

NOTES FROM ACADEME By David Glenn

In Vermont, a Scholar Records Democracy at Work

LINCOLN, VT.

THE TOWN OF LINCOLN (population: 1,214) holds its annual town meeting on the Monday evening before the first Tuesday in March, in a wooden community hall built in 1919. As people gather here this year, at least a foot of snow is on the ground, and more is in the air. Another foot will fall tomorrow. Members of the town board are handing out official town reports, which contain, among other things, the constables' log for 2004 (disturbing-the-peace complaints: five; mailbox bashing: five; bear on porch: one). Try as one might, it's hard to view this scene without a certain Norman Rockwell sentimentality.

Frank M. Bryan, however, is here to collect hard data. For more than 30 years, Mr. Bryan, a professor of political science at the University of Vermont, has been quantifying political behavior at town meetings throughout the state. What fraction of the town's population attends? What proportion of speakers are women? To what extent is the conversation dominated by elected officials and other elites?

When Mr. Bryan and his wife, Melissa Lee Bryan, enter the hall in Lincoln, they're greeted by several people who know their routine (Ms. Bryan helps her husband on these annual visits). The Bryans are Vermont natives, and they live several miles north of here, near Starksboro, in a converted hunting camp. They own two teams of oxen. There has never been any danger that Mr. Bryan would be perceived as an effete, carpetbagging academic prying into the world of small-town Vermont. He seems just as much at home as anyone else in the room.

Which is a good thing, because once the meeting formally begins, the Bryans' behavior looks a little odd. Their eyes take on the intensity of basketball referees, and their fingers tap the air, as they try to get an accurate census of the filled-to-capacity room. They will do this three times during the course of the meeting and then average their counts. (The average attendance tonight is 158; almost half are women.)

After some preliminaries, including a moment of silence in memory of the eight Lincoln residents who died last year, the meeting begins in earnest. The agenda—which is known, in vestigial colonial-era language, as the “warning”—contains 42 questions, almost all of which concern the budgets for the town and its school district. Should the town appropriate \$709,872 for its highway budget? Should it exempt the local cooperative preschool from property taxes? The warning also includes a less prosaic item: Lincoln, like 55 other towns, will vote on a resolution that decries the Vermont National Guard's role in the Iraq war and calls on the U.S. Congress “to take steps to withdraw American troops from Iraq.”

The budget items provoke a long series of polite-but-pointed questions. (Was it really necessary to run a \$5,000 deficit for gravel?) There is a palpable spirit of equality in the room; the speakers are neither deferential nor contemptuous toward one another. In his book *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), Mr. Bryan describes such gatherings as places “where communitarian impulses and liberal requirements are mixed, where real democracy is learned and practiced and developed.” (He points out, however, that H.L. Mencken once wrote that “some of the most idiotic decisions ever come to mortal man were made by New England town meetings.”)

Throughout the meeting, the Bryans maintain their extreme alertness. Each time a citizen speaks, the researchers enter him or her on a data grid. If they don't know the person's name, they make a notation like “guy with beard and red jacket.” And each time a vote is taken, the Bryans record the form of the

vote (voice vote, show of hands, or paper ballots) and its outcome.

The work can be tedious. This is one of three town meetings in Vermont that the Bryans will attend this year. (During a break, Ms. Bryan quips, “Sometimes I wish I'd married somebody who collects butterflies.”) And Mr. Bryan's research enterprise is much more vast than the meetings he himself attends. Because he can't be in 248 places at once, he has for many years sent his undergraduate students to towns throughout the state to tabulate similar data. (This year, because of bad weather, he has made the assignment optional.) In his gigantic database of local democracy, Mr. Bryan has recorded more than 260,000 discrete “acts of participation.”

Mr. Bryan compiles those mountains of data partly for archival reasons. As a graduate student, he was struck by a scholar's comment that we know almost nothing about how democracy was practiced in the rural communities of classical Athens. Mr. Bryan wants to ensure that Vermont town meetings are not lost to scholars 2,500 years from now. But he also wants to use his data to shed light on fundamental questions about the strengths and weaknesses of democratic systems.

ONE OF THOSE questions—and Mr. Bryan has deeply mixed feelings about this—is whether deliberative democracies can effectively deal with questions beyond the physical scope of small towns. That question comes up in Lincoln immediately after the Iraq resolution is introduced: A citizen rises to say, “Objection! This is not germane to town business.” A man in a hunting cap agrees, saying that 98 percent of the Vermont National Guard's budget comes directly from the federal government, so it would be improper for the State of Vermont, much less individual towns, to try to dictate how the guard is used.

The proponents of the resolution point out that, on a per-capita basis, Vermont National Guard members have had a higher death rate in Iraq than any other state's contingent. They argue that if Vermont suffers serious floods this spring (as happened in 1998, when this very community hall was severely damaged), there might not be enough National Guard members at home to deal with the emergency.

Mr. Bryan keeps silent—as a non-Lincoln resident, he is not allowed to speak—but in a later conversation, he points out that quarrels over the National Guard have a long history in Vermont town meetings. During the War of 1812, Vermont's governor tried to bring

home a contingent of guardsmen who were fighting the British in upstate New York. When the men received the order, they held a spontaneous “town meeting” in the forests of New York, and decided not to obey. And in 1838, President Martin Van Buren pleaded with the Vermont National Guard to stop aiding anti-British militias in Canada, in violation of a U.S. neutrality agreement. He sent emissaries to a town meeting near the Canadian border, but they were rebuffed.

Lincoln's debate over the Iraq resolution briefly becomes very heated, and the local proponents seem poorly prepared for the argument. (Among other things, they haven't brought copies of the resolution, so people aren't sure exactly what they're being asked to vote on.) A Vietnam veteran rises to say, “If we pass this resolution, the insurgents are going to be fortified. You'll see more deaths rather than fewer.” Then a young woman in the U.S. Marines, who seems to be near tears, says, “This resolution does do bad things. All it does is fuel the shit. I'm proud to go back to Iraq—I'm going over there to fight terrorists so they don't come bomb our country again.” After that comment, even though the sentiment in the room seems evenly divided, someone moves to “pass over” the item, and that motion carries, 84 to 68. (This turns out to be an unusual outcome. Of the 56 Vermont towns that considered the antiwar resolution, 48 passed them, although sometimes in watered-down form.)

Then the storm passes, as quickly as it arose. During the next controversial discussion—of whether to spend \$44,000 on the town's volunteer fire department—people who were on opposite sides of the Iraq argument find themselves allied.

When the meeting ends, near midnight, Mr. Bryan can finally relax and revert to his usual laconic humor. “It was a little bit like Texas Hold 'Em in there,” he says, referring to certain proponents' decision to support the motion to pass over the Iraq item. “They seemed able to handle intense conflict. When that young woman used the S word, there was real passion in her voice.”

Mr. Bryan says that after long reflection, he has decided that the Iraq resolutions are appropriate. “I hate to see town meeting used for purely symbolic things,” he says, “but here, that isn't the case.”

Ten-and-a-half hours from now, if the weather isn't too bad, Mr. Bryan plans to go to the town meeting in Newbury, his hometown, which he attended every year as a child. He and Ms. Bryan would drive to Newbury tonight and stay with their daughter, if they didn't need to go home and tend to their oxen.



Residents of Lincoln, Vt., vote at the annual town meeting.

PAUL BOBYERT FOR THE CHRONICLE