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Next, send Garner to Van Nuys

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I think that democracy, if you do it right, just doesn't work.

I mean, how many people do you think are smart enough to make decisions affecting you and your family? But a democracy is majority rule, so it's most people -- who you don't think are smart -- who end up making the decisions.

Does this scare you? Because it scares the heck out of me.

Democracy is not a revolutionary idea; it's downright incendiary. And anybody who doesn't break into a nervous sweat just thinking about the implications and the risks of a democracy doesn't really understand it. But we've grown so complacent about it that now we're exporting this institutionalized anarchy to another country as if we knew what the heck we were doing.

Iraq has been around since Shamshi-Adad drove out the Babylonians in 1850 B.C., but over just the next few months retired U.S. Army Gen. Jay Garner proposes to teach the Iraqis how to separate church and state, how to subjugate the military to civilian power, how to create a court system that doesn't indulge in politics and how to produce leaders who do not want to become rulers.

I guess after he finishes with the Iraqis, Gen. Garner can return home and educate us.

Dan Quayle defined the problem back in 1989 when he said, "I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy -- but that could change."

Boy, could it.

As an example: On Feb. 8 an election was held for a neighborhood council in Van Nuys, and 15 people got elected. Except they didn't.

You see, you're not allowed to campaign within 100 feet of a polling place, and it was charged by most of the losers in Van Nuys that most of the winners did just that.

The winners deny it, of course, and they're not willing to give up their seats and stand for another election unless somebody makes them.

But in a democracy, who the heck would that somebody be?

The problem, according to Greg Nelson, who runs the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which has some vague bureaucratic responsibility in all of this, is that the organizing Van Nuys council, which set up the election, ignored his department's advice and chose to have all election challenges decided by the elected council itself.

Except that nine of the 15 council members are being challenged -- five formally at the time of this writing -- which means that the six uncontested seats aren't a majority, so they can't resolve the challenges on their own. Somehow it doesn't seem kosher to have the nine contested members voting on each other's validity. Plus, just to make things more interesting, the winners are largely Hispanic and the losers are largely not. Everybody understands that this little bubbling conundrum could blow, but nobody seems to want take the pot off the fire.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council (contested) has been desperately looking for somebody to declare it legal, or as winner (contested) Hilda Garcia put it, "Once we get a third party, I think they'll find that the elected board, the ones who are challenged, did nothing wrong."

Well, maybe.

But so far two City Council members, the city attorney, the League of Women Voters and the Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County have all refused the invitation to study the challenges, although the league members did take the time to say they thought the election should be a do-over.

On Wednesday the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners asked the folks at the county Registrar-Recorder's Office to jump into this racial briar patch, and those folks are now researching to see if they think they have any authority. My guess is they'll think they don't.

There is one organization which was designed to shepherd neighborhood councils through difficult births, and that would be the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, but the Van Nuys Nine are vehement that DONE should mind its own business.

Laura Prince, who was on the interim board and thus partly responsible for creating this mess, said, "I'm seeking for us to be self-determining, rather than having DONE dictate to us."

Nelson, however, pleads, "The city attorney has explained to me repeatedly that DONE has no legal authority to resolve challenges. We'd be happy to do it, (but) the neighborhood councils can do what they want as long as they aren't violating any laws or rules."

Which, since they defined the rules, the Van Nuys Nine are not.

Democracy -- an idea whose time has come.

Just not to Van Nuys yet

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