

**“Doing Democracy” at Home and Abroad:
A Two-Way Street**

DPC Policy Note #17

by Valery Perry

**Sarajevo
January 2021**

A report from
Democratization Policy Council

Author: Valery Perry

Editing: DPC Editorial Board

Sarajevo

January 2021



This report was made possible with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The opinions and views of the authors do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Fund.

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1. Introduction

In the week after the January 6 mob attack on the Capitol I reached out to seven American friends and colleagues who are in or have recently lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) doing various kinds of democracy, human rights, and development work over the past 25 years. I asked the following broad questions:

- What were you thinking while watching the events unfold on January 6?
- Based on your experience in democracy promotion¹ abroad, what do you think is needed in the US to move forward?
- What do you think US democratization policy and support – globally – should look like moving forward?

Our one-on-one conversations included a number of themes summarized below, and together offer food for thought on reconstituting democratic practices, institutions, and norms in the US, and also on US democratization policy abroad.

2. The Thinkers

Mel Flanagan: former prosecutor and judge in Wisconsin covering everything from civil to family to criminal law with a special focus on violence against women, children, and the vulnerable; works on justice initiatives globally, including in the Western Balkans, Tunisia, Ghana, India, and Jordan; came to BiH in 2013, has received a Fulbright, and has lived in Sarajevo for several years doing professional development for justice sector professionals, and teaching Aikido.

Sue Folger: worked in media in Russia throughout the 1990s; worked in media reform/independent media for over a decade in Ukraine and BiH (five years); currently working at Vermont Law School in the US.

David King: came to BiH in 1996 just after war, and has worked to support economic development, competitiveness, a stronger business environment, and a more viable finance sector, drawing on his experiences in banking, with the US Federal Reserve, and manufacturing. He lives in Sarajevo, and has worked in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

Randall Puljek Shank: working/living in Sarajevo since 2001; research and professional focus on peacebuilding, civil society, and citizen engagement initiatives; received a PhD from the University of Nijmegen (in the Netherlands) with a dissertation focusing on the issue of civic legitimacy; engaged in get out the vote efforts for Americans abroad throughout 2020.

Kasey Vannett: worked as a journalist for *The Washington Post* in the 1990s; came to BiH in January 1996 with Catholic Relief Services, worked with USAID from 1997-2009, and has since engaged in the

¹ In this context this is being used in a broad sense to cover work in the promotion of liberal democratic practice, including strengthening of independent judicial systems, human rights promotion, economic development, anti-corruption and transparency, reconciliation, transitional justice, and conflict resolution.

private sector in BiH, living in Sarajevo; currently President of the Rotary Club Sarajevo International Delta.

Two people were interested in participating but asked that their names be withheld in light of their current employment so they could speak more openly about their impressions. One (R1) has been working in democracy and human rights promotion for 30 years in the international diplomatic sphere, including in BiH for five years. The other (R2) has worked in BiH on governance issues for over 10 years for an international organization, and recently returned to BiH after two years in the US during the period of the Trump administration.

3. On Watching January 6 Unfold

David said, “I was horrified.” He had been watching the “absurd” challenges to the electoral college certification, and when the mob began to break the Capitol windows he couldn’t believe it; he was stunned, as it was “beyond outrageous.” What bothered him most was the degradation of this “temple of democracy.” Even more, that first day, one still couldn’t tell just how violent it all was – the beating of the cops, the crushing of an officer. This has all become more clear.

Randall notes he had been focused on the results of the Senate election in Georgia and the electoral college certification process that day, and didn’t appreciate the seriousness of what started happening; his “estimation of the seriousness of this has gradually gone up” as more information about the attacks, planning, and organization has been revealed. However, while shocking he was not surprised, as “all of the ingredients were there,” including disinformation on and lack of respect for the election results, and also weapons and firearms. He commented on the surprising lack of efficient/effective security, and also the dynamics as the attack unfolded. The participants likely had different intentions in being in and participating in the crowd – “it’s what happens with mobs.”

R2 noted he expected protests, but thought there would be more security, especially after seeing the responses to the 2020 racial justice protests, with barricades, riots shields, etc. ubiquitous. On January 6, he “wasn’t expecting to see a mob.” It was a “sad day for the country,” and the culmination of 4 years of divisive rhetoric, especially since the election in November, and the claims that it was not free and fair. He went on to say that the far-right protests in Charlottesville in 2017 marked a key moment in US history as many extreme fringe groups likely felt emboldened by the president’s reactions and his refusal to outright condemn their actions and messages of hate. Trump opened the door to a variety of fringe groups and that door will be much more difficult to close after four years of having an ally in the White House. Trump and the Republicans now own this.

4. How Did the US Get to this Point?

A number of people described negative changes in terms of the functioning of and trust in institutions, but also underlying issues of values.

Mel noted she started seeing changes starting to happen 15, 20 years ago, in what she describes as a

strategy to reshape the federal courts starting from the lower level and moving up. This was mainly a conservative strategy; “Democrats are not the most strategic people,” and “they don’t think long-term, or long-game.” In addition to how people were being appointed to the federal bench she started to see political manipulation in terms of who the justices were and how they were expected to act and rule. Early on she didn’t see that pressure; however it became more frequent. “Trying to maintain impartiality with those pressure gets harder and harder.” Courts only work if people trust the system; they won’t work if people think they are unreliable.

She noted that at the Milwaukee police academy annual graduation ceremony, she would give a speech reminding graduates that they needed to be a good example and follow the law themselves – from everything from illegal parking to accepting a free coffee at a restaurant. They could not allow themselves to abuse their authority, as “one bad apple” would affect the perception of the justice system as a whole.

More broadly, she sees that civil servants are being degraded in general and by their community. Aggrieved people blame them for having public pensions that the private sector doesn’t enjoy. The attacks and pressure on people working on local election boards is just one example; they were just doing their job, yet have been blamed, intimidated, etc. The disrespect for Congress seen on January 6 reflects the escalation of this lack of respect. “Government only works if people believe that the government has legitimate authority.”

R2 hadn’t lived in the US for over 10 years, but during the Trump administration was there for a period and felt “the country was almost unrecognizable.” He noted his sadness at seeing the impact on his small hometown, which was now much more politically charged, which was different from when he was growing up and politics really didn’t matter day to day. He also reflected on the expressions of grievance he witnessed, grounded in the sense among many people that if someone else was getting something from the government that they hadn’t gotten, then it’s somehow not fair, leading to frustration and resentment. This was the opposite of a time when there was greater community solidarity and when people seemed to have more understanding and compassion for those with less.

Kasey also pointed out the victimization complex held by many who were involved in or supportive of the insurrection, and of Trump’s presidency in general. She knows knowledgeable people “spouting nonsense,” and not just among low information voters. People perceive they are being denied free speech, denouncing the “mainstream media,” but she notes this is all also a reflection of the diminishing privilege and power of some groups. A lot of these sentiments start from a truthful base, but then the narratives change as people and groups radicalize.

When considering changing values, Randall distinguished between democratic values and social values. There has always been disagreement on the latter (e.g., guns, abortion, LGBT rights, etc.). However on the former he said he would have thought that there *was* agreement that a peaceful transfer of power is something we can all support; that so many Republican representatives voted against certifying the electoral college election results is troubling.

5. The US's Reputation in Democracy Promotion

There was broad acknowledgement that the US has always been an imperfect democracy, yet has maintained a reputation globally – the fate of which is unclear after recent events.

Randall notes that in his experience, critical people have always asked questions about the contradictions between Americans idealism and reality, at home and abroad. We have such a long tradition of liberal democracy; in his opinion, the ideal of striving for an ever more perfect union” is one to which many aspire. It is always a process.

David also pointed out that the imperfections of US policy are not new. This isn't the first time the US has “done awful things” – overthrowing Mosaddegh in Iran, the Bay of Pigs, Iraq, Guatemala, and domestically, America's problems concerning race and society. In terms of US election processes, he spoke about the 2000 Bush/Gore election. Back then he had been in BiH already for 4-5 years, and he remembers laughing with Bosnian coworkers, including some people in high places, who said, here you (Americans) are, preaching about elections and democracy, and now we see the US supreme court making a decision along party lines to decide the election. (Sue noted she was in Ukraine when Bush won in 2000, and there too people were also saying to her there was a need for the US to look inward.)

But still, David points to history, going back to the Declaration of Independence. While imperfect, the US has been projecting an image of democracy, freedom, and liberty for some time, and this is attractive to a lot of people, including among those who have gotten on boats to go to the US. And for all the problems with US foreign policy, and while there are “ugly Americans,” at the ground level, the implementation work of foreign policy is done by people who really believe in these values and ideals. These are the people who are face to face with others around the world; “there are a lot of good people trying to persuade people to do the right thing.”

R1 thinks the US reputation has to a large part been based on what happened in Germany and Japan after World War II, saying we did a good job there, “and have coasted on that ever since.”

A key element there was rooting out and getting rid of the collaborators through denazification – getting them out of the civil service and leadership, and then educating people.

Kasey reflected, “maybe we never were a shining city on a hill;” just look at race and discrimination, for example. But over time the country has succeeded in getting better. She points to affirmative action policies aimed at vesting minorities in this system, and asks how such policies can be modernized and updated. The recent events have been difficult, but “we have a chance now to navigate through this.”

Sue said it would take more than four years to lose the reputation America has enjoyed, but that “we have a lot of work to do to regain trust and really demonstrate that we are a thriving democracy that had a four-year hiccup.” Mel said the risk now is people in other countries thinking, “if they can't do it, why would anyone try?”

6. What Should Democratization *in the US* Look Like?

R1 stated, “It’s time to bring the democratization lessons back here,” arguing that people in/from the US need to think about what is needed in terms of a “transition” to democracy. David similarly considers that maybe the US really needed this crisis, to force some difficult changes and lead to “a kind of reckoning.” Maybe it took Trump to put it all in the open; January 6 was a real crisis but was built upon existing tensions. He went on to say we started some sort of process by rejecting Trump; the Republicans lost the House, Presidency, and Senate in four years; that is a start.

Thinking about what is needed for democratization in the US, several themes were noted, all of which will be familiar to those who have been engaged in similar activities abroad.

Education/Civic Education

Education was noted by everyone in some way. Randall and R1 noted the need for more civics/civic education in schools, with Randall pointing out it is detrimental that so many Americans think the election was illegitimate. Mel suggested more implicit bias awareness and training, for its own value and to open space for difficult discussions.

R1 linked education with the capability of being a productive citizen, suggesting the need for an enlightenment debate on whether people can hold the responsibility of citizenship in the absence of a sufficient education. She wants to believe that education can prepare people for citizenship, but questions, “Did we allow the population to become civically decrepit?”

Related to education and civic education, Sue said media and information/digital literacy is key, to provide the analytical skills needed to begin to process all of the information bombarding people today. This should be mandatory, and should start already in elementary school. She can see how young people, constantly on social media, can start buying into conspiracy theories or disinformation. There is so much information out there, and people with short attention spans often don’t do a deep dive into anything. When asked how to reach adults, people no longer in school, she noted that it is tough to reach people in different stages of their life, suggesting finding leaders and role models that different groups listen to and respect: basketball players, rockers, country singers, Hollywood stars, rappers, Nascar drivers..... All can reach out to help raise awareness, and mentor a newly engaged citizenry.

Media

Echoing Sue’s advocacy for media literacy, everyone commented on the impact of information and disinformation.

David talked about the difficult questions about social media / Internet platforms, and how to balance free speech with the propagation of lies and use of these platforms to mobilize people to do terrible things. This is a very interesting issue as these tools have become like public utilities, and possibly need to be treated and regulated more like public utilities. He pondered that, “we’re probably entering a period like after 9/11,” as there may be some compromises regarding free speech and individual liberty, and some reasonable restrictions may be needed. Kasey expressed similar sentiments, noting that as a former journalist she has tended to be a free speech absolutist, but is now thinking more about what

this means in the current information environment.

Kasey reflected on the broader issue of journalism and ethics, noting that when she wrote for *The Washington Post* her editor was always fact checking her reporting, and calling her sources. This should be the standard in the profession, and (linking to media literacy) people should be able to see the difference between those outlets that do this and those that do not. She is frustrated by the right-leaning media, but notes that on the left too there is conflation of fact and opinion that needs to be addressed.

Both she and Randall both referenced the impact of the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, but wondered if such a practice would be impossible to bring back in the age of the Internet.

Competent Governance and Institutions

R1 notes that for some time she had been thinking that for all its problems at least US institutions have been working. However, over the past couple of years even these have lost their meaning in many ways. She reflected on what she has seen in the international sphere, where donors tend to find individuals to support, based on their personality and capacity, and don't work so much to really strengthen institutions. She commented on her time in BiH, where major reform was not possible since institutions were captured, so donors continued to pick individuals they hoped could bring change into systems and institutions. "It's scary" that in the US we've now seen institutions captured by people in power as well.

Kasey similarly noted that over the past several years we've seen what has happened to norms, and now that we've seen the gaps maybe we need to formalize and codify some checks and balances to prevent future democratic backsliding. She also emphasized the need for accountability, offering as an example the Enron scandal in 2001, for which some elites ended up in prison; this didn't really happen after the financial crisis, which led to frustration and a lack of trust that systems work.

Randall noted that if people saw the government was working better and doing something for them then this could help to cut through some of the problems that have been accumulating. People's lived experience matters. For example, with COVID, as people see people around them dying, they will want to see competent approaches. If the government can show results, then perhaps even people who identify as Republicans will look around them and see that their lives have improved. This could help reduce partisan divides, and rebuild trust in competent public policy.

Bottom Up Civic Engagement

Sue said that while leadership from the top down will be critical, bottom up engagement will be key, through country-wide efforts and town hall meetings, and people working through small groups. She is optimistic that there are people who want to engage like this, noting that in response to the George Floyd tragedy the Vermont Law School initiated an online series called "Embedded Racism and the Law," averaging about 300 participants each; such discussions have attracted more people than would have participated in pre-COVID "live" events.

David specifically pointed out that the work Stacey Abrams did in Georgia is a good example of democratization in practice; it was an enormous effort, to actively get people to vote and to oppose

voter suppression. And it worked. Other groups in other states should copy what she did to get more people voting and involved.

Randall emphasized that local government and engagement matters, and will be critical, especially in an environment of distrust in which so many people live in their own information bubbles. This is an organizational challenge that “calls for a democratic movement,” as people need to be reached through trusted interlocutors, whether through Elks clubs or religious groups or other associations. There are good people working at the local level. For example, to reduce the lack of trust in elections, get people from local election boards to reach out to respected people in a community to explain how the process works and build trust. This shouldn’t be seen as a foolproof solution – “We’re never going to convince the true believers” – but it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try. Community organizers can tactically look for who *can* be convinced, remembering that in non-violent strategies the aim is to *convince* the other side.

R1 thinks we need to explore new ways to approach democratic government and participation that makes citizen involvement more of an ongoing process (not just having elections every 2 or 4 years), so people feel a sense of ownership and a sense of responsibility. She suggests more use of the tools of deliberative democracy, through different electronic participation options, for example, or through working with sample groups. We can’t just “have “democracy, but “we need to *do* democracy.”

Economic Policy

To address the economic drivers of dissatisfaction, frustration, grievance, and general inequality, David thinks there needs to be a real effort to improve access to financing, for businesses but also households, so it’s easier to get financing to start and to run a business. When he owned a manufacturing business he knew how to seek financing and it was *still* very hard to secure. He says that for free markets to work you need equal opportunity so more workers can become owners, and must ensure access to assets for those who haven’t inherited it, and who didn’t make a lot of money in finance.

Kasey is hopeful economic development will include jobs, training, and investment in renewable energy. In addressing inequality and the changing labor market, she thinks unified basic income (UBI) is an idea worth “kicking around.”

R1 cautions that capitalism needs to be treated like any other resource or policy: it should serve people, and people shouldn’t live to serve it; it should be a tool for freedom for everyone, not a new oligarchy; and it should be a means to ensure people have a chance for good life, not an end in itself.

Transitional Justice, Deradicalization, and Ideology

Over the last 30 years, R1 has seen the development of a new oligarchy, often tinged with Christian fundamentalism, that has been slowly changing the nature and expression of patriotism. Today, political leaders who are elites themselves (Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley) have created and portrayed a narrow image of patriotism, merging capitalism, their version of religion and a constant “othering” that labels people as “real Americans,” or as something else. In spite of the lack of consistent ideology, January 6 shows that a large number of people have bought into these various populist narratives.

Thinking about January 6, Randall noted there is pressure to “just paper over it,” without coming to

terms with the drivers and what this all really means. We see many Republicans already calling for Biden to promote “unity;” however, this can’t be an excuse to pretend the attack on the Capitol didn’t happen. It is important to prosecute people who committed crimes on January 6. But messaging will be important - on the right, center and left. The new administration can’t just say, “we’re in charge now, just suck it up.” As we have seen in BiH, the region and elsewhere, there are always hard questions about transitional justice, what you have to do to move forward, and how to approach history. Following prosecution of key instigators, however, the challenge is how to “de-brainwash” people more generally, and how to prevent and deter the most radical from becoming even more organized.

Kasey reflected on what happened when Yugoslavia was broken up, pointing out that the separation didn’t really resolve anything from the past. She is concerned that before Trump she never heard people talking about things like California, as a large global economy, separating from the US, yet now, little by little such talk is almost normalizing; she warned that “we need to be careful.”

R1 said that in the past week all of this has made her even more aware of the fact of “how amazing it is that there hasn’t been mass violence or unrest in Bosnia” since the war, positing that it’s down to “the good character of the people there.” However in BiH there is a limit to what people can do to improve things before they run up against obstacles. Institutions are captured by those who don’t have the best interests of the people at heart; she increasingly sees that when this happens then systems can rot from within, anywhere.

Sue would like to, “Give every American a passport and make them spend some time overseas.” She says that Americans (especially those who haven’t travelled) are often very naïve and uninformed about the rest of the world. She’d like to see more people to people exchanges (we discussed sending people from Alabama to Finland; from Mississippi to Norway), with an emphasis on engaging with people from small towns who haven’t had such opportunities to see and learn from other places.

7. US Democratization Policy Abroad

In his work with the European Values Survey (EVS) in BiH, in spite of democratic backsliding reported everywhere (including among these thinkers), Randall noted the survey confirms the appeal of liberal democracy as an ideal, with respondents considering liberal values (“men and women are equal”) and social democracy as keys to liberal democracy.

However, “It’s good for Americans in democracy promotion to have a bit more humility,” as “Preaching at people is ineffective.” Practitioners need to adjust their approach to democracy promotion to the local conditions and context, and in terms of the US role, there should be more openness to two-way learning.

Mel notes she has never said, “what is good here is what’s good in America.” She looks at shared problems – for example, domestic violence – and looks for patterns and global good practices that might help to improve a situation, anywhere. The approach needs to be, “we *all* have this problem; let’s deal with it,” not, “we’ll show you the American way.”

As a Fulbright exchange participant, she reminded that Fulbrighters go in both directions – Americans abroad and other citizens coming to the US. Unfortunately when foreigners go to the US on a Fulbright, there can be a tendency for Americans there to think they can only learn from the US, not also that they can teach something to their American hosts. (She is also frustrated by what she sees in BiH and the region – that when people from here go elsewhere to live/study and then come back ready to use what they know, that their skills are not valued; this is a wasted resource, and another lesson, for both sides.) She thinks there could be a better balance. Values-based exchanges can help to make these experiences more of a two-way street.

Sue agreed there is a challenge now to prove that the US is trustworthy moving forward. She hopes the new administration will pour money into democracy promotion and development at home and abroad. When people around the world say, “how could 73 million Americans have voted for Trump?” she responds yes, but counters that over 80 million people voted for the *opposite* of that; the majority of Americans are still open minded and globally thinking.

R2 stated that none of this has changed his views on the value of democracy promotion, “But it does show how quickly cracks can start to appear if the system isn’t strong, and if there are strong checks and balances, even *then* it is possible for things to regress.” He admits it has been frustrating to see attempts at home to undermine key democratic principles and institutions that we promote abroad such as media freedom, an independent judiciary, free and fair elections and a smooth transition of power, and human rights. This dynamic puts people working in democracy promotion in a harder position, as people can more easily say, “your country's not much better.” His response to this reality is that, “there are principles and standards, and even if there is some regression at home, these principles are still very relevant.”

David said, “It’s a cliché but we need to keep doing what we’re doing,” and that maybe recent events can help to highlight the needs we *all* have: ensuring the right to vote, and the need for strong civil society and institutions. He sees a need to challenge the Putins and Erdogans, and to be more aggressive based on the values we say we hold. The US has the capacity, the people, the networks and the money to do this, and to do it well. Democracy, accountability, gender equality, free enterprise, fair education systems, access to health care – these are all good things, for the US and for other countries.

R1 says that the US will still have money to invest in democracy promotion, but will have to show through real work that the work has value – at home and abroad. However, “the ‘made in America’ label will be viewed differently now.” She “hopes that the impact in the US will be to work harder, be better; to see that we, ourselves, have just learned a massive lesson in democracy;” that there is a “need to realize that democracy is a job; we need to work on it all the time - at home and elsewhere.”