

The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 3 August 2021

Tyranny? Under a Constitution?

*"It is necessary for every American, with becoming energy to endeavor to stop the dissemination of principles evidently destructive of the cause for which they have bled. It must be the combined virtue of the rulers and of the people to do this, and to rescue and save their civil and religious rights from the outstretched arm of tyranny, which may appear under any mode or form of government."*¹

Tyranny: *"Arbitrary or despotic exercise of power; the exercise of power over subjects and others with a rigor not authorized by law or justice, or not requisite for the purposes of government."* So said Mr. Webster in 1828.

President Barack Obama once said: *"You've grown up hearing voices that incessantly warn of government as nothing more than some separate, sinister entity that's at the root of all our problems. They'll warn that tyranny is always lurking just around the corner. You should reject these voices. Because what they suggest is that our brave and creative and unique experiment in self-rule is somehow just a sham with which we can't be trusted."* Democrats, the greatest purveyors of tyrannical government, want us to believe their "soft-tyranny" is nothing more than "experiments" in democracy.

The Founders were exceedingly fearful of tyranny; having recently separated themselves from one tyrannical government, they were not about to set in place a foundation that would facilitate yet another – thus, our system of constitutional check and balances. But for the check and balances to work properly requires diligent observation and/or disclosure. If the states are not being diligent to the exercise of arbitrary power, the people must tell them.

So is tyranny "lurking around the corner" or has it already arrived?

Some time ago, Joseph Sobran wrote a beautiful essay entitled "How Tyranny Came to America." It's readily available on the internet (<http://sobran.com/articles/tyranny.shtml>) and I recommend everyone read it. I won't try to summarize the essay in this space. But, notice Sobran's use of the past tense in his title. For Sobran, tyranny has already arrived in America; it is thus too late for John Adams encouragement to "Nip the shoots of arbitrary power in the bud."²

¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, 1805.

² John Adams, *Novanglus Letters*, 1774

Today, Americans, both on the Right and the Left, throw the word “tyranny” at anything they disagree with, whether the action is constitutional or not. Remember Webster’s definition: “Arbitrary or despotic exercise of power.” How does one know whether a power being exercised by the government is arbitrary or perfectly constitutional? Without knowing your Constitution, you simply can not!

The Founders warned that the exercise of arbitrary power would indeed happen. *“Experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms of government those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny.”* Jefferson goes on to say: *“The most effectual means of preventing this [the perversion of power into tyranny] are to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts which history exhibits, that ... they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes.”*³

Ben Franklin observed that when freedom of speech *“is dissolved, tyranny is erected on its ruins.”*⁴ John Hancock called it our *“Christian and social duty”* to resist tyranny.⁵ Yet Americans know so little about their Constitution and government, and are so willfully unengaged with the process of government that one marvels how “the system” is still able to function, seeing as how “the people” are the source of the government’s power. Yet it does; and day by day, with each new arbitrary law, with each new unconstitutional regulation, with each new unwarranted court decision, tyranny grows stronger.

C.S. Lewis warns us of tyranny’s subtleness: *“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. They may be more likely to go to Heaven yet at the same time likelier to make a Hell of earth.”*⁶

Which will it be? Will we fight tyranny in America or make our bed in a Hell on earth?

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³ Thomas Jefferson, Bill for the More General diffusion of Knowledge (1778).

⁴ “Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the Constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins.” Ben Franklin, “On Freedom of Speech and the Press.” Essay in The Pennsylvania Gazette, Nov 1737

⁵ “Resistance to tyranny becomes the Christian and social duty of each individual. ... Continue steadfast and, with a proper sense of your dependence on God, nobly defend those rights which heaven gave, and no man ought to take from us.” John Hancock, Provincial Congress, Resolution to Massachusetts Bay, October 1774.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, “God in the Dock: Essays on Theology

Recommended Reading:

Liberty and Tyranny, by Mark Levin

Nullification; How to Resist Federal Tyranny in the 21st Century, by Thomas E. Woods, Jr.

Judicial Tyranny; The New Kings of America? By Mark I. Sutherland