

[Revolutionary Virtue](#)[Print](#)

Written by Becky Akers

Wednesday, 18 March 2009 18:00

0

Like

0



"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people," John Adams famously announced in 1798. "It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

He was paraphrasing a line he'd written in 1776 — "The only foundation of a free Constitution, is pure Virtue" — when the new nation was but a dangerous dream. Three years later, cousin Sam observed, "While the People are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but when once they lose their Virtue they will be ready to surrender their Liberties to the first external or *internal* Invader.... If Virtue & Knowledge are diffused among the People, they will never be enslavd [*sic*]."

Only the Virtuous Can Live Free

The Adamses were echoing an idea so common among the Founding Fathers it was almost a cliché: only a virtuous people can live free. However they phrased it, whatever synonyms they used for "liberty" (including, impossibly enough, "government") and "virtue" (including, logically enough, "Christianity"), the Founders insisted that liberty requires virtue. They were equally adamant that political slavery punishes immorality.

"Virtue" has a quaint ring to it, as 18th-century as "mobcap" or "syllabub." And Americans then obsessed about nourishing it as much as their descendants do about starving themselves into tight jeans.

Easy job, some might think. Who could be anything but virtuous in an age without MySpace and half-clothed Hollywood hussies?

Things were simpler then. You'll hear that same reasoning applied to the War on Terror: pundits often claim it's rendered the Bill of Rights obsolete. After all, muskets and bayonets were about as scary as it got in the 1700s; if the Founders had to worry about hijacked planes hitting skyscrapers, they'd have empowered government to whack bad guys instead of fretting over habeas corpus. But Redcoats with muskets seemed as deadly then as terrorists with box-cutters do now. Meanwhile, future generations, facing weapons we can't conceive, will laugh at our fears while envying our more innocent times.

Revolutionary Americans hoped their young country would light the world's way to liberty and righteousness. To that end, each man should school himself in virtue: a free, virtuous country is merely a collection of free, virtuous individuals.

Many turned the task into an art. Young Ben Franklin not only listed 13 disciplines he considered essential ("Temperance, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Moderation, Industry, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Silence, Sincerity, Justice, Chastity, Humility"), he charted his daily progress in practicing each. And almost every Founding Father, from George Washington ("Can it be," he asked in his Farewell Address, "that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue?") to Benjamin Rush ("Without [religion] there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty," averred this physician from Pennsylvania and Signer of the Declaration of Independence), testified at one time or another to the link between liberty and virtue.

So virtue was as fashionable then as ridiculing it is now. What trendy Founders to connect it with freedom! Or were they espousing an eternal truth? If so, why does liberty depend on virtuous citizens? What exactly is "virtue," and are all virtues created equal? For example, is chastity or courage as essential for liberty as honesty? And how do these characteristics produce freedom? Does their rejection truly guarantee tyranny, or were the Founders just trying to scare us into behaving?

Necessity of Morality

Dictionaries define "virtue" as "the quality of being morally good or righteous; moral excellence." Morals determine how we interact with others. The moral man doesn't lie, doesn't steal, doesn't murder. He follows the Ten Commandments and the Christian

shorthand for them, the Golden Rule. He doesn't compel others to do his will, nor does he manipulate them, in part because he wouldn't want them to treat him that way. He understands that people don't exist to fulfill his dreams or even his needs, nor to make him feel important and powerful. Rather, they are souls in their own right, competent and capable, created in the image of God with inalienable rights. This entitles them to the virtuous man's respect — a respect that doesn't arrogantly assume they need his help any more than it whines for theirs.

Unless someone physically attacks the virtuous man, force never distorts his dealings with others. Obviously, he doesn't compel anyone to hand him money, *i.e.*, he doesn't steal. But he also doesn't push himself on folks who don't want to deal with him — whether they are bigots who despise anyone different from themselves, or landlords who don't rent to tenants with children. The virtuous man doesn't hide behind a superior power that does the forcing for him, either.

Contrast that with the masses who live according to expediency, whim, or pleasure. They like compulsion and bending others to their will, whether they work directly for the government or whether they harness it to their interests. They confuse "legal" with "moral" and figure anything that doesn't get them arrested is kosher. They won't hold up the guy next door because that might send them to prison, but they eagerly accept all the money the state taxes from him on their behalf — and often clamor for more. They won't bulldoze his house, either, when it exceeds the size of theirs; that's the job of the zoning commissioners to whom they complain.

The Founders warned about the results should citizens abandon virtue. In his *Defense of the American Constitutions* of 1787, John Adams cautioned, "If 'Thou shalt not covet' and 'Thou shalt not steal' were not commandments of Heaven, they must be made inviolable precepts in every society before it can be civilized or made free." In these times of widespread socialism, when governments at all levels dangle other people's money before us, when the worst thieves never see the inside of a jail but are instead reelected to office, when citizens expect and receive ever larger shares of the plunder, only men strong in virtue will resist. Indeed, "virtue" descends from the Latin "virtus," meaning "strength, valor, bravery, manliness, manhood, virility, excellence, virtue,"; "virtus," in turn, comes from "vir," Latin for "man" (with a secondary meaning of "hero"; make of that what you will).

Tom Paine speculated in *Common Sense* that if we could "take off the dark covering of antiquity, and trace [government and its officials] to their first rise, that we should find the first of them nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners of preeminence in subtlety obtained him the title of chief among plunderers; and who by increasing in power, and extending his depredations, overawed the quiet and defenseless to purchase their safety by frequent contributions."

Ever since it hatched, the state has sought to neutralize morality with a series of logical fallacies. Government and most of its victims credit "the nation" — something that doesn't exist apart from the individuals comprising it — with privileges not a one of those individuals has. No man may invade another's home and make off with a percentage of what he finds there. But let him don a government uniform while claiming to represent "the nation," let him call what he steals a "tax," and suddenly his theft is no longer immoral — at least to people who spurn virtue. They never understand that what's wrong for an individual acting alone doesn't become right when he's part of a group, even one calling itself "government."

Citizens who demand their fair share of the government's spoils receive its control as well. Students expect the State to rescue them from the horrors of paying full tuition, so they agitate for subsidies, below-market loans, scholarships — even though politicians and bureaucrats then set the curriculum. In 2006, 300 colleges offered majors in "homeland security," thanks to \$50 million in grants from the eponymous Cabinet department. Yet decades of federal accreditation have so dulled sensibilities that *USA Today* reported this story without mentioning or even hinting at the word "propaganda."

Alas, grandparents can be just as greedy. They demand that taxpayers buy their medicines regardless of the power government then wields over the pharmaceutical industry.

Virtue and Liberty

What virtues are necessary for freedom? John Adams listed some: "the principles of humanity and general benevolences, public and private charity, industry, frugality, honesty, and punctuality in their dealings." Certainly, "courage" belongs in the catalog, too, since history proves Thomas Jefferson's adage that "the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground."

Citizens serious about liberty are constantly on guard against their government, however limited or constitutional. When they spot the first tumors of tyranny, they summon not only bravery but wisdom and perseverance to excise the cancer.

Such patriots also prize strong families, so they're loyal and chaste. The family — autonomous, loving, inviolate — undergirds freedom. It counterbalances the State, providing privacy and a refuge from the public square. No wonder governments attack it. Sometimes the assault is as obvious as coaxing, bribing, or torturing subjects to rat out relatives — tactics everyone from American Drug Warriors to Chinese communists use. More subtly, socialist empires trivialize the family with their cradle-to-grave caretaking. Who needs children to support his old age when Social Security does? Why sacrifice to educate kids when public schools do it for "free"?

Virtuous people rely on themselves, their families, and friends, not the State. Their virtue strengthens their family, which in turn strengthens them. Meanwhile, virtue neither leads astray nor shames its practitioner later. Disaster may strike, but it strikes in spite of the virtuous man, not because of him. Economist Friedrich Hayek observed that "morals are concerned with effects in the long run — effects beyond our possible perception [at the time]."

Contrast that with the backpedaling and excuses for George W. Bush. The *Washington Times* tried to explain away Americans' contempt for him: "Bush's unpopularity stems from the credit crisis and declining economy; the war in Iraq; and the federal government's performance in handling Hurricane Katrina.... [But t]he credit crisis had many fathers, [including] laws and policies passed in Democratic administrations.... Katrina was an unprecedented disaster.... Iraq had actually used WMDs in its war against Iran.... In context, Monday morning quarterbacking in these areas is somewhat unfair." Bosh. Bush eviscerated the Constitution, not only in these three instances but in almost every official act. Had he virtuously honored his oath of office instead, he wouldn't be dodging international calls to try him as a war criminal.

Religion: The Wellspring of Virtue

The Founders insisted that virtue sprang from religion — and by "religion," they meant Biblical Christianity. Noah Webster, whose primers educated millions of Americans from the 1780s on, thought that "the moral principles and precepts contained in the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws.... All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible."

George Washington knew something about defending liberty. And in his Farewell Address, he urged that we "with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion." His nuanced "with caution" allows for the fact that some people who never darken a church's doors behave like angels while others who attend weekly rival the Devil himself for wickedness. Hypocrites abound in this fallen world: politicians moan about the plight of the poor while raising taxes; labor unions supposedly fight for the working man while threatening "scabs" who take jobs without permission. Still, frauds seem to congregate disproportionately in the church, and that allows the reckless to dispute Washington's wisdom. They often argue that virtue can be grounded in reason alone. Human reason is egregiously flawed. Two Pure Reasoners starting from the same premise can respectively arrive at a virtuous precept and one so evil even the most pragmatic politicians blanch. For instance, Pure Reasoners usually maintain that each person owns himself. From here, they could — and many do — reason their way to euthanasia and abortion.

Pure Reasoners must also deny history since it teaches that on the whole, a population preaching and practicing historic Christianity murders far fewer victims than an atheistic one. Compare the American and French revolutions: both occurred in the last quarter of the 18th century; both claimed liberty as a goal; they even included some of the same participants. But while America's rebels relied on Divine Providence, France's vehemently rejected Christianity and God Himself. Ditto for every communist regime since. Their atrocities shock the world as they systematically torture and slaughter their own people. And why not? Without an omniscient, righteous Judge and an afterlife in which He punishes sin, why practice virtue when wickedness affords so much more power? Besides, without a Creator endowing liberty, inalienable rights suddenly become alienable: governments that bestow rights can also revoke them.

Unfortunately, far too many Americans still haven't learned their lesson two centuries after the Revolution. That makes Dr. Rush's observation as true today as then: "The war is over: but this is far from being the case with the American revolution.... It remains yet

to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens."

Becky Akers is an expert on the American Revolution.