

NEXUS INSTITUTE

Nexus Symposium

Democracy Today in the USA

Jeb Bush

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Anne Applebaum

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DeLaMar Theater, Amsterdam

Democracy Today in the USA

In February 1938, the German novelist and Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann arrived in New York for a coast to coast lecture tour entitled *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. For four months, in fifteen town halls, for an audience between two thousand and seven thousand people, the famous European novelist spoke for two hours about democracy, which he defined as: 'that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man.' He admitted that Europe has much to learn about the nature of democracy from America, because 'it was your American statesmen and poets such as Lincoln and Whitman who proclaimed to the world democratic thought and feeling, and the democratic way of life, in imperishable words'.

Obviously, with these words Mann referred to Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, in which the great statesmen famously said: 'That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' Not only the ideas of Lincoln, but also the teachings of the great American poet and thinker Walt Whitman aroused Mann's democratic heart. With the work of Whitman, Mann had a strong and rather personal connection. Two decades earlier, inspired by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and his reflections in *Democratic Vistas*, Mann transformed from a conservative anti-democrat into a passionate defender of democracy. He made Whitman's teachings his own: America, the New World, was destined to be a democracy, and the purpose of democracy is that the highest freedom becomes law, and then goodness and virtue would follow. Political freedom and the right to vote are not enough to sustain the true democratic spirit. Whitman deplored 'an atmosphere of hypocrisy' and 'the depravity of the business class', 'the slavery, misery, meanness' in American society. For Whitman, a new spirit of the age had to arrive, the era of literature has to emerge, as only an education in literature, a liberal education, could support American Democracy.

This also was Mann's argument in his plea for American Democracy at a time of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism in Europe and Russia: 'Democracy

wishes to elevate mankind, to teach it to think, to set it free. It seeks to remove from culture the stamp of privilege and disseminate it among the people — in a word, it aims at education.'

In 1831, more than hundred years before Thomas Mann's arrival in America for his by Walt Whitman inspired lecture tour on the 'American promise', a French aristocrat arrived in New York to study a new phenomenon that was transforming societies all over the world: the equality of conditions... democracy!

His observations on the nature of a democratic society were, however, more sober, more rational than the poetic, even euphoric evocations of the American bard and the German novelist. Without the burden of tradition, authorities and social classes, American society would be pragmatic, utilitarian, individualistic, materialistic. Americans have great faith that everything in the world can be fixed. Science, technology and business would be considered more important than philosophy, poetry and intellectual life. And despite its individualistic orientation, due to egalitarianism and materialism, society is endangered by a new despotism that may lead to 'an innumerable crowd of like and equal men [...] procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of others [...]. Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated [...] it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that [...].'

All the more reason for the leaders of society, in the Frenchman's view, to take responsibility: 'To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to time and place; to modify it according to circumstances and men; such is the first duty imposed on those who direct society in our day.'

This is the analysis by and the conclusion of Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. In its introduction, he writes: 'It is not only to satisfy a curiosity, otherwise legitimate, that I have examined America; I wanted to find lessons there from which we could profit. [...] I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to become acquainted with it only to know at least what we ought to hope or fear from it.'

There was and still is great wisdom in Tocqueville's attitude. Not only because he was right: since he published his book, and definitely since America became a leading superpower after World War II, the democratization — or better: 'Americanization' — of European society is a fact. Another fact is that

American politics do not only affect American society, but also have a huge impact on global affairs, including European matters. Having knowledge of and understanding democracy today in the USA therefore matters – especially in a year in which a new American president is elected. And despite existing similarities between American and European societies, many political and social phenomena also vary, making America different. We have to understand these dissimilarities ‘to know at least what we ought to hope or to fear from it’. What kind of democracy will exist in a mass culture? What about the role of money, celebrities, race? Why do many Americans consider their political system ‘broke’ and lacks confidence in their political class? What are the consequences of this, now and in the future? What remains of Walt Whitman and Thomas Mann’s idea that literature and a liberal education are the soul of a true democracy? And when watching the news today, how should we understand the undercurrent of racism in American society; the religious fundamentalism; the massive amounts of money as part of the elections; the role of anti-politics ‘politicians’ in the election of the American president; the many broken dreams?!

More important than ever for both Americans and Europeans is the sad remark by George Hanson (the young Jack Nicholson) at the end of the movie *Easy Rider*: ‘You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong with it’. For the sake of our own future, we must understand — we should instruct democracy and breathe new life into it!

Rob Riemen
Founder & President Nexus Institute

Speakers

ANNE APPLEBAUM

United States, 1964

Anne Applebaum is a columnist for *The Washington Post* and *Slate* and Director of the Transitions Forum at the Legatum Institute. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic* and many other publications. She is a graduate from Yale and the London School of Economics and wrote several books, including *Gulag. A History*, which won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, and *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*, which won the 2013 Cundill Prize for Historical Literature. She is a former Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics, a former member of *The Washington Post* editorial board, a former deputy editor of *The Spectator* magazine and a former Warsaw correspondent of *The Economist*.



ROGER BERKOWITZ

United States, 1968

Roger Berkowitz is the Academic Director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities and Associate Professor of Politics, Human Rights, and Philosophy at Bard College. He is the author of *Leibniz and The Gift of Science* and editor of *HA: The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center* as well as many edited volumes including *Thinking In Dark Times. Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Political Theory*, and many other publications. Professor Berkowitz's writing and teaching ranges from Greek and German philosophy to legal history and from the history of science to images of justice in film and literature. By bringing philosophy to bear on political and legal questions, he explores the origins and contours of real-world problems, from the violation of human rights to the reemergence of vengeance in criminal law. Above all, his work asks what it means to be just in our world.





JEB BUSH
United States, 1953

Jeb Bush was the 43rd Governor of the State of Florida, serving from 1999 through 2007. During his two terms, Bush remained true to his conservative principles, cutting taxes, vetoing earmarks and championing major reform of government programs. Under his leadership, Florida was on the forefront of consumer healthcare advances, led the nation in job growth, and launched and accelerated restoration of America's Everglades. In education, Florida raised academic standards, required accountability in public schools and created the most ambitious school choice program in the nation. As a result, Florida students have made the greatest gains in academic achievement and Florida is one of a handful of states to significantly narrow the achievement gap. Prior to and after his tenure as Governor, Bush was actively involved in the private sector helping to build the largest full service real estate company in South Florida and owning and operating successful consulting and investing businesses. Bush maintains his passion for improving the quality of education for students by serving as the chairman of the Foundation for Excellence in Education which works with education leaders, teachers, parents and advocates to develop and implement reforms that lead to rising student achievement. Bush has written three books: *Profiles in Character*, *Immigration Wars*, *Forging an American Solution*, and *Reply All*. He lives in Miami with his wife Columba. They have three children and four grandchildren.

RANDALL KENNEDY

United States, 1954

Randall Kennedy is the Michael R. Klein Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. Born in Columbia, South Carolina, he graduated from Princeton University, attended Balliol College, Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and graduated from the Yale Law School where he was an editor of the *Yale Law Journal*. He clerked for Judge J. Skelly Wright of the United States Court of Appeals and for Justice Thurgood Marshall of the United States Supreme Court. He is a member of the bar of the District of Columbia and the United States Supreme Court, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, and a Trustee Emeritus of Princeton University. Kennedy has written several books including *Interracial Intimacies. Sex, Marriage, Identity and Adoption, For Discrimination. Race, Affirmative Action and the Law*, and *Race, Crime and the Law* which was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Book Prize.



AZAR NAFISI

Iran, 1955

Azar Nafisi is a writer and literary scholar. After her studies in Switzerland and the United States, Nafisi returned in 1979 to Tehran to teach English literature at university level. About her experiences as a lecturer, she wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), which has sold over a million copies and which, after a successful opera adaptation, is currently being turned into a film. In 1997, Nafisi emigrated to the US; in 2008, she became an American. Another two bestselling books have since been published: *Things I've Been Silent About* (2009), about her youth in Tehran, and *The Republic of Imagination* (2014), describing the journey that led her to become an American citizen, a deeply moving hymn to America and a passionate plea for the importance of literature. Nafisi is a Visiting Professor and the Executive Director of Cultural Conversations at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC, where she is a Professor of Aesthetics, Culture and Literature, and teaches courses on the relation between culture and politics. Nafisi also writes for *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian*.





DEREK SHEARER
United States, 1946

Derek Shearer is Chevalier Professor of Diplomacy and World Affairs at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and serves as Director of the McKinnon Center for Global Affairs. Shearer served in the Clinton administration as an economics official in the Commerce Department, and then as Ambassador to Finland (1994–97). Among his many accomplishments were the creation of the administration’s coordinated strategy to the Nordic-Baltic region and the hosting of the Clinton-Yeltsin summit in Helsinki. At Ambassador Shearer’s recommendation during the presidential campaign, President Clinton established the National Economic Council in the White House. Additionally, he was a co-author of the Clinton-Gore campaign program ‘Putting People First’. Ambassador Shearer served as a foreign policy advisor to Vice President Gore during the 2000 Presidential campaign and to Senator Hillary Clinton in 2008. His articles on foreign affairs and public policy have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many weekly and monthly publications. Ambassador Shearer also is a regular contributor to the *Huffington Post*.



SEAN WILENTZ
United States, 1951

Sean Wilentz is a Professor in History at Princeton, one of the greatest experts on the history of American democracy and the official biographer of Bob Dylan. Wilentz studied at Columbia and Oxford before obtaining his doctorate from Yale. Wilentz best known works are the monumental *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *The Age of Reagan*, on American politics since the Watergate scandal; and *Bob Dylan in America*, emphasizing Dylan’s importance in history and comparing his place in American culture to Walt Whitman’s. Wilentz worked as an editor for *The New Republic*, *Dissent* and *Democracy*, and he wrote more than three hundred articles for prestigious publications such as *The New York Review of Books*, *Le Monde* and *Salon*.

NEXUS INSTITUTE

The Nexus Institute cherishes and celebrates the European humanist tradition and strives to keep the European intellectual heritage alive by stimulating and informed discussion on universal questions and contemporary issues. To this end, the Institute organizes conferences, symposia, lectures and master classes and publishes thought-provoking essays by international intellectuals in the Nexus Library series. The journal *Nexus*, published three times a year, comprises engaging cultural-philosophical essays by the world's foremost scientists, philosophers, artists and politicians.

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