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Article published Mar 4, 2012

## Town meeting: Local decisions that matter

About 10 minutes after midnight 38 years ago on March 5, 1974, Thetford, Vermont, did something wildly unique at its annual town meeting.

The moderator read the results of the vote: 160 yea, 130 nay.

Impeach him said the town. Impeach Nixon.

A patient (but sleepy) national press corps leapt into action. From that moment on town meeting took on a more positive meaning.

To understand why Thetford was so important, one must understand that the view of town meeting at the time (even in Vermont) featured nests of Yankees holding fiercely to the past, fighting progress, and skimping on public spending. Joe Sherman advanced this view in his book on Vermont summing up town meeting as "an old-fashioned ritual of democracy, spewing rhetoric and in some cases applauding jingoism."

Thetford changed that attitude.

The new view of town meeting that began in Thetford in 1974 was hammered firmly in place in 1982, when a proposal to freeze nuclear weapons production in America was approved by 150 towns. With the national media still smarting over the election of Ronald Reagan (who, they felt, added a certain urgency to the situation) the specter of Vermont's towns rising up against his bombs was simply too sweet to resist.

Vermont had told Americans that democracy was alive and well. It could be good again for them, too. Many of us in the communitarian left (which was mostly on the "right" in those days) may have muttered, "It's about time!" but we reveled in the obvious discomfort of people like then Sen. Dan Quayle in the following exchange with PBS's Jim Lehrer before a high-end national audience.

Lehrer: "Sen. Quayle, you said it's not going to be the folks at town meeting who are going to resolve this thing, but isn't that what has happened? Isn't that the reason we're here tonight? Isn't that the reason the president's speaking on it tonight because people at town meetings have raised the issue?"

Quayle: "Our military experts say that we're in an inferior situation: the Soviet military experts believe that we are in an inferior situation. And they're not going

to ask some grass-roots caucus taking place in Vermont whether they're inferior or superior."

To say that Thetford produced a democratic earthquake in America would be an exaggeration.

To say it produced an earthquake in Vermont would not.

I am writing today at the behest of one of the results of this changed attitude — the campaign to bring before Vermont's town meetings a proposal to disassociate the term "corporation" from the term "individual."

Since the nuclear freeze proposal of 1982, the practice of bringing national issues before town meetings has become commonplace. This year the issue goes all the way back to the Dartmouth College case of 1819 when the Supreme Court established the principle of "corporate personhood," which gives corporations rights and responsibilities like those of natural persons. Ironically, Daniel Webster brought tears to the eyes of the justices (led by John Marshall) with his passionate defense of little things. "It is, sir, as I have said, a small college and yet there are those of us who love it." Many Vermonters would say the same thing about their towns and the town meetings that govern them.

Now some Vermont citizens want to ask their towns to send a message to the nation, to wit: Corporations are not people at all, and to pretend they are is not only nonsense, it is capricious.

So what's not to like?

After all town meetings played a critical role in the formation of the republic itself. The king's "secretary of state" to the colonies pinned the Boston Tea Party on town meetings. "This is what comes," he wrote "of their wretched town meetings ... These are the proceedings of a tumultuous and riotous rabble ... that ought not trouble themselves with politics and governments."

If this proposal were exceptional, there would be nothing not to like. Indeed, 20 years ago I felt that this kind of thing was slowing down and well might only happen now and then. But in recent years it seems that town meetings are beginning to be co-opted more and more by special interests whose primary concern is to cloak their agenda with what leftist scholar and activist Murray Bookchin called "the enormous moral voice" of town meeting.

Moreover the use of town meeting to promote important issues, but issues which are extraneous to the town as a town, had led to something even more troubling — politicians holding public meetings to explain, promote or solicit the public's opinion on some program or policy now regularly call these gatherings "town meetings." A few weeks ago I got an email that informed me Sen. Sanders was "holding a town meeting" in (as I recall) Jericho. And some even use town

meeting as a campaign gimmick. President Jimmy Carter once claimed he held a town meeting in Japan. This began in earnest in 1992 with Ross Perot; but it was perfected by Bill Clinton, who was a master at it. John McCain, who was not, used the term town meeting in vain. The habit is clearly nonpartisan.

Now national media through force of habit (a habit founded by and abetted by us) are calling nearly anything a "town meeting." When you define something as "anything," you end up defining it as "nothing." And this is the most serious issue — the decline of town meeting. The evidence is clear. Attendance as a percent of registered voters is going steadily down. Equally serious is the fact that meeting time grows shorter and shorter. Town meeting is becoming a place to vent, not a place to vote.

The principal reason is that the towns have been losing power to the state to decide issues. Anything that detracts from us doing something about this should be questioned. Those spending their energy telling others what to do should spend it giving themselves the power to tell themselves what to do. In short it is disquieting in the extreme to sense that town meeting may soon become a glorified public opinion poll.

As I wrote in an invited column in Newsweek in 1984: "What kind of logic suggests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents on foreign policy? Some of us hold they can be trusted to do all three. So we distrust those who deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet egg us on to advise on matters of diplomacy."

For the soul of town meeting, the "moral voice" of town meeting, is in decision: real time decisions by local people, the implications of which (for good or ill) reflect them and their pocketbooks directly. This is the heart of the matter. We attend town meetings to get things done, to close on issues, to take care of the town's business. Town meetings without decisions that matter to the participants themselves are like sex without completion. It may be fun for awhile, but pretty soon you give up and go home.

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