

Constitutional Corner – America’s Fundamental Principles: Start the Conversation.

"Let [the Constitution] be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges, let it be written in primers, in spelling books and in almanacs, let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation." - Abraham Lincoln

I must confess up-front that I put off the writing of this essay until the last moment. Since the middle of last November we’ve been writing and speaking about America’s fundamental principles, those principles imbedded in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence that, combined, have made America the greatest, most powerful nation in the world. What facilitated that national success has been the unparalleled freedom that America’s citizens have enjoyed; freedom to venture, to try, to fail, and to try again; freedom to do these things with a conscience equally free.

Now it came time to discuss how to make these principles once again part of our national dialogue. That they are not, at least not with much regularity, is evidenced by the following quote from *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1830, Tocqueville observed:

"If you question [an American] respecting his own country ... he will inform you what his rights are and by what means he exercises them.... You will find that he is familiar with the mechanism of the laws.... The American learns to know the laws by participating in the act of legislation.... The great work of society is ever going on before his eyes, and, as it were, under his hands. In the United States, politics are the end and aim of education."

This is clearly no longer the case in America of 2016. The average American struggles to name the three branches of his government, let alone how they function, or should function. Nevertheless, most young Americans can talk endlessly about popular culture, describing the lives of their favorite celebrities in intimate detail. Their fathers can often cite years of sports statistics and talk of their favorite teams equally endlessly. But talk of fundamental principles of freedom? Outside an occasional Tea Party meeting, you’ll not hear much talk on that subject.

In my view, the chief culprit in this obvious decline in awareness of the precepts of liberty is our public education system. There are certainly great, dedicated teachers in that system, but all too frequently we see reports of absolutely bone-headed reactions to “pop-tarts chewed into the shape of a gun,” US Flag T-shirts, blatant Islamic and socialistic indoctrination, etc. The system as a whole has earned our scrutiny. Despite Standards of Learning which require the teaching of what used to be known as civics, high school graduates appear, in poll after poll, video after video, to know nothing of these principles. Once again, in the 1830s:

"... every citizen is taught...the history of his country, and the leading features of its Constitution. ... it is extremely rare to find a man imperfectly acquainted with all these things, and a person wholly ignorant of them is sort of a phenomenon." Today, to encounter someone "wholly ignorant" of these principles is the standard, and to find someone conversant in them is "sort of a phenomenon."

I'll venture that if you catch a student today coming out of their AP Government class they might be able to cogently discuss these topics, but catch them a month after graduation and the results will be quite different.

Today we've lost sight of the principles that have made us great. They are still imbedded in our structure of government, but that structure is slowly being changed in such a way that the principles are becoming obscured. They are dying by what the Chinese would call: "death by a thousand cuts." When Orwell's 1984 so famously missed its prediction everyone went on about their business. But we continue to move in that direction, if somewhat slower than Orwell predicted.

"Although all men are born free, slavery has been the general lot of the human race. Ignorant - they have been cheated; asleep - they have been surprised; divided - the yoke has been forced upon them. But what is the lesson? ...the people ought to be enlightened, to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government they should watch over it.... It is universally admitted that a well-instructed people alone can be permanently free."

James Madison warns us that we should "watch over" our government and, by implication, the principles of freedom it secures. Franklin warned us that the republic required "keeping." Weren't they saying the same thing?

The principles are there, but they must be acknowledged, reinforced, refreshed, and transmitted to new generations. Our freedom simply cannot be preserved any other way.

But there's the rub – how do we start a discussion of these principles in the national dialogue? Such a dialogue is not going on at the moment, and needs to.

It's my own fault; I chose the topic, but soon realized what a monumental challenge this will be.

A few things stand out at first blush: such a dialogue can't be forced – it can't involve the force of law. You may force a high school student to memorize a few dates and other facts long enough to pass a test, perhaps you can even help him or her to see the long term value of this knowledge; but you cannot force a student (or adult) to internalize or embrace these principles of freedom. That must come willingly and freely, i.e. voluntarily. And this process will be much

easier if parents, on whom God places the primary responsibility for the education of their children, would set the stage for understanding these principles at an early age. It can be done.

Second, you're going to need a patron, a patron who is also a patriot. Any effort to establish a national dialogue, on any topic, will have to involve the national media in all its various forms, and this will take money – lots of it. There are only so many Public Service Announcements these folks are willing to play for free.

People are unlikely to want to get together to just talk, aimlessly, even on such important topics, so there should be something to help facilitate discussion, and standardize it a bit.

Thus the idea: a book with accompanying Study/Discussion Guide. We'll call it: "Start the Discussion: America's Fundamental Principles." Each of the 12-13 chapters (fits in a typical Sunday School cycle) will be devoted to the discussion of a separate fundamental principle. The book will transmit the core knowledge on that principle and the Study Guide will be used to facilitate discussion and include space for people to take notes.

A tentative list of contents would include:

Chapter 1: The principle of one nation under god

Chapter 2: The principle of self-government (including the principle of virtue)

Chapter 3: The principle that all men are created equal

Chapter 4: The principle of inalienable rights: life, liberty & property

Chapter 5: The principle of political power derived from the people

Chapter 6: The principles of republicanism & limited government

Chapter 7: The principle of constitutionalism

Chapter 8: The principle of the rule of law (including natural law)

Chapter 9: The principles of abolishing and reforming government

Chapter 10: The principles of capitalism and free markets

Chapter 11: (TBD)

Chapter 12: Where Do We Go From Here?

Maybe a kids' version with a colonial period hero and his dog, no?

As the book nears its publishing date there will need to be a promotional project to get it into the public's eye: interviews on radio/TV, videos which explain its importance, celebrity endorsements, etc.

If we can time the release to coincide with an election year, it might receive some attention in candidate debates, which would be great, and would gel nicely with the books purpose. For those too timid to lead live discussion, there could be a DVD series that takes the students through the highlights of each chapter and poses questions for discussion.

Just think of the effect if we could get large groups of adults and students holding these discussions across the nation. The President comes on TV, perhaps at a White House news conference, and explains how important this dialogue is to the nation's future.

The book's authors are presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom and feted at the annual awards banquet in Washington, D.C.

At about this point I wake up from my dream and realize how grandiose this project really is and how resource-less is my organization. Nice idea though.

Beyond this I have no earthly idea what it will take to get people to start talking about the principles of freedom and liberty; perhaps a national calamity is necessary. Yes, that normally brings us together as Americans, but at great initial cost.

We will be discussing this topic on "We the People, The Constitution Matters" on WFYL radio Friday morning, 5 February, 7-8am. You can "Listen Live" at www.1180wfyl.com, or, if you are fortunate enough to live in the station's broadcast area, on the radio as you drive to work that morning. I'm lead to believe that at least one of my co-commentators has a somewhat radical idea to propose.

You can later download the podcast of the show and listen at your leisure, or you can listen to one of the rebroadcasts during the weekend. I would love to hear your ideas on this topic, including your critique of "Start the Conversation." Hope you'll join us.

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