



## **A Fragile Democracy** *Daniel Terris*

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In the days after the 2004 presidential election, the news media fixed on the fact that one poll showed that “moral values” was the principal animating the concern of 22 percent of voters in the presidential campaign. I, for one, hope that this is not true. Quite frankly, I would be dismayed if values were not a principal concern of *all* of our citizenry. If Americans do not think in moral terms about war and peace, wealth and poverty, justice and equality, it would be truly upsetting.

The problem is not the presence of values in American politics; rather, that we have succumbed to the fantasy that our own particular set of values ought always to prevail in the public sphere. It is inevitable that sometimes our leaders will take our communities and our country in a direction that runs against the grain of our most deeply held convictions.

When our opponents win, we can see very clearly how they amplify a fragile electoral triumph into a popular mandate to impose the full range of their beliefs on American society. We recognize this as unwarranted arrogance, and we quite rightly decry the dire consequences of running roughshod over the minority, and sometimes over common sense.

When *we* win, however, either through political triumph or community organizing or victories in the courts, we have no problem asking our opponents to live with defeat. Confident that our values represent the greatest public good, we expect the losers to accept defeat gracefully and to abide by the results.

For the most part, Americans give remarkably little thought to the sentiments of those who feel that their values have been betrayed by the democratic process. The triumphant proponents of a foreign policy based on unilateral militarism show little concern for the ways that they are turning their backs on the value many of their countrymen place on

cooperation and humility in world affairs.

This insensitivity, however, transcends political boundaries. Supporters of a woman's right to choose spare little thought for the anguish of those who see themselves as accomplices to murder by living in a society that condones abortion. Vigorous defenders of the First Amendment often expect those who are offended or hurt by racist, violent, and pornographic expression simply to accept their pain as the cost of living in a free society.

It is perilously easy to resort to the language of self-righteousness, whether in victory or defeat. But there is no greater threat to democracy than self-righteousness, because it closes down public discourse at the very moments when it is needed most. The more assertive we are that our values ought to be everyone's values, the less able we are to hear, respect, and debate those who disagree with us.

One of the great tests of a democracy is how the losers respond to defeat. Do they passively accept the will of the majority? Do they resort to sulking and name calling? Do they accept the challenge of reinvigorating their values for the next battle? Like it or not, it is up to the losers in our society to reinvigorate public discourse by modeling a spirit of vigorous respectful debate on the issues. They need to frame public questions in terms that acknowledge difference, respect competing claims, and save the most expansive rhetoric for the direst challenges to the nature of democracy itself.

The Jewish people ought to be good at this. No matter how hard Jewish-Americans have stressed the hyphen, have worked to create a synergy between "Jewish" and "American" values, a pluralistic nation in which Jews are a tiny minority will by definition often run counter to certain Jewish values. Jews bring to public discourse a healthy skepticism about the language of "vision" and "mission" that often informs a "Christian-American" view of politics in the United States. Long experience with loss (and recovery) and resistance to the utopian impulse should allow Jewish voices to speak with special relevance on the connection between values and the political future.

Jews also bring to the table a dark undercurrent of watchfulness, the gut-wrenching knowledge that things *can* go too far. Readers of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* will recognize the dilemma: at what point does

too much faith in the democratic process become a passive acceptance of the destruction of democracy itself? As we look toward the next administration, Jews can help Americans be passionate about making the full spectrum of values central to public discourse, all the while with one eye privately fixed on the dark truth that democracy is fragile, and that it can be subverted from within.

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