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# Mining for professional experience and for a various political answers

On Saturday, March 19, I took a day trip to the Nation's Capital—actually I was only there an hour, and I never really left town. I testified at a Model Senate hearing, and for a few moments, it felt a little bit like being in Washington.

The experience reminded me of a magazine commercial that shows a photograph of young people doing everyday things; a hand sketch overlaying the photo has that same person a few years later as an adult doing a job based on the same positions and motions depicted in the original photograph.

It is a reminder of a basic truth: every achievement began with a person who was young once—and uncertain and exploring new fields and probably often confused. I was testifying to a group of "Senators" of the Foreign Relations Committee who were trying on some professional roles, and perhaps imagining that future into existence.

I did some role-playing, too: I played a forty-something university professor with a little too much book learning and very little actual expertise

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even though there is still plenty of work to do get the rest of batter out of the bowl.

Objections emerged on the committee. There were fears that the US would be giving up power. I argued that the US can use its undisputed military leadership to insist that land mines be reduced and defused, and we can start with our own. In fact, we can use our work in this direction as a public relations coup: look at the American giant acting gently for the good of the world (Madison Avenue could not write a better script!)

There were other objections: if we do not sell landmines, then other countries and the black market will. My

attacks. When the military engagements are over, these technologies do not stay around, leaving the potential to kill and maim. Pest-control companies used to broadcast pesticides to a whole house and the area around it, which killed all the bugs, killed other things too, and left toxins for people to touch and breath, but now they have smaller bait systems that are more targeted to the particular bug under attack. If people are going to use killing machines, let's use technology that does what it is designed for, and not still more indiscriminate killing.

After thinking about mines for my testimony, I was curious to know what had happened to the real-life legislation

on my topic. The issue at hand was a 2001 bill to reduce the use of land mines, encourage their defusing, and support assistance programs for the victims. Good legislation, and I did my best to speak in its defense.

I started with some background: no one wants war (those who actually want to commit organized violence have psychological problems); even those who advocate military preparedness, talk about it for peaceful purposes: "peace through strength." Land mines are weapons of war, and we want to keep mines and war to a minimum.

The problem is that land mines serve some military purpose that keeps Americans and others using them. However, even for military purposes, they are not often the best weapon; what's more, after their military utility, they keep destroying civilians and creating debilitating fear for years. It is the ghastly gift that keeps on giving.

In my testimony, I did not like letting go of the ideal, but as with the student Senators, I tried to think like a politician weighing various interests. I advocated the gradual phasing out of land mines: 1. land mines in use for military purposes: reduce their use where they do not serve a very directed purpose, and 2. lands mines still in place after they have served their military purpose: the ideal goal is to eliminate. In order to reach that goal, we must gradually eliminate those easiest to find first, then keep going to eliminate more and more. Like pouring batter from a bowl: the first step is both the easiest and the most effective.

response was that this is conceding power to those other, lesser powers; why should we give up our world leadership to smaller states (who would readily follow our lead) or to illegitimate forces (that we readily consider immoral or illegal).

Many also say that we need to keep our forces strong (a chief example in our use of land mines is Korea, where an irrational dictator could launch a strike at the US and allied forces); but an argument from force does not mean only brute force. The best use of force involves smart force, so that we would use the force that we need, that works best, and that is most targeted to the purpose at hand. As students, your teachers don't just tell you to work hard; they also teach you to work smart, so that you direct your efforts to the best research material, and that you use your time most effectively.

In addition, technological improvements may help. Perhaps land mines can be less deadly and easier to remove if we use mapping and sensors to keep track of where they are planted. If we can mail a package cross country and keep track of its whereabouts by the minute and know exactly when it will arrive, then surely we can keep track of land mines. And there are alternatives to land mines, weapons that do the work that land mines do (protect against sneak attacks) without outlasting their military functions the way land mines do: night vision glasses can protect against night attack, heat- and motion-sensitive equipment can protect against sneak

I found that there have been no recent bills on the subject and that the US has not signed the Ottawa Convention that would work toward some of the goals I outlined. Although 152 nations have signed the treaty, no presidential candidate from either major party has endorsed it. In the current climate of fear of terrorism, there is little public interest in reducing land mines. And yet they are nasty instruments of war that will destroy countless lives and also damage our foreign relations around the world as the US is identified as a supporter and seller of landmines.

The Model Senate is a great learning experience for students. It was a lot for us all to learn about the US role with land mines. If you are against land mines, vote for candidates who think as you do, or better yet, write to your elected officials asking them for their views.

The US does contribute millions of dollars to efforts to defuse mines, but the budget is in constant danger of being cut. If you are in favor of land mines, think about why: is it for a plausible reason? If not, think twice or more times about whether those blow-em-sky-high video games are clouding your judgment, or better yet, go to the university with a values commitment nearest you to take a course or two to let you examine your own values commitments.

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## SECTION B

SUNDAY  
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THE NEWS-JOURNAL

# Why do we bother voting at all?

By PAUL JEROME CROCE

**T**he average citizen is receiving mixed messages when it comes to voting. One, a civic message, is clear: Voting is a special right in a free society; it is the citizen's chance to have a voice about decisions made on us. Some even add, with patriotic fervor, that it is a public duty.

A more subtle and perhaps more powerful message is the one that whispers, "Why bother?" This is the message not of the civics textbooks, but of everyday life and of the politics-watching that, for many of us, is the limit of our political involvement.

Democracy was born as an art of political involvement. Before the independence achieved by this great nation in 1776, democracy — rare as it was — was

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## WHY

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only considered possible in small communities. Cities that we would now think of as large towns, notably Athens and Geneva, were the outer limit, and they were the only places that knew any form of the government that actually trusted the people to rule themselves rather than rely on the ancient assumption that "their betters" should be in charge.

To bind the 13 former colonies into a single nation grounded in democracy, the founding fathers at the Constitutional Convention had to think outside the traditional democratic box. James Madison had the key insight. He made an end-run around the prohibition on size for a democracy by proposing that a large nation (he called the United States an "extended republic") could actually conduct a better democracy than a small one because there would be more diverse interest groups (he called them "factions") to balance off against each other. More balance meant less chance for any one faction to gain control and more democratic participation for more citizens.

Bracketing for now the fact that Madison and his peers limited their democracy to white, male, property-owners, his ideas had the seeds of our modern multiculturalism. He favored diversity, and he had the deep conviction that from the many groups in a pluralistic society, a stronger nation — and a better democracy — would emerge. It would take more than 200 hundred years for his principle to be applied more broadly to diverse groups by race, gender and class, but he had the basic modern democratic idea.

While our modern nation has done a fairly good job of fleshing out Madison's democratic principle to be more socially inclusive, we have actually grown worse with a central core principle of democracy: the participation of the average citizen.

It is clearly a sentimental abstraction to say that "every vote counts," when dealing with such large numbers — a hundred million votes in the last presidential election. But just as clearly, votes grow in importance in the aggregate; and they begin to feel important with the political participation that can build momentum starting with any position of political power.

Madison could not have anticipated the immense engines of politics in mass culture that have worked to undercut that participation and to deflate almost every avenue of political power but the most moneyed and the best connected to established political authorities.

As each voter becomes a commodity to be studied, assessed for his or her likelihood to show up, and if possible bought — not with cash, but with advertising to purchase people's imaginations — that individual voter feels less and less personally significant. Technically, each vote still counts, but voters can be left with the feeling they are viewed like a product for sale.

Few people mind this in their economic lives. Large corporations seem to increase efficiencies, keep prices lower and increase the varieties of stuff in stock. Not many notice the down sides of reduced quality of life and, yes, less participation of the consumer in relation to a community.

We have simply applied the corporate model to voting. And the engines of manipulation through anticipation of voter feelings are becoming stronger and bolder each year. The two major political parties are, of course, the major national political corporations, but the Republican Party has been the more adept and aggressive in implementing the corporate strategy.

Republicans have adopted a number of methods to gain more power by relying on even less participation from voters. Five years ago, Congressional Republicans sought impeachment of an elected president who had clearly committed gross immorality, but not high crimes. In 2000, a Republican court chose a Republican president based on disputed votes in a state run by Republicans. In Texas this year, Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay has attempted to ensure a larger Republican congressional delegation from his home state of Texas by redoing the last reapportionment. And in California, we are witnessing an attempt to recall an elected governor not for misbehavior, but for unpopularity.

The Democrats have also been involved in extra-electoral maneuvering. Witness the court order in New Jersey that allowed Democrat Frank Lautenberg to step in for the embarrassed Robert Torricelli even

after the deadlines for such a change had passed during the 2002 campaign season.

Republicans of the last generation, dominated by the more conservative, righteous wing of the party, have thrown themselves into this bypassing of the messy, participatory parts of democracy because they are completely comfortable with the power of corporations in contemporary culture.

For the inner circle, it is a frank recognition of the centers of power in our time. For many out of power, there is more than a little deference for the aristocracy of our time. In addition, countless others who support the powers of the right wing tend not to look past the mouse ears on the Walt Disney Corporation or the country look of Cracker Barrel when they look at corporate giants. There is a sheen of sentimentality and down-home country patriotism that surrounds the raw power and immensity of corporations. Currently, the ascendant, conservative wing of the Republican Party is comfortable with both. Unfortunately, the corporate comfort zone doesn't leave much room for participatory democracy.

Campaign finance reform offers hope for change by reducing the vast abundance of cash available to campaigners; but the dynamic underneath the money will still be there as long as most people are willing to trade their participation for consumption.

In shopping, a glossy ad does not mean it is a good product or right for you. The same is true in politics. Even a money-drenched campaign would get nowhere if citizens would really participate and make choices based on their own understanding and their own real interests, not acquiescing to a political entity that plays on voters' emotions and which is ready to trip-wire voters into serving the corporate interest.

So please do go ahead and vote on Tuesday and each election day. But as you do, make it your own.