

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

I LOVE THAT SONG! What a beautiful hymn to America! It captures so much of what we love about this country—our pilgrim origins, our founding fathers' dreams, the gorgeous and rich potential of the land itself, the spirit of brotherhood which led us to overcome and move past the deep rift we call the Civil War, and, above all, our historic reliance upon God's grace to fulfill what Theodore Roosevelt called our "manifest destiny" to serve as a "light to the nations." America the beautiful indeed!

From the very beginning, America was unique. Lincoln captured that idea in the *Gettysburg Address*, where he used the language of conception and childbirth to emphasize the uniqueness that nowadays has come to be called "American exceptionalism." In Lincoln's words, our forefathers "brought forth a new nation, conceived in liberty..." America's character was formed in the womb of a Puritan culture that extolled three basic values: Christian worship and morality, the inherent virtue of hard work which came to be called the "Protestant work ethic," and a free enterprise system that encouraged commerce. Impelled by these values, Americans worshiped, worked and created businesses and America grew and flourished. Not without grievous faults, of course, chief among which were the practice of slavery and the displacement of a native population. But despite these social sins—sins for which we are still atoning—people from all over the world flocked to our shores and by the late 19th Century, with the advent of the industrial revolution, America had become an economic colossus. And on into the 20th Century America continued to grow and prosper. We helped win two world wars in Europe and the in the far east. By the conclusion of World War 2, America was the most powerful nation on earth and American pride was riding high.

And then...and then...as many of us find ourselves saying these days, "What in the hell happened?" Now a sizeable number of our citizens mock our origins, condemn our present character and despair over our future. The melting pot of American society that absorbed numerous immigrant groups and melded them into a unique culture that was distinctly "American," has crystallized into mutually hostile factions, each with its own axe to grind. Race against race, poor against rich, old against young, gender against gender (insofar as gender retains any objective meaning). What happened?

Well, if you will go back 2400 years with me to ancient Greece and the writings of a man by the name of Plato, I think we can find the answer to that question. Did you know that it was Plato who invented the idea of a republican form of government? In his most famous work, *The Republic*, Plato described a form of government where people lived under the rule of law, rather than under the authority of a king or a dictator. Plato argued his case as follows: all forms of government ultimately rely on the consent of the governed in the sense that the absence of consent results in revolution. However, he said, different forms of government obtain popular consent in different ways. A king relies upon the loyalty of his subjects. A dictator relies on fear of the dictator. But a republic, he argued, was the most fragile of all because it relied on what he called "the public virtue," which he defined as a willingness on the part of the people to put the

good of the republic ahead of their own personal interests. We call this “patriotism,” and in its fullest form it’s what leads people to give their lives for their country.

Plato thought that a republican form of government was superior to all other forms, but it had one great vulnerability. Human nature being what it is, he said, over time the public virtue tends to erode and when it does, self-interest takes over. Instead of asking what they can do for their country, people begin to ask what their country can do for them. And as he put it, *“When the citizens of the republic begin to vote themselves grain from the public grainery it is the beginning of the end of the republic.”* This sad fact about the political nature of man is what led another philosopher, a 19th-century Frenchman by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville, to write a book called *Democracy in America*. In that book he wrote: *“The American republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public’s money.”* We call this “pork barrel politics” and “influence peddling” and it led Benjamin Franklin to say to a woman who asked him what form of government the Second Constitutional Convention had settled upon: *“We have given you a republic, madam, if you can keep it.”*

Right now it seems that we’re not doing a very good job of keeping it. The melting pot has been replaced by political tribalism, with each tribe demonizing its rivals and screaming for a greater share of the rights and benefits of the republic. As far as politics go, many people would agree with Tocqueville’s words on that subject as well: *“I do not know if the people of the United States would vote for superior men if they ran for office, but it is doubtful that such men will run.”*

So that’s what happened. The question is: what do we do about it? Or, more importantly, what can we do as Christians to help our country reclaim its “public virtue”? How do we exert a positive influence upon popular culture?

It’s a very good question and not an easy one to answer. Christ has not called us to be political activists in His Name. Quite the reverse, He has emphatically separated His kingdom, the Kingdom of God, from the kingdom of this world—which we call secular society. *“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”* (Matthew 22:21) And, *“The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”* (Luke 17:20-21) So the two kingdoms are utterly separate: there is no overlap. But having said this, history does show that where the Kingdom of God has advanced—that is, where the Christian faith has taken root and grown—secular has benefited as well.

For example, you may or may not know this, but hospitals were invented by Christians. And for centuries the only hospitals were church hospitals. And during the Middle Ages, Christian monks in their monasteries not only preserved the Holy Scriptures and tended to the poor, but through their research, laid the groundwork for modern agriculture. In the Italian Renaissance, Christians like Dante, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Raphael, created some of the greatest works of art and literature known to mankind. And when the Renaissance spread to England, Christians like Sidney, Spencer, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Erasmus produced some of the greatest literature the world has ever known. At the same time, Reformation theologians like Luther opened the door for the emergence of modern science by introducing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which freed individual minds from the bonds of ecclesiastical authority. Where ever the light of Christianity shone it illumined minds and produced fruit. It illumined the mind of William Wilberforce, who, inspired by the great Puritan evangelist and hymn-writer, John Newton, led the fight to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. It illumined the mind of John Brown, who led the early abolitionist movement in America.

But now European history is frequently characterized on university campuses in our country as the history of “dead, white European males,” while American history is deemed something of which we should be ashamed rather than proud. At one of our most prestigious universities, Stanford University, courses in the history of Western Civilization have been dropped and replaced by courses in gender studies and pop culture. At Harvard Divinity School, part of a university which was chartered to promulgate the Gospel of Jesus Christ, orthodox Christianity is openly mocked by students and faculty alike. This is where we are, folks. So once again, what do we do about it?

Well, what we do is the work that God’s children have always done: we go in peace and we serve the Lord. We live out our lives as believers and give all glory to God. In Paul’s words, we “*work out our salvation in fear and trembling,*” knowing that, “*it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose.*” Our marching orders couldn’t be more clear: “*...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” (Matthew 28:19-20) And God will help us, for he added: “*...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20) and “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” (Matthew 28:18) So we have a job to do, we have God’s authority to do it, and we have His promise to help. In Peter’s words, all we need do is to, “*...be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*” (1 Peter 3:15-16)

I know it seems miniscule, tiny and insignificant compared to the hostile forces that are arrayed against us. How can our poor little Christian lives and testimonies possibly stem the tide of institutionalized mockery and antagonism. But never forget that twelve plain, ordinary men and a few women changed the world simply by going out and telling people what they had seen and heard.

Alexis de Tocqueville spent a great deal of time in this country, observing how people lived and worked and worshiped all over America. He interviewed people across the entire social spectrum—from prisoners in penitentiaries to President Andrew Jackson himself. Finally, he wrote the following: “*I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers—and it was not there...in her fertile fields and boundless forests and it was not there...in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution—and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.*”

God help us add to the good that is in America. And happy Independence Day!

Amen.