

Can We Find Solidarity in the Face of Climate Disaster?

By Nell Irvin Painter

WHEN I THINK of the fate of American democracy in 2050, I can't help showing my roots as a historian, but at the same time I'm not able to look past the behemoth overshadowing our future as humans: global warming and its attendant climate disasters. The treatment of Indigenous Americans, a series of assaults and democratic failures, has contributed to our climate's endangerment. Had Indigenous Americans been able to influence the nature of democracy in this country, we may well have avoided the excessive development of and reliance on fossil fuels that imperil the environment today. Before the lost role of Indigenous Americans in the American environment was recognized, I remember mid-twentieth-century visions of the future that imagined superhighways to everywhere and cars that could fly. Highways and cars looked better before the cost of those highways to people whose homes and businesses were demolished was widely known, as it is more likely to be now. We're no longer able to regard the future as myopically as we did before the horrors of climate change became obvious and the disasters of Trump-time prompted fears for the future of American democracy. So when

this magazine asks whether continued union is really possible, I hear dread. I hear it stopping short of what comes next, the scary phrase “civil war.”

I know people who fear civil war as ultimate disaster. Not me. I look back at the Civil War of 1861–1865, which killed at least 620,000 combatants, as a human calamity. But death is not the Civil War’s entire meaning. The Civil War got rid of slavery, and war was probably the only means of ending the crimes of enslavement. The Civil War also added three Amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—to the United States Constitution, thereby improving an American democracy that definitely needed improvement. American democracy, even though further improved since the mid-nineteenth century, can still stand improvement, so long as Republicans can lose the popular vote but still hold the presidency and appoint a majority of justices to the Supreme Court. The resulting Republican Supreme Court is about to finish off one of the twentieth century’s signal democratic improvements: the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Nonetheless, at no point can we look backward to a time when U.S. democracy was more robust or complete than it is now, threatened though it may be by the kinds of armed attacks and election denial not seen since the nineteenth century.

In the nearly two years since the January 6, 2021, assault on the United States Capitol, an overwhelmingly white riot, Republicans have solidified their embrace of the assault, just as they embrace former President Donald Trump’s profoundly anti-democratic lies about a “stolen election.” It’s as though Republicans were bent on reminding us of their ever more obvious rejection of democracy’s crucial symbol and central act: voting.

In November 2020, millions of Americans voted, with images widely broadcast of voters, especially voters of color, standing in long lines in order to do so. In Georgia, the contest for U.S. senator was between a Trump-endorsed white Republican and Raphael Warnock, a Black Democrat allied with Stacey Abrams’s New Georgia Project for voting rights. The right to vote is closely associated with the Democratic Party, and voting rights are widely considered a Black, not a white, issue, even though universal suffrage is not supposed to be limited by color.

As long as we have a party of Republicans perceived as white and a party of Democrats perceived as Black, as we do now, politicized versions of race remain a threat to American democracy, especially given the well-armed and fanatically loyal nature of the Republican base. I can easily envision more anti-democratic actions from Republicans to come in the near future, for their hold on state, local, and national offices seems secure for now. It is also possible that massive climate-disaster induced migration will encourage the kind of anti-democratic responses that have occurred in Sweden (see the success of the Sweden Democrats) and eastern Germany (see the success of the AfD Alternative für Deutschland). At the same time, I see important countervailing tendencies in the United States that by 2050 could very well make this country’s democracy stronger than it is now.

I take my cues from Heather McGhee’s revealing 2021 book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. Starting from the swimming pools that twentieth-century racist localities preferred to fill in rather than desegregate, McGhee reminds us that paved-over swimming pools penalized everyone, not just aspiring swimmers who were Black. Those bigoted actions deprived “the sum of us” access to a public good. In more recent

years, McGhee finds something new, a recognition of that loss. She tells of people who have done something that seems hard in our racialized public sphere: overcome racial barriers to work locally toward results that benefit “us all.”

McGhee finds her examples in places like Lewiston, Maine; Richmond, California; and East Haven, Connecticut, where local actions, the foundation of democracy, provide a “solidarity dividend” that benefits everyone. Immigrants from several African countries regenerated the dying town of Lewiston, and the Maine People’s Alliance, founded in 1982 and now 32,000 members strong, spearheaded the ballot provision that brought Medicaid expansion to the state in 2017, after the governor had refused to do so. The environmental movement that began in the South in the 1980s gave rise to organizations such as Just Transition Alliance; the Poor People’s Campaign; Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation; the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition; Fight for \$15; California’s Richmond Progressive Alliance; and so many other local and statewide coalitions that work across racial and ethnic boundaries for public ends such as environmental justice and an expanded safety net. McGhee concludes that “when people have a chance to create a bond that’s not based on skin color or culture, what they actually connect on are the things they value in common.”

Unfortunately, given the central role of entertainment value in U.S. news, it’s far easier to learn about QAnon, Oath Keepers, and election deniers than about peaceful, multiracial coalitions for the public good. One nationwide, multiracial, multiethnic coalition is in full view, however, and that’s the Democratic Party, which has won the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris campaigned on a promise to defend voting rights and pursue environmental justice; in 2021, they established the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Federal policy has included the term “environmental justice” since the 1990s. At this point, however, the severity of global warming’s wildfires, droughts, and floods has made the need all the more visible, and all the more deserving of being addressed equitably.

Although climate disaster can threaten democracy, climate may play a pro-democracy role by forcing us to see that we are all in this together and encouraging collaborative work toward environmental ends. The example of the Richmond Alliance’s work for environmental justice may well say more about the future of a multiracial U.S. democracy than the actions of a group of heavily armed white nationalists.

Am I “hopeful” or “optimistic” about the future of our democracy? No, I am not. I have lived as a Black American too long to dare to be hopeful about my country’s politics, for hopes are bound to be dashed on the rocks of racial violence and discrimination. At the same time, I don’t expect a future civil war or a steep, long-term destruction of U.S. democracy. I lived through the era of McCarthyism, and my studies in history taught me about the slave and Jim Crow eras. I do fear more anti-democratic assaults in the near future, as long as the cult of Trump entrances the white party. Meanwhile, masses of Americans are learning to work together to spread what Heather McGhee calls the “solidarity dividend” that accrues to Americans working together locally for their common good. The “solidarity dividend” is good for democracy, good for us all. **INR**

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