VOLUME VIII No. 3

Bulletin of

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE
IN ANNAPOLIS

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND
JULY, 1956
Founded as King William's School, 1696. Chartered as St. John's College, 1785

ON THE COVER:

Francis Scott Key's great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. William T. Jarvis of Chevy Chase, Maryland, and Dr. Richard D. Weigle, president of St. John's, examine the College Register for 1789-1855 in which Francis Scott Key is first enrolled as a student.

The secretary desk once belonged to the author of "The Star Spangled Banner" and was a gift from Mrs. Paul Mellon to the College.

Volume VIII JULY, 1956 Number 3

Published quarterly

Entered as Second-class matter, February 18, 1949, at the Post Office, at Annapolis, Maryland, under the Act of August 24, 1912.

COLLEGE RECEIVES $1,000,000 GRANT TOWARD KEY MEMORIAL AND LABORATORY BUILDING

Old Dominion Foundation of New York City has made a generous new grant of one million dollars to St. John's College to make possible the erection of the Francis Scott Key Memorial Auditorium and the new laboratory building. This gift enables the College to claim the five hundred thousand dollars toward the Key Memorial voted conditionally by the General Assembly at its February session this year.

The auditorium, which will contain facilities for the Friday night lectures, the College's concert series, the King William Players' productions and the Saturday night showings of the R.A.M. Film Club, will constitute a living memorial to Francis Scott Key of the Class of 1796. The auditorium will contain as well a room suitable for choral work and for the discussions following the Friday night lectures. There will also be music seminar rooms, music practice rooms and facilities for painting, ceramics and sculpture.

The laboratory building will contain ten of the most modern laboratories and more than twenty small offices and individual project rooms. The new facilities will replace one hundred and thirty-eight-year-old Humphreys Hall which will eventually be rebuilt as a modern dormitory for men.

Architectural plans for the building have been drawn by the firm of Neutra and Alexander of Los Angeles, California, who have associated with them as local resident architect the firm of Alexander S. Cochran Associates of Baltimore, Maryland. Bids will be called for the end of July and it is expected that ground will be broken late in the summer. In all probability the building will require approximately eighteen months for completion.

THE MYTH AND LOGIC OF DEMOCRACY

BY JOHN S. KIEFFER

Democracy is a myth. From one point of view there is not and never has been a government or a society that is truly democratic. But on the other hand, when the name is given with sincerity to a government, there are demands imposed on that government and its people that compel them to act so that the name is not completely falsified. This is the nature of a myth. It is a story that is both false in detail or in literal fact, true in spirit and in general.

The myth of democracy is, however, in our tradition, more definite than these general considerations. The myth of democracy is the history of ancient Athens. It has its quintessential formulation in the funeral oration of Pericles, though it is told by all the great Athenian writers; poets, historians, orators, or philosophers. It is a lively, living myth. When modern historians write about Athens, they reveal as much about modern political feeling as they do about ancient Athens. All the battles of politics in the nineteenth and twentieth century have been fought in the Agora of Athens.

The myth of democracy is largely legend, that is a story explaining some great phenomenon of history. What does it explain? To take an example of another myth, in the case of the Trojan cycle it seems probable that the myths explain the breakdown of the Mycenaean world. Periods of chaos are productive of legend. But this is not the full story. The myth of Troy as we have it is the work of a man of genius who seems to have lived long after the disappearance of the Mycenaean world. The expansion of Greece through colonies seems to have been the exciting cause of the Homeric poems. This was again a period of swift change such as to be fertile in making myths. So, for the Trojan war, it seems that two periods of history contribute to the story. (I am not saying

that the Homeric poems are caused by historical circumstances. The absolute cause must be the myth-making faculties of Homer and his unknown predecessors. I am saying that historical periods supply the material for the poet's imagination to work on. And further, that periods of change supply the most usable kind of material. Still further, it may be that the finished poem, the Iliad or Odyssey, is produced in a stable period following a period of change.)

With the analogy of the Iliad and Odyssey in mind, we may try to see what historical circumstances furnished material for the myth of democracy. I am not going to say the fifth century, because that was the myth. To us looking back it has historical being and becomes circumstantial to the myth; to the people living then it did not, of course, exist historically, and so could not be the phenomenon they felt called on to explain. I think the historical phenomenon I am looking for is that same period of colonization, or rather its concluding phase, that had been, in its earlier phase, the material for Homer. The second set of historical conditions for the myth of democracy would be the rise of the Persian empire.

So it is my contention that the myth of democracy that we know from a community of bards, classic writers, and they knew from the rhapsodes of the assembly, somehow told itself by applying its imagination to the colonizing period that ended in the sixth century B.C. and to the Persian wars. What was there about that period that aroused the imagination to see a way of government by words? And secondly, why does this produce a myth of democracy?

I answer my first question first. Words must have achieved a new importance for the sea-faring colonizers. Ulysses shows by his example how his survival depended on his skill with words: his quick repartee with the Cyclops, his courteous speech and inspired tale-spinning among the Phaeacians, his self-concealing lies when he had returned to Ithaca. We can well imagine how often a group of colonizers had use for quick wit and ready tongue, to ease their way among strange

tribes on the coast of Italy or the Crimea, to gain advantage over rival groups seeking a "home far off" on the same site, to settle disputes among the colonists themselves, now they were living far from their accustomed ways and ancestral habits.

This last was perhaps most important of all, for, though hearth fire and home gods accompanied the colonists, and ancestral customs were carried in their very souls, the change of setting must have weakened the sentiment with which the colonists regarded them. Moreover, many of their gods and customary rites must have been inappropriate to their new surroundings. Add to this, that the colonizers went in small groups to widely scattered places, from the Crimea to Spain, and came from many different home cities, and so there was no central direction of their movement. They were forced to rely on their own resources. No wonder then that the colonies were often pioneers in new constitutions and in the development of written law. In all this words assume an importance not only greater than before, but also of a different kind.

So we have the myth of Hellas and have seen how the Greeks have discovered the power of words to hold together a self-uprooted, changing society. Why does the myth of democracy eventuate from this finding? To answer this question we may first look at the political myth that prevailed in Greece before the colonizing period and that guided the plans and actions of the colonizers. That myth, I suggest, was the patriarchal myth, the myth of fatherhood, of the wisdom of the elders. It was the myth that was to be named aristocracy when later ages became self-conscious and invented labels for its customs. Its foundation in economics was in the ownership of land and its legal expression was through ancestral custom, the laws (thesmoi) of Zeus-born kings and the pronouncement of oracles. The myth or elements of it survived all through the later age of democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny. You can feel its presence on every page of Plato. By contrast one of the formative myths of modern democracy is the Social Contract. Now the Social Contract implies the

natural equality of all men, it foreshadows brotherhood rather than fatherhood and is forward-looking not backward-looking. Men in a Social Contract society ask what new agreement shall we make to deal with a new situation; in a patriarchal society they ask, what does the custom of our ancestors, or the will of our father, God, direct us to do. Probably the inner logic of political behavior will always interweave the strands of fatherhood and brotherhood. Our society is founded on the Social Contract and yet our own Social Contract, the Constitution of the United States, has become, and had to become, an institutionalized father image, the incarnation of ancestral wisdom.

In the foundation of the Greek colonies this order is reversed. The colonies, as we have seen, were founded according to the ancestral model of the mother-city, but by the logic of the situation, geographical dispersion and political autonomy, the colonies were forced to look ahead, not back, and to act in practice as if on the theory of the Social Contract. Accordingly, as we have seen, they became leaders in the writing of constitutions and the making of legal codes. Moreover, as we have also seen, the Social Contract implies equality. Therefore, the tendency toward democracy acquired the backing of political practice. When the cumulative force of the many separate experiences with government showed what had happened, historic patterns came into view. Tyrannies arose, oppositions in the name of ancestral custom convert the traditional, unselfconscious aristocracies into politically conscious oligarchies, and the people, the Demos, thereby became conscious of itself as a political force.

I see the grounding of the myth of democracy, then, in the colonial movement, which weakened the unquestioned acceptance of the old patriarchal way of life of the land-owning aristocracy pictured and idealized in Homer and Heriod, and in the Oder of Pindar. I have argued that colonizing put a new emphasis on the use of words as means of politics and that this meant a tendency away from ancestral custom toward something like a Social Contract. Another way of putting it

is that tradition disappeared to be replaced by reason. Historical realities never exactly conform to categories of thought. The more rational new forms of the colonies retained traditional forms and relations and developed their own traditions. Conversely, the traditional forms began to use the mode of reason in their struggle for self-preservation.

The democratic myth includes something more than a set of historical conditions and a new way of using words. It includes also an implicit change in the view of men in relation to one another and a new foundation of political power. These two changes are related to each other. If we can believe the accepted view of most historians, the colonizing movement was one expedient adopted because of population pressure. Rather than risk revolution, the citizens of the metropolis decide to encourage a portion of the populace to emigrate and colonize. So, you see, a group that may have been an unconsidered mob of base-born paupers acquires a new status. Partly this is because of its physical strength as it grows more numerous, and perhaps because of the appearance of bold and intelligent leaders in its ranks. More significant, however, is that, by the proposal to send out a colony, the old aristocracy confers on the group of colonies the dignity of a rational equal. No longer are they just a number of poor people who can be absorbed as tenants or clients and cared for in a fatherly way by the well-born landowners. It is now in embryo a corporate body with whom the aristocracy can treat in a reasonable way. This is the birth of Demos.

But while these reforms ended forever the old aristocratic power they introduced the schism, that was to prove fateful, that divided Greece between democracies and oligarchies. For as to the birth of Demos there always remained an uncertainty. Was Demos the poor alone, or was he the whole state? Periclean Athens came close to ending the schism, but at the cost of a new division. The Demos of Athens was corrupted by the imperial power the city gained as a result of the Persian war, and ultimately the rational basis of democracy and its appeal to the aspirations of men was lost in the

struggle for power. So the myth of Athenian democracy ends in tragedy.

I believe we can trace a progress in the form of one central question. Aeschylus and Pericles seem to ask the question, "What will make democracy work?", while Plato asks rather, "Why won't democracy work?". Socrates is the pivot on which the question turns. The transformation of the question is due, I think, to the tragic flaw in the democratic myth that I have pointed out. For Aeschylus, the answer to his question is that democracy, which is represented as the victor over the Furies, will work if it reveres the compact between Athena and the Furies, now become the Eumenides, and preserves Athena's court of Areopagus. In other words he accepts the democratic exchange, but warns that the wisdom of the elders, which we have seen to be characteristic of the old aristocracies, must be allowed to make its voice heard. Democracy is to be the government of all, not the government of the many. Pericles, to judge from the funeral oration, finds the source of the wisdom needed to guide deliberation in the character and institutions of the Athenians. Athens is the School of Hellas, and must be, consequently, her own first scholar. For Pericles, too, democracy is the government of all, Demos is not just the poor. The city will have wise leaders and a public opinion that is a judge of good leadership, even if it is not capable of originating policy. For Aeschylus and Pericles wisdom is something a little mysterious. They each, in fact, are somewhat complacent in accepting the confident view that the success of Athens is due to her wisdom and that one need not doubt that the wisdom is there.

Socrates' whole life was a life of questions. In him the power of rationality puts ancient wisdom to the question to declare its meaning to a new generation. The democratic heirs of the old patriarchate had inherited the noble terms, καλός, ἀγαθός, δικαιός, "noble," "good" and "just." But just as Cleisthenes had rearranged the patriarchal tribes of old Athens into geographic wards, in order to obliterate the

political power of ancient birth, so the sophists were rearranging the meanings of the ancient words and thereby obliterating the ancient moral wisdom of the polis. As they became gradually aware of what they were doing, the Sophists summed up the discussion with the words φύσις and νόμος, nature and convention. "What is just by nature differs from what is just by convention" is a thesis that points up the contradiction in the democratic position of Pericles and his contemporaries. To Conservatives: The ancestral custom of justice is natural and opposed to the injustice of tyranny, which is conventional. The sophists transvalue values. Ancestral custom is conventional, brute power is natural. The natural is just is the major premise here. The mysterious paternal wisdom that Aeschylus saw interpreted by the goddess Athena and Pericles found in the curriculum of the School of Hellas has become a subject of inquiry to the rational spirits of the sophists. Socrates, therefore, appears in the pivotal role of democratic dialectic. To the simple man, who was satisfied with the wisdom of his fathers, he was a sophist. To the sophists, themselves, he was the supreme antagonist and reactionary.

Socrates claimed to be the only true statesman in Athens, because he alone went about asking people to examine themselves and to find out what as men they really wanted. The so-called statesmen simply outbid each other in giving the people what they thought they wanted. This position of Socrates is a rational criticism of democracy. He saw that the movement to rationality, which, as we have seen, played so large a part in the growth of democracy, was tending to destroy the foundation in ancestral wisdom not alone of democracy, but of any orderly government. The early aristocracies could subsist in its moral life on the gnomic pronouncements of the sages, buttressed by the ambiguous declarations of the oracles. As soon, however, as the success of the colonial experiments in rational construction of government had time to sink into the consciousness of the Hellenic world, the authority of ancient wisdom, enshrined in sententious

sayings, was first perverted then challenged: perverted by being applied in contexts apart from the old ways of behaving, then challenged by a rationalizing ascription to reason.

Socrates is a statesman, then, because he made possible the rational criticism of politics. He is a democratic statesman, because it was only in democracy that his method could work. I do not mean that people in an oligarchy or an aristocracy could not play the game of dialectic. But for Socrates his method was not a game, it was a political program, aimed at the improvement of the process of government. The reason why it could work only in a democracy is that it is only in democracy that the means of governing is speech. Oligarchy and aristocracy alike rest on a non-rational foundation, the one of wealth, the other of personal prestige or nobility. Political control is reached either by purchase or by awe-inspiring and in the end, sustained by force, command. Whatever reasoning may go on among the elite, themselves, the final authority is external to reason. In a democracy, on the other hand, reason is the final authority. I do not imply that a democracy always reasons well, or that the authority of reason never breaks down. I mean simply that you can't have democracy without this principle. In Athens the people discovered the principle, used it implicitly without full understanding, were insufficiently self-critical of their own wisdom, and so put Socrates to death.

The death of Socrates was followed, within less than a century, by the death of Athenian democracy, at the hands of the Peripatetic philosopher, Demetrius of Phalerum. In their dying both became myths for us. There is a curious difference, however, in our reception of the myths. No one, I suppose, would hold that Socrates' death is a warning for us not to seek knowledge. Yet there have been many who have held the death of Athenian democracy a warning not to practice democracy. To a certain extent this difference may be due to the dialogues of Plato. In them Socrates is hero and democracy villain, at least as many read the dialogues. But Plato is not melodramatic. The death of Socrates is as

much the tragedy of Athenian democracy, as it is of Socrates. Plato, I think, makes it clear that this is his feeling. One has only to read his loving and hating satire on democracy in the eighth book of the Republic and compare it with the coldly disinterested treatment of oligarchy, the unmitigated contempt of tyranny, to see that Plato was no oligarchical reactionary. In spite of Plato's anti-democratic profession we gain from him a sense of the power of the democratic myth to make itself the standard by which all other forms of government are judged.

One point immediately the myth puts before us for decision. Are we going to understand democracy as a government of the many or of all. This, as we have seen, was the tragic uncertainty in Greek democracy. Thucydides has shown the irreconcilable division that drove the democrats more and more in the direction of many rather than all. It is not primarily an intellectual confusion, but a real difficulty. Mr. Lippmann has stated the difficulty for our time in his recent book, *The Public Philosophy*. In it he shows what confusion surrounds the term "the people" in our political thought. It is not a semantic or intellectual confusion, though he uses a semantic device to make it clear. It is the kind of confusion that cannot be cleared away, because the people means both things at once that Mr. Lippmann tries to separate. His two senses are the electorate at any given election, "the pee-pul" of political satirists, and the whole host of the nation, the ancestors, ourselves who now are living, and the unborn generations to come. Government belongs to all the people in this latter sense, while the electorate of the moment is but a temporary trustee for the whole people. Yet in so far as a generation is the product of its ancestors and holds its beliefs from them (in large part) while also having in its heart hopes for its progeny, it is impossible to separate the people from the People. And on the other hand the larger People is itself a temporary part of humanity. Its habits and beliefs may be, in a larger context, as momentary as the people in any given election year. It seems to me that,

just as ancient democracy both lived and died through the tension of few and many, so our democracy lives in this same tension, extended through time. Whether it will eventually die from the tension is not for us to say. Mr. Lippmann has done us a service by reminding us that it exists. Aware of it, we know better where we are and, possibly, how we should act.

Perhaps Plato offers a solution in his conviction that politics is a science, an epistone. For Plato this discovery, which he generalized from Socrates' claims to statesmanship, led to the conclusion that monarchy or aristocracy (of the wise) was the best government. Since only a few can be wise, therefore, only a few can govern. In this way democracy is put out of court. In the *Politicus*, however, Plato in despair puts all human government out of court, by showing, against the *Republic*, that a wise king must be a god, no man having sufficient wisdom for the task of kingship. Plato's desperation is our opportunity. Having once and for all disposed of government by an elite, Plato forces us to the only possible course of action, which is to discover how to make do with what we have.

If Plato is driven to despair because the science he held politics to be was beyond human capacity, the fault may lie in Plato's conception of science rather than in human nature. Plato sets up a rigid alternative: either an all-wise king or an unchangeable code of laws, embodying the unchanging principles of political conduct. The dialectic of wisdom and reason, out of which we saw the myth of democracy grow, is replaced by complete separation of them into mutually exclusive realms. In the myth of the dialogue, the *Statesman*, they are placed in different eons of the world, kept apart by a cosmic catastrophe.

In trying to escape Plato's dilemma, let us first agree that politics is a science, that is, that a government will be successful in achieving justice only when it is conducted by men of intelligence, possessing wisdom and knowledge. I shall further premise that a dictatorship or an oligarchy, however

intelligent, wise and knowing its leaders, necessarily rests in the end on extra-rational foundations and will ultimately rely on force to keep its power, in other words, to exist. This means that opposition to the government, however rational, will be a crime. All such governments are, therefore, unjust. Hence, only democratic government can, in principle, achieve justice.

Can democratic government achieve justice in practice? I do not know, but before fleeing with the despairing Plato to Utopia, I would consider what means may exist to make democracy worth a try.

I would first see whether the rigid alternatives of Plato are really so separate. Considering his first alternative, the all-wise king, we can see that, if his wisdom is to succeed in making just decisions in particular disputes, it is not sufficient for the decisions to be abstractly just. They must be accepted as just by the parties to the dispute; otherwise, the king will have to use force and to that extent his government will be unjust. His subjects, therefore, must have at least the intellectual capacity to recognize justice. But so they will be intellectually above the standard supposed by Plato to measure the capacities of all but a few men.

In the case of the other alternative, rigid laws governing by general principles admitting no exceptions, there is no chance at all for justice, since no particular case exactly fits a general principle. Therefore, the standard for men is even higher. The men in this society must have the wisdom to recognize that everyone must accept a little injustice for the sake of others.

I have pointed out these consequences of Plato's position in the *Statesman* because I believe they reveal two demands that just government makes on its citizens, one that they know what justice is and the other that they accept something less than justice for themselves in any given situation. These seem to me to be the presuppositions of the Social Contract, but they do not depend for their existence on the theory of the Social Contract. It is rather the other way around. The

Social Contract is a myth to account for these two inescapable demands of society. It now remains to show that they can be met by a democratic society, and to suggest some of the means available to a democracy for meeting them. That they cannot be met by a society other than democratic has already been stated as a premise.

The first demand requires the assumption of human rationality, while the second requires the assumption of human wisdom. You will notice that Plato's hypothesis of an all-wise ruler entails rational subjects, while his hypothesis of pure rationality of government entails wise subjects. In so far as democracy is government in which all rule and are ruled in turn, both presuppositions are entailed. You will notice, too, that the government of wisdom is personal government, while the government of rationality is institutional or government of law. I think you will now see how I will argue that democracy meets these demands. A government of laws is no respecter of persons, but any government other than democratic is a respecter of persons, in so far as it distinguishes a ruler or ruling class from the other members of society. The condition that makes the injustices inherent in human government bearable, however, is that they be justly distributed without respect of person. So the second demand is met by democracy.

The two principles are that men are capable of acting rationally and of acting wisely, that is capable of knowing principles and having the skill to apply them. The means to establishing democracy are the ways of converting these capabilities into actualities, of bringing it about that men do as they are capable of doing. From Aristotle on teachers have recognized that men learn by doing. This fact makes sense to me of the slogan that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. If democracy operates by rational discussion, the way to learn the art of rational discussion is through discussing rationally the problems encountered in society.

The foundation then for bringing democracy into being and maintaining it is the liberal arts. There are two practical problems here. One is to have liberal arts in one's tradition, the other is to make them available to all citizens. On the first count we are in one respect more fortunate than the Athenians. They were inventing the liberal arts while they were inventing democracy. The positive work of the sophists was their invention of the liberal arts. Sophocles, Herodotus, Euripides, Aristophanes, the whole list of classic Greek authors testify to the lively effect of this invention. Thucydides and Plato confirm it, while they portray its somber side of failure. We are more fortunate in this, that having the tradition that they invented, we are less dazzled by the brilliance of the invention and can use it more soberly. On the other hand, we can lose the liberal arts by reducing them to routine, as the Greeks reduced the wisdom of their early sages to conventional opinion. Nevertheless, because we have the Greek authors, we can go back to them, and have done so from time to time to light again the fires of the liberal arts.

I have all too briefly sketched some of the materials that democracy has to work with in the human attempt to achieve justice. In conclusion, let me say what I think I have been saying. Democracy is the best form of government because people insist on governing themselves, and any attempt of men to govern other men against their will begets injustice, which is the negation of the end of government. People can govern themselves, because they can be wise and reasonable. Athens once made a brave attempt at democracy and left us a myth from which we can learn about democracy. Moreover, she left us the beginning of the liberal arts, which, once given to the world, took to themselves the discoveries of Romans, of Jews, of Christians and have transmitted to us the paradigms of the science of government, especially in education, law and religion. I hold neither to the law of progress, which would affirm that democracy is the inevitable final stage of history; nor to a biological analogy which places democracy as one stage in some cyclically unfolding course of events.

I think that men can and sometimes do succeed in governing themselves; that by rational self-criticism they may prolong their success; that a genuine education will sustain their self-criticism.

Excerpts from a lecture given by Mr. Kieffer at St. John's College on Jan. 13, 1956.

STUDY CONFERENCE OF COMMISSION ON LIBERAL EDUCATION

Dean Jacob Klein of St. John's College and President Harold Taylor of Sarah Lawrence College served as co-leaders of a seminar study conference of thirteen college presidents in Nova Scotia early in July. Participants were all members of the Commission on Liberal Education of the Association of American Colleges, of which President Weigle is the chairman.

The conference, which was financed by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York City, was designed to divert the minds of the college presidents from administrative matters and give them eight days of intellectual stimulation through reading and studying together. Books which were read and discussed included Plato—*The Meno*, Jonathan Swift—*Gulliver's Travels*, Walter Lippmann—*Public Philosophy*, Ortega y Gasset—*Revolt of the Masses*, Gordon Chalmers—*The Republic and the Person*.

The group were guests of Mr. Cyrus Eaton, Chairman of the Board of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company, at his ancestral home in Pugwash, Nova Scotia.

GIFTS AND BEQUESTS

St. John's College is a non-sectarian, independent liberal arts college deriving its income from student fees, from a limited appropriation by the Maryland General Assembly, from the gifts of its friends and alumni and from permanent endowment funds. These funds now exceed $1,500,000 but must be quadrupled to assure the financial stability of the College.

Planning for the future has been based upon the conviction that the College enrollment should not exceed 300 students. This will preserve the present close relationship between faculty and students. To provide adequate physical facilities for a student body of this size, new buildings will be required as well as renovations to existing structures.

The College invites gifts and bequests to its current budget, to its building program, and to its permanent endowment funds. Inquiries may be addressed to the President or the Treasurer. Bequests may be made in a form similar to the following:

> "I hereby give and bequeath to the Visitors and Governors of St. John's College in the State of Maryland, an educational corporation existing by Charter of the General Assembly of the State of Maryland and situated in Annapolis, Anne Arundel County, in said State, the sum of ..... dollars."

If bequests are made for specific purposes, such can be fully stated. Attention is invited to the fact that Federal and State income tax deductions resulting from such gifts may mean a cost to the donor of only a fraction of the value of the gift to the College.


FACIO · LIBEROS · EX · LIBERIS · LIBRIS · LIBRAGVE