

July 2020

Book Review: The Character of American Democracy — Preserving our Past, Protecting our Future

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Recommended Citation

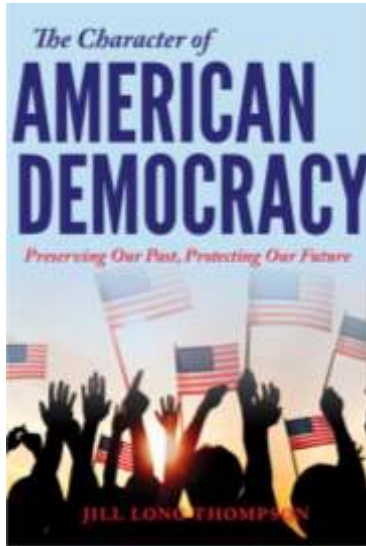
Gingerich, Elizabeth and Thompson, Jill Long (2020) "Book Review: The Character of American Democracy — Preserving our Past, Protecting our Future," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 23.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22543/0733.132.1337>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol13/iss2/23>

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Book Review and Summary



Title: *The Character of American Democracy – Preserving our Past, Protecting our Future*

Author: Jill Long Thompson

Reviewer: Elizabeth F.R. Gingerich

Paperback: 162 pages

Publisher: Indiana University Press (September 15, 2020)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 025305043X

ISBN-13: 978-0253050434

It is tempting when picking up a book to wonder just how much experience the author has in the subject at hand while concomitantly questioning his or her expertise. But Jill Long Thompson, the author of the soon-to-be-released *The Character of American Democracy*, manifests an unsurpassed record of principled leadership and a long, celebrated legacy of public service.

Having attained a B.S. in Business Administration from Valparaiso University followed by MBA and doctoral degrees in Business from the Indiana University Kelley School of Business, Long Thompson began a long succession of political positions.

Quite remarkably, in 1986, Long Thompson became the first woman in the State of Indiana to win the nomination for the U.S. Senate, and three years later, successfully secured a Congressional seat which she held for several consecutive terms until 1995. As a member Congress she served on the Agriculture and Veterans' Affairs Committees. She was also a National Vice Chair of the Democratic Leadership Council and a speaker at the 1992 Democratic National Convention in New York.



From 1995 to 2001, Long Thompson served as Under Secretary of Agriculture for Rural Development during the Bill Clinton Administration, managing 7,000 employees and a \$10 billion budget while overhauling single-family loan programs and helping to create thousands of jobs in economically-challenged rural communities.

In 2008, Long Thompson won the Democratic nomination for governor of Indiana, again making her mark as the first woman in Indiana history, this time to be nominated for governor by a major party.

In 2012, at the pinnacle of her political career, Long Thompson served as Chair and CEO of the Farm Credit Administration (FCA) during the Barack Obama Administration, in charge of a multi-billion-dollar budget.

Following years of teaching at Indiana University, Long Thompson authored this work, focusing her examination on the synergistic interplay of ethics, democracy, character, citizenry, capitalism, and leadership. She introduced a comprehensive ethics reform bill in 1993 – *Congressional Ethics Reform Act*, HR 2735 – the focus of which was to ban all gifts from lobbyists to congressional representatives. Reviewing the circumstances of this bold move reminded me of the micro actions of late Dr. Quentin Young, a tenacious advocate of healthcare ethics and reform: as the former chairman of the Department of Medicine of Cook County/Stroger Hospital, Young banned all pharmaceutical sales representatives from the facility, citing undue influence in physician’s plans of treatment. Like Young, Long Thompson champions the eschewing of every potential influence – from a soft drink to an all-expense paid vacation – that might impact the decision-making process of those deigned to serve the public good.

In its totality, *The Character of American Democracy* reminded me that we are living at a time of unprecedented challenges – both universal in nature as well as intrinsic to America’s unique history. Never has its leadership, character development, sense of ethics, appreciation of diversity, search for trust, and intolerance of corruption been put to such a test. Long Thompson provides guidance by identifying, defining, and applying those fundamental components of ethical leadership necessary to lead the nation and the world in corrective action; by checking indifference and mismanagement which unequivocally undermine the rule of law; and by balancing individual freedoms with serving the interests of the collective good.

Predominant Themes of “The Character of American Democracy”

The Predicate Gift. Americans were bestowed the gift of a constitutional democracy premised upon the principles of self-governance and individual liberties, yet accompanied by burdens and challenges. The setting of its adoption was far from unblemished, however, as the majority of its authors owned slaves, fractionalized Native American Indians, and rendered women as largely irrelevant to the political process. The Constitutional Preamble “for a more perfect union” would be a continuing objective, tested by such momentous events as the Civil War, waves of immigration, extension of voting rights, a Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, and more currently, extremist isolationist measures and policies. No doubt, as the author points out, the American democratic system has been subject to a lengthy learning process.

Essential Definitions. Long Thompson explores key terms intrinsic to the American system of government and economic growth.

- **Character:** Empathy and understanding are cited as important attributions of character whereas its individual components are specifically identified as *trustworthiness, citizenship, fairness, responsibility, caring, and respect*.
- **Capitalism:** Noting the historical and current unequal opportunities precluding full participation of the populace in a market-based economy, the author remains positive

about its potential when subject to a wisely-based regulatory scheme environment which promotes social responsibility.

- **Democracy:** Central to the proper functioning of a democratic government is integrity and essential to the maintenance of integrity are the dual agents of “accountability and transparency.” Democracy is predicated on values-based leaders as well as a well-informed and thoroughly-involved citizenry. As Long Thompson stresses, “Democracy is a shared responsibility, and we must look inward to ourselves, as well as outward to our leaders and fellow citizens, to make it work.”
- **Fairness:** A just government demands the development and implementation of fair policies and directives and the rejection of any philosophies or actions which marginalize segments of the populace, whether through overt or covert acts of racism, gender-related discrimination, or other nefarious practices which hinder equitable application.

Noted Distinctions. Comparing and contrasting certain subjects is imperative to this study of American democracy. For example,

- **Government vs Business:** As Long Thompson explains, “running a government is not like running a business. Businesses exist to generate a profit while providing a product that serves the needs or wants of the customer. Governments exist to provide order and security for a society.” Business profit objectives must be tempered with sound regulatory administration and a commitment to stakeholder involvement. The individual freedoms and liberties of the American-style of government must be counterbalanced by the need to serve the collective good.
- **Ethics vs. Morality:** A distinction is made by the author between actions deemed ethical and guiding morals or principles. Ethics refers to the widely-shared, intuitively-premised universal understanding of what is right and wrong. Morals, on the other hand, are better associated with personal norms, often predicated on individual outlooks and opinions.

Present Challenges. Long Thompson decries that the “lack of ethics and character among our nation’s leaders in both the public and private sectors makes this one of the most disconcerting times in my life. Even more disconcerting is the fact that the public outcry is not as great as it should be. We must fight the tendency among some to see unethical behavior as normal or, even worse, as acceptable.” She cites numerous manifestations of distortion in governance:

- **Unabated Political Spending:** Well-regulated campaign financing has largely been reversed as the result of the 2010 US Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision, infusing massive corporate spending and influence into the political arena.
- **Unchecked Conflicts of Interest:** Lack of mandatory financial disclosure has elevated the pursuit of individual gain in the highest office. The author cites the promotion of presidential-based business involving family-owned hotels and golf courses as key examples.
- **Restricted Access to the Polls:** Compromising the significance of the vote ostensibly undermines democracy. As evidence of this threat, Long Thompson cites gerrymandering, the reduction of polling stations, and the purging of voting lists.

- ***World Standing:*** The signing of the Constitution signaled the emergence of American ideals onto the world stage, crystallizing a profound leadership role which grew exponentially over the next 250 years. The emoluments clauses served as checks on financial misdeeds, setting the stage for international emulation. The author notes that while the United States continues to be a world leader, the country has been more respected and influential under the leadership of other presidents as compared to the current administration. For instance, the Marshall Plan of post-WW II and development of the World Trade Organization (WTO) have given way to wholesale isolationism. The country's traditional leadership role in formatting alliances has now been diminished. While America is not the world leader as it has been in the past, the author is quick to emphasize America's potential to rally together to share resources and ameliorate deleterious circumstances – characteristically part of the functioning of any democracy.
- ***Rule of Law:*** The US Constitution established a system of separate but equal branches of government, all operating under a rigorous set of checks and balances. Yet the rule of law is seriously put into question when ethical guideposts are obscured and unethical behavior sanctioned. The author cites the disgraced former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich as an example of such questionable behavior (*reviewer note:* pardoned by President Trump on February 19, 2020).
- ***Corruption and Oversight:*** From Wells Fargo's corporate policies of creating ghost financial accounts to charges of self-dealing by the White House, American institutions and ideals are under assault by incidences of unbridled corruption. Long Thompson asserts that unfettered oversight must be restored to ensure a strong, well-functioning democracy.
- ***Pursuit of Truth and the Role of the Press:*** The antithesis to conveying truthful information is the intentional dissemination of falsehoods. The author emphasizes the need for a well-informed electorate, necessary to fully participate as engaged citizens in a democracy. To that end, the press must be allowed to move forward unfettered, yet with a moral directive to strive for factually-based reporting. This rationale is in line with Thomas Jefferson's admonition that "our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost." Long Thompson recognizes that a free press is quintessential to the infrastructure of a democracy, yet has the responsibility to deliver and uncover the truth. And the public, as part of its exercise of citizenship, must be equipped with the abilities to discern which sources of information are the most credible.

The Need. In her advocacy of ethical leadership, character-building, sound governance, and an unflinching commitment to ensure equal market and political opportunities, Long Thompson depicts a public hungry for grace and decorum, chivalry and mutual respect. In a democracy where everyone has a role in making government work, the key to achieving these objectives is through:

- ***Introspective Examination:*** While it is easy to critique others' opinions and political leanings, it is imperative for each citizen to identify, define, and eschew personal prejudices – which may include conformity, gender, and racial biases – which nefariously work to undermine objective thinking and mindful action. For one is not able to treat others fairly until he or she is able to eliminate biases in the quest to gain greater objectivity.

- ***External Examination and Public Critique:*** Long Thompson underscores the importance of debate, discussion, and disagreement to the preservation of American democracy. This view coincides with Benjamin Franklin’s directive that it “is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority” and what has been ascribed to Thomas Jefferson that “dissent is the highest form of patriotism.”

Expectations and Mandates. To properly strengthen American democracy, the author stresses that there are obligations which all its constituents must undertake:

- ***Active Citizenship:*** Americans must take their citizenship roles seriously by not simply paying their taxes and voting for their representatives, but by respecting the rights of others and by striving “to become informed and stay informed on candidates, public officials, and policy.”
- ***Seek and Embrace the Truth:*** It is every citizen’s obligation to seek, demand, and disseminate the truth for in truth comes safety and trust. Concomitantly, those who spread falsehoods either flagrantly or more obtusely must be called out and held accountable. Lying by public officials not only misleads the public but undermines basic democratic principles.
- ***Equal Opportunity Capitalism:*** The author concludes that capitalism can be allowed to function properly where participants have equal market opportunities, diversity created by generations of immigrants is celebrated, a well-designed regulatory environment is established, and collective bargaining rights are strengthened and respected.

Conclusion. Long Thompson concludes this masterful work by interjecting certain unassailable maxims: *character matters* and *loss of ethical leadership is a dangerous and imminent threat to democracy*. In the words of Dwight Eisenhower “a people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both.” The plea is for the American public to relish and preserve the gift of democracy or be faced with its disintegration.

— Elizabeth F.R. Gingerich, Editor-in-Chief, JVBL