty years later, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote about the release of the report whose committee he chaired on protecting and reducing government secrecy: "Wars used to end with homecoming parades and demobilization. Nothing so unambiguous happened after the Cold War, and so it requires an

effort to think anew" (56).
The Commission report makes this conclusion: "The Soviet Union is gone. But the secrecy system that grew in the United States in the long travail of the 20th century challenge to the Western democracies, culminating in the Cold War, is still in place as if nothing has changed. The system is massive, pervasive, evasive. Bureaucracies perpetuate themselves; regulations accumulate and become even more invasive" (A-77).
The Commission defines the scope of the secrecy system in the United States. Some two million federal officials, civil and military, have the ability to classify information (xxii). In 1995, government and industry spent over $5.6 billion to protect classified national security information (10). There are over 1.5 billion pages of government records over 25 years old that are unavailable to the public because they are still classified (xxiv).
Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Commission is its exploration into the culture of secrecy: that secrecy enhances political and bureaucratic power; that secrecy is a form of government regulation; that secrecy makes government less than accountable for its activities; that secrecy prevents meaningful scrutiny of old beliefs; that secrecy prevents the public from engaging in meaningful debate; that secrecy begets both suspicion and cynicism.
When there are too many secrets, there are really no secrets. Secrets are selectively leaked for strategic purposes: to support an administration, weaken an administration, advance a policy, undermine a policy (A-3). In reality, there are now no sanctions for such disclosure to the press. Only one person has ever been prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage code for unauthorized disclosure to the press, a civilian who leaked photographs to Jane's Defense Weekly of a Soviet nuclear-powered carrier under construction. The employee received a two-year sentence (A-3).
Althan G. Theoharis describes the result as it relates to political deliberation: "Acting in secret, cold war presidents could counteract their adversaries (whether foreign or domestic) without in the process provoking a divisive domestic debate" (4).

I reach now the argument that I want to make in my conclusion: that the significance of the cold war rested in its ability to postpone an on-going debate about the significance and meaning of the American experience. America before Pearl Harbor was still coming to terms with the effects of the machine age, urbanization, the decline of the power of the individual, the emergence of a strong

federal government to deal with the ills of the Great Depression, a strong presidency, and an over-reliance on expertise. William Greider describes well how "Americans have been systematically taught to defer to authority and expertise in a complicated world" and "that those chosen to hold power have access to a special knowledge and intelligence not available to others and, therefore, their deliberations and actions are supposedly grounded in a firmer reality" (407). In the cold war period, expertise was paramount, and it was the rare politician or citizen who resisted. Indeed, given the argument that the Soviets meant to fracture basic civic institutions, their very legitimacy became questioned. Additionally, it is not so easy to pierce a culture of secrecy, but deliberative politics cannot exist without information. Demands for changes in this culture of secrecy will have to come from citizens. They will not come from government or market forces.

If it is true, as I have argued, that the significance of the cold war rested in its ability to postpone the continual American debate about its own meaning, then the end of the cold war offers opportunities for the resumption of that debate: about the role of the individual versus the common good; about the role of government and its relationship to actual needs; about the value of expertise versus the value of ordinary experiences; about the role an active citizenry can play in forming better deliberative politics; about the meaning of self-government. The cold war took away, and then monopolized, the terrain where such debates could occur. As Michael Sandel notes, "The formative aspects of republican politics require public spaces that gather citizens together, enable them to interpret their condition, and cultivate solidarity and civic engagement" (349). Perhaps the current difficulties I described earlier reflect the battle for such space.

Since neither government nor the market will provide viable solutions, then civil society as kind of a "third way" needs to be understood, cultivated and perhaps reborn. This is not such an easy task. Michael Walzer said it very well: "Civil society is a project of projects; it requires many organizing strategies and new forms of state action. It requires a new sensitivity for what is local, specific, contingent – and, above all, a new recognition (to paraphrase a famous sentence) that the good life is in the details" (107).

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