Notes on Democracy

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H. L. Mencken wrote his *Notes on Democracy* in 1926. In the intervening years the United States has suffered and recovered from an economic depression, fought in World War II, staved the spread of Communism in Asia and Eastern Europe; to name a few things. The role of the federal government has grown to unprecedented proportion, and tides of conservatism and liberalism have impacted the political landscape. So, while Mencken makes many interesting points it is appropriate in this new century to revisit his work and question its relevance.

The largest discrepancy between the work of Mencken and our present political reality is his strong focus on democracy. Preconditions for this system of government are a gathering of a nation's citizens and participation. The current trend in the United States is one of disaggregation and non-participation. In 2008, an election with record turnout, only 58.23% of the voting age population cast a vote for President of the United States of America (2008 Presidential Popular Vote, 5). This was not a coming-together under Thomas Paine's "tree" (132). Nor were many people active participants, most choosing to vote only. It was a record year. Instead, I contend that our nation has entered into a new age marked by solitude and lonesomeness.

Solitary Man

Democracy excited our nation to uproarious applause. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs put this country back to work. In return, people were more than happy to make sacrifices, especially during the war. So happy were the people that Roosevelt was all but an elected monarch for the duration of his life. Not finding what they wanted from the only man to ever deploy nuclear weapons, the people, in their wisdom, elected the victorious Supreme Allied Commander. There was no turning back; our Presidency was ever after imperial.

The psychology of the Solitary Man has its roots in individual struggle. After abandoning the greased pole (Mencken, 36), man went off, alone, to sulk. Those

Written for Dr. Erik Trump's PS 334 Course
Author's Major: Communication

share in their success. Emerging from this is a psychology of solitude. Solitary Man dare not help his fellows for either sheer xenophobia, or fear that they will somehow take what is rightfully his. Individualism drives him and alone he will either succeed or fail. Propping up this new psychology is an over-reliance on technology. Through the internet, Solitary Man can accomplish nearly everything from the comfort of his own home.

The psychology of solitude has a clear effect on the realm of politics. Driven by fear, and blind to the world around him, Solitary Man is burdened with a dearth of knowledge. The main purpose of government is to fill a vacuum and so politicians and bureaucrats alike rush to plug the gap. It is a lucrative business and attracts 1.8 million workers at the national level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Career Guide to Industries, 2008-09 Edition, Federal Government), and an astounding 8 million for states and municipalities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Career Guide to Industries, 2008-09 Edition, State and Local Government). Overwhelmed by sheer number Solitary Man is forced to listen to only the loudest of the herd. Knowing this, politicians make use of all media and with voice vociferous appear to be qualified.

Liberty is the most sacred possession of Solitary Man. No longer is the right of revolution reserved to hungry city mobs (Mencken, 53). Now, anyone with a grudge to hold or a bee in their bonnet has, at their disposal, the means to launch petition drives, letter-writing campaigns, polls, press releases, and political rants with either their own personal blog or through a variety of websites. Whenever an individual liberty is perceived to be under assault, people become wide-eyed screaming babies and refuse to quiet until coddled by their government through some token gesture. Solitary Man screams for liberty but only sings the song of a caged bird; he likes it that way.

The eternal mob is gone, moved to a subdivision in suburbia, and shall never return. Solitary Man longs for no more human contact than is necessarily polite. Minority party politicians, pundits, and antiestablishment authorities all seek to maintain an illusion of a populist mob, but Solitary Man will only abide them until they grow boring. The modern mob is a sideshow, a collection of people protesting just to add the event to their résumé of activism, a collection of buttons, a litany of bumper stickers. The Solitary Man only joins a mob to indicate individual accomplishment.

The Solitary State

All governments are a reflection of the values its citizenry holds dear. This is as true in the United States as it is anywhere else in the world. Solitude is carried out by the state as it is lived by its people. Abroad we act unilaterally; at home the state is unimpeachable. We coerce coalitions into existence to fight wars overseas. Within our borders civil liberties are purposefully trampled and crushed by a mad