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Three Proverbial Triads: Sapiential Imperatives for a Peaceful Existence

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ABSTRACT. The number three has played a major role in cultural, folkloric, and linguistic tradition. There are numerous proverbs based on a triadic structure in various languages dating back to antiquity and continuing to this day. But there are also so-called proverbial triads consisting of but a string of three words like “*Veni, vidi, vici*”, “*Wein, Weib und Gesang*”, “*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*”, and “Blood, sweat, and tears”. Many folk triads like “Ready, willing, and able” and “Signed, sealed, and delivered” also abound. Of special interest are three American triads based on the fundamental ideas of a free and democratic society, namely “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people”, and the less well known and newer “Freedom, justice, and democracy”. The origin, history, dissemination, and meaning of these formulaic triads are discussed in considerable detail with contextualised references. They express the belief in and call for a democratic world based on peaceful, fair, and humane coexistence. Of course, these fundamental proverbial triads also show that there exists a natural inclination to state basic socio-political principles in an easy to remember triadic pattern.

KEYWORDS: American, democracy, politics, proverb, triad.

Trys patarliškos triados: išminties imperatyvai taikiam gyvenimui

SANTRAUKA. Skaičius trys svarbus daugelyje kultūrinių, folklorinių ir kalbinių tradicijų. Įvairiose kalbose esama daugybės trinarės struktūros patarlių, ištakomis siekiančių antikos laikus ir išlikusių iki šių dienų. Yra ir vadinamųjų patarliškų triadų, sudarytų vien iš trijų žodžių, kaip antai: *Veni, vidi, vici*, *Wein, Weib und Gesang*, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* ir „Kraujas, prakaitas ir ašaros“. Taip pat gausu tokio tipo populiarių triadų – pavyzdžiui, „Pasirengęs, norintis ir galintis“ ir „Pasirašyta, užantspauduota ir įteikta“. Ypač įdomios trys amerikiečių triados, grįstos pagrindinėmis laisvos ir demokratinės visuomenės idėjomis: „Gyvenimas, laisvė ir

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laimės siekis“, „Valdžia iš žmonių, žmonių ir žmonėms“ ir mažiau žinoma, naujesnė, „Laisvė, teisingumas ir demokratija“. Straipsnyje, pasitelkiant kontekstines nuorodas, išsamiai pristatoma šių formulinių posakių kilmė, istorija, paplitimas ir reikšmė. Aptariamosios triados išsako tikėjamą demokratiniu pasauliu, kuris grindžiamas taikiu, teisingu ir humanišku sugyvenimu, ir ragina jį kurti. Be to, šios patarliškos triados, reiškiančios esmines demokratinio pasaulio nuostatas, liudija natūralų žmonių polinkį pagrindinius socialinius-politinius principus išdėstyti per lengvai įsimenamą trinarės struktūros modelį.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: amerikietiškas, demokratija, politika, patarlė, triada.

INTRODUCTION

Considering that the number three as the first plural indicator is pervasive in most languages and cultures throughout the world, it should come as no surprise that it plays a considerable role in proverbs and proverbial expressions (Doctor 1993; Williams 1988). Just as with three wishes in the fairy tales or the religious holy trinity of supreme gods in various religions, there exist many enumerative proverbs that speak of three items, as for example “There are three types of people in the world: those who have wishbones, those who have funny bones, and those who have backbones” and “There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the right side” (Mieder, Kingsbury, Harder 1992: 460, 539). Doubtlessly the medieval Latin anti-feministic proverb “*Sunt tria damna domus: imber, mala femina, fumus*” that appeared in English translation in the fourteenth century as “Three things drive a man out of his home: smoke, rain, and a scolding wife” is another revealing example that was widely disseminated (Taylor 1926). A truly international triad are the three monkeys holding their ears, eyes, and mouth closed exemplifying the proverb “Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil” (Mieder 1981, see also Mieder 2005a; Taylor 1957). Of course, there is also the German proverb “*Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang*” that was loan translated into other languages, appearing in English as “Who does not love wine, woman, and song, remains a fool his whole life long” (Mieder 1983, see also Mieder 2004b). Of importance is that the proverb has long been reduced to the triadic formula “Wine, women, and song” – a clear indication of verbalising matters as triadic formulas rather than complete proverbial sentences. Clearly Julius Caesar already knew this when he boasted “*Veni, vidi, vici*” after a quick and surprising military victory in 47 BC (Deutsch 1925; Mieder 2013: 350–374; Stutz, Finkbeiner 2022). Of course, Robespierre’s well-known revolutionary slogan “*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*” from 1790 comes to mind as well (Mieder 2016: 129–145; Shapiro 2021: 686), and from more modern times there is Winston Churchill’s rallying triad “Blood, sweat, and tears” with which he called the British people to arms against the Nazi menace (Mieder, Bryan 1995: 63–66).

Caesar's and Churchill's triadic quotations have long become proverbial, and as one would expect, there exist plenty of more mundane triads whose individual words more often than not are linked by alliteration, as for example in such book titles as "First, fast, and furious", "Health, happiness, and harmony", "Men, money, and motors", and "Plays, players, and playhouses" (Collitz 1931–1932: 207–208). While these are not particularly proverbial, Alan Dundes includes numerous traditional folk triads in his seminal article "The Number Three in American Culture". He points out that there is something like a "three-determinism" or what the Danish folklorist Axel Olrik has called the "law of three" in 1909 (Dundes 1968: 402). Trichotomic patterns are certainly present in folk speech, with Dundes including examples such as these:

Beg, borrow or steal
 Blood, sweat, and tears
 Cool, calm, and collected
 Hither, thither, and yon
 Hook, line, and sinker
 Hop, skip, and jump
 Lock, stock, and barrel
 Ready, willing, and able
 Signed, sealed, and delivered
 Tom, Dick, and Harry
 Veni, vidi, vici (ibid.: 407).

But this list (for German examples see: Blei, Spaniel 2006; Mieder 1980), easy to be expanded, also includes the sociopolitical triple constructions "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people", excluding the less popular triad "Freedom, justice, and democracy". While insisting that the number three is pervasive in American culture, folklore, language, politics, religion, and any other domain, Dundes offers no explanatory comments as to the origin, dissemination, history, function, and meaning of the latter three triads grown on American soil. Since they deal with life and human rights in a free democratic society that is under siege today in various parts of the world, it is certainly worthwhile to take a closer look at them in the following three sections.

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The proverbs "All men are created equal" and "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" were both coined by Thomas Jefferson based on a number of precursors

(Mieder 2019: 298–301). They are joined together at the beginning of Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence* (1776) which can be a guidepost for humankind tied together globally in a network of mutuality. There certainly is no American who does not know that this claim of human equality occurs at the beginning of the second paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence*, adopted by the Continental Congress as the founding document of the United States of America on the evening of July 4, 1776, at Philadelphia. That day has been immortalised by declaring it “Independence Day”, which is celebrated every year with readings of the *Declaration*, parades, concerts, picnics, etc. Two days later, on July 6, the text was printed as an easily obtainable and distributable broadsheet for the residents in the colonies. This was the beginning of it being ingrained in the American mind and heart and it has remained part of the American cultural literacy ever since. It was crafted by Thomas Jefferson, who later became the third President of the United States (1801–1809):

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness (Hirsch, Kett, Trefil 1988: 241).

What an incredible statement by Jefferson that expresses in just a few lines or in one long sentence the very basics of a democracy! But it must be remembered that the final wording was not created out of a vacuum, for Jefferson as a Virginian was well acquainted with a draft of Virginia’s Declaration of Rights, which begins as follows:

That all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety (Aron 2008: 92–93).

It should also be pointed out that for the by now proverbial triad “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” Jefferson was influenced by John Locke who in 1689

had declared that all men had rights to life, liberty, and property. The idea that a good government should promote happiness of the governed was not original with Jefferson,

but his substitution of ‘pursuit of happiness’ for ‘property’ in the traditional Lockean formulation put a distinctively American imprint on the Declaration – and on the newborn nation itself (Rawson, Miner 2006: 187).

Both American proverbs are frequently cited in tandem in quotation dictionaries, with “All men are created equal” having been registered in proverb dictionaries (Mieder, Kingsbury, Harder 1992: 398) as well. However, “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has appeared for the first time only very recently in the *Dictionary of Authentic American Proverbs* (Mieder 2021: 121) since such triads were usually ignored by paremiographers. Due to the wide dissemination of the *Declaration of Independence*, the two proverbs gained much popularity during the next decades as America established itself as a democratic nation plagued by the ills of slavery. It comes as no surprise then that Theodore Parker (1810–1860), one of the most influential preachers and abolitionists in Boston, cites both proverbs repeatedly in his sermons and pamphlets, to wit his severe condemnation of slavery in a sermon of July 6, 1851:

It is plain there is not righteousness enough in the people to hinder us from doing what we know is contrary to the law of God. Thus, we keep one sixth part of the people in the state of slavery. This we do in violation of our own axiom, declared to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with the unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We have here three million slaves: if things go on as now, there will be twelve millions before the century ends. We need not say we cannot help it. Slavery in America is as much our work as democracy, as free schools, as the Protestant form of religion. At the Declaration [of Independence], we might have made the slaves free; at the time of the Confederation; at the formation of the Constitution. But no! There was not righteousness enough in the people to resist the temptation of eating the bread which others earn. American slavery has always been completely in the power of the American people (Kraller 2016: 146).

It is interesting to note that Parker also includes an allusion to the Bible proverb “In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3: 19), adding considerable authority to his argument that the white population is going against religious wisdom.

Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), who would issue the “Emancipation Proclamation” on January 1, 1863, also argued vehemently against slavery on August 17, 1858:

When in the distant future some man, some faction, some interest, should set up the doctrine that none but rich men, or none but white men, were entitled to life, liberty

and the pursuit of happiness, their posterity might look up again to the *Declaration of Independence* and take courage to renew the battle which their fathers began – so that truth, justice, and mercy, and all the humane and Christian virtues might not be extinguished from the land; so that no man would hereafter dare to limit and circumscribe the great principles on which the temple of liberty was being built (1953 2: 546; see also Mieder 2000: 135–136).

In several other statements Lincoln returned to both proverbs of the *Declaration of Independence* to condemn the inhumanity of slavery (Mieder 2004a: 180–189). The same is true for Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) who as an escaped slave and abolitionist became a giant among civil rights leaders in the United States. With words and deeds he fought against slavery and championed civil rights for all citizens, regardless of race, gender, or creed. His very own proverbial motto “If there is no struggle, there is no progress” expresses his moral commitment to free the slaves and to fight for human rights for all and not just white males. Just as his contemporaries Parker and Lincoln, he too relied on the two proverbs at the beginning of the *Declaration of Independence*. The following two references from December 7, 1859, and the year 1892 may serve as examples of his powerful rhetoric. In the first forceful text he also cites the golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7: 12):

They [Americans] professed liberty, but it was with mental reservations. They said all men were created equal, except negroes; all men were entitled to life, liberty, and to pursue happiness, except negroes. The commandment that “whatsoever though wouldst that men should do to thee do even so to them,” was really tortured into an argument to sustain slavery (Douglass 1985 3: 283; see also Mieder 2001: 357).

There are many good things concerning our country and countrymen which we would be glad to tell, if we could do so, and at the same time tell the truth. We would like for instance to tell our visitors that the moral progress of the American people has kept even pace with their enterprise and their material civilization; [...] that the statement of human rights contained in its glorious *Declaration of Independence*, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not an empty boast nor a mere rhetorical flourish, but a soberly and honestly accepted truth, to be carried out in good faith; [...] that the American Government is in reality a Government of the people, by the people, and for the people. [...] All this, and more, we would gladly say of American laws, manners, customs and Christianity. But unhappily, nothing of all of this can be said, without qualification and with flagrant disregard of the truth (Douglass 1955 4: 470–471; see also Mieder 2001: 324).

Even though Douglass does not mention women in particular, he fought for women's rights later in his life in support of the two early feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906). It was Stanton who at the beginning of her famed “Declaration of Sentiments” of July 19, 1848 added the word “women” to the first paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence* as a proverbial signal that the feminist movement had started:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed (Gordon 1997 1: 78; see also Mieder 2014: 218).

Anthony joined her fellow feminist by declaring:

Women are persons – hence citizens – hence voters; endowed, not only by their Creator, but by their Government also, with “the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Gordon 2000 2: 445; see also Mieder 2014: 219).

It must be remembered that while African American men obtained the right to vote with the 15th Amendment of 1870, women gained that right considerably later by way of the 19th Amendment of 1920. In any case, here are Stanton's revolutionary arguments for women's rights from a speech of March 20, 1860:

It is declared that every citizen has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Can woman be said to have a right to life, if all means of self-protection are denied her, – if, in case of life and death, she is not only denied the right of trial by a jury of her own peers, but has no voice in the choice of judge or juror, her consent has never been given to the criminal code by which she is judged? Can she be said to have a right to liberty, when another citizen may have legal custody of her person; the right to shut her up and administer moderate chastisement; to decide when and how she will live, and what are necessary means for her support? Can any citizen be said to have a right to the pursuit of happiness, whose inalienable rights are denied; who is disenfranchised from all the privileges of citizenship; whose person is subject to the control and absolute will of another? (Campbell 1989: 170; see also Mieder 2014: 219).

Several decades later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the well-known triad numerous times to argue for a socially and politically stable society. Reflecting on the year 1938, he wrote on June 16, 1941:

The liberal party insists that the Government has the definite duty to use all its power and resources to meet new social problems with new social controls – to insure to the average person the right to his own economic and political life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Roosevelt 1941 1938: XXIX).

And in an address to labour organisations on May 17, 1944, he employed the triadic formula once again to declare that it forms the basis of a free and democratic society. In a way he is paraphrasing the beginning of the *Declaration of Independence* known to his entire audience:

You have been meeting in Philadelphia where, one hundred and sixty-eight years ago, the Fathers of the Republic affirmed certain truths to be self-evident. They declared among other things that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In these words are expressed the abiding purpose of all peoples imbued with the ideals of freedom and democracy. Let us never forget those words (Roosevelt 1950: 127).

A couple years later, Winston S. Churchill (1874–1965) employed the triad with international intent in 1946 as Europe was beginning to rebuild after the Second World War: “An impartial Administration shall be set up to maintain the fundamental guarantees of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ to the millions” (1974: 7417; see also Mieder, Bryan 1995: 287). Four years later, President Harry S. Truman in 1950 used the proverbial triad in a hopeful attempt to spread its democratic message throughout the world: “We are trying now to get that right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for everybody in this world” (1965: 705). It must also be remembered that George Marshall (1880–1959), as President Truman’s secretary of state, played a big role in rebuilding Western Europe by way of the so-called Marshall Plan, which gave Germany a chance to rejoin the international community. In his speech “On Reconstruction of Germany on a Democratic Basis” which he delivered on March 14, 1947, in Moscow, he did well in reminding the Russians what democracy means by including the proverbial triad:

I realize that the word *democracy* is given many interpretations. To the American Government and citizen, it has a basic meaning. We believe that human beings have certain inalienable rights, that is, rights which may not be given or taken away. They include the right of every individual to develop his mind and his soul in ways of his own choice, free of fear or coercion – provided only he does not interfere with the like right of others. To us a society is not democratic if men who respect the rights of their fellow men are not free to express their own beliefs and convictions without fear that they may

be snatched away from their home and family. To us a society is not free if law-abiding citizens live in fear of being denied the right to work or deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Stoler, Bland 2013: 77–78; Mieder 2019: 103–104).

It should come as no surprise that Martin Luther King (1929–1968) as one of the greatest social reformers of modern times made the proverb “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” into a leitmotif in his numerous sermons, speeches, and books. As a civil rights leader, defender of nonviolence in the desegregation struggle, champion of the poor, anti-war proponent, and broad-minded visionary of an interrelated world of free people, King included many Bible and folk proverbs in his communications, citing the proverbial triad numerous times as he argued for the basic human right of “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for people everywhere. Here are but two examples of many such statements:

This then must be our present program; non-violent resistance to all forms of racial injustice, even when this means going to jail; and bold, constructive action to end the demoralization caused by the legacy of slavery and segregation. The non-violent struggle, if conducted with dignity and courage already shown by the sit-in students of the South, will in itself help end the demoralization; but a new frontal assault on the poverty, disease, and ignorance of a people too long deprived of the God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, will make the victory more certain (September 6, 1960; Washington 1986: 150; Mieder 2010: 388).

It is time that we stopped our blithe lip service to the guarantees of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. These fine sentiments are embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but that document was always a declaration of intent rather than of reality. There were slaves when it was written; there were still slaves when it was adopted; and to this day, black Americans have not life, liberty nor the privilege of pursuing happiness, and millions of poor white Americans are in economic bondage that is scarcely less oppressive. Americans who genuinely treasure our national ideals, who know they are still elusive dreams for all too many, should welcome the stirring of Negro demands. They are shattering the complacency that allowed a multitude of social evils to accumulate. Negro agitation is requiring America to reexamine its comforting myths and may yet catalyze the drastic reforms that will save us from social catastrophe ((1968) in Washington 1986: 315; Mieder 2010: 394).

When President Jimmy Carter (1924–2024) gave his farewell address to the nation on January 14, 1981, he doubtlessly was aware that citing one of the great American declarations would bring forth an emotional and positive response from listeners, just as was the case in the speeches of Douglass and King. So he began by

reminding his audience of the beginning of the *Declaration of Independence*, urging everybody to remember its basic message:

Remember these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit to Happiness.”

This vision still grips the imagination of the world. But we know that democracy is always an unfinished creation. Each generation must renew its foundations. Each generation must rediscover the meaning of this hallowed vision in the light of its own challenges. For this generation, ours, life is nuclear survival; liberty is human rights; the pursuit of happiness is a planet whose resources are devoted to the physical and spiritual nourishment of its inhabitants (Whitney 2003: 451; see also Mieder 2019: 305).

While Carter closed his presidency with the proverbial triad, President Bill Clinton (born 1946) cited it at the beginning of his inaugural address on January 20, 1993. Spring had just sprung in Washington, D.C., and this led Clinton to his idea of reinventing America while holding on to its basic principles:

A spring reborn in the world’s oldest democracy, that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America. When our Founders boldly declared America’s independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change’s sake, but change to preserve America’s ideals – life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American (Hunt 1997: 500; see also Mieder 2005b: 181).

His wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton (born 1947), also remembers the triad in her acclaimed book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996) in a most positive way:

When we’re reminded of the bounty and protection we enjoy, most of us are grateful. Our gratitude has its roots in a view of government that dates back to the Pilgrims and to the successive waves of immigrants who came to the country seeking religious and political freedom and better economic opportunities. In this view, government is an instrument both to promote the common good and to protect individuals’ rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (2006: 284; see also Mieder 2019: 222).

This comment on the three basic rights of all human beings is a proverbial reminder of the important role that government must play in making certain that

they are achieved and maintained. Of course, her at times liberal rival Senator Bernie Sanders (born 1941) from Vermont, also defines what his vision of democracy entails by conjuring up Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* with its proverbs that "All men are created equal" and the proverbial triad of "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", which are part of American cultural literacy (Burrell 1997: 29–32; Aron 2008: 89–96):

Democracy is the right of a free people to control their destiny. Not kings or queens or czars, but ordinary people who come together in a peaceful manner in order to determine the future of their society. Democracy means that the government belongs to all of us and that it is our inherent right to elect people who will represent our interests. After all, this is what our Declaration of Independence proclaims when it profoundly states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Sanders 2016: 185–186; see also Mieder 2019: 242).

Later on in his book *Our Revolution: A Future to Believe in* Sanders returns to this proverbial passage by explaining that these ideals are undermined by the economic inequality that is tearing the American society apart:

The idea that all Americans are created equal and that all of us are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were, according to the founders, supposed to be "self-evident truths." But those foundational notions about what this country is supposed to be all about are seriously imperiled by the grotesque level of wealth and income inequality that exists in American today (2016: 277; see also Mieder 2019: 242).

Another reference to the two proverbs "All men are created equal" and "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" appears in Sanders' fellow US Senator John Lewis (1940–2020), who was one of the nation's major African Americans fighting for civil rights with Martin Luther King. In the final chapter of his book *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (2012), John Lewis reminds his readers that the proverb "All men are created equal" and the proverbial triad "Life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from the *Declaration of Independence* should forever be the social compass with its message deeply ingrained in the minds and hearts of citizens:

The *Declaration of Independence* expresses the purposes of human community by affirming this [basic freedoms] as a fundamental root of our founding: "We hold these

truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Inalienable means that no law, no man, no woman, no child, no power can separate us from this divine quest (Lewis 2012: 170; see also Mieder 2019: 162).

Towards the end of his autobiography *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (1998), Lewis says something quite similar, stressing that the country must pay special attention to instil in its young poor and often black people the belief in a better existence for all. As he continues, he broadens his uplifting little “sermon” to include the disadvantaged of all age groups, urging them proverbially that they must think about how their lives can improve “in the long run”:

I truly believe that if we don’t invest more in our young people, we are headed for disaster. And this is where the [modern] revolution must begin. A revolution of values. A revolution of attitude. A revolution that instills the sense of *possibility* in these young people’s minds and hearts, a belief that this nation does indeed offer to them the opportunities of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The people, young and old alike, in these [poor and largely black] communities need to organize, to form a movement, a movement fueled not just by anger and rage, but by moral *authority*, by a sense of human righteousness fueled by the spirit (Lewis 1998: 488; see also Mieder 2019: 162–163).

President Barack Obama (born 1961) might well have thought of Douglass, King, and Lewis (Mieder 2020) when he gave his inaugural address on January 20, 2009, as the 44th President of the United States:

We remain a young country, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things [Corinthians 13: 11]. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness (Mieder 2009: 253–254).

To be sure, Obama merely alludes to the two well-known proverbs that his audience for the most part recognised as proverbial wisdom coined by one of his predecessors, namely the country’s 3rd president Thomas Jefferson. It behoves not only Americans but people everywhere to uphold this democratic triad par excellence!

GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE,
FOR THE PEOPLE

Abraham Lincoln's closing remarks of his short yet famous "Gettysburg Address" of November 19, 1863, have become proverbial as "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people". Yet, as is the case with some other famous utterances of Lincoln, he relied on the wisdom and insights of others to create his memorable phrase that provides a most succinct definition of democracy. The earliest statement that has at least some resemblance to Abraham Lincoln's powerful triad is contained in an epistolary description of the new American government and society for a British friend that Thomas Cooper (1759–1839) includes in his book entitled *Some Information Respecting America*:

There is little fault to find with the government of America, either in principle or in practice; we have very few taxes to pay, we have no animosities about religion; we have few respecting political men or political measures. The government is the government of the people, and for the people (1794: 52–53).

Even though Cooper uses but two elements of the triadic structure, he is already expressing the fundamental idea that a democratic government consists of the members of that society. While this particular formulation gained no currency in the public sphere, it serves as an indication that the underlying idea of the phrase is in the air at this time. This is very well shown by a comment that Chief Justice John Marshall (1755–1835) made in his "McCulloch v. Maryland" opinion of March 6, 1819:

The government of the Union, then, [...], is, emphatically and truly, a government of the people. In form and in substance it emanates from them. Its powers are granted by them, and are to be exercised directly on them, and for their benefit (1995: 262).

About ten years later the rhetorically gifted Daniel Webster (1782–1852) included his definition and characterisation of the American government in a famous speech in the Senate of January 26, 1830 that dealt with the so-called Missouri Compromise of 1820 that admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state while prohibiting slavery in territories that later became Kansas and Nebraska:

It is the people's Constitution, the people's government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people. The people of the United States have declared that this Constitution shall be the supreme law. We must either admit the proposition,

or dispute their authority. The States are, unquestionably, sovereign, so far as their sovereignty is not affected by this supreme law (1853: 321).

This is an extremely important argument for the singleness of the nation that is governed by laws that go beyond those of individual states. His argument for a national “people’s government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people” is quite close to Lincoln’s statement at the end of the *Gettysburg Address* some thirty years later, but it does not yet have the ‘proverbial ring’ to it which Lincoln the masterful rhetorical craftsman was able to give to it.

In a speech of May 25, 1850, at a meeting of the citizens of Boston, the clergyman, social reformer, and abolitionist Theodore Parker addressed the vexing problem that slavery presented to the nation; his words mark the beginning of a constant flow of attempts by him to find the best wording for a short definition of the nature of the American government. In these early remarks, he has not yet found a concise triadic structure:

Shall we extend and foster Slavery, or shall we extend and foster Freedom? This is presently to be decided here in the United States by the servants of the people, I mean, by the Congress of the nation; in the name of the people; for the people, if justly decided; against them, if unjustly (1861: 2).

But then, two months later on July 29, 1850, Parker found truly compelling words in his speech on “Slave Power in America” at a New England anti-slavery convention in Boston. Here he defines the American government in exactly the same way that Abraham Lincoln would thirteen years later, although there is one considerable difference in that Parker includes the inclusive adjective “all” three times before the noun “people”, clearly signalling that he means to include the hopefully soon to be freed slaves of the nation as well. His remarks belong to the most impressive statements of that period in American history, and they certainly deserve to stand next to those of Lincoln, whose important utterances could obtain wider currency due to his leadership position:

There is what I call the American idea. I so name it, because it seems to me to lie at the basis of all our truly original, distinctive and American institutions. It is itself a complex idea, composed of three subordinate and more simple ideas, namely: The idea that all men have unalienable rights; that in respect thereof, all men are created equal; and that government is to be established and sustained for the purpose of giving every man an opportunity for the enjoyment and development of all these unalienable rights. This idea demands a democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people (ibid.: 41–42).

Quite certainly Lincoln was influenced by Theodore Parker's use of the triadic structure of his government definition. When Lincoln concluded his "Gettysburg Address" on November 19, 1863, with the claim that the "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth", he gave it the concise and perfect form in which it survives. He can hardly be called the originator of this phrasal definition, but it was he who implanted it in the minds and worldview of his contemporaries and generations of Americans to come. Interestingly enough, Lincoln dropped the inclusive word "all", and that is exactly where the historical, cultural, social, and political problem arises with Lincoln's proverb. Did he even include the African American population and women in his thoughts when he spoke of a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people"? After all, Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation* of January 1, 1863, had not yet brought suffrage to the former slaves, and women's right to vote was also not established yet. Thus the proverb appears as a privileged statement for white males, with Theodore Parker's more liberal statement proving the exception to the rule.

There is no doubt that Lincoln "conned the texts of speeches made by Webster" (Crocker 1968: 19), Parker, and others, and it is only natural that such careful studies led to rhetorical borrowings ranging from direct quotations to paraphrases and indirect allusions. As Lincoln prepared his numerous speeches, he would gather material from many sources and spend days "reading, listening, rephrasing, refocusing, and strengthening his arguments" (Braden 1988: 51). Clearly no person works in absolute isolation, and as Byron D. Murray aptly and not at all defensively has pointed out,

it detracts nothing from Lincoln to say that he appears not to have written always out of the loneliness of his own mind, but to have reflected upon and given his own savour to some of the best expression of his time (1966: 261).

To suggest even the thought of plagiarism is utterly absurd, and the interrogatively phrased title of a journalistic essay "Lincoln: Rhetorical Copycat?" not only misses the point but intimates a *modus operandi* on the part of Lincoln which does not hold water. One might, however, be inclined to agree with its author Thoburn V. Barker that in certain instances, including some of his famed utterances, "what he [Lincoln] said was customary rather than original, universal rather than unique" (Barker 1967: 30). But it was he, Lincoln, who said what he said, when he said it, and how he said it. That cannot possibly be argued away or diminished in any way.

These considerations lead quite naturally to one of the most famous phrases attributed to Lincoln, namely that included in the closing remarks of his short yet famous "Gettysburg Address" of November 19, 1863:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. [...]

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – 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 (Lincoln 1953 7: 18–19).

When Lincoln added at the very end that a democratic government “shall not perish from the earth,” he might well have had a passage from the Bible in mind: “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he” (Proverbs 29: 18). But regarding the precise wording of “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, the phrase is indeed Lincoln’s. Bi- and tripartite variants of it were in considerable oral and written circulation. However, if there was any direct influence, it most likely was by Daniel Webster or even more obviously by Theodore Parker. Except for the word “all”, Parker’s phrase is absolutely identical to that of Lincoln, and the latter can hardly be considered the originator of this triadic formulation. This does not mean, of course, that Lincoln did not popularise his version through his masterful “Gettysburg Address” so that it now has become a proverbial definition of a free and democratic government. In the precise wording of “Government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people” this statement became a memorable quotation and eventually having become a well-known proverb belongs to Abraham Lincoln – no doubt about it.

In all of his work for the steady improvement of the black race, Lincoln’s contemporary and friend, the former slave and subsequent abolitionist and sociopolitical reformer Frederick Douglass, never lost sight of his goal of fighting for the civil rights of all people. On May 11, 1857, at New York, he speaks of “the people” and the Constitution by directly alluding to its preamble:

“We, the people” – not we, the white people – not we, the citizens, or the legal voters – not we, the privileged class, and excluding all other classes but we, the people; not we, the horses and cattle, but we the people – the men and women, the human inhabitants of the United States, do ordain and establish this Constitution, etc. (Douglass 1991 4: 176).

In his essay on “The Work of the Future” that appeared in November 1862 in *Douglass’ Monthly*, he put all of this quite succinctly into the formulaic statement:

“The Government is not enthroned above the people but is of, by and through the people” (Douglass 1952 3: 291).

This almost proverbial statement precedes Lincoln’s quite similar conclusion “government of the people, by the people, for the people” from the *Gettysburg Address* of November 19, 1863, by about a year. However, once Douglass learned of Lincoln’s formulation in the “Gettysburg Address”, he too started using it in that precise wording in numerous speeches, thus in fact adding to its popularity, which resulted in its eventual proverbial status. In his major speech on the “Sources of Danger to the Republic”, delivered on February 7, 1867, at St. Louis, he used it for the first time:

I am here to advocate a genuine democratic republic; to make this a republican form of government, purely a republic, a genuine republic; make it a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and for all the people, each for all and all for each; blot out all discrimination against any person, theoretically or practically, and make it conform to the great truths laid down by the fathers; keep no man from the ballot box or jury box or the cartridge box, because of his color – exclude no woman from the ballot box because of her sex. Let the government of the country rest securely down upon the shoulders of the whole nation; let there be no shoulder that does not bear up its proportion of the burdens of the government (Douglass 1991 4: 158).

What a statement barely two years after the Civil War! What a vision for a positive Reconstruction of the nation “for all the people, each for all and all for each”, without any discrimination by race or gender! He is clearly years ahead of major constitutional amendments in this ideal view of a new republic. It must never be forgotten that “next to Abolition and the battle for equal rights for the Negro people, the cause closest to Douglass’ heart was woman’s rights” (Mieder 2001: 91).

Fifteen years later, in an address on May 30, 1882, at Rochester, New York, Douglass incorporated the proverb into a global vision, indicating that he went far beyond the purely American interpretation of its wisdom. The breadth and depth of Douglass’s thoughts on race, gender, and politics are indeed astounding in such statements that are as fitting today as they were in the nineteenth century:

If there is anything in the world worth living for, fighting for and dying for, the suppression of our rebellion by force was not only a thing right and proper in itself but an immense and immeasurable gain to our country and the world. Had that rebellion succeeded with all its malign purposes, what then would have become of our grand example of free institutions, of what value then would have been our government of the people by the people and for the people? (Douglass 1992 5: 48).

All of these citations show that Douglass's work as agitator and reformer was never done, and he dedicated much of his energy in his later life to the cause of women's suffrage. Once again Lincoln's proverb served him extremely well to agitate for this basic right:

And now I ask, What right have I, what right have you, what right has anybody who believes in a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, to deny to woman this full and complete citizenship? What right have I, what right have you, what right has anybody, thus to humiliate one-half of the human family? There is no such right outside of the right of the robber and the usurper! (Sept. 22, 1887; *ibid.*: 262).

As is generally known, the nineteenth amendment giving women the right to vote was not passed until 1920, but Douglass deserves much credit for having supported women of all races in their struggle for universal suffrage.

The last words of this review of 19th century appearances of Lincoln's proverb belongs to the women's suffrage leader and social reformer Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who included the following remarks in her "Address of Welcome to the International Council of Women" of March 25, 1888, at Washington, D.C. There is a good chance that Frederick Douglass might have been there for this memorable event, and if so, he would have been most pleased to hear his friend use Abraham Lincoln's proverbial words in this fashion and context:

The women from many lands have assembled at last to claim their rightful place, as equal factors, in the great movements of the nineteenth century. In the Old World they have governments and people; here we have a government of the people, by the people, for the people – that is, we soon shall have when that important half, called women, are enfranchised, and the laboring masses know how to use the power they possess (DuBois 1992: 212–213).

This is indeed effective rhetoric, quoting a well-known Lincoln phrase turned proverb in a most positive way and then adding an unexpected twist to it that places it right in the middle of women's rights and the whole problem of voting by women and the masses in general. Abraham Lincoln's proverbial definition of a democratic government has established itself well, and it will be made use of in whatever way to comment on the positive and negative sides of the American government.

The revealing contextualised texts of the proverb during the 19th century recount the struggle of American society towards a meaningful and sincere interpretation of this democratic wisdom. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the proverb has lost its limited male orientation and can in fact be understood as a piece of folk

wisdom describing democratic principles where race and gender should not make a difference.

On October 31, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) made the following Thanksgiving Proclamation, proudly quoting the words of Lincoln without having to name the former president. His fellow citizens knew very well whom he was citing:

In no other place and at no other time has the experiment of government of the people, by the people, for the people been tried on so vast a scale as here in our own country in the opening years of the twentieth century. Failure would not only be a dreadful thing for us, but a dreadful thing for all mankind, because it would mean loss of hope for all who believe in the power and righteousness of liberty (Roosevelt 1903: 11).

Lincoln's words also reappeared in the mass media of the turbulent years of the first half of the twentieth century with its two world wars, prohibition, stock market crash, and many social problems. At times, the famed proverb is parodied to add satirical bite to the critical comments:

1924: They [the two major political parties] have fallen under control of a single dominant power which uses them to further its own interests. Instead of a government of the people, by the people, for the people, we have a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street and for Wall Street (*The New York Times*, September 2, 1924, p. 3).

1943: Only a year ago we would have had to say that the outlook was grim. Government of the people, by the people, for the people had ceased to exist on the continent of Europe. The world's two great democracies, Britain and ourselves, were fighting for survival, with the prospect of victory none too bright. If the English-speaking peoples went down it would be all over with free government. The test which had been successfully met at Gettysburg would have been annulled eighty years later. Now that we are sure of victory for the United Nations we are justified in saying that when the present job is finished Abraham Lincoln will be more than vindicated (*The New York Times*, February 13, 1943, p. 10).

The last paragraph shows how Abraham Lincoln's words became a rallying cry in America's war with Nazi Germany. It was indeed a very positive propagandistic use of the proverb, one that helped to convince the American population that the menace and horror of the Hitler regime had to be eliminated.

Both Winston S. Churchill and Harry S. Truman made repeated use of Abraham Lincoln's proverbial triad. Two days after the end of World War II, Churchill rose on August 16, 1945, in the House of Commons to deliver his prophetic speech

“The Iron Curtain Begins to Fall (Final Review of the War)” which looked into the future of a Europe divided into East and West. With clear understanding of the political challenges that were facing western Europe, he returned one more time to the proverbial triad that had served him so well before:

We must know where we stand, and we must make clear where we stand, in these affairs of Eastern Europe [with Russia taking control]. Our ideal is government of the people, by the people, for the people – the people being free without duress to express, by secret ballot without intimidation, their deep-seated wish as to the form and conditions of the Government under which they are to live (Churchill 1974: 7214).

It is, of course, an impressive tribute to American values for Winston S. Churchill, as Prime Minister of Great Britain and an Americanophile, to cite this special proverb in his key speech on world politics.

On the American side of the World War II struggle and its aftermath, it was Harry S. Truman who repeatedly drew on Lincoln’s wisdom to underscore the ideals of a democratic government (Mieder, Bryan 1997: 137–138), as in his “Remarks to Members of the Associated Church Press” on March 28, 1951, challenging the other side to be open and forthcoming:

Our Government is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, and we are trying to make it work as best we can. And we are making it work. What we want to do is to convince the people behind the Iron Curtain that we do not, under any circumstances, want to control or tell them what to do. All we want is for them – for their own welfare and benefit – to do the things that are necessary for the welfare of their own people, and to do it in their own way. Raise the curtain, and let us see how they do it (Truman 1965: 200).

One is reminded of President Ronald Reagan’s remark some forty years later on June 12, 1987 at the Berlin Wall: “Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” (1989: 635).

During the past seven decades, Lincoln’s proverb has found continued use as a well-known verbal symbol of democracy. At times the name of Abraham Lincoln is mentioned in order to add his authoritative voice to an argument or observation, but perhaps more often than not it suffices to state the entire phrase by itself or even just to allude to it.

As one would expect, presidential candidates as well as presidents continue to be aware of the emotional power of Lincoln’s democratic proverb that resonates so well in the minds of Americans. Thus John F. Kennedy (1917–1963), shortly

before becoming president, uttered the following words in a campaign speech of October 31, 1960:

I believe in an America with [...] a responsible government that is efficient and economical [...] a government willing to entrust the people with the facts that they have – not a businessman’s government with business in the saddle, not a labor government, not a farmer’s government, not a government of one section of the country or another, but a government of, for, and by the people (Frost 2013: 111).

When Barack Obama stopped at Philadelphia and Baltimore on January 17, 2009, on the way to his historic inauguration as the first African American president of the United States on January 20, he made the following statement:

The early patriots were willing to put all they were and all they had on the line – their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor – for a set of ideals that continue to light the world. That we are equal. That our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness come not from our laws, but from our maker. And that government of, by and for the people can endure. It was these ideals that led us to declare independence and craft our constitution, producing documents that were imperfect but had within them, like our nation itself, the capacity to be made more perfect (Mieder 2009: 159).

That is eloquent proverbial rhetoric by a sincere, courageous, and admired person. Quite different from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who more recently saw himself as the people’s candidate for the presidency. Not surprisingly his website for campaign volunteers was innovative. And when opening the site, one found at the very top in white letters on a blue background the message:

Bernie 2016

A Government of the People, by
the People and #ForThePeople
March 21, 2016 [1]

In a way, the definition of democracy was reduced to a campaign slogan. Most likely Hillary Clinton was aware of this, which probably led her to the following statement on July 12, 2016, at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, after Bernie Sanders had just endorsed her for the nomination to become president:

As Bernie and his supporters have argued so eloquently, we won’t get anywhere unless we overhaul our campaign finance system. (Applause) It is past time to end the stran-

glehold of wealthy special interests in Washington and get back to government of the people, by the people and for the people. (Applause) That's why as president from my very first days, I will make campaign finance reform a top priority [2].

And Donald Trump (born 1946), in his remarks on "Creating a New and Better Future for America's Inner Cities" on August 16, 2016, at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, followed suit with a mere self-serving allusion to the triad:

This is all just the beginning. We are going to make this a government of the people once again. This is our chance to take back power from all the people who've taken it from you. These are tough times. But I know we can make America Greater Than Ever Before. To do this, we are going to need a fighter in the White House. I will be your fighter [3].

President Joe Biden (born 1942), in his address "Standing up for Democracy" of November 2, 2022, did much better by citing the entire proverbial triad with explanatory comments added for rhetorical effect:

From the very beginning nothing has been guaranteed about democracy in America. Every generation had to defend it, protect it, preserve it, choose it, for that's what democracy is: It's a choice – a decision of the people, by the people, and for the people [4].

These last references might not equal the rhetorical prowess of people like Daniel Webster, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Harry S. Truman, and others. But times are clearly different for presidential candidates and future presidents, when every word is recorded and together with pictures is broadcast instantly around the world. That being the case, it behoves modern politicians to pay close attention to their rhetoric once again as their predecessors most assuredly practiced it. The words and phrases of spontaneous utterances as well as of formal addresses need to be chosen with considerable care, and a good dose of pride in the English language ought to be added to it. With such proper respect for the power of words, modern presidents as well can formulate statements that will be entered into the annals of American political and social history. In the meantime, Americans and people of other nations have Abraham Lincoln's proverb "Government of the people, by the people, for the people" to guide them in their attempt to make democracy work. It certainly is a piece of wisdom that might lead humankind with the assistance of the United Nations to a free and democratic world.

FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND DEMOCRACY

Strangely enough, the triad “Freedom, justice, and democracy” has not found its way into quotation dictionaries and proverb collections although it is widely disseminated with such introductory terms as ideas, ideals, principles, and values that draw special attention to the triad. That it is in fact well known can be seen from the following reference that refers to it as a generally known phrase among the American population:

Americans are used to hearing the phrase “freedom, justice, and democracy” from their political leaders in the earthly context of secular politics. But [...] in the spiritual realm as well, freedom, justice, and democracy are closely interrelated. With the amount of discussion going on right now in both the West and the Muslim world on the issue of compatibility between Islam and democracy, as well as on the issue of human rights in Islam, it is advisable to reflect on the Qur’an’s conceptions of spiritual freedom, justice, and democracy (Bakar 2004: 104).

It is indeed correct that the human rights of “freedom, justice, and democracy” are not only applicable to American politics but rather to all walks of life throughout the world. In fact, the earliest reference found thus far dates from 1852 accusing the Supreme Court of negating these social ideals:

The [appointed and not elected] Supreme Court indeed! [...] This is Judgeship and Supremacy with a vengeance! – Sir, there are four hundred thousand men [primarily from the Free Soil Party that was against the expansion of slavery] – men of intelligence – men born here on American soil – men in whose veins courses the blood of revolutionary sires; who are persuaded that some laws sanctioned by the [undemocratic] Supreme Court are unjust, and in opposition to liberty, justice and Democracy. Shall the dictation of nine men on the Supreme Bench, be absolute against 29,000,000 of the people! (“Great Mass Meeting at the Chinese Museum...” 1854: 313¹).

The early variant of “Liberty, justice, and democracy” did not gain a wide currency once the word “liberty” was replaced by “freedom” – more or less equivalent terms – towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The earliest reference of “Freedom, justice, and democracy” thus far found appears in Morrison Swift’s book on *Anti-Imperialism* where it serves as an ideal for international politics based on democratic principles:

.....
1 I owe this reference to my friend Charles Clay Doyle.

We should have formed, and should now form, with Great Britain, Switzerland and perhaps Germany, a Joint Protectorate over the Philippines, upon a plan binding all to the two simple principles of protecting the islands from predatory powers, and assisting the free government constituted by the inhabitants to preserve internal order.

I name Switzerland because she represents advanced ideas of freedom, justice and democracy. Having no temptation to avaricious aggrandizement she would bring into the counsels of the protectorate elevated principles and impartial judgments (1899: 60–61).

Some twenty years later the triad was popularised by appearing in 1918 at the end of the First World War in various labour union magazines. It became somewhat of an American slogan for a new world order during the last months of the war to end all wars:

The people and the Government of the United States are now engaged in a world struggle for freedom, justice and democracy. We have sent overseas perhaps a million of the best blood and sinew and brain of our republic to fight against autocracy and imperialism. But we have not sent all the manhood and womanhood over there. The fighting forces which we have sent represent the whole people of the United States, and just so it is with the labor movement. The American labor movement is the fighting force for labor, whether all are members of our organization or not (*The Stone Cutters Journal* 33 (7), 1918, p. 9).

At the same time *The Shoe Workers' Journal* employed the triad for its claim that the United States entered the war as a crusade for “freedom, justice, and democracy”:

With the world-development and the world-struggle and growth of our time, the American Federation of Labor [...] asks you to take home to your chief, to our chief, the great interpreter and defender of freedom, justice and democracy, the message of the men and women of the labor movement, nearly three million strong, “We are with you Woodrow Wilson.” We are confident that he will uphold the banner of justice and of freedom, that there can be and will be no lowering of the standards of the ideas and ideals and the high purposes which he has presented to the world, and by which, with the entrance of the Republic of the United States in this world-struggle, transferred it from a war to a crusade (*The Shoe Workers' Journal* 24, 1918, p. 4).

And shortly before the end of the war, the *American Federationist*, “devoted to the interests and voicing the demands of the trade union movement”, proclaimed optimistically:

We declare that in this war, not only the fact but the spirit of imperialism, militarism and autocracy must be crushed. The hope of the world, self-determination, freedom, justice and democracy, shall be enthroned for all time to come (*American Federationist* 25 (10), 1918, p. 917).

During the year after the war, the by now proverbial slogan of “Freedom, justice, and democracy” continued to appear in labour publications reaching thousands of readers and thus establishing itself as a commonly known triad with solid footing in the American worldview:

By having followed safe and sound fundamental principles and policies, founded on freedom, justice, and democracy, the American trade-union movement has achieved successes of an inestimable value to the masses of toilers of our country. [...] Given the whole-hearted support of all men and women of labor our organized labor movement with its constructive program, its love for freedom, justice, and democracy will prove the most potent factor in protecting, safeguarding, and promoting the general welfare of the great mass of our people during the trying period of reconstruction and all times thereafter (*Monthly Labor Review* 8 (3), 1919, p. 72).

In fact, some statements employing the triad were reprinted in various magazines far beyond those specifically addressing the labour force, with the following proclamation having played its part in the continued dissemination of its basic idealism during 1919:

The affairs of the whole world are in the process of a better day than today, to make tomorrow and tomorrow’s tomorrow each a better day than the one that has gone before. That evolutionary process of progress and improvement is the basis for the opportunity for freedom, justice and democracy (*McClure’s* 51 (4–6), 1919, p. 12; *The Literary Digest* 62, 1919, p. 44).

Six years later, the *American Federationist* continued to insist that the labour movement is playing a major role in safeguarding and spreading the fundamental rights of “Freedom, justice, and democracy”:

Our movement has created great traditions. It has imbedded in our national life great principles. It has become to all Americans a great bulwark of human freedom. It is the accepted defender of the fundamental rights and interests of the masses of our people. It is the voice of the millions of wage earners throughout our land. It is looked to with hope and assurance everywhere by those who, standing alone, are weak and defenseless.

The oppressed of other lands have found encouragement and support in its strength and in its ceaseless struggle for justice and freedom. It has no other purpose than to promote the great principles and ideals of human freedom, justice and democracy. To these it must ever give its full support. It can never have any other purpose (*American Federationist* 32, 1925, p. 31).

Of course, the sociopolitical aspirations and ideals expressed in the by now solidly established triad found their way into the political realm, as can be seen from Edward Sait's comment in his analysis of *American Parties and Elections*:

The intelligence of the American people will lead them to determine which platform more nearly conforms to their desires and which expresses more nearly their ideals and aspirations toward freedom, justice and democracy (1927: 164).

And here are a few excerpts from various government records during the 1930s and 1940s, illustrating the repeated employment of the triadic principles of a democratic society. It is of interest that President Franklin D. Roosevelt mixed up the order of the three nouns for once in a heartfelt statement on September 13, 1937:

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy (1941 1937: 351).

We have a deep concern for the cause of freedom, justice, and democracy everywhere, and we cannot give our sanction to a régime that maintains an autocratic domination over the Russian people. We cannot sanction the oppression of the Russian people now any more than we did when they were oppressed by the Czar. We resent and cry out against the wholesale slaughter of Russian workers under so-called communist dictators as we did when they were slaughtered under the Romanoff régime (*House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress* 3 (1), Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1930, p. 582).

All [Abraham Lincoln and his circle of politicians] joined in the one noble sentiment that only by the preservation and perpetuation of the American Union could government based upon the principles of freedom, justice, and democracy be preserved not only for our own people but for all nations of the earth (*Congressional Record, 79th Congress, First Session, Appendix*, Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1945, A781).

Having voluntarily served my country in two world wars and two of my sons in this war with me, I am forced to observe that if we hope to maintain the high morale of

our citizenship, individual pride in service, respect for our institutions and for the fundamental principles of freedom, justice, and democracy, we must in equity make part of these principles the immortal and inspired words of Lincoln: “To care for him who has borne the battle, without equivocation and adjudication and for his widow and his orphan” (*Eighty-First Congress, First Session 1*, Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1949, 260).

Importantly, the well-established triad also appeared during the hearings of the North Atlantic Treaty of April and May 1949 in the US Senate recalling the “Moral Principles Behind World War II”. The following comment clearly underscores that “Freedom, justice, and democracy” had become a motto to be adhered to in international relations:

Grounded in the great moral principles of our fathers, our great President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and Hon. Tom Connally and Senator Vandenberg, and their coworkers converted the Allies to these moral democratic American principles, and they organized the United Nations for freedom, justice, and democracy for all people, large and small, who aspired toward self-government (*ibid.*: 968).

Little wonder that the United States saw itself as the champion of the triadic principles during the Cold War, to wit the following comment in Congress:

We feel strongly that the endeavors of women’s patriotic organizations are of great importance to the United States as it faces the growing menace of world communism. American Legion Auxiliary publications are devoted largely to stimulating interest and guiding activities of our members in the work of building and maintaining a strong spirit of patriotism in this country – a patriotism based on real understanding of America’s freedom, justice, and democracy, and expressed in the firm determination that America shall be defended against all enemies no matter what the personal cost (*Eighty-Sixth Congress, Second Session*, Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1960, p. 202–203).

In this regard, what the chairperson of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had to say in 1973 at a hearing in Congress regarding soldiers who voiced their opposition to the war in Vietnam is of considerable interest:

It should be noted that the position taken by them was arrived at through the intellectual familiarizing themselves with the issues surrounding the war through reading and discussion, and not out of blind emotion. For this they have been prosecuted. How

does this country proclaim that it is fighting for freedom, justice and democracy for the Vietnamese people. This country knows nothing of freedom, justice and democracy when it punishes people for thinking (*House of Representatives, Ninety-Third Congress, First Session*, Washington, D.C. US Government Printing Office, 1973, p. 169).

This was quite a slap in the face for a self-righteous America that claims at times too quickly to be “synonymous with freedom, justice and democracy” (*Military Intelligence* 12 (2), 1987, p. 7). To declare that “The Founding Fathers are always [seen as] the champions of freedom, justice, and democracy” (Fresia 1988: 3) also does not quite express the truth when considering the fact that many of them were slave holders.

As is the case with proverbial phrases in general, this triad is also applicable to a multitude of contexts. In his book on *The Field of Social Investment*, Severyn Bruyn applies its “human values” to the world of economics:

Social investors have shown a strong interest in supporting *human values* in the economy. The enterprise system is founded on such great values as freedom, justice, and democracy. They are vital to the well-being of the economy, even though economists do not normally study them as part of their discipline. The value of *freedom* is bred into the system in multifaceted ways; it is supported by common law and by statutes that protect business from state controls. The value of *justice* is formally expressed and interpreted daily in the work of the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department and regulatory commissions of the government as well as in the ethical codes of trade associations. The value of *democracy* is formally expressed in the organization of consumer federations, farm marketing associations, and trade unions as well as in business law (1987: 40).

The triad also came in handy in a message released at the end of the ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council in June of 1990 after the historic breeching of the Berlin Wall that would also a year later see the collapse of the Soviet Union:

We, the Foreign Ministers of the Alliance, express our determination to seize the historic opportunities resulting from the profound changes in Europe to build a new peaceful order in Europe, based on freedom, justice and democracy. In this spirit, we extend to the Soviet Union and to all other European countries the hand of friendship and cooperation (*Nato Review* 38 (3), 1990, p. 28).

A year later, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) also seized on the triad in her remarks after having been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George Bush on March 7, 1991, at Washington, D.C.:

The great principles of freedom, justice, and democracy, which are the inheritance of both our countries, find their most eloquent expression in the American Declaration of Independence. As one of your great statesman [Senator Henry Clay in 1850] pointed out, it was not a document designed for one generation, but, and I quote: “For posterity unlimited, undefined, endless and perpetual.” And so it has been. And so it may ever be (*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush. 1991*, Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 227).

In a speech delivered on April 25, 1993, Eric Rofes employed the triad in his speech entitled “Unashamed, We Embrace the Traditions of the Broad Civil Rights Movement in America” to argue that the fight for true democracy in America must go on:

We have couched the language of our movement in words that have failed to be powerful or specific enough to link us to core values in American democracy. Instead of framing the debate around “anti-discrimination,” “human rights,” or “freedom of choice,” we need to state our struggles boldly for what they are: *a fight for freedom, justice and democracy in the purest sense of the terms*. This is about who participates in democracy in America (Ridinger 2004: 637).

Vincent Harding, Robin Kelley, and Earl Lewis have something similar to say in their book *We Changed the World: African Americans 1945–1970*. They too stress that the triad “Freedom, justice, and democracy” must apply to the entire population without neglecting black people:

Although the freedom movement was based on a clear recognition of the failure of American democracy to address the life of black people, it never confined itself to protesting that failure. Rather, at their best, the freedom workers always insisted on pressing our nation to realize the potential for all people. The men, women, and children who marched, dreamed, organized, sang, and stood firm against the forces of white supremacy were working for us all. They were helping our nation to move away from a condition in which there was much talk about freedom, justice, and democracy for all but also a harsh refusal to apply these great truths to black people. The freedom movement insisted on creating a healthy nation, a nation that “could live at peace with itself”, as Martin Luther King, Jr., often put it (Harding, Kelley, Lewis 1997: 182).

In South Africa it was Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), who after the first democratic election in 1994 exhibited “an extraordinary feat of human resolve, dedication and bold spirit borne out of the passion to deliver freedom, justice

and democracy to the entire nation” (Muthien, Khosa, Magubane 2000: 365). No wonder that the triad was introduced as expressing “human rights”, “liberal values”, and more generally “principles”:

The struggle for human rights of freedom, justice, and democracy has created a new space and a new time in which a new law takes command – the law of love (Song 1993: 219).

There are grounds for cautious optimism that Western democracies really have made important steps in learning how to deal with ethnocultural diversity in a way that respects and promotes liberal values of freedom, justice, and democracy (Kymlicka 2001: 3).

A culture of peace consists of values, attitudes and behaviours that reflect and inspire social interaction and sharing based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy (Lee 2018: 30).

The various references above have shown that the triad “Freedom, justice, and democracy” is of American origin with considerable distribution in sociopolitical writings and speeches. While it does not have the frequency of occurrence of the two other triads “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”, it is established and known enough that it should be registered in phraseological dictionaries. And yet, it behoves Americans to heed the following observation:

America’s most enduring myth has been its image of itself as a chosen people deposited in a virgin land to build a new order based on freedom, justice, and democracy (Bobbitt 2007: 55).

Such hubris is unwanted in an interconnected world. But nevertheless, with proper humility, “the United States must stand for the promotion of freedom, justice, and democracy across the world” (O’Driscoll 2008: 69) as a beacon of hope for humanity everywhere. While all three proverbial triads originated in the United States, their democratic messages are most certainly applicable internationally as ideals for a peaceful existence based on moral values.

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The author prepared the current article based on a plenary presentation delivered at the international conference “Small Genres of Folklore: Local Contexts and Comparative Parallels”, held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 28 February – 1 March 2024, in honour of the 100th anniversary of Kazys Grigas, dedicating it to his long-time friend and colleague.

For more on the triads featured in this article, see also, among others:

- Mieder Wolfgang 2014. “‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness’: Martin Luther King’s Proverbial Struggle for Equality”, in: *Behold the Proverbs of a People: Proverbial Wisdom in Culture, Literature, and Politics*, University Press of Mississippi, p. 133–171.
- Mieder Wolfgang 2025. “‘Freedom, Justice, and Democracy’. A Proverbial Triad for a World of Peace”, in: *Obras hablen, palabras callen. André Gallego y la paremiología, (Biblioteca fraseológica y paremiológica 10)*, Madrid: Instituto Cervantes (https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/biblioteca_fraseologica/n10_estreder/indice.htm).
- Mieder Wolfgang 2026. *Proverbial Democracy: Government of the People, by the People, for the People*, New York, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, Oxford: Peter Lang.

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- [1] Bernie (<https://berniesanders.com/forthepeople/>).
- [2] Katie Reilly, “Read Bernie Sanders’ and Hillary Clinton’s Remarks From the Endorsement Rally”, Time, 2016 (<https://time.com/4403264/bernie-sanders-hillary-clinton-endorsement-full-transcript>).
- [3] “Full text: Donald Trump campaign speech in Wisconsin”, Politico, 2016 (<https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/full-text-donald-trumps-speech-on-227095>).
- [4] The White House (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/03/remarks-by-president-biden-on-standing-up-for-democracy/>).

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