

The Private Depends on the Public

From the beginning, America provided public education, public hospitals, public roads and bridges, an army to protect the union, a legislature to make laws regulating and maintaining the union, an executive to carry out those laws, a justice system to enforce those laws, a national bank, a patent office, means to promote interstate commerce, and above all, a system for the public to choose those who govern us. Without such public resources there could have been no satisfactory private life and no functioning business community in America—and no democracy!

This tells us something deep and crucial about American democracy, and Western democracy in general. American democracy has grown out of the idea of a union—a coming together of citizens who care about each other and therefore care about their nation as a whole. America has worked as a democracy because enough Americans have taken responsibility for each other—that is, for the nation—using their government to provide public resources for all, enough and of the right kind to provide decent private lives for most of our citizens.

Understanding this requires noticing and appreciating those public resources, appreciating the civil servants who provide them, and understanding that we as citizens take on the responsibility, both through paying for them and providing political support.

It is even more true today that the private depends on the public. We, as citizens working through our government, have provided much more—an electric grid, public universities, an interstate highway system, publicly funded scientific research that has resulted in the field of computer science and all computer technology, satellite communications that make telecommunications and the Internet possible, modern medicine, airports and an air traffic control system, pilot training through the air force, a center for