

"Worthy to be Free"

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The authors of the Constitution of the United States were realistic and practical men who viewed human nature with healthy skepticism as they labored on their historic document. James Bryce noted that the Constitution "is the work of men who believed in original sin and were resolved to leave open for transgressors no door which they could possibly shut."

John Calvin would have approved the Constitution. He had no illusions concerning the nature of man, the fallen creature who needed to be saved from himself. As Bryce suggested, "The aim of the Constitution seems to be not so much to attain great common ends by securing good government as to avert the evils which will flow not merely from a bad government but from any government strong enough to threaten existing communities and individual citizens."

The idea of centralized power disturbed Madison and his colleagues, even though they understood the necessity for a government strong enough to govern. Essentially, they mistrusted men who might be elected to positions of power or who, by virtue of wealth or influence, might be able to subvert the government.

Thomas Paine, unjustly described by Theodore Roosevelt as "a dirty little atheist," was a thoroughgoing Calvinist when he wrote, "Society is the fruit of our virtues, but government is the product of our wickedness." He understood that a government strong enough to deal with the wickedness of men was necessary.

History has justified the fears of the authors of the Constitution that corruptible human nature corrupts government. The checks and balances they wrote into their document were designed to guard the nation against the ambitions of the unscrupulous. They balanced their idealism with honest realism about human nature.

The checks and balances prescribed by the Constitution frequently make government difficult. When Congress and the President are at odds and the Supreme Court disposed at one time to be liberal and at other times conservative, the government appears devoid of power to act. Nevertheless, as Winston Churchill noted, "Democracy is the worst form of government ever invented-except for every other."

What stands clear now as in the early days of the nation's history is the need for incorruptible men and women in every area of our common life. Democracy always is threatened by the corrupt and dishonest. It is saved by men and women who cannot be bought or coerced. Its strength is in a consensus of worthy ideals and values in the body politic.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was haunted by a lack of commitment to ideals and values and a "hollowness of heart" in those who shared the nation he knew and loved. "Genuine belief has left us," he lamented. "The underlying principles of the states are not honestly believed in. The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed but infinitely greater."

The question posed by Arnold Toynbee is worth pondering: "Suppose that in the next generation the ablest minds and most perceptive spirits were to come to the conclusion of Socrates that the most urgent business on mankind's agenda is to close the morality gap?" Closing that gap is certainly the most urgent business on our agenda.

Emerson was aware, as was Reinhold Niebuhr, that "only religion can create the unpurchasable man." Both insisted that only a firm faith in God can enable men and women to manage their

freedom with dignity and integrity. Nothing less than high faith can nourish honesty and integrity, justice and righteousness. Essentially, we are what we believe.

Although the authors of the Constitution provided safeguards to protect us against the unscrupulous, they could not make us fit to bear the burdens of our own freedom. Nothing less than reverent faith in God can do that.

"I have heard it asserted by some, that as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness ...I answer roundly that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice of her. The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

"Britain is the parent country, say some.. .Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home pursues their descendants still...

"O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind!"

from Thomas Paine's Common Sense

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