

# Being American

## The Legacy of Freedom

**The founders of the American republic were not saints.**

**Nor did they** entertain any illusions about the perfection of human nature.

The authors of the Constitution recognized in themselves and in others the familiar vices of vanity and greed, but they preferred the risks of civil democracy, to the false assurance of a benevolent monarchy.

The framers knew that the law is by no means a perfect tool for ensuring universal liberty and justice.

Yet the mechanism of checks and balances they proposed placed as many obstacles as possible in the way of what might be inflamed passions of the moment.

Thus they hoped to preserve the principles and practice of freedom, against the ancient human tendency to seek security in the rule of kings.

**Today**, a timid and fearful public increasingly demands displays of divine omnipotence from its leaders.

Political medicine-men loudly offer prayers and public sacrifice on the altar of media celebrity, as they strive to elevate themselves to positions of power and control over their fellow citizens.

The wish for kings is an old and familiar desire, appearing no less at home today in a society thought dedicated to the opposite ideal of individual freedom, as it was in the monarchies of medieval Europe or tribal Africa.

From the dazzling Camelot of the Kennedys, to the debauchery and czarist edicts of the Clinton (and now the Obama) regime, modern nobles do little except stand as symbolic figures in the midst of as much pomp and circumstance as can be reasonably arranged.

They give royal audiences, receive petitions, and grant privileges, power and favor, meantime indulging in the royal pleasures and perquisites of their high office.

To the extent that political and social leaders are thus able to create an image of godlike omnipotence, they promise to relieve their followers from the human burdens of responsibility, anxiety, and fear.

**Freedom is hard**, which is apparently why most people are so afraid of it.

The visceral yearning for kings is likewise the fear of individual freedom and responsibility.

Under the pretext of rescuing hapless citizens from the incalculable peril of liberty, government has claimed for itself far-reaching powers of repression and control.

Increasingly punitive interpretations of the law tend to support the needs and ambitions of the state and its agents, rather than the liberties of the people.

**Freedom erodes and withers away** if not defended and put to regular use.

For the last several years, it has seemed that Americans would rather not suffer embarrassment by making a scene about something so small as an infringement upon a liberty or a Constitutionally-guaranteed right.

We have learned to speak softly in the presence of authority, to

bow and smile and to fill out the printed forms with scarcely a whisper of dissent.

Polls show large majorities willing to "give up some freedoms" (especially the liberties of others), or to suffer higher taxes, if only it will mean greater security, less fear, more "fairness", or the profit of a new spending program.

Such security, however, is the "freedom" of the plantation slave.

To the extent that democracy allows its participants to come to their own conclusions and to chase their own dreams, it provides them the chance to not only achieve those dreams, but to survive the process.

If we want to live in freedom, we must learn to endure the fearsome shadows on the walls and the wind in the trees.

**The principle of liberty is always at risk.** The practice of self-government is too easily overturned.

Democratic institutions demand the ceaseless care and tinkering of a people willing to accept responsibility for even their most appalling acts.

But people who have lost faith in themselves, who no longer understand their own history or trust their own experiments, can no longer summon the energy to imagine their own future.

They subside into a state of immobilized fear, seeking salvation from anyone who will promise to deliver them another few moments of peace and security, and banish the monsters from beneath the bed.

To the extent that modern society has emerged from barbarism, it is because, and not in spite of, the hopes and dreams of ordinary people that have prevailed over the interests of the state.

Now, as in ancient Athens, democracy represents humankind's best attempt to date to organize a liberated human spirit and freedom of the mind against the forces of despotic tyranny and superstition.

**Democracy** is perhaps better characterized as a habit of mind rather than a system of government. We protect the other person's liberty in the interest of protecting our own.

What joins Americans to one another is not a common nationality, language, race, or ancestry, but the shared work of imagining the future.

The love of country follows from the love of its freedoms, not from the pride in its armies or its monuments.

As a means and not an end, American self-government is a narrative. Not one story but many stories, and none of them more privileged than others.

Civilizations do not decline because of freedom. They die instead from the fear of thought and paralysis of spirit that accompanies the worship of kings and the desire to make time stand still.

It was this simple truth that the founders understood, and sought to leave to their descendants.

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