

# SEARCHING FOR DEMOCRACY

by Steffen Walter Schmidt

There is a small town in the south of the United States where a few years ago the municipal government passed a local ordinance requiring every adult to carry a gun. The logic was that most people are honest and good citizens and if criminals knew that in this town all citizens were armed they would commit their crime elsewhere. In the state of Illinois there is a town that has an ordinance prohibiting anyone from owning a handgun. Their logic is that the town will be safer unarmed.

The United States is not a country—it's a continent. One would hardly expect a tightly uniform execution of governance given the scope of the United States (below). Imagine a France seventeen times its current size in territory! Then imagine France without the French people, made up overwhelmingly of foreigners.

Country	Square Miles
United States	3,615,122
France	211,207
Texas	262,134

The United States is more like the Ottoman or Roman Empire than a conventional state. It is a huge geographic expanse with fierce regionalism, diverse regional political cultures and enormous racial, ethnic, language, and religious heterogeneity. James T. Farrell once said, "America is so vast that almost everything said about it is likely to be true, and the opposite is probably equally true."

In order to take root, grow and survive over time, American democracy, by necessity, has been elastic, multi-layered, tenuous, pragmatic (not ideological), diffuse, frustrating, slow, and ambiguous.

Nonetheless, this Republic is not unprincipled. There are numerous clear and enduring American "creeds" spelled out in both the constitutional structure and in the symbolism of the "American way of life." These include a high emphasis on personal freedom and liberty that we owe to the French (*Liberté* has taken root more than *Egalité*, and *Fraternité* which are very difficult in this culture). Individualism, religiosity (faith in God), multiculturalism

("America is a land of immigrants"), property rights, and personal material rewards earned through opportunity and hard work are also proudly cited as American values.

Moreover, Americans have turned their backs on the past, on history, and looked forward, not backward. It is common to insist in the United States that people coming here must leave their politics and their troubles behind in their countries of origin. Even in architecture, Americans see most buildings as temporary conveniences, often constructed with only a 30-year life span. The Caterpillar Bulldozer—the Cat—is a fundamentally American machine. Demolition by dynamite is a weekend curiosity. With little sentimentality about these sorts of things, nothing is permanent in America.

There is above all in the American creed a deeply ingrained mistrust of government. This has been firmly institutionalized in the separation of power between the three federal branches that Americans hope will check and balance—i.e. weaken—each other. This effort to dilute the power of the state is further strengthened by the division of power between the central government and the 50 states. These states have an astonishing amount of real power and political autonomy. As an immigrant from Colombia, I was amazed to see such power sharing, something unknown in my homeland where all lines of authority (at least theoretically) lead to the presidential palace in Bogotá.

Americans also want frequent, pervasive control over the people occupying power in government. What other country elects its governors, mayors, sheriffs, local school boards, and even its mosquito control district boards! There are over 87,000 real elected governmental units in this country with budgets, taxation powers, and policy-making authority. We have estimated that the US has more elections than any other country on earth.

The federal government is kept deliberately inefficient and conflictive because an efficient government would more easily tyrannize.

Part of this mistrust of government has been the American civic compulsion to organize voluntary associations to solve local problems, a propensity noted so emphatically by de Tocqueville in his journal *Democracy in America*. This tendency not to wait for the government to solve all problems persists vigorously today and is

enshrined in the hundreds of thousands of organizations which flourish at all levels.

It is true that in practice many of the American principles are unevenly executed with enormous differences from place to place. Moreover, the federal government has encroached on state's rights for at least sixty years in spite of federalism. Multiculturalism and integration of the races is still debated. Even many African American leaders have begun to question the benefits of integration. Separation of church and state (an ideal borrowed from the French by Thomas Jefferson) has not fully taken root and faces increased hostility by a country in which over 80% of the people say they believe in God and go to church. However, there is a profound optimism that, as President William J. Clinton said, "there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."

With all its imperfections, the United States has to be considered a success. It has survived intact for a modest amount of time, has prospered economically, is a magnet for people from throughout the world, and is still a refuge for people who are persecuted for their beliefs. The system is quite elastic and can tolerate a very wide range of human practices. In fact, American democracy normally exhibits a perverse pride in its willingness to be challenged and offended. For example, when Caribbean immigrants wanted to sacrifice small animals as part of their religion in violation of a local ordinance in Hialeah, Florida, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with the immigrants in the 1993 case of the *Church of Lukumi Babalu v. Hialeah*.

Perhaps the most powerful manifestation of this democracy is American pop-culture. The hamburger and french fries as well as pizza are, oddly enough, American food. Blue jeans designed by German immigrant Levy-Strauss for the California gold rush is American. Jazz, the Blues, Rock and Roll, Coca-Cola, Hollywood, CNN, and of course Disney are American. Air conditioning, television, big cars, and tall buildings are American. So are the atomic bomb and victory over European and Japanese fascism. Microsoft, Apple computers and the Internet are American, too.

The United States has always been a global culture.

American pop-culture and commercial culture is so compelling and irresistible because it is an amalgam of bits and pieces of people's traditions, customs, and beliefs from throughout humanity over the past 300 years of immigration, absorption, adaptation, and amalgamation. There is no *Academy of the American English* language to

insure the "purity" of U.S. English! That's because American English, like everything else including government and politics in this odd country, is a work in progress, constantly changing, absorbing, incorporating, adapting, and mutating.

Ultimately the success of American democracy is that people here do not think anybody has the correct answer, especially not government. Therefore, in America, the truth is pursued and discovered through empirical testing, experimentation, demonstration, correction, adaptation, trial-and-error, and relentless transformation. Americans would let the Austrian Freedom Party leader Joerg Haider get elected. Then they would coopt him, wear him down, frustrate his efforts, block his actions, appeal decisions to the powerful U.S. Supreme Court, give the majority in Congress to his opposition, and finally drive him into early retirement. Americans are certain that the structure, fiber, balance, and decentralization of power of the U.S. system is strong and resilient, able to easily overcome the whims of any silly leader.

Let's understand this—American democracy does not exist. It is always ahead, over the hill, on the other side—a dream, an aspiration. It is the restless search for democracy, for a better, more fair, and prosperous society that makes this such a wonderful country. If Americans ever actually think they have found democracy, this excellent experiment will be over. American democracy is the journey, not the destination.

*Steffen Schmidt is a Professor of Political Science at Iowa State University. (Note: This article was written by Prof. Schmidt in response to a request by French journalist Alain Hertoghe of the Paris newspaper la Croix. Monsieur Hertoghe covered the Iowa caucuses and other primaries and wrote a series of articles for his newspaper on American politics. He invited Prof. Schmidt to write a positive piece on U.S. democracy for a French audience for a special issue of la Croix "Etats-Unis; La democratie imper-turbable," February 20, 2000. The article was juxtaposed to a basically skeptical or critical piece on U.S. government and politics written by Andre Kaspl, a professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris. This article appeared in that issue as "La recherche incessante de la democratie." The English version of the article, which differs slightly from the French, appears on the e-zine ElectricPolitics.com, Vol. V, Jan-Feb, 2000.)*

**GOVERNMENT--MR. SINGISER--OUTSIDE READING**  
**"SEARCHING FOR DEMOCRACY" by Steffen Schmidt**

1. How does the size and diversity of the United States effect the American system of government?

2. How does Schmidt make the argument that "mistrust of government" is a major force guiding American government?

3. Knowing what you know about the Constitution, offer **six specific examples** from the Constitution which proves that the framers were mistrustful of the government.

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4. ON THE BACK OF THIS SHEET, WRITE A COUPLE OF PARAGRAPHS WHICH SEEK TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION---WHY DOES SCHMIDT TITLE HIS ARTICLE "SEARCHING FOR DEMOCRACY"?