

THE AGENDA

IDEAS

 **What Whitman Knew** 

Walt Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" is still the most trenchant explanation of American policies and ambitions

BY DAVID BROOKS

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Whenever I hear people say something stupid about America, which is often these days, I want to punch them in the nose and hand them Walt Whitman's 1871 essay "[Democratic Vistas](#)." The punch would temporarily stem the flow of idiocy, and the copy of "Democratic Vistas" would give them some accurate sense of what the United States is all about.

I should make it clear from the start that "Democratic Vistas" can be an infuriating piece of writing. Whitman could not be bothered with mundane considerations like clarity, coherence, and organizational logic. But it survives as our nation's most brilliant political sermon because it embodies the exuberant energy of American society—the energy that can make other peoples so nervous—and it captures in its hodgepodge nature both the high aspirations and the sordid realities of everyday life.

Whitman grappled with a central paradox: America strives to be great and powerful as a nation so that it can bring about the full flowering of individuals. "Political democracy, as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training school for making first-class men," he declared. "It is life's gymnasium, not of good only, but of all." Americans, he continued, are or should be "freedom's athletes," filled with "brave delight," audacious aims, and restless hopes.

Whitman longed for democratic noblemen and noblewomen who would be "in youth, fresh, ardent, emotional, aspiring, full of adventure; at maturity, brave, perceptive, under control, neither too talkative nor too reticent, neither flippant nor somber; of the bodily figure, the movements easy, the complexion showing the best blood, somewhat flushed, breast expanded, an erect attitude, a voice whose sound outvies music, eyes of calm and steady gaze, yet capable also of flashing." These people would realize themselves amid political combat, hard work, social reform, nation building, and global causes: "So will individuality, and unimpeded branchings, flourish best under imperial republican forms."

The forces of affluence, fashion, comfort, modesty, and civility were, Whitman feared, breeding "inertness and fossilism" in his countrymen and countrywomen. He embraced, as countermeasures, spirit and vivacity in every form, no matter how vulgar. "I hail with

joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age," he wrote. And he harbored the fervent hope that in the decades and centuries to come these raw energies would fuel spiritual and intellectual breakthroughs to create largeness of soul. "Thus we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade, and a blank. But the throes of birth are upon us."

A cosmic optimism pervades the essay, as it does all of Whitman's works. But "Democratic Vistas" was actually written in a mood of some bleakness. Whitman had believed that the Civil War would cleanse the nation of its most serious ills. As the war approached and then commenced, he railed against business interests and war opponents—and wrote several recruiting poems ("Thunder on! stride on, Democracy! strike with vengeful stroke!"). During the conflict he nursed the wounded. Literary critics sometimes emphasize the homoerotic nature of his attraction to the soldiers, but there was more to it than that. He admired their selfless heroism and their calmness and bravery as death approached. "Grand, common stock!" he exulted in "Democratic Vistas."

Whitman worked as a government clerk during the war, climbing from post to post, admiring Grant and worshipping Lincoln. Like everyone else, he had his moments of despair. "Every once in a while I feel so horrified & disgusted," he wrote to his mother in 1863. "[The war] seems to me like a great slaughter-house & the men mutually butchering each other." But even in such a dark moment, he continued, "I feel how impossible it appears again, to retire from this contest, until we have carried our points."

After the Union victory and Lincoln's sacrificial death, Whitman hoped that grief would cement the people together and call forth each person's best self. But of course the heroic mood did not survive. Life sank back to its normal sordid pattern. Political and business corruption were rampant. The middle classes returned to their trivial enjoyments.

In April of 1867 the prophetic British historian Thomas Carlyle published an essay called ["Shooting Niagara—and After?"](#) It was a vituperative attack on democracy, equality, and the liberation of the slaves. Where the common people rule, he argued, all culture is brought low, and life becomes mediocre and vulgar. Whitman took up his pen to defend democracy and the United States. But by the time he completed his reply, "Democratic Vistas," he had to admit that Carlyle was right on many points.

Whitman's essay contains vacillations that give it a head-spinning quality. One paragraph expresses revulsion over the people he saw around him.

Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us ... The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. The aim of all the *littérateurs* is to find something to make fun of. A lot of churches, sects, etc., the most dismal

phantasms I know, usurp the name of religion. Conversation is a mass of badinage.

The next paragraph recounts his walking the streets of New York, amid the "assemblages of the citizens in their groups, conversations, trades and evening amusements," and finding himself overcome by "exaltation" and "absolute fulfillment." In the paragraph after that he is despondent again, unable to find around him men worthy of the name, or arts worthy of appreciation. "A sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics."

Whitman was teaching an important lesson here: It is misleading to think one can arrive at a single, consistent judgment about the United States (or perhaps about any society). When it comes to the health of the country and its culture, the highest highs and the lowest lows are simultaneous and adjacent. Extremes must be accepted without regard for consistency—a lesson that our gloomy cultural critics and self-congratulatory political orators almost never get right.

In spite of his concessions to Carlyle, Whitman never fully reclined into pessimism. In the first place, his boundless energy always propelled him toward hopefulness, toward some activity that would lead to a brighter future. Second, unlike most cultural critics, he was not a snob, putting himself above those whose spiritual flatness he criticized. His love for his fellow Americans, as they actually lived and breathed around him, prevailed. No matter how trivial his neighbors might appear on the surface, he always saw through to their underlying nobility. "Shams, etc., will always be the show, like ocean's scum," he acknowledged. Even so, the American people were "the peaceablest and most good natured race in the world, and the most personally independent and intelligent." They were reliable in emergencies and possessed "a certain breadth of historic grandeur, of peace or war," in that regard surpassing the citizenry of any other great nation. The behavior of the average American during the Civil War, he contended, proved beyond all doubt "that popular democracy, whatever its faults and dangers, practically justifies itself beyond the proudest claims and wildest hopes of its enthusiasts." No future age could entirely know how the unknown rank and file of both armies fought and sacrificed for their ideals and proved themselves through "fearful tests."

Whitman had a remarkably subtle sense of America's unique historical mission. Many people before and since have argued that the United States was assigned by God or destiny to spread democracy and advance human freedom around the globe. But Whitman learned, perhaps from Lincoln, that this is both a glorious and a tragic assignment. Reading "Democratic Vistas" is a bit like looking at a painting of the Annunciation, as Mary glimpses the divine but sad future of her son.

Whitman foresaw that the country's task of promoting liberty and democracy would be an arduous one. He further foresaw that we would have to embrace that task even at times when life at home was far from perfect. America's mission would not always be a romantic quest headed by dashing, heroic figures. It would sometimes be led by Presidents (and others) who failed to be impressive or inspirational. "Even today, amid

these whirls, incredible flippancy, and blind fury of parties, infidelity, entire lack of first-class captains and leaders," the United States is still destined to sail the "dangerous sea," he argued. He wrote,

It seems as if the Almighty had spread before this nation charts of imperial destinies, dazzling as the sun, yet with many a deep intestine difficulty, and human aggregate of cankerous imperfection ... You said in your soul, I will be empire of empires, overshadowing all else, past and present, putting the history of Old-World dynasties, conquests behind me, as of no account—making a new history, a history of democracy, making old history a dwarf—I alone inaugurating largeness, culminating time.

Whitman also perceived that the nation could not readily communicate its mission, either to the world or to itself. He dreamed that a crop of literary giants would emerge to develop an American soul equal to American economic and political might. "Democratic Vistas" was intended to inspire a "literatus of the modern"—poets and writers who would complete the task Whitman had begun.

It's hard these days to put that much faith in poets and writers. The geniuses Whitman envisioned have not arrived. America's greatest contributions to the world are generally found in its innovations and its actions, not in literary masterpieces. Now, more than 130 years after Whitman published "Democratic Vistas," that essay remains the best explanation of the nation's energy and aspirations.

No one since Whitman has captured quite so well the motivating hopefulness that propels American policy and makes the nation a great and restless force in the world. No other essay communicates quite so well what it is like to live constantly in the shadow of the future, trusting that tomorrow's world will be better and will redeem the incompleteness of the present. Whitman's essay, with its nuanced understanding of the American national character, stands today as a powerful rebuttal to, for example, the parades of European anti-Americans. What these groups despise is a cliché—a flat and simpleminded image of American power. They do not see, as Whitman did, that despite its many imperfections, America is a force for democracy and progress. "Far, far indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas!" Whitman wrote. "How much is still to be disentangled, freed!"