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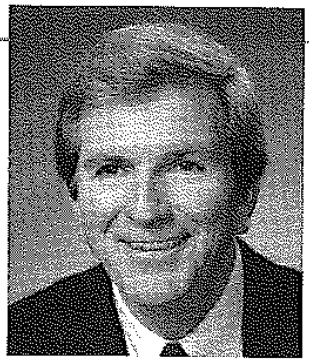

Mathews

The National Issues Forums and the Challenges of Deliberative Democracy

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Editor's note: David Mathews presented "The National Issues Forums and the Challenges of Deliberative Democracy" at the University of Georgia for its 1997 Hill Lecture, established to highlight the leaders in public service and outreach. Dr. Mathews noted: "This lecture is my way of paying tribute to the University of Georgia and those members of its faculty and staff who have played a major role in trying to make American democracy work as it should." The Hill Lecture series was created by UGA Vice President for Public Service and Outreach and JPSO Publisher S. Eugene Younts.

When I left the Cabinet in 1977, I was convinced Americans had to have a better way to understand and shape the policy decisions that were going to affect their health, education and welfare. So I began speaking to any group that would listen, advocating something comparable to the Foreign Policy Association for domestic issues. In most cases, I got a polite reception, though occasionally eyes would glaze over or flash in objection. I remember one particularly unencouraging response. I was making my case as persuasively as I could when a senior university dean stood up and said, "What you are advocating is absolutely wrong — and, what is more, we are already doing it." That is serious rejection, however ambiguous.

Speeches and a series of exploratory meetings over the next four years helped to identify about a dozen institutions that, from their own experience, had come to a similar conclusion about the need for better public-policy education. In 1981, representatives of these institutions, meeting at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wis., committed themselves to developing a different type of public forum. They created a consortium called the Domestic Policy Association (DPA), later named the National Issues Forums (NIF).

There were others in the early 1980s who shared a sense that more had to be done to help citizens inform their discretion, although I knew only a few of them at the time. Harry J. Middleton, director of the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, was an early

and constant "fellow traveler" in the meetings that led to the founding of the DPA. Daniel Yankelovich, a noted survey researcher, was soon to become a partner along with Public Agenda, a foundation he and Cyrus Vance established out of similar concerns. In the academic world, those having the closed affinity with what we were attempting proved to be the scholars of rhetoric or speech communication; and one of their number, Annabel Hagood at the University of Alabama, was very helpful in thinking through what should happen in the new forums.

William Boyd, president of the Johnson Foundation, who had heard about what we were trying to do from an early supporter, Mark Curtis of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, made the Wingspread Conference Center available for DPA meetings. The University of Georgia was one of the original participants in the first gathering that eventually became the NIF network. With nothing but word-of-mouth promoting the endeavor, the group grew slowly. The Kettering Foundation took responsibility for designing the meetings and Public Agenda produced the first issue books. Each year, the assembly of participating institutions doubled in size, until it outgrew the Wingspread facility. In 1986, the educational program to train forum leaders was moved to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Fifteen years after its inception, the NIF network now includes a core of about 2,600 civic and educational organizations around the country, which extends to roughly 5,000 others. The well-being of the network is the principal concern of a new nonprofit organization, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), chaired by former Mississippi Governor William Winter. At the same time, more than twenty colleges, universities, and national organizations are instructing moderators through their own Public Policy Institutes, and the Kettering workshops at Miami University have become "graduate seminars" to train faculty for the twenty-plus institutes.

When new representative governments replaced authoritarian regimes in the 1980s, their tribulations prompted the creation of civic organizations to strengthen the democratic roots of these governments. These organizations began their own forums to develop a citizenry possessing the skills needed for public decision making; they soon found their way to the NIF network in the United States. The international group began to hold an annual assembly to coincide with Kettering's Miami workshops, called the International Civil Society Workshop (ICSW). This international network, which began with "Forums on the Interests of Citizens" in Colombia, spread from South and Central America, to Russia and Eastern Europe to Lebanon and then to South Africa. Today, thirty organizations in twelve countries have their own deliberative forums.

American citizens have invested millions of dollars in time and effort into building the NIF network, and they have been critically reflective about their investment, about the problems they face, the criticisms they encounter and the challenges they have yet to master. More than twenty studies of NIF have been completed — some are

histories of local forums, and others are scholarly evaluations (a few of them doctoral dissertations).

This is a report on what is being learned from the effort to use NIF to create a strong form of democracy and on what the NIF experience can tell us about the American public and its capacity for self-government.

Can, Will, Americans Decide What is in the Best Interest of the Public

At the time the U.S. Constitution was framed, the nation's leaders had grave doubts about the ability of people to govern themselves: Distrustful of democracy, they established a republic and limited citizens to electing representatives who would govern in their name. These doubts have persisted throughout our history.

Recently, a newspaper editor complained that the people of his city are apathetic about public issues, particularly education, and argued that a czar was needed. I told him I had just returned from a country with a czar and that it hadn't worked out as people had hoped, but that didn't lessen his frustration or impatience. This editor was voicing honestly the reservation we have all had from time to time about whether "We, the people" can really govern ourselves.

Doubt became the conventional wisdom of the twentieth century, when "the public" was declared a myth in works like the Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* (1925). Lippmann contended that Americans are like people who come to a play during the fourth act — they haven't the foggiest notion of what is happening. People live in a large, complex world, controlled by forces beyond the experience of most. However smart they may be about local circumstances, there is absolutely no way the average citizen can understand the forces that drive the world beyond our doorsteps. This argument that people don't know enough to govern themselves is usually accompanied by another charge; that we are too self-interested to accept the moral responsibility for promoting our shared or common concerns.

I think that studies of NIF forums over the past fifteen years speak directly to Lippmann's misgivings. They suggest he was right about the complexity of issues and the power of self-interest but wrong in his conclusion that they render people incapable of self-government. The test of our ability to govern ourselves centers on whether we can, and will, make sound decisions about what is in the best interest of the public. A sound decision is obviously a correct decision; but, since we never know whether a decision was right until years after we have made it, the only way we can evaluate the quality of our decisions is to determine whether their consequences are consistent with what is most valuable to us.

Sound decisions are those whose consequences are understood, accepted, and consistent with what is valuable to a society. Making sound decisions requires a particular form of thought and reasoning. We have to weigh all possible actions very carefully against what we believe is valuable. We have to take into account the costs and consequences, and we also have to consider others' views of these

costs and consequences. I use the word "deliberation" for the kind of talk that promotes such reasoning. The question of whether we can govern ourselves really amounts to a question of whether we can deliberate publicly and reach sound conclusions. If that is possible, or possible under certain circumstances, then citizens have powers that influential observers like Lippmann underestimated.

What does the experience in the NIF network tell us about our capacity to be deliberative citizens? The record of experience won't satisfy those who are looking for incontrovertible proof, but it should count for something. People who have been holding these forums for years have given a good deal of thought to how deliberation differs from just talk or partisan debate. They have heard all the criticisms of deliberative democracy as they have tried to gather support for their forums. And in 1995, Doble Research Associates sat down with a number of them to record their experiences and the responses they made to their critics (Doble 1996). Here is the gist of what came out of these sessions, supplemented with information from the other studies.

Deliberation is an Unnatural Act

Early on, the Doble group noticed that doubts about the public's capacity to deliberate are nested within one another like Russian dolls: As soon as one is opened and set aside, another appears to take its place. The charges usually begin with the claim that deliberation is an esoteric activity, foreign to everyday life.

Experience shows that people may not call what they do in forums "deliberation," perhaps because considering options, weighing the pros and cons of each, and talking with others are common activities in personal and family life (The Harwood Group 1996). People deliberate with friends and family over such things as difficult career choices, and they understand the process very well. The problem is that Americans are reluctant to deliberate about public matters, not because they don't understand deliberation or because it is an unnatural act, but because our political culture does not value public deliberation. There is no place for it in politics as usual. And people are deeply pessimistic about their ability to change the political system. A single forum can't alter their beliefs, although repeated deliberation does seem to engender a feeling that the system should, and perhaps could, be different. When asked why they take the time to go to forums, people say they attend because they are looking for an alternative to politics as usual, which they see as partisan, divisive and unable to solve their problems. Although initially attracted by the issue on the agenda, people who come back say they like the practice of deliberation, which they believe haswidespread application in making decisions with others. Deliberation isn't merely a technique, a process, it is, for those who stay with it, a deeply valued practice.

One of the ironies of our history is that public deliberation has become so invisible in a country whose founding owes so much to the deliberations of its early town meetings. Town meetings of our own time, however, are more occasions for talking with officials and

listening to speakers than they are opportunities for citizens to talk and decide among themselves.

Whether from dim memory of deliberations past or from personal experience, Americans are, in fact, able to deliberate publicly—under certain conditions. Because deliberation is natural doesn't mean it is easy. So forums have to begin with an unambiguous charge from the moderator somewhat like the charge a judge gives a jury. Unless participants understand clearly that their job is to work toward a decision, they will often just talk. The moderator continues to have a crucial role — not in giving direction to the exchange but in reminding the group of the work that has to be accomplished.

Equally important, the issues on the forum agenda must be presented in public language (in terms of what is valuable to people rather than in legal or technical terms). And the issue frameworks have to present all the options fairly, highlighting conflicts among choices, contradictions among perspectives and unpleasant costs and consequences. Deliberation occurs naturally, but in fits and starts and over a long period of time; forums need some structure to prompt at least the beginning of deliberation in a three-hour forum.

Two key challenges for the NIF network are to find a better way to train forum moderators and to develop a greater understanding of the kind of issue framework that prompts genuine deliberation. Ronald Hustedde, a sociologist at the University of Kentucky, has confirmed the impression that the NIF methodology is difficult to learn (1996). So the twenty-odd institutes that now train forum moderators need to evaluate what participants are learning, find out how moderators are actually conducting forums, and experiment with new ways to teach deliberation. And the institutes, along with Kettering's Miami workshops, need to clarify what is distinctive about a framework for deliberation, since more and more organizations are preparing their own issuebooks to supplement the NIF publications.

Only Elites Have the Time and Inclination to Deliberate

Just saying "public deliberation" evokes the image of the middle-class meeting in a nice college auditorium. Critics maintain that others, poor and hard-pressed, are too occupied with survival to be interested in any form of public activity. Yet, while middle-class folks do have more opportunities to participate, forums in housing projects, low-income neighborhoods, prisons, and literacy and citizenship programs for recent immigrants demonstrate that everyone can and will deliberate. Educational level or financial status is no barrier.

Literacy programs for immigrants have been sites for extremely productive public deliberation on the West Coast, along the Texas border, and in Florida. National Issues Forums have been held in the prisons of Washington, D.C. (perhaps with a few formerly elite participants). Since Americans from all walks of life can deliberate, the challenge is to find organizations that will provide opportunities for a cross section of citizens to enter into a shared dialogue. The preconception that deliberation is only for the middle class and that

people with lower incomes have no interest in public affairs is a major perceptual barrier that must be overcome. The problem is not people's lack of ability but an unwillingness to believe in that ability.

We Are Too Different to Deliberate Together

Even if everyone can be deliberative, the next charge begins, only people who are alike will deliberate with one another. We are simply too different to be able to decide on anything together. There are too many people, with too many life histories and cultural experiences, for them to understand each other. And they may not even want to. We are much more comfortable with people like ourselves than we are with those who are different. And, when our differences bring us into conflict, deliberation is powerless to help.

One of the most persuasive tests of the ability of a diverse group to deliberate together was provided in January of 1996, when the National Issues Convention was held in Austin, Texas. It brought a random sample of six hundred people from across the United States to deliberate for three days on issues central to the presidential campaigns: the troubled American family, America's global role, and the distribution of economic benefits. The participants were well aware that they differed from each other in many ways, but after the forums they were equally aware that they had a great deal in common. Their differences didn't prevent their deliberating; in fact, they enriched the dialogue. In other situations, Kettering has found that homogeneous groups are the ones that have trouble deliberating because they don't have enough differences in perspective to evaluate all the options fairly. While it is true that we are comfortable with people who are like ourselves, we are also curious about those who are not. Over and over again, participants in forums have said, "I would like to find out what you think about that."

A study by Public Agenda sheds more light on what deliberation demands of people and what it produces. First of all, deliberation doesn't require or result in absolute agreement, and it doesn't necessarily cause people to change their opinions. While that often happens, it is much more common for participants to change their opinions of other people's opinions as they come to understand why others take the positions they do (Farkas, Friedman and Bers 1995). That understanding opens up possibilities for working together. Rather than building consensus, deliberation helps find the area between agreement and disagreement, which is actually where we live our lives.

Deliberation's capacity to change people's opinions about others' opinions and to build understanding where little agreement is possible is critically important where differences threaten to erupt into conflict. It has been reported that forums on volatile national issues like abortion and affirmative action or on local issues framed in public terms have had a constructive effect on what would otherwise have been explosive situations (The Rutherford Story 1995). Part of the reason may be that deliberating together is a form of common work (Boyte 1995).

Experiences in the NIF network also raise questions about how homogeneous supposedly homogeneous groups really are. In Grand Rapids, Mich., a group of African-American women who had been close friends for years began to use the NIF books in their meetings. They assumed that because they were ethnically alike they would have the same views on public problems. Once they started dealing with issues like what to do about welfare and crime and drugs, however, they found that their views were actually quite different.

The differences that most often keep us from deliberating together are geographical. People deliberate where they live, and Americans don't live in demographically balanced groups. So the challenge for the NIF network is to connect deliberative forums throughout cities and states. Communities like Reading, Pa., have been able to do that because the local public television station has been willing to convene all the forums. But experiments with connecting forums, particularly those in different parts of town or different sections of a state, are still few and far between.

When Push Comes to Shove, Americans Won't Face up to the Tough Choices

This is an old criticism, which goes back at least to Plato's portrait of democratic man as an intemperate and self-indulgent creature in the *Republic*. Today's version contends that the American people are wedded to their particular self-interests and don't accept responsibility for the larger public good. We want everything and won't face up to the hard choices inherent in political life; we ignore the consequences of what is popular.

It is true people have a tendency to want everything, but deliberation can prompt us to be much more realistic, much more likely to acknowledge difficult trade-offs, much more willing to confront problems and deal with them. Of course, this maturing of attitudes doesn't happen all at once. Daniel Yankelovich, who has tracked the movement from popular opinion to more reflective and shared "public judgment," says people proceed in stages on a long journey — from complaining and wish-listing to the point that they face up to and work through the conflicts inherent in choice making (1991).

The challenge is to make deliberation a habit. Like going to the gym, one forum doesn't accomplish much. In order for that to happen, forums will have to have more than sponsors. There must be citizens in new civic organizations or coalitions of existing ones committed to making space for deliberation as a permanent part of their community's political landscape. Encouraging trustees for the perpetuation of public deliberation is one of the principal projects of the NIFI Board. Communities that have made deliberation a habit and have had forums for ten to fifteen years, report changes in the way they deal with problems.

The charge that the public is irresponsible is related to the charge Walter Lippmann made much of: That the modern world is simply too complex for people to understand. While citizens may be deliberative, they are too uniformed to reach sound conclusions.

Experience with years of NIF forums indicates that certain facts are essential. Knowing that many government payments go to the middle class, for example, strongly influences the way people think about the welfare system. But the forums also show that deliberation is not a debate about which facts are correct; it is a moral struggle over how we should act. That struggle forces us to deal with what is truly valuable in our common lives. We have found that debates over facts often mask and suppress deeper conflicts over what is most important. And we have learned that when given the same strategic facts, people will make decisions of similar quality regardless of the amount of other information they have or of their educational background. That finding is reinforced by the results of an experiment in which scientists and people on the street were asked to make a series of policy decisions about scientifically and technologically complex issues. Both groups were asked the same policy questions. While the experts obviously had a great deal of additional information at their disposal, the participants all made similar decisions (Doble and Richardson 1992).

Participating in forums doesn't lessen people's appreciation of information; instead, it encourages them to seek more. (That happened in National Issues Conventions in both the United States and Britain; people read newspapers and saved clippings.) And classroom forums suggest students learn more facts when they find a use for them in deliberation.

The continuing challenge for anyone in preparing an issue book to prompt deliberation is to identify the strategic facts, to put them in the context of the things that are valuable to people, and to come up with a guide that is comprehensive, fair to all perspectives, and clear about where different approaches to a problem conflict. That challenge reemerges with each new issue. And the issues of the 1990s are likely to be especially difficult to frame because they reach deep into the social fabric and moral condition of the country, where ambiguity is greatest.

"Talk Don't Pick No Cotton"

The ultimate way of dismissing deliberation is to charge that it is just talk, that it doesn't do anything. People in forums, particularly those in communities that focus on dealing with local problems, respond by pointing out that talk is itself a kind of action; that deliberation changes relationships, which makes more action possible; and that deliberation helps set directions and delineate shared purposes, both essential prerequisites for public action. Many point to new community projects that originated in forums.

Community forums must be clearer about what public action is and how it supplements institutional, programmatic action, which is more familiar. Public action — the action of citizens joined together — recalls community traditions of barn raising and potluck suppers. It has distinctive qualities. Its components are mutually reinforcing because the efforts have a common purpose. It has what economists call low transaction costs because it doesn't require bureaucratic coordination. Obviously, people cannot act together publicly until

they decide (together) how they should act. So public deliberation is a precondition for public action. The challenge is to get from one to the other. Forums have already shown that deliberation encourages people to take the first step by revealing where they need to become active. Forums dispose participants to act.

New Challenges

Plato's criticisms of democracy and their modern counterparts have to be taken seriously and must be engaged rather than dismissed. They have posed a long list of challenges for the NIF network that are only now becoming clear. (In the early years, the forum leaders' all-consuming concern was whether anybody would show up.) But, on the horizon, new tests are massing, which have yet to be fully comprehended. There are also new opportunities. The continuing dissatisfaction with the electoral system, which becomes most pronounced during the quadrennial presidential debates, raises a question about whether we need national public deliberations before our elections. In states like California, where citizens cast ballots not just for candidates but on major policy issues as well, people are now saying it is dangerous for voters to vote before they have talked together. And, rather than solving that problem, establishing simpler methods of registering and voting may actually exacerbate it.

Electronic technologies boast of their ability to promote democracy, but what kind of democracy would they promote? Is chat on the Internet deliberative or merely expressive? The University of Georgia is now leading an experiment to see whether choice work can be carried out on this new medium.

Reconnecting Americans with their deliberative traditions will be essential, whether or not the new technologies facilitate that endeavor. Deliberative forums seem to have their roots in the congregational deliberations of the colonial churches of New England. Are our own churches, which are key institutions in American public life, willing to be host to after-services, Monday-evening forums? Some Christian school educational programs in Catholic dioceses, as well as a few joint programs of African-American churches and their counterparts across town, are keeping this valuable tradition alive. And some Native American tribes are using NIF books to revive their ancient deliberative practices. These experiments help restore the deliberation that has been pushed aside by partisan debates and talk show revelations. These are old frontiers revisited.

Even though the NIF forums have been evaluated constantly since they began, they are still a rich one to be mined. There are any number of challenges that new research should take on. For example, we now know a fair amount about the effects of deliberation on adults, but much less about its effects on school children and their teachers. Do forums enlarge their understanding of what it takes to make democracy work as it should?

Finally, what began as a few scattered forums across the country has become a network with Internet-like qualities, multiple

sites in different kinds of institutions (civic organizations, schools, libraries, churches, etc.) which draw strength from making connections with one another. Finding a way for this network to communicate with itself is key to its growth, vitality, and usefulness. The twenty-some institutes that train more than a thousand moderators each year have the potential to net the network by playing the role that "servers" play on the Internet. For them to be effective in that role, however, they will have to move from holding conferences to building connections. And they will have to fuel the network with jointly sponsored research on what people are learning from their forums.

Public Deliberations, Public Servants and Public-Serving Professionals

Some institutes have begun to concentrate on professions that are using public deliberation to change the relationship between their institutions and the larger community. The Purdue institute has a special program for law enforcement officers. The institute at the University of Kentucky is helping extension agents restructure their relationship with the farm community. And an institute at the University of Pennsylvania brings educators into public forums on those NIF issues that have implications for the schools. Some organizations, such as the North American Association for Environmental Education, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the National Collegiate Honors Council, have organized their own institutes to train moderators in the use of issue books they have prepared.

As professionals have a different experience with the public through forums, they often reformulate their concept of their field. For example, when public deliberation was used in literacy programs, it changed the meaning of literacy — from the ability to read a book in private to the ability to enter the larger social and political discourse (Alamprese 1995). Public deliberation has also changed the meaning of leadership — from what a few people with their followers do to all the initiatives it takes to move a community from one point to another. The emphasis has shifted from leaders to "leaderfulness."

Public deliberation has had an interesting and unanticipated effect on professionals in the press. Prior to a referendum on affirmative action last fall, some Californians recognized it was crucial for citizens to talk about the issue both before and after they voted. With this in mind, the *San Jose Mercury News* sought the assistance of NIF users in the state libraries, who organized public forums on affirmative action based on an issue book the paper prepared and printed. What journalists did on the editorial page of the newspaper was reinforced by what citizens did in the forums. The project demonstrated that journalists have a stake in what happens in public life — demonstrated that these professionals can't do their job of informing the public unless they do that job in such a way that public life functions as it should. Journalists also have a

proper self-interest in public deliberation. Unless citizens are trying to make choices, they are not as likely to try to get the information the news provides to inform those choices.

Elected officials are also beginning to report on the way deliberative forums have affected the way they do their jobs. Listening to the citizens struggle with hard choices gives them information they couldn't get from constituents' petitions or from polls. Deliberative forums reveal what people consider most valuable when push comes to shove. Being in forums with citizens also helps improve the often counterproductive ways citizens and officeholders relate. The two are joined in the common work of making choices about direction and purpose for policies. So in Panama City, Fla., for instance, the state representative, the sheriff, the county commissioner, and the superintendent of schools encourage and participate in the deliberative forums sponsored by Gulf Coast Community College. There must be more experiments like this on bridging the divide that now separates the people of the country from the government of the country.

The Long View

The National Issues Forums seem to respond to a growing feeling that something has to be done to change, not just government, but the political system itself. That includes the way citizens behave politically.

Perhaps, as at the end of other centuries, American democracy is trying to take on a new form. Think about the late 1700s — the Revolution, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution. Look at the end of the nineteenth century — Populists, Progressives, strikes, expansion of the suffrage, new initiatives like the referendum and recall. Now, as we approach the twenty-first century, some Americans are once again trying to make changes. People today feel as though they are in a motel room with an unresponsive thermostat — regardless of which way they turn the dial, the temperature remains the same. And polls tell us that confidence in most of our institutions is down, as is people's confidence in each other. So maybe, as some scholars are now contending, our democracy needs to become stronger, more civil, more public — and more deliberative (Barber 1984; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996). While scholars develop theories about what form democracy could take, the NIF forums are providing citizens with a practical experience in what our democracy might become.

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