

The Key to American Liberty



"God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever."

-Engraved on Jefferson Memorial, Washington D.C.

Since the early 20th century America has entered into a century long romance with the leviathan of public debt. Since the year 2000 our debt has exploded from \$5 trillion to over \$17 trillion. Thomas Jefferson had interesting insights into this subject.

America's third president warned against the centralization of power in the hands of an elite. He saw the people, not an elite, as the hope of preserving our republic,

"And to preserve their [the peoples'] independence, we must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt. We must make our election between economy and liberty, or profusion and servitude. If we run into such debts, as that we must be taxed in our meat and in our drink, in our necessities and our comforts, in our labors and our amusements, for our callings and or creeds, as the people of England are, our people, like them, must come to labor sixteen hours in the twenty-four, give the earnings of fifteen

of these to the government for their debts and daily expenses; and the sixteenth being insufficient to afford us bread, we must live, as they now do, on oatmeal and potatoes, have no time to think, no means of calling the mismanagers to account; but be glad to obtain subsistence by hiring ourselves to rivet their chains on the necks of our fellow sufferers."

This description of England in his time sounds strangely familiar to us today. According to Jefferson, "private fortunes are destroyed by public as well as by private extravagance. And this is the tendency of all human governments... Till the bulk of the society is reduced to be mere automatons of misery, and to have no sensibilities left but for sinning and suffering... And the fore horse of this frightful team is public debt... Taxation follows that, and in its train wretchedness and oppression."

To maintain our freedom Jefferson said that we must go back to the "ancient principles." These principles are found in the self-governing model republic of the Hebrew nation. They were known by most Americans until the 20th century. In this model God instructs Moses, through Jethro, to elect godly representatives and judges to represent the people and to decentralize power at the local level. This model was in direct contrast to those of all the ancient nations which drove power to a dictator or tyrant.

The pattern Jefferson describes reflects the divine constitution given to Moses. This biblical model was instituted by Patrick in Ireland. Alfred the Great, England's greatest king, followed this same pattern in developing strong local government and limited national government. The American colonies followed the divine constitution given to Moses with its pattern of local control of government. Our U.S. Constitution drives almost all power and control of civil government down to the people and the states. The 10th Amendment of the Bill of Rights

strongly presents decentralization of power: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.”

In 1816, Jefferson looked back and wrote of the genius in the New England townships. These townships began with the example of Plymouth. They were the greatest model of self-government and biblical government ever established. Jefferson observed, “These wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation.”

He then described how much of the government power should be controlled by the people locally. He said that the towns should have “A justice, chosen by themselves, in each, a constable, a military company, a patrol, a school, the care of their own poor, their own portion of the public roads, the choice of one or more jurors to serve in some court... and by making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and its republican constitution.”

Later, in the 1830's, the French jurist Alexis de Tocqueville toured America and wrote his famous book *Democracy in America*. De Tocqueville considered the local, decentralized township government of New England as the key to American liberty. He said, “In the laws of Connecticut, as well as in all those of New England, we find the germ and gradual development of township independence which is the life and mainspring of American liberty at the present day. The political existence of the majority of the nations of Europe commenced in the superior ranks of society [top down control] and was gradually and imperfectly communicated to the

different members of the social body. In America, on the contrary, it may be said that the township was organized before the county, the county before the state, and the state before the union.” [bottom up control]

This local and accountable governance was the working model of liberty in America even up to the 20th century. Historian Douglas Campbell wrote in 1893 of the contrast between the governments of England and America. He said that in England, “Parliament legislates for the whole kingdom. That body takes upon itself the management of the domestic, the local, the parochial, and the municipal affairs of all the communities of England, Ireland, Scotland and

Wales. It arranges for every local gas bill, water bill, sewerage bill and railway bill for the two islands. In America, the Federal Congress legislates only on matters of national concern, everything else is left to the separate states.” Campbell said that the townships of America were, “an infinity of little republics, each managing its own local affairs.” Sadly, Americans in recent decades have forgotten these truths and followed the socialist model – reaping a whirlwind of despair.



Our answer to this dilemma lies not in Washington D.C. or even in the Constitution itself. It lies in the people, dependent upon Almighty God. As Jefferson admitted, “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by *education*. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.”

The victory of individual liberty over tyranny comes thorough regeneration not revolution. Millions of God-dependent believers living out their faith in their communities can transform our nation from within.

-Marshall Foster