

National Mall *Liberty Fund D.C.*



**From Revolution to Republic
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Remarks of Maurice A. Barboza
National Mall Liberty Fund D.C.**

Good morning, my fellow history activists. Between 1978 and 1980, I traced my ancestry to multiple soldiers of the American Revolution. A black genealogist suggested I join the Sons of the American Revolution. In 1980, after being welcomed by the SAR, I suggested to my aunt, Lena Santos Ferguson, that she join the Daughters of the American Revolution. She reminded me of how the DAR had barred the famous black opera singer Marian Anderson from performing at Constitution Hall in 1939. Lena said, "Maurice, it won't be easy." I replied, "But this is 1980." Sure enough, Lena's application languished for months. A DAR chapter official told one of her sponsors that her membership would "break up the chapter." After three years, the National DAR was content to ignore Lena.

My calls to reporters to expose the story often were not comprehended. "Call back when the story matures," some replied. In September 1983, we visited Rep. Nancy L. Johnson. Our beloved hometown of Plainville, Connecticut is in her district. Rep. Johnson agreed to introduce a bill to honor black soldiers and liberty seekers as a way of prodding the DAR. President Ronald W. Reagan signed Pub. L. 99-245 in an Oval Office ceremony in mid-March 1984, just days after Lena became a reluctant celebrity.

On March 9, 1984, the front page of The Washington Post had announced, "Black Unable to Join Local DAR Chapter: Race is a Stumbling Block." The D.C. city council threatened to repeal the group's real estate tax exemption worth over a million dollars a year. The law firm Hogan and Hartson came to my aunt's defense and remained her pro bono counsel for over 17 years. That morning, and for weeks to come, my telephone rang continuously: Today Show, Good Morning America, JET, AP, UPI, New York Times, The Washington Afro-American, Good Morning America, 60 Minutes, Charlie Rose, Newsweek, the Wall Street Journal. Now, anxious to avoid further scrutiny, the DAR invited Lena to join.

Lena refused the overture, insisting that the group sign a settlement agreement to ensure no other black woman would suffer her fate. The DAR was required to keep track of, and help, minority descendants become members; advise women that they could be eligible regardless of their race or the race of their ancestor; offer scholarships to graduating seniors in D.C. schools; conduct a seminar on blacks in the Revolutionary war; and identify everyone of African descent who served. She sought no personal consideration except simple respect. Only after 17 years of prodding did the DAR finally publish the compendium of over 2,000 African American and 400 Indian patriots. Many more remain undiscovered, and I'll talk about that later.

In late 1984, I decided those patriots deserve a memorial. Rep. Johnson and Senator Al Gore introduced companion bills in early 1985. On October 27, 1986, President Reagan signed Pub. L. 99-558. On March 25, 1988, the history was declared to be "of preeminent historical and lasting significance to the nation." With that, the memorial was eligible to stand on the Mall. Since approving Pub. L. 100-265, Congress has never revoked that designation.

All of the elements for success were in place by 1992, including the land on the Mall, an approved design, major donors, and the support of over 20 influential national organizations. The project, sadly, went downhill after my aunt and I left the project at the end of that year. None of the persons who pledged to build the memorial afterward were up to the long and grueling task. After volunteering to help the group from mid-2003 to early 2005, I realized nothing could save the memorial. So, I decided to assemble National Mall Liberty Fund D.C. to renew the project's original spirit and finally build the memorial.

By October 27, 2005, the group's authority to build the memorial had expired and members of the Senate remained skeptical about reviving the project. Everyone we consulted, including committee staff in the House and Senate, were opposed unanimously to reauthorizing the other group. Besides their poor track record, three years earlier Congress had prohibited the construction of any new memorials on the Mall except those with preexisting site approval. With the lapse in the black patriots authorization, some thought that would be an insurmountable obstacle.

However, the National Liberty Memorial Act, S. 2495, was introduced in the U.S. Senate on April 3, 2006, by Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and Senators George Allen, Charles Grassley, Robert Byrd, Barack Obama, Elizabeth Dole and Lincoln Chafee. They were convinced that the defective Foundation was a separate issue from the lofty memorial. The challenge was to draft legislation that would not jeopardize the revived project by any association with the previous sponsor. No person and none of its indicia, including the design, are associated with the National Liberty Memorial. The memorial's honorees, however, remain precisely the same. The memorial still would honor slaves and free persons who served as soldiers and sailors in the Revolutionary war. Honored, also, are men, women and children who petitioned for liberty, ran away from slavery, and performed patriotic acts.

Senator Dodd's bill was referred to the Senate National Parks Subcommittee (Energy & Natural Resources Committee). Sponsors are working to pass S. 2495 when the 109th Congress returns for the lame duck session in November. The parks subcommittee's chairman, Senator Craig Thomas of Wyoming, will decide the fate of the legislation. Senator Thomas (202-224-6441) and his colleagues will likely make the best decision possible for the National Liberty Memorial if they know how strongly you feel about S. 2495. Other leaders who would welcome your opinion are Energy Committee chairman Pete Domenici and ranking members Jeff Bingaman and Daniel Akaka. (Congressional switchboard: 202-224-3121.) In addition, please tell your Senator to cosponsor S. 2495.

On June 27, 2006, our patience paid off: The National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission, a representative panel charged by Congress with overseeing memorials in Washington's monumental core, voted to preserve the Mall site for the National Liberty Memorial. The Commission concluded that the legislation does not violate the Commemorative Works Clarification and Revision Act of 2003. Besides that decision, two other factors are working in favor of the revived project: First, over the past 20 years historians and researchers have written scores of books and articles that confirm the memorial's merit. Scholars Gary B. Nash, a prolific colonial historian, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author and humanities professor, sent an impressive bibliography to the U.S. Senate saying, "The nation's Mall will never be a "completed work of art" until this memorial takes its place across from a memorial to the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence." Most of those 40 books were written in just the past five years.

Second, the descendants of those patriots are beginning to step forward. Perhaps as many as 60 African Americans have joined the DAR and the Sons of the American Revolution, since my aunt demonstrated it could be done. Last Summer four black men were inducted into the Virginia Society Sons of the American Revolution at George Mason's home, Gunston Hall. They are related to a woman who joined the DAR several years ago upon discovering a Revolutionary war ancestor, a free black man from North Carolina, listed in the compendium of patriots prepared by the DAR as part of my aunt's settlement agreement. During the memorial advisory commission hearing on June 27, 2006, the descendants of multiple patriots from Charles City County, Virginia testified in support of the memorial. Two of them were students from the County who are descended from Sgt. Isaac Brown, Joseph Wallace and William Timothy. The other, Dr. Marion Lane of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is also a descendant of Sgt. Isaac Brown. The national news media has embraced the recent discovery of the Revolutionary war ancestor of Dr. Gates, John Redman of Virginia, through his PBS Series "African American Lives." Dr. Gates was inducted into the SAR in July 2006. Dr. Lane recently became a member of the DAR.

Then there's another unusual story of a patriot who being discovered although he was already famous. Cato Mead's name is on a cemetery stone and engraved into a memorial at the Iowa state capitol along with 41 other compatriots who died there. Originally from Connecticut, he made his way west with the Mormons. However, his color had been lost to history until recently. Retired school teacher Barbara MacLeish of Minnesota discovered he was black. The Montrose, Iowa community gathered around his impressive gravestone, recently, to honor his memory. Senator Grassley issued a press release.

Last year, Liberty Fund D.C. and the SAR announced a cooperative effort to encourage African Americans to trace their heritage. Further, the Sons of the American Revolution and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University recently announced a joint project to examine pension files of Revolutionary war soldiers and compare them with census records to identify black soldiers and uncover evidence of living descendants. One of the purposes is to encourage descendants to honor their ancestors by joining the SAR and other hereditary organizations.

There has been a consciousness that those patriots deserve a memorial from as early as 1848. Historian William C. Nell and others petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for a memorial to Crispus Attucks that year. Seven years later, Nell authored, "The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution," the first of many books on the subject. In 1908, Virginians Giles B. Jackson and Webster Davis observed in "The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States" that "Monuments innumerable have been erected to white soldiers who fought in the Revolution. Only a few kind words have been said for the colored soldiers...."

The first question that most people ask when they learn that blacks served in the American Revolution is why would a slave fight for someone that had enslaved him. The answer to that question -- to a large extent -- lies in the Declaration of Independence and the history that preceded it. The idea that "all men are created equal" and that slavery was an evil institution were not new ideas to Americans, whether they were black or white. When presented with an opportunity to secure their freedom, blacks recognized it. The Revolution was such an opportunity.

Benjamin Quarles in the "American Revolution as a Black Declaration of Independence" said that "all blacks during the Revolutionary era shared a common goal -- the pursuit of freedom and equality." The dawn of the American Revolution presented an opportunity, too, for America to live up to her true meaning by abolishing slavery and taking steps to assure the equal rights of all persons.

When the Continental army was being organized, blacks were barred from service for fear that they might understandably be inclined to aim their weapons at their former masters. But free blacks of Boston, who had already been in the army, protested; the order was partially reversed. However, recruiters, hard-pressed to fill quotas, continued to ignore the order and accepted runaway slaves, free blacks and others. Washington did not turn his back on them.

The states began to reverse policies excluding blacks from the militias in the face of British attempts to entice slaves to their side with promises of freedom. Americans were stunned by a 1775 Declaration issued by Lord Dunmore promising freedom to slaves who joined his side. Those irksome efforts to drive a wedge between master and slave and take away a potential source of American manpower were taken seriously. By 1778, blacks were being welcomed into service and efforts were initiated, particularly in the South (but without much success), to raise all-black regiments. James Madison's November 20, 1780, letter to Joseph Jones said "would it not be as well to liberate and make soldiers at once of the blacks themselves." He continued: "It would certainly be more consonant with the principles of liberty, which ought never to be lost sight of in a contest for liberty."

The Southern states, which were threatened most by British forces after 1778, with the occupation of Savannah, had been stingy in filling their quotas, and recognizing this, an effort was undertaken by a key Washington aide, John Laurens, to raise an army of 3,000 blacks. It did not succeed and Washington told Laurens of his dismay. By around 1779, Massachusetts had furnished the bulk of men, 67,907, while the colonies South of Pennsylvania furnished only 50,493 -- 8,414 less than a single colony.

Blacks ran away to join the army, using assumed names to get past recruiters. They bargained with their masters for commitments of freedom in exchange for military service, accepting the possibility of wounds, capture, starvation, disease and death as gambles well worth the freedom they coveted. Some had the unfortunate experience of having masters who reneged on their promises of freedom, like James Robinson and Jack Arabas. Understanding his predicament, Arabas ran away and eventually was set free by a Connecticut court. The decision enabled other Connecticut soldiers to receive their promised freedom. Living over 100 years, Mr. Robinson finally received his freedom with the Emancipation Proclamation.

The majority of black soldiers came from the Northern states. However, no state failed to be represented in their ranks. Most blacks served in integrated fighting units, although Rhode Island, Connecticut and other states boasted a few notable all-black units. Besides the army, many blacks served in the Navy, the colonies having a population of around 2,000 black seaman at the time of the Revolution.

Many black soldiers distinguished themselves in battle. Salem Poor was officially commended by the Massachusetts General Court for bravery at Bunker Hill. The Court said "we would only beg leave to say, in the person of this said negro centres a brave and gallant soldier." Austin Dabney of Georgia was awarded 112 acres in recognition for "bravery and fortitude" in several engagements." Edward Hector was given 50 pounds by the Pennsylvania legislature 50 years after the war for protecting an ammunition wagon while other Americans retreated. Salem Poor was officially commended for his services at Bunker Hill.

Black soldiers brought skills to their military service; there were wagoners, musicians, shoemakers, basket makers, farmers, bakers and planters. Because of their status, they generally served longer terms than whites. Francis Freeman, Cato Howe, Titus Kent, Pomp Liberty and others served the entire duration of the war. When the war ended, blacks had served in every major engagement from Lexington and Concord to Yorktown. Some black soldiers had been carried from Africa to be slaves, men like Gad Asher, Richard Cozens and Caesar Clark.

Besides honoring soldiers, the National Liberty Memorial would honor black men and women who provided civilian assistance such as a Danbury, Connecticut slave named Ned, who helped embattled whites in a house under attack by the British. They were eventually overcome; after being shot, Ned attempted to get up to shoot his assailant. His head was cut off. Ned's owner, Samuel Smith, said that Ned was "a very zealous friend to the American cause." Smith successfully petitioned the legislature in 1778 for reimbursement for Ned's loss. Black men and women also performed mundane support work that freed others to do the fighting.

Blacks seemingly used whatever means were available to secure their freedom by joining the militia, buying their own freedom and running away. Jefferson estimated that during 1778 alone more than 30,000 Virginia slaves ran away. A South Carolina historian, Ramsey, estimates that his state lost at least 25,000 during the war. The total slave population in the South was estimated to be near 455,000.

Slaves also exercised the right to petition courts and legislatures. They submitted touching petitions. Dr. Quarles describes the efforts of a group of Connecticut slaves, who petitioned the legislature in 1779 for their freedom. They claimed that they "groaned" under their own burdens, but that they contemplated with horror the miserable Condition of Our Children, who are training up, and kept in Prepartion, for a like State of Bondage and Servitude."

Black Revolutionary war patriots left a legacy; they formed churches and self-help groups that would light the way for later generations. They formed family units whose immediate offspring served America in many ways and in other wars, including the Civil War. Prince Hall founded the black Masons, an organization of over 300,000 members, which still bears his name. James Mars, the son of Revolutionary war patriot Jupiter Mars, wrote an autobiography about his life in slavery, because at the time of the civil war few knew "that slavery ever lived in Connecticut." His son served in the civil war. Lemuel Hayes, a minuteman who fought at Lexington and Concord, became a leading minister. A few years ago, historian Kari J. Winter rediscovered, edited, supplemented, and reprinted the extraordinary memoir of Jeffrey Brace, "The Blind African Slave," published in 1810 (as told to Benjamin F. Prentiss, Esq.). Born in Africa and transported to the U.S. as a slave, Mr. Brace served in the 6th Connecticut Regiment and fought in many of the major battles of the Revolutionary war over a period of five years.

While many generations would have to wait to rejoice in the freedom that only a handful of blacks would achieve during the Revolution, a deep channel had been cut into America's consciousness through which a mighty river would rage and eventually engulf slavery and its evils. The free black population in Boston, New York and Philadelphia rose from 4,000 to over 22,000 by the turn of the 19th century. Slavery was abolished in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Vermont by 1785.

Although the adoption of the Constitution was a disappointment to blacks (since it recognized the legality of slavery and the inhumanity of slaves), the Declaration of Independence remained a beacon of hope to blacks. On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., while standing before the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, repeated the generations-old echo concerning the Declaration of Independence: "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed--we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

When Marian Anderson performed that Easter Sunday 1939 at the Lincoln Memorial, only a handful of historians knew the extent of the participation of blacks in the American Revolution. Those in Congress who had once considered the pension applications of black soldiers like John Carey of Fredericksburg Virginia and Washington, D.C. and Primus Hall of Massachusetts had long since passed to their graves. Subsequent Congresses -- controlled by Southern powerbrokers determined to finally win the civil war -- were interested only in deconstructing the principles of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments under the guise of patriotism and states rights.

Over the past decade, citizens and institutions have pondered ways that America could atone for the horrors of slavery. Some have proposed a formal "apology to African Americans for hundreds of years of slavery." Some African countries and noted politicians support such an apology. I was confused a few days ago to discover that one Senator who supports such an apology had refused to sign on as a cosponsor of the National Liberty Memorial Act. My opinion, and my experience has been that apologies are sound bites without any bite. The only apology for such a horror as two centuries of slavery is a plan that brings the memories of those persons back to life, inspires their descendants and tells the nation squarely of the value of both.

The National Liberty Memorial could have been a starting point for that member of Congress. In fact, for over five generations, now, and longer if you count the sporadic and heroic efforts of early black historians, that movement to resurrect the contributions of those men and women is in full bloom. Besides, African Americans have come too far on their own grit to be marginalized and pitied by an apology with no teeth and no foresight. After all we are now full citizens, and we would be apologizing to ourselves. Instead, through the construction of the National Liberty Memorial, that Senator should propose to say, "We owe a debt, and a thank you, to African Americans who -- through slavery and second class citizenship -- remained faithful to the nation, its defense, and its principles while promoting liberty and justice for all."

My aunt's experience with the DAR suggests that even when there is a legally binding promise backing up an expression, you might not get what you expect. Lena never received an apology from the DAR although officials acknowledged that things were handled inappropriately. She never insisted on one. She understood that an apology would not guarantee that black women who came after her would be treated any better. Instead, Lena used her leverage to insist that the DAR bar discrimination in membership and create procedures to ensure that local chapters are held accountable to strict standards of equality. She also wanted the DAR to tell the nation what it had already known for generations -- that black soldiers had served in the Revolutionary war.

After weeks of negotiation, the DAR signed a settlement agreement in May 1984. The group agreed to bar discrimination in membership, inform women that regardless of their color or heritage, and that of their ancestors, they could be eligible to join the organization. In addition, the DAR agreed to identify "all the black soldiers of the American Revolution," as penance and a way to attract black members - particularly in the District.

A year into the agreement, however, we were baffled by the lethargic pace. Four years passed before the first thin state booklet was published. No progress reports were forthcoming, as required. Without our knowledge, the distinguished black genealogist and researcher, James Dent Walker, was terminated. Eventually, six different Presidents General would snub our pleas for urgency. There would be scores of letters exchanged and meetings conducted over 17 years.

My aunt was 52 years old in 1980 when she first applied for DAR membership. She was about to turn 73 when she received the last booklet in the mail. Still, she was not made whole. Before she died, at 75, she filed away in her papers the unpublished "Forward" we had written. All of her kind acts, and public remarks, about the National Society had not been reciprocated.

By 1999, the DAR had identified only 1,656 black soldiers. Lena and I knew there were many more. Using an electronic spreadsheet and numerous sources, I sliced, diced and folded in names that showed that the DAR had missed hundreds of readily identifiable black soldiers. These include ones with names rarely, if ever, given to whites. The DAR also failed to use census records to identify black heads of households who might have served. They could have simply cross-checked them against military records.

Census records, also, could have been used to identify soldiers from among those whose military records were racially neutral. Here's an example: the military record of Cesar Upton of Massachusetts does not list his race. However, he is listed on the 1790 census as black. Upton's first name also should have tipped off the DAR. The first name "Cesar" was seldom given to whites during the 1700s, but was a common name for blacks. Besides that, the DAR applied such a narrow definition to the term "black" that multitudes of soldiers, described on muster roles as "brown" and "yellow," are excluded and presumed to be "white." Slave masters and newspapers of the period had used these terms to describe runaway slaves. Peter Winslow, a Massachusetts soldier, was listed on a muster role in 1780 as "reported a Negro" and, later, in 1781, on another as "brown."

The DAR would not budge. By 2000, we applied some external pressure. I began calling the media and posting press releases on the Internet. I sought opinions from 16 outstanding colonial historians. I searched the DAR Patriot Index to determine if any DAR members had joined based upon descent from a "brown" soldier. I sent the President General a list of 300 possible names. To her credit, she conceded that as many as 57 "brown" soldiers were listed.

The Associated Press and others wrote about our displeasure with the research. Without telling us, the DAR, apparently, thought it best to go back to work. They found several hundred more overlooked soldiers. Then, in 2001, the DAR added the new research to the existing batch and published "African American and American Indian Patriots of the American Revolution." I updated the spreadsheets. Still, the research missed hundreds of readily-identifiable men. While the DAR clung to the narrow definition of "black," they did add some "brown" and many "yellow" soldiers, as well as those with traditional black names.

"African American Patriots" now lists five soldiers described as "brown" on muster roles. These men are also listed in the "DAR Patriot Index" of proven Revolutionary war soldiers. At least two of them, Solomon Bebe and Barnabas Cole, each sired at least two women who became DAR members perhaps before Marion Anderson's Easter Sunday concert in 1939.

In a June 4, 2002, article in the Hartford Courant, "Injecting Race Into The Revolutionary War," the DAR had no real defense to my allegations. Recently, I was told by a writer that they have conceded that "white" women had joined the DAR on mixed race ancestors even before the rebuff of black contralto Marian Anderson. I am offended each time a DAR official pleads colorblindness when asked for the number of black members. Lena's settlement requires chapters to track, and report to the National Society, the names of black women who present themselves for possible membership. The moment the chapter that had rejected my aunt laid eyes on her, they knew her color.

The proposed site of the National Liberty Memorial, which is specified in S. 2495, is within view of DAR Constitution Hall and mid-way between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. In the early 1930s, the DAR confirmed its patriotic fervor by constructing a block of magnificent federal style buildings off the Mall. One building, a 5,000 seat theater, was named Constitution Hall. The other, the headquarters, was named Independence Hall. There, the DAR wrote a message in the landscape that is affirmed by their actions -- that only white men, their ancestors, were responsible for the "birth of a nation." For decades presidents and powerful congressmen came to make patriotic speeches that affirmed the organization's priority claim to ownership of the nation's heritage.

The National Liberty Memorial will make its own statement that present and future generations must hear. It would share the lake at Constitution Gardens with a memorial to the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, a document that gave hope to these patriots' drive for freedom. When tourists, standing on the island where the Signers Memorial sits, look across at the National Liberty Memorial, they will see in its representation the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence.

On this land, multiple sight lines radiating toward beloved memorials will place African Americans -- whose lives preceded the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott by 10 generations -- in the mix of "real" American history. Looking east at the Washington Monument, Americans will know that black soldiers and patriots helped win the nation's Independence and reshape the Constitution. Looking to the west at the Lincoln Memorial, they will be reminded that 185,000 black soldiers helped preserve the union while fighting for freedom and liberty, from the Revolutionary war to the adoption of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. Visitors will recall what Martin Luther King, Jr. said looking out at the Mall in 1963 about their dream "deeply rooted in the American dream." The site is on a direct line to the future King Memorial on the Tidal Basin.

The sound of water gently splashing the shore of the lake at Constitution Gardens will remind visitors of the harrowing ocean passage of some of these men and women and their ancestors from their native Africa. The Washington Monument is a reminder of General Washington's vigorous efforts to recruit black soldiers and his personal recognition of their bravery and contributions. The Lincoln Memorial is a reminder of the Emancipation Proclamation and of Lincoln's commitment to equality. Viewed together with the National Liberty Memorial, they will make the point that thousands of determined blacks had won freedom on their own initiative generations before Lincoln's birth.

The proximity of the proposed memorial site to Constitution Hall will forever link black patriots with the Revolution and their white compatriots. Here is such an example: John Carey served as a soldier and body servant to General Washington for the entire duration of the Revolutionary war. Mr. Cary was a member of the First Baptist Church of Washington (now the First Baptist Church in the city of Washington). An article in the Albany Patriot of June 6, 1843, recounts Mr. Cary's funeral service:

"The Pastor, Rev. Obadiah Brown, delivered an excellent discourse. He stated that Carey was born in Westmoreland county, Va., in 1729, as he had learned from documents that he had recently seen. This made him 114 years old next August. Gen. Washington, who knew how to appreciate worth, in a black, as well as in a white man, chose him for his body servant. He was with him in the old French war, at Braddock's defeat and throughout the revolution. He was often in the ranks, helping to fight the battles of his country. At the close of the war, Gen. Washington gave him one of his regimental coats, which he always wore, especially on public occasions.

And what reward did the grateful Republic give him for his services? Why, a few months before his death, by the exertions of Hon. GEORGE N. BRIGGS, of Pittsfield, Mass., Congress was induced to pass a bill giving him a pension for the rest of his life. He received about enough to bury him decently!"

The Annual Report of the Library of Congress of June 30, 1910, page 34, describes "eight lots receipted...embracing a great variety of subjects -- the question of the removal of George Washington's remains; the relief of his body servant John Cary...."

Could prompt passage of the National Liberty Memorial Act put a burnish on the upcoming November elections when Americans contemplate the blessings of liberty and confirm the promise of our democracy?